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PLATFORM AFFORDANCES, VISUAL CONTENT, AND DISABILITY REPRESENTATION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FACEBOOK AND INSTAGRAM

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Abstract

Social networking sites provide persons with disabilities and disability advocacy communities with opportunities to produce and circulate representations outside traditional media gatekeeping. Yet Facebook and Instagram offer different communicative environments: Facebook accommodates longer captions, links, groups, and discussion, whereas Instagram privileges visual display, image-led storytelling, and hashtagged visibility. This study examines whether those platform differences correspond with different patterns of disability representation and whether visual content type is associated with portrayal valence. A quantitative secondary content analysis was conducted on 240 public posts, comprising 170 Facebook posts and 70 Instagram posts. Platform, primary frame, portrayal valence, visual content type, caption length, and hashtag category were coded. Cross-tabulations and chi-square tests were used to examine associations. The distribution of primary frames did not differ significantly between Facebook and Instagram, $\chi^2(4) = 2.847$, $p = .584$, Cramer's $V = .109$. Portrayal valence was also nearly identical across the platforms, $\chi^2(2) = 0.287$, $p = .866$, $\varphi = .035$, with positive portrayals accounting for 50.0% of posts on each platform. Visual content type, however, was significantly related to portrayal, $\chi^2(6) = 23.456$, $p = .001$, Cramer's $V = .221$. Personal photographs produced the highest proportion of positive portrayals (65.7%), while stock images produced the lowest (28.6%). Disability-pride hashtags were also associated descriptively with more positive portrayals than advocacy or awareness tags. The findings suggest platform convergence at the level of broad framing and valence, but meaningful differentiation at the level of visual form. For disability communicators, representational quality appears to depend less on choosing Facebook or Instagram than on selecting visuals that preserve agency, specificity, and dignity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Representations of disability are not neutral descriptions of bodily or social difference. They define problems, assign responsibility, encourage particular emotional responses, and make some solutions appear more reasonable than others. Traditional media have often relied on a restricted set of images: the tragic victim, the dependent recipient of charity, the medical case, or the exceptional individual who "overcomes" disability. These portrayals can attract attention, but they may also reduce disabled people to impairment, pity, or inspiration for non-disabled audiences (Barnes, 1992; Briant et al., 2013; Grue, 2016; Haller, 2010; Haller & Ralph, 2006; Silva & Howe, 2012).

Social networking sites complicate this representational history. Facebook and Instagram allow disabled people, families, advocacy groups, and organizations to publish without relying entirely on professional newsrooms. They can foreground lived experience, disability pride, accessibility, employment, relationships, political demands, and ordinary daily life. This shift does not guarantee progressive representation, because the same digital spaces can reproduce medical, charitable, or inspirational stereotypes. It does, however, redistribute the capacity to construct and circulate disability narratives (Bowker & Tuffin, 2002; Ellcessor, 2016, 2017; Ellis & Kent, 2011; Goggin & Newell, 2003; Thoreau, 2006).

The design of a platform also matters. Facebook combines pages, groups, links, photographs, video, reactions, and comparatively long captions. Instagram is organized more strongly around images, reels, carousels, captions, and hashtags. These features create different possibilities for visibility, association, participation, and narrative depth. In affordance terms, platforms do not mechanically determine what users communicate, but they make some forms of communication easier, more prominent, or more culturally expected than others (boyd, 2011; boyd & Ellison, 2007; Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Gillespie, 2010; van Dijck, 2013).

Research on disability and social media has often concentrated on the content of frames or on the relationship between frame type and positive or negative portrayal. Less attention has been given to a related question: whether broad representational patterns actually vary across Facebook and Instagram, and whether the choice of visual material matters more than the platform itself. This distinction is important. If platform type is the main influence, communicators should tailor representational strategy primarily to each site. If visual form is more influential, the key decisions concern whose image is used, whether the image is personal or generic, and whether the subject appears as an active person or as an illustration of need.

The present article addresses this problem through a secondary analysis of a 240-post doctoral thesis corpus. An earlier publication using the corpus examined associations between generic frames and portrayal valence (Zamir, Shehzad, & Gillani, 2026). The current study is analytically distinct: it places platform comparison and visual content at the centre of the inquiry. It asks whether Facebook and Instagram differ in their broad framing and portrayal patterns and whether personal photographs, infographics, stock images, or the absence of visuals are associated with different representational outcomes.

