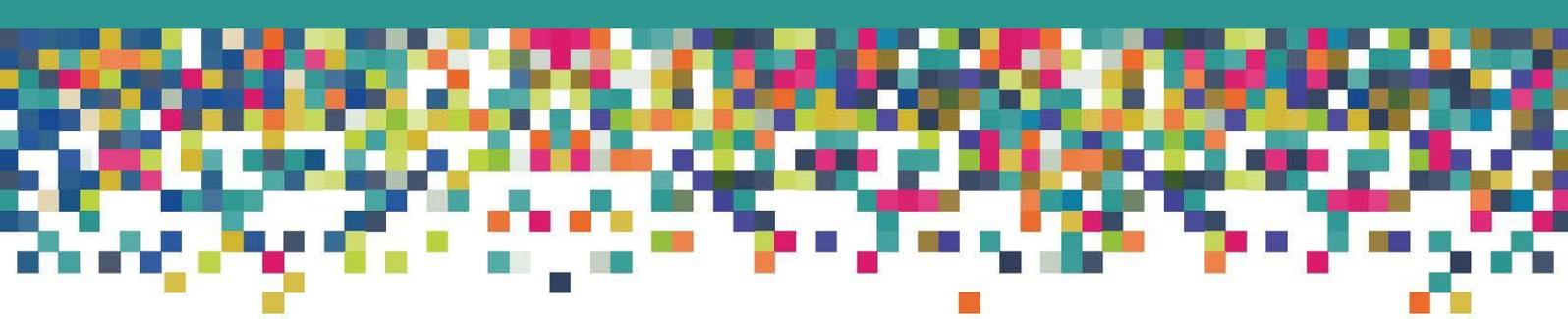




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## OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND

Examining How Representation and Accessibility Impact Each  
Other With Relation to Visual Impairment

**Rebecca Sophie Brahde**



# Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Examining How Representation and Accessibility Impact Each Other With Relation to Visual Impairment.

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## Abstract

*Where literature discussing the representation of the visually impaired community is abundant, there has been less research into social implications of accessibility, and very limited research that looks at these two processes in relation to each other. This research aims to delve into this relationship with regard to visual impairment. It acknowledges both the misrepresentation and underrepresentation in the media of visual impairment (Corbella and Acevedo, 2010; Kleege, 1999). It, furthermore, explores ableist attitudes towards making services, facilities and information accessible. This is a qualitative study which carries out ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Five interviews are with sighted respondents, and five are with visually impaired respondents. Both groups are included within this study as they both are fundamental in the processes discussed throughout this dissertation. All the participants in this study are in their twenties and are either British, or have lived in the UK for more than three years. Age group and geographical context can play a vital role in shifting the nature of the relationship between representation and accessibility, due to the varying ways that different age groups engage with the media (Pfeil and Zaphiris, 2009; Bachmann and Zúñiga, 2013), and the variations in the media and accessibility across different geographical locations. Thus, it is important the conclusions drawn within this study are not taken out of their geographical, temporal or intended context. This research argues that representation and accessibility have a somewhat cyclical relationship whereby the current discourses around representation account for a lack in understanding of accessibility, but a lack of accessibility can work to reproduce some of the oppressive stereotypes conveyed in the media. It locates societal bias as a process of upholding such structures of oppression.*

## INTRODUCTION

In 2019, a post depicting a visually impaired woman went viral on Facebook. The post included a picture of a woman with a white tip cane in one hand and looking at her phone with the other, claiming that she was faking being blind as she was looking at her phone. The assumptions made in this post, and the subsequent likes, comments and shares demonstrates a current lack of understanding of visual impairment and reflects a plethora of societal biases towards the visually impaired community. Two of the most notable assumptions made in this case were a) an individual either sees complete darkness or is sighted, and thus disregards the majority of visually impaired individuals that fall within the spectrum and b) it shows little understanding towards accessibility features within technology, in this case a smart phone. Furthermore, many of the comments reflected common, but dangerous stereotypes about blindness assuming incapacity, vulnerability and dependency. Unfortunately, such attitudes are the norm and not the exception. Following this post many more visually impaired individuals came forward about experiencing similar types of mockery towards their visual impairment, and being accused of 'faking their blindness' on a regular basis. The frequency of such accusations demonstrates the closed-mindedness of societal perceptions towards visual impairment.

Such attitudes and biases do not derive from a vacuum, but rather are a product of many different processes. Representation within the media plays the primary role in shaping societal perceptions and understanding of disability, this is particularly the case when individuals have little exposure to disability within their own lives (Haller, 2010). The representation of disability, and more specifically of visual impairment within the media is minimal (Kleege, 1999; Corbella and Acevedo, 2010). When visual impairment is represented in the media, it is frequently plagued with damaging stereotypes or idealisations of the visually impaired community (Corbella and Acevedo, 2010; Shakespeare, 1999; Ellis, 2015; Barnes, 1992). This dissertation delves into these issues of representation, and draws links between representation, societal perceptions and issues of accessibility to unveil some of the widespread systems of oppression that the visually impaired community face.

The study was motivated by some of the experiences that I have faced within my own life as a visually impaired individual. Most of these experiences could be tied to issues of representation, societal understanding and matters of accessibility. It noted, when doing the initial research for this study that whilst there was an abundant amount of literature on representation, the primary topic that I was initially concerned with, and a moderate amount of literature regarding the social implications of accessibility, there was a gap in the literature that explored how these two concepts impact each other. Therefore, this research aims to explore this relationship. It delves into societal perceptions and understandings as such perceptions act as a vehicle in linking these two concepts. The focal point of this study is the media, whilst this is a very broad term, the forms of media that shape the discussion within this study are television, film, news, books, public figures and radio.

Before I continue, it is important to note what the term visual impairment encapsulates. A visual impairment denotes the spectrum of vision loss that cannot be corrected by glasses; from individuals who are completely blind to individuals who are partially sighted (Corn & Koenig, 1996). As of 2010, the estimated number of people with a visual impairment in the world was 285 million (World Health Organization, 2012). Of these 285 million with a visual impairment approximately 39 million were blind (World Health Organization, 2012), that is approximately 13%. Only 5 to 10% of those who are classified as legally blind are not able to *'make out anything more than light levels'* and a lower percentage *'will be totally unable to perceive even bright sunshine'* (Dodds, 1993, p1-2).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This section aims to explore some of the relevant literature. Whilst it is important to explore the topics discussed within non-Western contexts and drawing from non-Western literature, this research focuses on Western literature, as the study is based in the UK. It will start by discussing some of the different conceptualisations of disability, followed by the discourses surrounding representation and accessibility. Finally, it explores some of the ways we can view representation and accessibility in relation to each other, this concept will be developed throughout the study. It draws from literature that discusses both visual impairment and disability, as many of the theories outlined regarding disability can be applied more specifically to the visually impaired.

### Theorising disability

the object of disability studies is not the person using the wheelchair or the Deaf person, but the set of social, historical, economic and cultural processes that regulate and control the way we think about and think through the body (Davis, 1995, p2).

As argued by Davis, there are many different elements that impact the way we conceptualise both disability and normality. The term disability is used to describe a large and diverse group of individuals whose only commonality lies in the fact that they have some kind of bodily variance (Davis, 1995), be it physical or cognitive; visible or invisible. Naturally, due to the ambiguity of this category, there are many different conceptualisations of disability. Here, I will explore the three prominent models that theorise disability.