1.1 Research objectives

1. To compare the distribution of disability frames across Facebook and Instagram.
2. To determine whether portrayal valence differs between Facebook and Instagram.
3. To examine the association between visual content type and positive, negative, or neutral disability portrayal.

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4.To interpret what platform convergence and visual-content differences mean for disability advocacy and digital communication practice.

1.2 Research questions and hypotheses

RQ1: Does the distribution of primary disability frames differ between Facebook and Instagram?

RQ2: Does portrayal valence differ between Facebook and Instagram?

RQ3: Is visual content type associated with portrayal valence?

H1: Primary-frame distribution differs significantly between Facebook and Instagram.

H2: Instagram contains a higher proportion of positive disability portrayals than Facebook.

H3: Posts using personal photographs contain a higher proportion of positive portrayals than posts using stock images, infographics, or no visual material.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Disability representation and the limits of traditional imagery

Disability representation has historically been organized around a small number of recurring narratives. The medical model treats disability primarily as an individual deficit requiring treatment, correction, or care. Charity-oriented narratives present disabled people as recipients of help. Inspirational narratives celebrate exceptional achievement but may imply that the central problem is an individual's failure to overcome impairment. In each case, social barriers can disappear from view. The social and human-rights models of disability offer a different starting point by locating disablement in inaccessible environments, discriminatory institutions, and unequal social relations rather than in impairment alone (Degener, 2016; Goodley, 2016; Lawson & Beckett, 2021; Oliver, 1990).

Media scholarship has shown that these representational choices affect public understanding and the identity work of disabled audiences. Images that repeatedly associate disability with tragedy, dependence, or heroism may narrow the range of socially recognizable disabled lives. Rights-based and agency-centred representations widen that range by showing disabled people as workers, students, parents, partners, creators, citizens, and political actors (Briant et al., 2013; Haller, 2010; Haller & Ralph, 2006; Zhang & Haller, 2013).

The distinction between positive and negative portrayal must nevertheless be handled carefully. A post about discrimination may carry a negative valence because it documents exclusion, yet it can still be rights-based and politically enabling. Conversely, a highly positive post may reproduce the "supercrip" stereotype by praising an ordinary act as extraordinary merely because the person is disabled. Valence is therefore a useful descriptive measure, but it should be interpreted together with agency, responsibility, visual context, and the purpose of the post (Grue, 2016; Silva & Howe, 2012).

2.2 Social media, self-representation, and disability advocacy

Digital media have enabled disabled people to participate more directly in the production of disability discourse. Online self-representation can challenge professional gatekeeping, connect geographically dispersed communities, and support collective identity. It also allows communicators to combine personal testimony with demands for accessibility, policy implementation, and institutional accountability (Bowker & Tuffin, 2002; Clark, 2016; Ellcessor, 2016, 2017; Pearson & Trevisan, 2015; Thoreau, 2006).

These opportunities are especially significant because personal narratives and community communication do not simply replace older stereotypes. They create a counterpublic space in which disabled people can define relevant issues, recognize shared experiences, and dispute ableist interpretations. At the same time, visibility is shaped by platform norms, audience expectations,

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digital inequalities, algorithms, and the communicative resources available to account holders. The resulting content can include empowerment, solidarity, identity pride, policy critique, medical information, fundraising, or inspirational storytelling (Bruns & Burgess, 2015; Dobransky & Hargittai, 2006; Gillespie, 2014; Jackson et al., 2020).

2.3 Platform affordances and representational convergence

Platform affordances refer to the possibilities for action that arise from the relationship between technological features and user practices. Facebook and Instagram share a corporate ecosystem and several functions, but their communicative cultures are not identical. Facebook supports groups, public pages, external links, discussion threads, and long captions. Instagram emphasizes image-led profiles, hashtags, carousels, short-form video, and a visually coherent feed. These features can influence how users package stories, mobilize attention, and present identity (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Klinger & Svensson, 2015; van Dijck, 2013).

Affordances should not be treated as deterministic causes. Users adapt platforms to community needs, and communities may carry common narrative conventions across different sites. Disability advocates, for example, may use Human Interest stories on both Facebook and Instagram because personalized narratives are meaningful to the community, not simply because either platform technically requires them. Cross-platform similarity can therefore be theoretically important: it may indicate that community norms and advocacy goals outweigh platform differences (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Gillespie, 2010).