#### *The medical model*

The medical model considers disability as a biological issue that needs to be overcome on an individual basis (Ellis, 2015). This has historically been the dominant way of thinking about disability due to its technical superiority, its exploration of the biological mechanics of disability and the prominence of the idea that there is a medical solution to disability (Devlieger, 2005). However, this model has frequently been criticised for treating disability as a personal issue and not a societal issue, and thus, overlooks systems of oppression (Ellis, 2015). Moreover, in seeing disability as 'curable' it creates a binary between the able-body and the disabled body, whereby the able-body is normal and

good, and the disabled body needs to be changed in order to fit in with the bodily 'norm' (Grue, 2011). Whilst this mode of thought remains prominent in certain contexts, such as in a hospital (Devlieger, 2005), it has been challenged with the emergence of the social and cultural models (Ellis, 2015).

### *The social model*

The social model aims to contextualise disability within the confines of its broader environment. Where the medical model seeks to change persons with impairment to accommodate society, *'the social model seeks to change society to accommodate people living with impairment'* (People With Disabilities Australia, 2020). Such a model sees disability as a social construct and focuses on issues of social disablement and access to the workforce. Finkelstein (1981), identified three distinct eras with relation to disability and employment prospects.

- 1) In the feudal era, disabled individuals worked as part of and were cared for by the family unit. As machinery was hand-built it could be and was frequently adapted to suit bodily variance.
- 2) During the industrial revolution, the focus shifted towards a uniformity in machinery, which thus established an able-bodied normality, as these individuals were interchangeable in the production line without need for machine variance. This was the period where the medical model of disability came to prominence as disabled individuals were cared for by institutions, thus removing them from public sight.
- 3) As information technologies emerge, Finkelstein predicted that we would see the reintegration of disabled individuals in the workforce due to adaptive technologies (Finkelstein, 1981).

Where technology has allowed for the development of adaptations and accessibility, exclusion from the workforce remains a prominent issue. Currently, one in four registered visually impaired individuals are in employment (RNIB, 2020). Nevertheless, although progression in the current era remains slow, it is through looking at disability in terms of these different eras that we can see how integral social, economic and historical context is in determining the treatment and integration of disabled people within society. Thus, viewing disability through such a lens has played a crucial role in shifting perspectives towards seeing disability as the subject of socially created oppression (Ellis, 2015). However, this model has been criticised for overlooking cultural imagery and the medical impact of impairment; not taking into account personal experience as many scholars formed a binary between the social model and the medical model (Shakespeare and Watson 2001; Ellis, 2015).

### *The cultural model*

In light of such critiques, the cultural model recognises the prominence and intertwinement of both the medical and social models when conceptualising disability (Devlieger, 2005). It acknowledges the necessity for a technical approach to the phenomenon of disability, and its impact on the individual under the medical model, whilst noting the importance of the collective struggle of disability and issues of disablement (Devlieger, 2005). Garland-Thomson's depiction of the different aspects of disability encapsulates the cultural model approach:

Disability has four aspects: first, it is a system for interpreting bodily variations; second, it is a relation between bodies and their environments; third, it is a set of practices that produce both the able-bodied and the disabled; fourth, it is a way of describing the inherent instability of the embodied self.' (Garland-Thomson, 2002, p74)

Here, Garland-Thomson demonstrates the importance of viewing disability through its many different aspects, showing that the term should not be essentialised into either a medical or a societal issue. Additionally, he draws upon the notion that able-bodiedness is unstable and can change at any point (Davis, 1995). Therefore, due to the well-rounded approach of this model, this dissertation will view disability through the cultural model lens.

### **Representation in the media**

Media representation refers to textual, visual or linguistic codes which circulate within the media and carry some form of symbolic content (Orgad, 2014; Hall, 1973). Representation is the process by which 'members of a culture use systems of signs to produce meaning' (Orgad, 2014, p48). This system of signs can include videos, images, language and many other forms of story-telling. It is therefore important to highlight that representation is an active process of meaning production (ibid). Representation holds high significance as it is fundamentally founded in relations of power: 'Power relations are encoded in media representations, and media representations in turn produce and reproduce power relations by constructing knowledge, values, conceptions and beliefs' (Orgad, 2014, p61-62).

There has been a long-lasting tradition of both underrepresentation and misrepresentation of the visually impaired community. Some argue that this is due to the historical exclusion of disabled individuals from the public sphere (Mitchell and Snyder, 2001; Barnes, 1997). However, when both visual impairment and disability have been represented, dominant stereotypes which do not reflect the experience of such communities are frequently portrayed (Ellis, 2015; Corbella and Acevedo, 2010; Bolt, 2006; Kleege, 1999, 2005). Corbella and Acevedo (2010) argue that there are three distinct periods of cinematic representation of visual impairment. Until the late thirties, blindness was portrayed as comical, pitiful or evil; the second period until the Seventies focused on overcoming the limitations faced by blind characters; finally, since the seventies, it is dealt with in terms of social justice, sexual expression or daily life (ibid). These different eras of representation demonstrate how such depictions are reliant on the society that they derive from. Such shifts represent the perceptions of those in power towards the visually impaired community, and not shifting behaviours of visually impaired individuals themselves. Where these eras demonstrate an improvement in the representation of visual impairment, a growth that has taken place alongside shifting societal perceptions towards disability and the emergence of both the social and cultural models, there is a history of underrepresentation. Additionally, films and TV shows since the Seventies often contain harmful stereotypes or play into these historical representations.

Corbella and Acevedo (2010) identify seven stereotypes of disability that persist in current times. Through these stereotypes disabled individuals are portrayed as: 1) pitiful and pathetic, 2) heroic, 3) sinister, evil and criminal, 4) 'better dead', 5) misfits, or their own worst enemy, 6) a burden for both their family and society, and 7) unable to lead a successful life. Others such as Norden, argue that disabled individuals are commonly represented as isolated within cinema. This is played out through typical storylines of isolation; in the way that film-makers visualise the disabled character's interactions with other characters; and through their tools of framing such as editing, sound design, the setting and more to suggest isolation through more symbolic means (Norden, 1994).

Authors such as Bolt and Kleege, identify a stereotype of blindness, as individuals who are ignorant, stupid or epistemologically inferior (Kleege, 1999; Bolt, 2006). As argued by Kleege, this stereotype is played out in language, where the word blind is used as a synonym for ignorance, confusion,

ineptitude and indifference (Kleege, 1999). A few of the examples that she gives are: blind date, the blind leading the blind, blind faith, blind trust and blind luck (ibid). As she argues, this use of language is not new, but the connections between a lack of sight and cognitive or spiritual incapacity were made by the Anglo-Saxon translators of the Gospels (ibid). Saussure argues that the making of difference within language is fundamental to meaning production (Saussure, 1974). Here, the linguistic difference created is: 'us', the sighted individuals as knowing, clear-minded and cognitively superior, and 'them' the blind individuals as unaware, ignorant and confused. Using such terminology in the contexts mentioned above, demonstrates a linguistic approach which represents sighted individuals in their moments of unawareness, ignorance, confusion or ineptitude as characteristic of the blind.