The present analysis treats platform type as a broad affordance environment and examines observable content features that operate within that environment, including visual format, caption length, and hashtag use. The central expectation is not that platforms mechanically produce a frame, but that their communicative architectures may be associated with different representational choices.

2.4 Visual content, authenticity, and agency

Visual material can influence disability representation independently of the accompanying text. A personal photograph can establish specificity, embodiment, and social context. It can show the person acting, working, studying, protesting, creating, or participating in relationships. A generic stock image, by contrast, may detach disability from a particular life and reproduce familiar visual shorthand, such as an anonymous wheelchair viewed from behind or a helping hand offered to a passive subject (Haller & Ralph, 2006; Jewitt, 2009; Pauwels, 2012; Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2015).

Personal images are not automatically ethical or empowering. Consent, authorship, camera position, caption language, and the purpose of circulation remain important. Nevertheless, personal photographs can make it easier to portray disabled people as recognizable social actors rather than abstract examples. Infographics serve a different function. They can communicate policy, accessibility, employment, or health information, but their informational orientation may produce more neutral portrayals. Posts without visual content may rely on longer textual explanation and may be used more often for documenting systemic barriers or institutional failure (franzke et al., 2020; Markham & Buchanan, 2012; Zimmer, 2010).

This study therefore expects visual content type to have a stronger association with portrayal valence than platform type alone. The comparison provides a way to separate the broad environment in which a post appears from the representational resources used inside the post.

3. Theoretical Framework

The analysis combines framing theory, platform affordance theory, and the social model of disability. Framing theory explains how

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communicators select and emphasize aspects of reality to define problems, identify causes, make evaluations, and recommend responses (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974; Scheufele, 1999). Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) generic typology provides five categories: Human Interest, Responsibility, Conflict, Morality, and Economic frames. In the present study, these frames are used to establish whether broad narrative structures vary across platforms (de Vreese, 2005; Matthes & Kohring, 2008).

Platform affordance theory directs attention to the communicative possibilities and constraints of Facebook and Instagram. Rather than assuming that technology determines meaning, the approach examines how users work with platform features and cultural conventions. Similar framing patterns across two platforms would suggest that disability-community norms and advocacy purposes travel across technical environments. Differences would suggest that platform-specific practices shape representation (boyd, 2011; Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Gillespie, 2010; van Dijck, 2013).

The social model of disability provides the normative and interpretive context for evaluating visual representation. It distinguishes portrayals that individualize disability as pathology or tragedy from portrayals that recognize inaccessible environments, discrimination, and unequal institutions. It also supports attention to agency: whether disabled people appear as subjects who act and speak, or as objects spoken about by others (Charlton, 2000; Degener, 2016; Goodley, 2016; Lawson & Beckett, 2021; Oliver, 1990). Together, these perspectives allow the study to compare platform-level patterns while treating visual form as a substantive representational choice.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

The study used quantitative visual content analysis to conduct a secondary analysis of a doctoral thesis dataset. The unit of analysis was the individual public social-media post, including its visual component, caption, hashtags, and coded contextual characteristics. The design was comparative and cross-sectional. It was intended to identify associations among platform, frame type, visual format, and portrayal valence; it did not test causal audience effects (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017; Pauwels, 2012; Snelson, 2016).

4.2 Sample and platform distribution

The corpus contained 240 publicly accessible posts concerning persons with disabilities. Facebook contributed 170 posts (70.8%), and Instagram contributed 70 posts (29.2%). The unequal platform distribution was retained because it reflected the archived thesis corpus. Content originated from public pages, groups, advocacy accounts, and public-facing profiles that met the study's inclusion criteria. Posts using disability only as a metaphor, duplicate content, private material, and posts without sufficient information for coding were excluded.

The thesis materials identify the broader data-collection period as 2020-2024. Because social-media content is continuously created, removed, and reordered, the sample is treated as a purposive corpus rather than a probability sample of all disability-related posts. Statistical findings therefore describe associations within the analysed corpus and should not be interpreted as population estimates for all Facebook or Instagram content (boyd & Crawford, 2012; Tufekci, 2014).

Table 1 Profile of the analysed corpus

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Characteristic	Category	n	%
Platform	Facebook	170	70.8
	Instagram	70	29.2
Portrayal valence	Positive	120	50.0
	Negative	80	33.3
	Neutral	40	16.7
Visual content	Personal photographs	102	42.5
	Infographics/educational visuals	45	18.8
	Stock images	28	11.7
	No visual content	65	27.1

Note. Percentages are based on N = 240 and may not total exactly 100 because of rounding.