Another prominent stereotype in the media is perceiving disabled individuals as inspirational, to which Stella Young coined the term 'inspiration porn'. Whilst many see it as a positive stereotype, Stella Young argues that it has damaging effects as it objectifies disabled individuals for the benefit of able-bodied individuals (Young, 2014; Shakespeare, 1999). She, furthermore, argues that it demonstrates the diminished expectations that society holds for disabled individuals, as disabled individuals are viewed as inspirational even when carrying out mundane tasks (Young, 2014). Scholars such as David Bolt argue that positive stereotypes of visual impairment are, like negative stereotypes, damaging as they are not accurate representations of the community (Bolt, 2006). An example is the misconception that those who have a visual impairment experience heightened senses in other aspects, such as greater hearing or smelling capabilities (Bolt, 2006). Bolt argues that such a depiction leads to the animalisation of visually impaired individuals, whereby there is a suggestion that these individuals are of a lower evolutionary order than sighted individuals, particularly when a heightened sense of smell is presented (ibid). Additionally, such representations incubate both misunderstanding and a lack of understanding towards the experiences of the visually impaired community, especially if the media is the only exposure that an individual has to visual impairment.

Through the frequent and normalised production of meaning that connects both blindness and disability with these harmful stereotypes, we can see how an inaccurate presentation about such groups can gradually become the dominant societal perception. Brooks and Herbert argue:

Much of what audiences know and care about is based on the images, symbols and narratives in radio, television, film, music and other media. How individuals construct their social identities... is shaped by commodified texts produced by media for audiences that are increasingly segmented by social constructions... Media, in short, are central to what ultimately come to represent our social realities (Brooks and Herbert, 2006, p297).

The social effects of underrepresentation and misrepresentation of the visually impaired community are faced on a regular basis by those with a visual impairment (Barnes, 1997) as demonstrated with regular accusations of individuals faking blindness. Where individuals do not fit the mould of the misconceptions propagated through the media, they are blamed and discriminated against (Goffman, 1963), and the media is not held accountable for failing to adequately and accurately represent such groups. The historically dominant 'reflectionist' approach towards media representation argues that the media simply reflects society at large. Authors such as Orgad (2014), argue that whilst this idea remains largely prevalent within the news industry, it is faced with increasing levels of scepticism and opposition. As demonstrated with the shifting eras of representation, I would argue that representation is more reflective of power relations and the perceptions of those in power, rather than society itself.

### **Accessibility**

In its simplest form, accessibility aims to make available facilities, services, information, technology and other aspects of society that is already available to many, to individuals who do not typically have access. Accessibility has dramatically improved with the rapid expansion and development of technology; however, this improvement of accessibility has not yet been reflected in public perceptions of blind and visually impaired individuals. Nevertheless, issues in accessibility persist. This section aims to explore some of the discourses surrounding accessibility; namely, attitudes towards it, content accessibility and audio description.

In 2018 a barber shop was not accessible to a wheelchair user, and thus, the barber cut this individual's hair on the street. In the many news articles that reported this incident, the overwhelming rhetoric was that the barber was charitable and heroic in his insistence to cut this man's hair instead of turning him away (Burns, 2017). Many of the reporters gave justifications as to why the barber shop was not

accessible. None of these news articles focused on the disabled individual or the underlying issues of accessibility that place limitations upon the disabled community. This example shows the damaging phenomenon whereby, as argued by Elizabeth Ellcessor, there is a 'politics of disability as deficit and access as charity' (Ellcessor, 2016, p129). In viewing both disability and accessibility in this way, we allow for a plethora of prejudices and injustices to occur.

Viewing accessibility as charity manifests perceptions that accessibility is not a necessity. As Ellcessor argues, accessibility is often an afterthought, in both infrastructural and technological advancements (Ellcessor, 2016). This means that frequently individuals need to ask for and fight for information, services and facilities to be made accessible (Ellcessor, 2016). As accessibility differs for each disability and with varying degrees and needs on an individual basis, it can be a time-consuming process. Considering this in relation to the proliferating amount of content that is being both produced and consumed as a result of the Internet (Andrejevic, 2013), many companies and other actors are needing to prioritise which content they will make accessible (Ellcessor, 2016). Frequently it is more 'civic-minded, developmental or practical material rather than more popular or entertainment-oriented offerings' (Ellcessor, 2016, p130) which are favoured. This information prioritisation demonstrates a paternalistic nature in the notion of content accessibility, whereby actors in the accessibility field decide what content certain individuals can have access to (Ellcessor, 2016). Here we see that certain content is implicitly understood as a 'luxury' in comparison to informational content which is deemed a necessity (ibid). This entrenches the disadvantages of certain disabled groups of individuals, for instance, those who are visually impaired, as many of these individuals need accessibility features to gain access to content that is readily available to mainstream audiences (ibid).

Issues of accessibility do not solely derive from what content is made accessible, but also with how content is made accessible. Georgina Kleege explores and critiques the notion of audio description. Audio description is additional audio provided for visually impaired individuals, which aims to describe what is happening visually in theatres, television and movies (Kleege, 2016). She outlines some of the guidelines that audio description needs to follow such as: 'Descriptive adjectives are important in enhancing a scene, but must not reflect personal views' (Kleege, 2016, p92). Here she argues that many of the guidelines, such as the one mentioned above, emphasize neutrality. However, this can pose issues when it comes to interpretative elements: she gives an example of a

comedic aspect of a film where characters made sarcastic comments towards one of the character's shirts as it was ugly, however, the audio description merely described it as a 'dark paisley button-up' (ibid). In failing to make judgements that are clear to sighted viewers, it makes it difficult for blind viewers to grasp certain aspects of the content, such as the humour as with this case. She fundamentally argues that the current state of audio description guidelines, in focusing on notions such as neutrality and objectivity, prevent blind viewers from interacting with the content to the same extent as sighted viewers (ibid). Furthermore, in attempting to conceal the inevitable subjectivity of the author of particular audio-descriptions (such as word selection, choice of what to include, or other interpretative factors), audio description comes across as if it represents some unassailable truth (ibid). Thus, even where content is made accessible, visually impaired individuals do not experience the same level of content engagement as sighted viewers.

There has been a tradition of using perceived costs as the reason for not making inclusive technologies and policies (Bowe, 1993; Kanayama, 2003; Jaegar, 2005). In using such justifications and in viewing accessibility features as charity, it overlooks the costs of excluding such a large portion of the visually impaired from both employment and being able to access other forms of facilities. Accessibility should be viewed, not only as a right (Jaegar, 2005) and a necessity, but also an investment, that would enable many more to contribute to the economy as workers and consumers. In line with the general trend towards customising products, authors such as Kleege and Ellcessor advocate that accessibility should be viewed as adaptations, or customisations, that can be useful to all individuals (Ellcessor, 2016; Kleege, 2016). As with wheelchair ramps, which were originally designed for wheelchair users but are now used by anyone, particularly those with wheeled suitcases, prams or skateboards, audio description can be used for sighted individuals who are multi-tasking whilst watching a TV show for example (Kleege, 2016). The innovations created for accessibility purposes can be used to advance technology, infrastructure and other aspects of society, and in doing so, benefit those who the adaptations were not designed for.

### **Connecting accessibility and representation**

As with Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding, we can see representation as a set of power relations, whereby those involved in the media industry have the power to encode messages that will be

propagated to the public (Hall, 2003). Hall (2003) argues that the public have the power to decode such messages and the autonomy to interpret this content as they wish. Applying this theory to the discourses mentioned above can help demonstrate a few issues.