4.3 Coding categories

The variables used in the present article were selected because they directly addressed the relationship among platform, visual form, and representation.

Platform: Facebook or Instagram.

Primary frame: Human Interest, Responsibility, Conflict, Morality, or Economic, based on the central organizing idea of the post.

Portrayal valence: positive, negative, or neutral. Positive portrayals emphasized dignity, participation, achievement, rights, or inclusion. Negative portrayals emphasized stigma, pity, pathology, discrimination, or barriers. Neutral portrayals were predominantly informational and did not contain a clear evaluative direction.

Visual content type: personal photograph, infographic/educational visual, stock image, or no visual content.

Supporting features: caption-length category, disability-related hashtag category, first-person narrative, call to action, and engagement level where available.

Frame and valence were coded as separate variables. This distinction was necessary because a negative post could document structural discrimination while still advancing a rights-based interpretation, and a positive post could contain inspirational stereotypes. The visual-content categories focused on the source and communicative function of the image rather than on aesthetic quality.

4.4 Reliability

Two trained coders independently coded 48 posts, representing 20% of the corpus. Cohen's kappa indicated excellent agreement for primary frame (κ = .847), portrayal type (κ = .892), and disability type (κ = .934), and substantial agreement for secondary frame (κ = .789). Disputed cases, representing 3.2% of the sample, were resolved through discussion and consensus. These coefficients support the consistency of the principal coding categories used in the analysis (Lombard et al., 2002; Matthes & Kohring, 2008).

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4.5 Statistical analysis

Frequencies and percentages were calculated for platform, frame, portrayal valence, and visual content type. Pearson chi-square tests of independence were used to examine platform by primary frame, platform by portrayal valence, and visual content type by portrayal valence. Cramer's V or phi was reported as an effect-size measure. Statistical significance was assessed at $p < .05$. Because several analyses were exploratory and the platform groups were unequal, emphasis was placed on the direction and practical meaning of patterns as well as on p values.

4.6 Analytical distinctiveness and publication ethics

The corpus was previously used in a publication centred on frame-portrayal associations and strategic communication (Zamir et al., 2026). The present manuscript addresses a different set of questions by foregrounding cross-platform convergence and the role of visual content. The earlier article should be cited in any submitted version, and the shared data source should be disclosed to the target journal. Tables and prose in the present article were newly organized around the current research questions rather than reproduced from the earlier publication.

5. Results

5.1 Platform and primary-frame distribution

Human Interest was the dominant primary frame on both platforms. It appeared in 62.9% of Facebook posts and 64.3% of Instagram posts. Responsibility frames accounted for 18.8% of Facebook posts and 18.6% of Instagram posts. The remaining frames were comparatively uncommon on both sites.

Table 2 Platform by primary frame

Platform	Human Interest	Responsibility	Conflict	Morality	Economic	Total
Facebook	107 (62.9%)	32 (18.8%)	16 (9.4%)	8 (4.7%)	7 (4.1%)	170
Instagram	45 (64.3%)	13 (18.6%)	7 (10.0%)	4 (5.7%)	1 (1.4%)	70
Total	152	45	23	12	8	240

Note. Pearson $\chi^2(4) = 2.847$, $p = .584$, Cramer's $V = .109$.

The association between platform and primary frame was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(4) = 2.847$, $p = .584$. The effect size was small (Cramer's $V = .109$). H1 was therefore not supported. Despite different interface cultures, Facebook and Instagram displayed nearly identical broad framing patterns. The result indicates that the organizing narratives of disability communication in this corpus were more stable than platform-specific.

5.2 Platform and portrayal valence

Portrayal valence was also highly consistent across platforms. Exactly 50.0% of posts on Facebook and 50.0% on Instagram were coded as positive. Negative portrayals accounted for 32.9% of Facebook posts and 34.3% of Instagram posts, while neutral portrayals represented 17.1% and 15.7%, respectively.

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Table 3 Platform by portrayal valence

Platform	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total
Facebook	85 (50.0%)	56 (32.9%)	29 (17.1%)	170
Instagram	35 (50.0%)	24 (34.3%)	11 (15.7%)	70
Total	120	80	40	240

Note. Pearson $\chi^2(2) = 0.287$, $p = .866$, $\varphi = .035$.

The platform-valence association was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(2) = 0.287$, $p = .866$, and the effect size was negligible ($\varphi = .035$). H2 was not supported. Instagram's visual orientation did not correspond with a higher overall positive portrayal rate. At the broad level of valence, the two platforms were virtually indistinguishable.

5.3 Visual content type and portrayal valence

Visual content type produced a different pattern. Personal photographs were associated with the highest proportion of positive portrayals. Of the 102 posts using personal photographs, 67 (65.7%) were positive, 23 (22.5%) were negative, and 12 (11.8%) were neutral. Stock images showed the lowest positive rate: only 8 of 28 posts (28.6%) were positive, while 15 (53.6%) were negative. Infographics and educational visuals were more evenly distributed and contained the highest neutral proportion. Posts without visual material were also less positive than posts using personal photographs.

Table 4 Visual content type by portrayal valence

Visual content type	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total	% positive
Personal photographs	67	23	12	102	65.7
Infographics/educational	18	12	15	45	40.0
Stock images	8	15	5	28	28.6
No visual content	27	30	8	65	41.5
Total	120	80	40	240	50.0

Note. Pearson $\chi^2(6) = 23.456$, $p = .001$, Cramer's $V = .221$.

The association between visual content type and portrayal valence was statistically significant, $\chi^2(6) = 23.456$, $p = .001$, with a modest but meaningful effect (Cramer's $V = .221$). H3 was supported. Personal photographs were 37.1 percentage points more positive than stock images and 24.2 percentage points more positive than posts without visual content. The result suggests that visual specificity and personal presence are linked with more affirmative disability representation.

5.4 Supporting patterns: caption length, hashtags, and engagement

Supporting analyses reinforced the distinction between platform identity and content choice. Short posts of 1-50 words contained the highest

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concentration of Human Interest framing (79.5%). Responsibility framing became more common in medium and long posts, although the overall association between content length and primary frame was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(12) = 12.847$, $p = .381$. The descriptive trend suggests that personal storytelling can be communicated briefly, whereas systemic critique often requires more explanation.

Hashtags were present in 189 posts. Disability-pride hashtags were the most common category and were associated descriptively with a 73.1% positive portrayal rate. Advocacy tags produced a 44.7% positive rate, while awareness tags produced 41.4%. The association between hashtag category and portrayal was statistically significant, $\chi^2(8) = 18.234$, $p = .019$. The lower positivity of advocacy hashtags should not be interpreted as weaker representation: advocacy posts often document inaccessible institutions, discrimination, or policy failure and therefore carry negative valence while directing criticism toward social systems.

The 24 highest-engagement posts were also visually distinctive. All contained an image or video, 91.7% used a first-person account, 83.3% included a call to action, 79.2% used Human Interest framing, and 70.8% were positive. These descriptive findings indicate that visual presence, personal voice, and explicit audience direction frequently appeared together in highly engaged disability communication.

5.5 Summary of hypothesis testing

Table 5 Summary of hypotheses

Hypothesis	Statistical result	Decision
H1: Primary-frame distribution differs by platform.	$\chi^2(4) = 2.847$, $p = .584$, $V = .109$	Not supported
H2: Instagram has a higher positive portrayal rate.	$\chi^2(2) = 0.287$, $p = .866$, $\varphi = .035$	Not supported
H3: Personal photographs are associated with more positive portrayal.	$\chi^2(6) = 23.456$, $p = .001$, $V = .221$	Supported

6. Discussion

6.1 Platform convergence rather than platform determinism

The most striking cross-platform finding is the absence of meaningful difference. Facebook and Instagram showed nearly identical frame distributions and exactly the same positive portrayal rate. This result challenges a simple technological explanation in which Instagram's visual emphasis necessarily produces more celebratory or aesthetically positive disability content, while Facebook's longer format produces more policy-oriented material (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Klinger & Svensson, 2015).

A more plausible interpretation is platform convergence. Disability communicators appear to carry common narrative priorities across sites. Human Interest framing dominated on both platforms, and responsibility, conflict, morality, and economic frames appeared in similar proportions. These patterns may reflect shared community norms: personal testimony, identity affirmation, achievement, accessibility, and advocacy remain relevant regardless of where the content is posted. The technical environment influences packaging, but it does not fully determine the narrative purpose.

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This finding also supports a relational understanding of affordances. A feature has communicative significance only through the practices that users develop around it. Facebook can be used visually, and Instagram can support long captions and policy-oriented storytelling. Disability advocacy communities can therefore adapt similar messages to different interfaces. The result does not show that affordances are irrelevant; it shows that they operate through community practice rather than as direct causes of frame or valence (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Gillespie, 2010; van Dijck, 2013).