### *Encoding*

It is commonly acknowledged that those who encode meanings in the media are not a diverse group (Herman and Chomsky, 2002; Davis, 2003), and thus, frequently represent communities that they are not part of. Where there are many different forms of oppression which prevent this group from becoming more diverse, issues of accessibility can play an active role in preventing visually impaired individuals from entering the media elite. The consequence is the underrepresentation and misrepresentation explored above. Representation in this form can play a dangerous role in constructing inaccurate knowledge and skewing societal perceptions towards such groups (Orgad, 2014; Haller, 2010; Shakespeare 1999; Davis, 2003; Brooks and Herbert, 2006), impacting how these groups are treated within society (Herman and Chomsky, 2002). Social disablement is the belief that social perceptions play an active role in disabling individuals with impairment, not the impairment itself (Ellis, 2015, p9; Young, 2014). Where this is a controversial term as it is tightly linked to the social model and, therefore, does not take into account the personal experiences of impairment (Shakespeare and Watson,2001; Ellis, 2015), it does highlight the impact that societal perceptions can play in one's life. It is these societal perceptions that contribute towards preventing individuals from reaching positions of power, including high positions in the media. As part of this issue of social disablement, we see a lack of role models for the visually impaired community in the form of media representation, storylines, and in the sense of not seeing many visually impaired individuals holding high positions. This, as argued by Carroll and Rosenblum, can have a major influence on how young visually impaired adults, in particular, perceive themselves and their own capabilities (Carroll and Rosenblum, 2000, Jaegar, 2005). With many different factors at play, it makes it difficult for visually impaired individuals to enter such elite groups

### *Decoding*

Where Stuart Hall envisions audiences as having the power to decode encoded messages, authors such as Ellcessor argue that this does not take into account disabled individuals with accessibility needs (Ellcessor, 2016). Firstly, as already mentioned, not all content is made accessible, meaning that many from the visually impaired community do not have the power to decode the messages at all. When content is made accessible, as argued by Kleege, the blind viewers do not have the same interpretative autonomy, and this is not accounted for within accessibility features such as audio description as it attempts to be both neutral and objective.

Additionally, I would argue that such discourses around accessibility act to reproduce and reinforce some of the damaging stereotypes of visual impairment such as vulnerability, dependency and isolation. The vulnerability stems from the paternalistic nature of accessibility, whereby a group of individuals have control over what content certain visually impaired individuals can consume (Ellcessor, 2016). This paternalistic nature can be played out in many different forms, and does not solely apply to content accessibility. Additionally, authors such as Saugeres, argue that in Australia a lack of adequate housing, welfare provision and accessibility for individuals with disabilities makes them more dependent on others (Saugeres, 2011). Applying this to other contexts, where a lack of accessibility persists (Ellcessor, 2015; Djamasbi et al., 2006), visually impaired individuals are not able to access essential services and, thus, are commonly more dependent on those around them to compensate for this. Finally, in not providing accessibility features for popular or cultural entertainment, individuals that need such features are excluded from engagement with this content, and thus this process can contribute to socially isolating those people. Djamasbi et al. argue that developing greater accessibility features in the World Wide Web can serve as an effective tool in breaking social isolation as it allows them to better fulfil their information and communication needs (Djamasbi et al., 2006).

Hence, we see a cyclical relationship between representation and accessibility where a discourse of both underrepresentation and misrepresentation feed into societal understanding (Eitam and Higgins, 2010; Shakespeare, 1999) and beliefs about the visually impaired community. A lack of understanding or thought about visual impairment can impact the extent to which accessibility features are incorporated within content production, or even post-production. As argued by

Ellcessor, a solution to this would be to incorporate accessibility into the production process (Ellcessor, 2016). Yet, the current issues in accessibility, can feed into these negative stereotypes and act as a constraint, preventing visually impaired individuals from reaching the media elite as to be able to represent their own community.

### **Theoretical framework and research question**

Where many scholars have commented on the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of both visual impairment and disability, fewer have commented on issues of accessibility. There is very little scholarly work that connects these two concepts within disability studies to explore how they impact each other. The above discussion attempted to outline some of the major discourses within disability studies and illustrate how issues of both accessibility and representation play into larger systems of oppression. It is important to note that this dissertation does not have the scope to investigate the full extent of the relationship between representation and accessibility and its wider impact, but should merely be seen as a starting point. Due to its broader approach, this dissertation is not able to look in depth at particular issues that take place within these comprehensive concepts. For example, the accessibility within infrastructure is a very important and prominent aspect within the field (Jaegar, 2005) and carries its own discourses. Furthermore, the discussion on content accessibility is merely an insight into a much more extensive discussion.

This research differs from much of the past literature in two ways. Firstly, much of the literature regarding accessibility focuses on practical issues and solutions, an aspect that is extremely important and useful in progressing accessibility technologies. However, there is much less literature that explores attitudes towards accessibility and the social implications of the many discourses and issues faced within accessibility. This dissertation theoretically and qualitatively attempts to view accessibility through a social lens. Secondly, in looking at the relationship between representation and accessibility, broader structures and power relations become more visible.

Where theoretically I take a broad approach, connecting complex concepts and structures to bring light to an overarching system, empirically, I explore the in-depth experiences and perceptions of two specific groups of individuals. The following section will explore through qualitative means the impact that this relationship has on visually impaired individuals and the societal perceptions of

sighted individuals. From my research, it has become apparent that there has been very little work that has interviewed both sighted and visually impaired individuals so as to be able to place both groups within wider structures. Therefore, this research aims to bridge this gap and look at how the experiences of visually impaired individuals can be located within the relationship between representation and accessibility.

With this in mind, this dissertation is driven by the question: **How can issues of representation and issues of accessibility be seen in relation to each other?** Due to the broad scope of the above question this study attempts to tackle a more specific research question: **How do young sighted and visually impaired individuals living in the UK understand and experience the dynamics of representation and accessibility on the topic of visual impairment?** This approach of young people living in the UK was chosen as it reflects my own social context.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

This section aims to outline the methodological strategy and research design of this project. Ten individuals between the ages of 21 and 28 were interviewed through one-to-one semi-structured interviews. Five of the ten participants were visually impaired and the other five were sighted. Both sighted and visually impaired individuals were interviewed as this study acknowledges the agency that both groups have in shaping the experiences of visually impaired individuals (Davis, 1995).

### **Methodological rationale:**

The chosen method allowed for the collection of detailed qualitative insights and interpretations (Warren, 2002), a form of result that is vital when focusing on personal experiences and perceptions. Authors, such as Kvale, argue that the purpose of an interview is to 'investigate varieties of human experience' (Kvale, 2006: 481). As already mentioned, the intent of this research is to investigate the experiences of visually impaired individuals and explore the influence of representation and accessibility on this experience, therefore, the natural methodological selection was interviewing. An interview was more suitable than a focus group due to the sensitivity of the topic (Elmir et al., 2011; Kaplowitz, 2000). Finally, interviewing as a method was favoured as it allows for more detailed and

elaborate insights from respondents than questionnaires or other qualitative methods would provide (Rowley, 2012; Wilson, 2012).

### **Sampling**

When creating the research design, it was clear that this study would include both visually impaired and sighted individuals as the perceptions of both these groups are fundamental within the field being researched. As this research aims to explore two distinct groups, it was important to make sure there was a clear sampling universe that was used across both groups as to ensure some level of homogeneity (Robinson, 2014). Consequently, all participants within this study were in their twenties and have lived in the United Kingdom for more than three years. The study included ten individuals as this number meant that there was scope for developing cross-case generalities whilst preventing an excess in data under the time and resources allocated (Robinson & Smith, 2010). Four of the respondents were male, and six were female.