6.2 Visual form matters more than platform label

Although platform type was unrelated to portrayal, visual content type was significantly associated with valence. Personal photographs produced the clearest positive pattern, while stock images produced the most negative pattern. This difference shifts attention from the platform as a whole to the representational decisions made within it.

Personal photographs can connect disability with a particular person, setting, relationship, and activity. In the thesis corpus, positive themes included professional achievement, education, sports, identity pride, assistive technology, family life, and community participation. These themes are easier to communicate when audiences can see an identifiable subject engaged in a social world. The photograph does not merely illustrate the caption; it can establish agency by showing the person as acting rather than being acted upon (Jewitt, 2009; Pauwels, 2012; Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2015).

Stock images work differently. They often rely on recognizable symbols of disability and can detach the subject from voice, biography, and social context. A generic image may be useful when privacy is necessary, but repeated reliance on anonymous imagery can reproduce disability as a category of need rather than a lived identity. The high negative proportion among stock-image posts is consistent with their use in content about hardship, medical problems, inaccessible services, or charitable appeals (Haller & Ralph, 2006; Zhang & Haller, 2013).

Infographics occupied an intermediate position. Their relatively high neutral proportion reflects an educational function: they communicate data, policy, accessibility guidance, or service information. Neutrality in this context should not be treated as a failure of advocacy. Informational content can support rights claims by making institutional conditions visible. Similarly, posts without visual content may be used for longer explanations of discrimination or policy failure and may therefore appear less positive without being stigmatizing.

6.3 Positive portrayal is not identical to empowering portrayal

The strong association between personal photographs and positive valence requires critical interpretation. Positive visibility can affirm identity and challenge the absence of disabled people from public culture. Yet visual positivity can also become inspirational spectacle. A photograph of a disabled person completing an ordinary task may be framed as extraordinary, heroic, or miraculous. Such a post appears positive but can reproduce low expectations and shift attention away from social barriers (Grue, 2016; Silva & Howe, 2012).

For this reason, ethical visual communication should combine positive affect with agency, context, and ordinary complexity. The question is not simply whether the person looks happy or successful. It is whether the post allows the subject to appear as a whole person, whether the caption respects self-definition, and whether achievement is presented without treating disability as a dramatic obstacle for audience consumption.

Negative valence also needs differentiation. Responsibility and advocacy content frequently documents inaccessible transport, employment

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discrimination, healthcare gaps, or legal failure. The negativity is directed outward toward institutions rather than inward toward the disabled body. From a social-model and human-rights perspective, such posts can be politically empowering because they identify remediable barriers and assign responsibility for change (Charlton, 2000; Lawson & Beckett, 2021).

6.4 Hashtags, visibility, and strategic communication

The hashtag findings show that the language used to position a post within a digital conversation is related to portrayal. Disability-pride tags were associated with the highest positive rate. Pride discourse typically emphasizes identity, community, self-acceptance, and visibility. Advocacy and awareness tags were less positive because they are often used to identify problems, mobilize support, or demand change (Bruns & Burgess, 2015; Clark, 2016; Jackson et al., 2020). This distinction has practical value. Advocacy organizations should not maximize positivity at the expense of structural critique. A communication strategy can use personal, consent-based imagery to build connection while also naming the policy or environmental conditions that require change. In this sense, emotional identification and institutional accountability are complementary rather than competing goals.

High-engagement posts combined personal voice, visual material, and calls to action. This suggests that audiences respond not only to positive images but to content that gives them a clear relationship to the story and a clear next step. The result supports a strategy in which disabled people's own voices and images are central, while the caption connects individual experience to a collective issue.

6.5 Theoretical contribution

The study contributes to disability communication research in two ways. First, it demonstrates that platform affordances do not necessarily produce different framing outcomes. Broad disability narratives can converge across platforms when users share community norms and advocacy purposes. This finding qualifies platform-determinist accounts and directs attention to the interaction between technical features and collective practice.

Second, the analysis shows that visual form is a meaningful representational variable in its own right. Personal photographs, stock images, infographics, and text-only posts are not interchangeable containers. They are associated with different forms of visibility, specificity, emotional orientation, and social meaning. Integrating visual content into framing analysis therefore provides a more complete account of digital disability representation.