There was a combination of strategies used to obtain interviewees. For the sighted respondents, all participants were found through recommendations from my own connections. Through this recommendation process, I tried to ensure that there was diversity amongst the respondents regarding gender, race, political beliefs and other aspects of their background. It was important that these individuals were not my own connections as their knowledge, exposure and understanding on the topic could have been skewed through knowing me, a visually impaired individual. For the visually impaired respondents, I asked organisations linked to visual impairment to advertise the study, and posted on visually impaired social media groups. Through this method, I was able to find one individual who was willing to participate. The other four visually impaired respondents were found through my own personal network; I met the majority of them through being part of visually impaired organisations myself. Whilst I acknowledge that finding respondents using one's own personal network can play some role in impacting the results (Robinson, 2014), the risk of skewing the results was much lower with the visually impaired individuals. The reason being the interview aimed to draw from that individual's own experience as a visually impaired person which would,

consequently, have an impact on their perceptions of representation, accessibility and social inclusion of visual impairment. This group of respondents were also diverse in the ways mentioned above.

Unfortunately, despite attempting to ensure diversity of the participants on many different levels, all of the participants were university graduates, which is a common but problematic tendency within sampling (Henrich, Heine and Norenzayan, 2010). This study, however, acknowledges that the samples cannot be considered as representative of the greater populations that they derive from.

### **Topic guide**

This research used semi-structured interviews: whereby there was a structure of questions to ask, but this structure was flexible and could be adapted depending on how the conversation was flowing, including the freedom to ask follow up questions (Rowley, 2012; Wilson, 2012). This allowed for a natural flow of conversation, whilst maintaining some form of coherence in structure across the different interviews (Rowley, 2012; Wilson, 2012). There were two topic guides: one for the sighted respondents and one for the visually impaired respondents. Whilst the broader topics were the same, and there was an overlap in many of the questions, the interviews with the sighted individuals focused more on their perceptions, understanding and exposure to visual impairment, whereas the visually impaired interviewees were asked more questions which drew from their own experiences and opinions on the broader concepts of representation, accessibility and social inclusion. Both topic guides included some broad theoretical questions as well as questions that focused on perceptions, understanding and personal experiences. The most sensitive topics were discussed as the interview progressed, which allowed for the participants to feel more comfortable and a rapport to be built (Warren, 2002).

### **Interview dynamics**

As these respondents were all of a similar age to my own, and there were no elite structures involved, it was important to create an informal environment, as to ensure the interviewees were comfortable sharing intimate information. I introduced myself as a student which attempted to overcome researcher- respondent power dynamics (Reinharz, 1992). The interviews lasted between thirty

minutes and one hour, depending on how much the respondent had to say on the topic. Due to the current pandemic, all the interviews took place virtually. Where a Zoom video call was attempted in all cases, two of the interviews had to be done on the phone due to issues of accessibility and poor connection. Virtual interviews have been discussed to have both advantages and disadvantages and can impact the interview dynamics. The biggest downfall of virtual interviews is commonly argued to be the inability to read the full body language of the interviewee, and on telephone interviews the inability to see facial expressions as well (Warren, 2002). As a partially sighted researcher, such visual cues are not as important. The greatest advantage of virtual interviews, however, is that the respondents in most cases feel more comfortable as they generally take the call within the confines of their own home (Warren, 2002). The comfortability of the respondents was a priority, particularly due to the sensitive nature of the topic, and thus virtual interviews may have worked in favour of this research.

### **Coding framework and analysis**

The interviews were recorded on Zoom, or where they did not take place on Zoom, were recorded on a phone. These recordings were then fully transcribed and analysed through a thematic coding process, the framework for this can be found in Appendix B. This was the most appropriate way of analysing the data due to the exploratory nature of this research (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). Ideally in this process all of the data collected in the interview is accounted for within a category (Glasser & Strauss, 1967), although this is not always possible (Burnard, 1994). I therefore started by creating as many categories as possible to account for all of the usable data. These categories were then condensed and compared to find any overlaps, general trends or opposing elements between the different interviews. This process whereby the data was categorised and then condensed, was repeated to ensure that all the usable data was included in a code. As to minimise the researcher bias, these codes were cross-checked by a colleague (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017; Burnard, 1994); however, to ensure the participants' data was protected, the transcripts were anonymised.

As the categories were finalised, they were then brought into the context of the relevant literature. This technique allowed for the relevant literature and qualitative data to be integrated appropriately. When handling the data, it was important to frequently refer back to the transcripts and ensure that

the quotations that were being used, did not have a change of meaning when taken out of the context of the general conversation (Burnard, 1994). It is important to note that due to the limitations in the length of this research all the codes could not be included in the analysis section and thus, whilst I attempted to objectively select the most relevant categories, and once again cross-checked this, there is an inevitable subjectivity in this analysis (Bernard, 1994). The interviews with the sighted participants and the visually impaired participants were analysed separately.

### **Ethics and Reflexivity**

As already mentioned, this is a sensitive topic, and thus, the ethics of this research were carefully considered. The research ethics and design were approved by a supervisor before the participants were recruited. The participants were reminded during the recruitment process and in a consent form that was signed prior to the interview, that their participation was completely voluntary; they could refrain from answering any questions and could withdraw from the research at any point. All the interviews were anonymised (Whiting, 2008). During the interviews, I tried to make the respondents feel as comfortable as possible and attempted to ensure that the interview questions, particularly when related to sensitive topics, were both asked and phrased in a way that did not put pressure on the participants to answer. As the interviews took place virtually, it gave the respondents the choice to participate in the interview in a setting that made them feel most comfortable (Warren, 2002; Wilson, 2012).

It is important to note my own positionality within this topic. As a white, visually impaired female, I acknowledge that this research is influenced by my own experiences and identity and, therefore, cannot claim any form of objectivity (Danieli and Woodhams, 2005). I acknowledge that the experiences that I have due to my race, gender, country of origin and invisible nature of my disability are very different to others with a visual impairment (Hall, 2011; Hansen et al., 2017). This was very clear throughout the interview process and within the relevant literature. Measures have, however, been taken in the attempt to minimise any personal biases that I have, particularly with regard to the collection and analysis of the qualitative data (Burnard, 1994).

There is a long-lasting tradition within disability literature whereby research is conducted by non-disabled scholars; this persists within the field of media representation (Mitchell and Snyder, 2001). Many question the authenticity of individuals without disability researching disability as it reflects the problematic nature of individuals without disabilities speaking on behalf of those with disabilities (Casper and Talley, 2005; Davis, 2000; Manderson et al., 2006). As an individual who was fully sighted, I developed a visual impairment at the age of sixteen. Having spent the last six years adapting to this change, this topic is very personal to say the least. It was important to adopt techniques throughout the process that enabled me to cope with the more sensitive elements of this research (Manderson et al., 2006). Nevertheless, due to my experience of being both fully sighted and visually impaired, and due to the invisible nature of my disability, I felt that I was able to connect with both the sighted and the visually impaired participants. I, therefore, believe that my positionality was beneficial to this research project.

Where I disclosed my disability to those who were visually impaired in an attempt to ensure they felt comfortable speaking to me on the topic, I did not disclose such information prior to any of the interviews with the sighted respondents. Admittedly, two of these respondents: Respondents D and E, may have already known due to my network who recommended these individuals discussing my visual impairment with these respondents in the past. The reason why this information was selectively disclosed was to attempt to make all the participants comfortable in sharing their perceptions, beliefs and experiences. In hindsight, it would have been preferable if all the respondents had the same information disclosed to them. However, I do not believe that this has had a significant effect on the results acquired.

## **RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

This section aims to explore the perceptions, understandings and experiences of both the sighted and visually impaired respondents. It is organised thematically and explores the ideas of visual impairment as being hidden, societal perceptions and accessibility. It looks at the responses from the visually impaired and the sighted participants comparatively to explore these themes. To ensure

anonymity the participants have been renamed: Respondents 1-5 are visually impaired participants and Respondents A-E are sighted participants.

### **Hiding visual impairment**

There is a long history, of course, of locking away people with disabilities in attics, basements and backrooms- not to mention the many institutions created to keep secret the existence of disabled family members (Siebers, 2004, p2).

Tobin Siebers argues that disability is hidden on a variety of different levels. This section of the analysis will explore how the three broad themes that were discussed in the interviews of representation, institutionalisation, and the socialisation of wanting to hide one's own disability plays into his theory of disability as a masquerade.

### *Representation*

All ten participants acknowledged a lack of representation of both the disabled and the visually impaired communities. When asked for examples of visually impaired individuals, characters or other forms of representation of visual impairment in the media, many participants (both sighted and visually impaired) were not able to provide any examples. There was only one example that was mentioned twice: a blind character called Jenna in the TV series *Pretty Little Liars* who is portrayed as the enemy throughout the show. When asked on her depiction Respondent A said:

I think she is quite evil, I think she is portrayed really nastily.

Respondent C stated regarding her depiction:

It is awful. They make her seem really bad and they kind of bully her.

Jenna was the only character with a visual impairment who was mentioned, and her character falls into the tendency of depicting visually impaired individuals as evil, as commonly identified (Corbella and Acevedo, 2010; Barnes, 1992; Ellis, 2015). This example illustrates another theme that was mentioned by both sighted and visually impaired respondents during the interviews, whereby characters with a visual impairment are most commonly side characters:

they are going to be a side character so you don't get to learn of their feelings or you don't really see them as main people in society (Respondent 3).

This is another common tendency as identified by Carroll and Rosenblum, whereby most visually impaired characters are supporting characters and have little character development throughout the storylines that they are a part of (Carroll and Rosenblum, 2000; Shakespeare, 1999). Such a practice can further contribute to both underrepresentation and misrepresentation. Due to the nature of side characters, they can be one dimensional and more susceptible to stereotypes, an issue identified by Shakespeare (1999) when discussing the representation of disability. Consequently, characters of such a nature do not aid in informing or accurately exposing audiences to such communities, rather they frequently entrench misconceptions.

Two of the visually impaired respondents mentioned that a common representation of visual impairment is vulnerability. This is amongst the 11 common depictions that Barnes identified in 1992, but is also a notion that has been discussed by authors such as Georgina Kleege and Tobin Siebers regarding both representation and the societal treatment of visually impaired and disabled individuals (Barnes, 1992; Kleege, 1999; Siebers, 2004). When discussing depictions of disability, Respondent 3 noted:

I think mainly it's the fact that they are kind of vulnerable that need protecting all the time.

Where none of the visually impaired respondents identified with the representations of visual impairment in the media, one of the respondents discussed some of the social impacts of its misrepresentation.

they start doubting that you're visually impaired because you don't wear classes... you don't actually look any different from anyone else, I don't have a cane myself I don't wear glasses I dress differently to how they expect me to dress, I can engage with just as much things as an able sighted person can so I think if it's already kind of misrepresented it doesn't look very good on the people who then break that mould (Respondent 3).

Here, this respondent explains well the social implications of misrepresentation. Media institutions continue to propagate a dualistic approach to visual impairment whereby individuals are either blind, in complete darkness, wear sunglasses and need a cane, or they are sighted, and if they are blind then they are prescribed certain characteristics. When individuals from this community do not conform to these static, one-dimensional and often inaccurate conceptions, then it is the credibility of the visually impaired individuals that is questioned, as seen with the opening example of this study. Such processes can drastically alter the social experience faced by those with a visual impairment.

All ten of the respondents noted that representation plays a prominent role in either constructing knowledge, or shaping perceptions and thoughts towards communities:

I think representation is very, very important in the sense that it helps shape people's thoughts, ideas and largely their attitudes towards whoever or whatever is being written about (Respondent 4).

representation is important to me because I think... in the forms of media you learn and pick up a lot of things through that, especially when you're younger, so if certain ideas or groups of people aren't represented equally or properly then you can grow up with in built ignorance towards that, so I think it is really important to have fair representation. (Respondent B).

These two examples demonstrate a common rhetoric amongst scholars, who argue that representation plays a vital role in shaping the perceptions, understanding and even behaviour towards such groups, in this case towards the disabled community (Orgad, 2014; Barnes, 1997; Ellis, 2015; Herman and Chomsky, 2002; Brooks and Herbert, 2006). When such groups are underrepresented, several respondents noted the notion that a lack of exposure leads to lowered understanding, different treatment and even a lack of thought on the topic:

Lack of representation... leads to society not paying attention to a certain group of people or an idea, a prevalent idea in society. If that idea is not represented or if those people are not represented in one way or another everybody tends to forget about them or forget about that idea. And whatever sufferings those people are going through are left unattended to because in the long run nobody knows about it and nobody cares (Respondent 4)

This is a common discussion amongst disability scholars, where many argue that where individuals do not know people with a disability, it is the media that shapes how they think of them. Where there is a lack of representation, individuals are commonly not prompted to think about such underrepresented communities (Haller, 2010; Brooks and Herbert, 2006). Thus, we see through all these different discourses of representation, whereby visual impairment is misrepresented and underrepresented a wider notion of hiding disability from the public (Ellis, 2015).

### *Institutionalisation*

As already discussed, there has been a history of institutionalising disabled individuals (Siebers, 2004; Finkelstein, 1981). This notion was discussed in the experiences of two of the visually impaired respondents. Respondent 5 explained with relation to her experience of going to a school for visually impaired students:

well I felt that I had a representation that because of my disability I'm not able to go to a normal school, so there was that representation of you have a disability, you belong here, you can't achieve certain things, this is what's best for you, you go to a disabled school, you go to a disabled college, you stay in that box (Respondent 5).

The experience that she discusses here demonstrates a culture of separating disabled individuals from many aspects of society and treating them differently. Furthermore, she shows how such institutions can change the way that one perceives themselves and their own abilities, through sentiments that one is not normal or capable enough to go to a normal school. Finally, it is through separating visually impaired individuals from the rest of society through institutions such as specialist schools that those with visual impairments remain hidden from society (Siebers, 2004). This idea was also discussed with another interviewee, who expressed that many careers advisors had suggested that she entered a career relating to disability. Whilst this is not necessarily institutionalization, it reflects a culture of separation and can induce similar sentiments:

you can help people who are also visually impaired, or you can do this for other blind people it's never really a universal thing that any person can do it's this is the kind of thing only you can do (Respondent 3).

#### Hiding one's own disability

Another theme that was mentioned amongst some of the visually impaired respondents was a notion that they hide their own visual impairment from others.