7. Practical Implications

The results support several recommendations for disability advocates, public institutions, media professionals, and social-media managers.

Prioritize consent-based personal imagery. Personal photographs were associated with the most positive portrayals, but their use should be based on informed consent and the subject's control over context and captioning (franzke et al., 2020; Markham & Buchanan, 2012; Zimmer, 2010).

Show agency rather than staged dependence. Images should depict disabled people as participants, professionals, students, creators, family members, advocates, and decision-makers. Assistance can be shown without making dependence the person's defining characteristic.

Avoid generic stock imagery where possible. When stock images are necessary, choose images that are specific, contemporary, non-infantilizing, and free from pity-based visual cues.

Connect personal stories to structural context. A personal image can attract attention, while the caption can identify inaccessible systems, policy responsibilities, or rights-based solutions.

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Do not equate advocacy with positivity. Posts documenting discrimination may be negative in valence but constructive in purpose. Communication evaluation should distinguish stigma from systemic critique.

Use platform features strategically without assuming platform effects. The same ethical representational principles apply across Facebook and Instagram. Captions, carousels, hashtags, groups, links, and calls to action should be selected according to communicative purpose.

Build accessibility into visual communication. Images should include meaningful alternative text, videos should include captions, and text embedded in graphics should remain readable and available in the caption (Lewthwaite, 2014; Wentz et al., 2011).

8. Limitations and Future Research

The corpus was purposively assembled and cannot be treated as a probability sample of all disability content on Facebook and Instagram. Platform groups were also unequal, with substantially more Facebook posts than Instagram posts. These limitations are common in social-media research because platform search, ranking, deletion, and access conditions complicate complete population sampling (Tufekci, 2014).

The study compared broad platform categories rather than measuring every affordance directly. Future research should code features such as reels, carousels, links, group context, comment visibility, recommendation systems, and image-caption sequencing.

Visual content was classified into four broad categories. A more detailed visual analysis could examine camera angle, gaze, composition, setting, assistive-device visibility, authorship, self-representation, and the relationship between image and caption.

Portrayal valence does not fully capture empowerment. Future coding should distinguish rights-based negativity from stigmatizing negativity and positive agency from inspirational stereotyping.

The cross-sectional design identifies associations but cannot establish that a visual format caused a particular portrayal or audience response. Experiments, interviews, and audience-reception studies are needed to examine interpretation and attitude change.

The analysis focused on Facebook and Instagram. TikTok, YouTube, LinkedIn, and X may support different visual and narrative practices, particularly through short video, professional identity, and real-time political discussion.

Because the corpus overlaps with an earlier publication, future submissions should maintain transparent disclosure and ensure that the visual-platform contribution remains clearly distinct from the previously published frame-portrayal analysis.

9. Conclusion

This study examined disability representation across Facebook and Instagram by separating the influence of platform from the influence of visual content. The two platforms displayed remarkably similar frame distributions and identical positive portrayal rates. These findings do not support the assumption that Instagram's visual orientation automatically produces more positive disability representation or that Facebook's discursive structure produces a different framing pattern.

Visual content type, however, was significantly associated with portrayal. Personal photographs were linked with the highest positive rate, while stock images were linked with the lowest. The difference suggests that representational specificity, personal presence, and visible agency matter more than the platform label alone. Infographics and text-only posts served more informational and critical functions, reminding researchers that neutral or negative valence can support advocacy when it identifies social barriers.

For disability communication, the central lesson is practical and ethical. Effective representation

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depends on how disabled people are shown, whose voice organizes the post, and whether the visual and textual elements preserve dignity and agency. Facebook and Instagram provide different tools, but community norms and content choices shape the meaning of those tools. Platform strategy should therefore begin not with the question "Which site is more positive?" but with the question "What form of representation allows disabled people to appear as full social actors?"

Declarations

Ethical considerations

The analysis was limited to public-facing social-media content. Private profiles and closed groups were excluded. Usernames and other identifying details should not be reproduced in publication, and any illustrative examples should be paraphrased or used with appropriate permission. The doctoral study reported institutional ethical approval; the final submitted manuscript should include the formal approval number where required by the journal (franzke et al., 2020; Markham & Buchanan, 2012; Zimmer, 2010).

Data availability

The coded dataset contains social-media material involving potentially vulnerable individuals and is not suitable for unrestricted public release. De-identified aggregate data may be made available in accordance with institutional ethics approval and platform terms.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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