I have to hide it in order to be normal, and sometimes I feel pretty smug and good if I am able to get away without showing it, and sort of pretending to be normal for a bit, which I don't want to have to do. (Respondent 1).

There is a practice of wanting to hide one's own disability as demonstrated by two of the participants in this study, but is also written about in some of the relevant literature (Siebers, 2004; Kleege, 1999). This practice derives from a complex history of those with disabilities being hidden (Siebers, 2004). This is still played out through practices such as underrepresentation and institutionalisation which can have impacts on the levels of societal understanding. Where within the British context there maintains a lack of understanding, visually impaired individuals are susceptible to subsequent

prejudices, discrimination and other forms of oppression. Where this can sometimes be avoided by hiding one's own disability, or individuals are made to feel ashamed of their disability, many decide to conceal it. Clearly, one can only conceal their visual impairment up to a certain threshold or in certain situations. One of the respondents also reported being told by his friend to not use his cane as it would stop them from meeting people. This also reflects a discourse discussed by Tobin Siebers (2004), whereby in the instances that disability is not hidden, disabled individuals become invisible and are frequently excluded. In this instance, it was his friend that did not want to be the brunt of this social exclusion.

### **Societal perceptions of visual impairment**

All the participants acknowledged that there is a lack of societal understanding towards the visually impaired community. Four of the five sighted participants admitted that they had little understanding of the visually impaired community. The sighted participant who stated that he had a relatively good understanding of this community said that this was due to him having a visually impaired relative. This supports arguments already in the relevant literature whereby those who know visually impaired individuals have more understanding of the community (Barnes, 1997). Additionally, all the visually impaired respondents reported experiencing bias, prejudice or discrimination on varying levels. Respondent 4 explains the discrimination as being two-fold:

unfortunately you have implicit and explicit discrimination, you can have someone explicitly discriminating against you but also you can have institutions most especially, implicitly discriminating against you and it becomes very frustrating especially if you are meant to enjoy the same opportunities and privileges as every other person (Respondent 4).

Here respondent 4 explains well how discrimination doesn't have to take the form of social encounters but can take the form of structural or institutional issues such as a lack of inclusion or accessibility. When measures are not taken to ensure inclusion or to tackle pre-existing structural hierarchies then we see a persistent imbalance in opportunities whereby it is the visually impaired individuals who lose out. Such discriminations can create feedback loops such as those with a disability being hidden or conceptions of visually impaired individuals being isolated.

On the other hand, some of the sighted individuals reflected on their levels of education and understanding towards the visually impaired community, and the general importance of education:

I don't think that just because I'm not disabled that I shouldn't know about it because there are just so many people out there, what if you see someone who's crossing the road and they have none of those beeping sounds or anything, I think it's important to be educated. (Respondent E).

Here this respondent, along with several of the other sighted respondents, discussed sentiments of wanting to help those who are visibly visually impaired but either not knowing how to, or not wanting to come across in the wrong way:

they've been blind probably for a very long time and they've done tasks probably twice as difficult. What makes me think that they need my help to cross a road? They are independent. And it's getting that balance between showing that you've got concern and care for them and treating them like a baby. (Respondent D).

One of the visually impaired respondents who has used both a white tip cane and a guide dog discussed his varying experiences:

When you use a cane most people just want to avoid you. I suppose that is good in some ways. When you have a dog, people either love you, or are terrified of you. (laughing), so certain people, you will get on the bus and they will just go on the other side of the bus. (Respondent 1).

Here we see how codes of behaviour can derive from a lack of understanding and a lack of a conversation about visual impairment. The thought processes of the sighted individuals within these interviews aimed to help the visually impaired struggling, whilst understanding some of the discourses around perceptions of the capabilities of this community. A lack of wanting to do something that could be offensive to that individual or inappropriate meant that some of the sighted respondents reported not helping, leading to discourses described above as the visually impaired community as being largely invisible (Siebers, 2004). Clearly, as discussed by the visually impaired respondent above, being stopped or helped frequently could be frustrating, however, what is often the case instead is that visually impaired individuals are ignored (Siebers, 2004). A greater exposure to visually impaired individuals, having more of a conversation about such issues and a greater understanding of accessibility would aid in sighted individuals being able to identify situations where their help is needed and understand when it is not. Clearly visually impaired individuals can ask for help, however, even in this case many of the visually impaired respondents reported hostile responses to their requests, or even being ignored when asking for help.

Some of the sighted respondents demonstrated the problematic tendency of viewing visual impairment as negative:

I wouldn't say that I feel sorry for them but I always like I don't know actually. I think I would feel very grateful for the position that I am in to have sight (Respondent C).

Here, this respondent along with two other sighted participants demonstrated notions described by Stella Young whereby disabled individuals are objectified for the benefit of non-disabled individuals. In this example, visually impaired individuals act as a reminder that one's life could be worse, they could not have sight. Such ways of thinking not only demonstrate the common tendency to see blindness and visual impairment as complete darkness, but also can frequently lead to the propensity to view visually impaired individuals as inspirational. Furthermore, it displays a binary way of thinking between sighted and able-bodied as positive, and visually impaired and disabled as a negative attribute (Davis, 1995).

### *Role models and societal perceptions of capabilities*

Three of the respondents (all sighted) discussed how underrepresentation can impact the way that a minority group view themselves and their capabilities. Two of these participants discussed this notion with respect to the underrepresentation of their own minority groups:

growing up I never saw anyone on screen that was successful who was Asian. I wouldn't say it made me feel like I was less of a person, or that I feel terrible about myself because I don't see myself out there but it's these unconscious voices that is ingrained in yourself that you feel that because you don't see yourself on screen you feel people like me who look like me will never make it (Respondent E).

She later drew ties with this experience, and the experience faced by the underrepresentation of those with a visual impairment. She explains well the subtleties of socialisation through the media, particularly when growing up and how this can affect how one sees their own prospects; an idea that coincides with an argument made by Carroll and Rosenblum (2000). In line with this, one of the visually impaired individuals expressed the following:

I feel like, no matter what, we, people with disabilities, visual impairments, we have had to do a lot of proving, proving not just to the world but to ourselves that we can achieve something but at the same time we're not really sure what we can achieve because this is a disability that we suddenly had or gradually had or had from birth so it's like we have to try and overcome our own biases in our minds where like, can I actually be something, you know, how do I do it, like I'm not even sure if I can do it (Respondent 5).

The sentiments felt by this respondent reflects the internal biases that individuals with a visual impairment face. The full extent and reasoning behind this is not something that this dissertation has the scope to address, however, many of the main themes within this study such as underrepresentation (Corbella and Acevedo, 2010), a lack of role models (Carroll and Rosenblum, 2000), social disablement (Ellis, 2015) and issues of accessibility (Ellcessor, 2016) can play prominent roles in forming these biases both internally and externally.

### **Accessibility**

Within the topic of accessibility there were two prevalent themes that arose throughout the interviews. The first was a disconnect in understanding of accessibility by the sighted interviewees

and the experiences of accessibility amongst the visually impaired respondents. The second theme discussed by both visually impaired and sighted respondents was the concept of accessibility as being a charitable act.

#### Low levels of understanding

Throughout the interviews with the sighted individuals, it was quite clear that none of them fully understood accessibility features for visually impaired individuals. Not surprisingly, the individual who knew the most features was the respondent who had a visually impaired relative, additionally he was the only sighted individual who did not mention braille. Regarding media consumption, the only other features that were mentioned were audio description and radios and podcasts, although these were only mentioned by two of the respondents. Finally, the use of a cane, guide dog and a few other infrastructural adjustments were mentioned by three of the respondents. In comparison, when asked what accessibility features they used, none of the visually impaired respondents mentioned braille. Four of the five respondents mentioned using a screen reader, the fifth participant said that he did not need it as his primary issue was with mobility and not reading. Here we see a disjuncture in the understandings of accessibility from sighted individuals, and the realities of accessibility from those who are visually impaired. This can impact how those who are sighted perceive the abilities of those with visual impairment, and therefore, their inclusion.

The task associated with editing or writing obviously involves a lot of reading and due to costs and internal processes and even just getting hands on material, it's easier to write things than to have them fully translated into Braille and so it almost makes sense from like an internal production point of view that most journalists and writers are not visually impaired (Respondent D).

Here, this respondent demonstrates a lack of understanding of accessibility and what it would entail for a visually impaired individual to be a writer or journalist. This is a phenomenon depicted by Georgina Kleege when she describes a man's reaction to her being a visually impaired writer (Kleege, 1999). This is not to say that braille is not used, but as of 2012 fewer than 1% of visually impaired individuals in the UK used braille (Rose, 2012). With the advent of technology, there are many different tools that would enable a visually impaired individual to access text, without it being turned into braille. Common misconceptions of accessibility features, as also demonstrated by the opening

example of this dissertation, inevitably influence the perceived capabilities, prospects and experience of those with a visual impairment by sighted individuals.

It is important to note that this is not to say that there are not issues within accessibility and making things accessible. When asked on accessibility, some of the visually impaired respondents reflected the following sentiments towards it:

I guess things are either really fine, like a news article, you can zoom in as much as you want or they are just not... It's either people think about it or they don't (Respondent 2).

### *Accessibility as charity*

The idea that has already been explored of accessibility as charity was reflected in several of the interviews by both visually impaired and sighted respondents.

Another common representation is making it seem like persons with disabilities are very demanding so, usually it is presented as if we are always asking for things to be done, we are always asking for a lot, but we should be told most of the things we've been asking for are just things that we need as people with disabilities to survive and thrive in life. So, for example if people ask for beeping traffic machines on the road, clearly this is not, this shouldn't be presented as demanding too much (Respondent 4).

In comparison one of the sighted respondents said on the matter:

So, for instance seeing a BBC presenter who's blind, I would then think wow BBC has gone to a lot of effort to put that together, that's very, very compassionate. And also look at how great they are at reporting in their job (Respondent D).

In viewing the effort made in making a job accessible as compassionate respondent D demonstrates the common idea that accessibility is not a necessity, but is a bonus, and those who make things accessible are charitable as discussed by Ellcessor. Where this way of thinking has already been critiqued, and some of the repercussions explored, the points made by respondent 4 depict well why accessibility should be seen as a necessity. His emphasis on accessibility simply enabling those with a disability to survive and thrive demonstrates this.

## **DISCUSSION**

This final section will discuss how the findings from this study and the literature outlined can expose a cyclical relationship between representation and accessibility. It will then briefly identify some notes for further research.

### **Linking these themes: the impacts of representation and accessibility on each other.**

Herman and Chomsky argue that the function of the mass media is:

to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behaviour that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society (Herman and Chomsky, 2002, p1).

Here, they identify how vital the media is in influencing the behaviour of audiences and those within greater society. This is a recurring theme of this research and is vital when considering the relationship between media representation and accessibility, as social perceptions and codes of behaviour act as a vehicle in connecting the two concepts.

The processes discussed in the analysis section can be linked to demonstrate a cyclical relationship between issues of representation and issues of accessibility. Where disability has been and remains to be commonly hidden from many within society particularly through processes such as institutionalization (Siebers, 2004), the media is the only form of exposure that many have to disability (Haller, 2010). However, underrepresentation and misrepresentation are common practices when it comes to the media depiction of the visually impaired community (Corbella and Acevedo, 2010; Ellis, 2015; Carroll and Rosenblum, 2000). Thus, an overall lack of exposure and the propagation of misconceptions through the common use of stereotypes all work together to impact the levels of understanding within society (Eitam and Higgins, 2010) towards the visually impaired. When discussing media representation, all the visually impaired respondents said that they felt that the media depictions were inaccurate to their own experiences.

Where the media does not accurately explore the experiences of those with a visual impairment, there is little representation of their daily processes (Brylla and Hughes, 2017), including how they access facilities, information and other services. This once again impacts societal understanding of

accessibility and how they view the capabilities of those with a visual impairment as explored above. Thus, notions such as misrepresentation, a lack of exposure, and a lack of understanding play a prominent role in reinforcing societal attitudes that uphold social structures of oppression (Haller, 2010; Barnes, 1997). Such structures influence not only how those in society view individuals with a visual impairment but can also have an impact on how those with a visual impairment view and perceive themselves (Caroll and Rosenblum, 2000; Jaegar, 2005).

Whilst there is a lot of explicit bias, discrimination and prejudice faced by those with a visual impairment (Kleege, 1999), there remains implicit discrimination which can often take the form of a lack in accessibility (Ellcessor, 2016). Jaegar argues:

If persons with disabilities are socially excluded and classified as having little value, then few efforts are made by the society to provide equal access. When persons with disabilities are socially included and classified as having value, then issues of equal access become social concerns (Jaegar, 2005, p63).

Here, he demonstrates how reliant attitudes towards accessibility are on public perceptions of the community itself. As already explored, such public perceptions are heavily shaped by media discourses, and it is a shift in perceptions towards visual impairment that will impact the levels of accessibility experienced. When accessibility is lacking, it works to prevent visually impaired individuals from having the same opportunities in every aspect of their lives as those who are able-bodied. Where many with a visual impairment are creative in figuring out ways to overcome obstacles, when there is no access there sometimes is little that an individual can do. Consequently, in these instances, individuals can be more dependent, vulnerable or isolated. Thus, these instances can play into the stereotypes depicted in the media. One of the respondents explained this well:

when the media portrays it in that way it fails to also add that this sense of vulnerability they are presenting stems out of the lack of social facilities and the lack of societal understanding for persons with disability and their needs. (Respondent 4).

As stated by respondent 4, the stereotypes that are often promulgated, are taken out of the context of accessibility and the different forms of societal oppression that are faced and simply depicted as a characteristic of visually impaired individuals as a community. Furthermore, he discusses the notion that issues of accessibility play a vital role in shaping the way that visually impaired individuals are

able to act. This notion was briefly discussed in terms of the paternalistic nature of content accessibility (Ellcessor, 2016), but clearly this notion can derive from many different forms of accessibility issues, be it infrastructural, or technological. Where there is a lack of accessibility, and a lack of willingness to make certain things accessible (Ellcessor, 2016; Jaegar, 2005), this can impact job prospects of the visually impaired community, including the likelihood of these individuals to reach the media elite as to be able to represent themselves. Additionally, it can impact the amount of visually impaired role models in the media, therefore, playing into the same systems of underrepresentation.

### **Notes for Further Research**

Whilst this research has outlined a correlation between representation and accessibility, it is important that this relationship is explored in more depth. There are many different aspects of both representation and accessibility that this research was not able to touch upon, and thus, a natural follow-on would consider how specific forms of media representation, such as representation in the news, can impact specific forms of accessibility. This research focused on technological accessibility, thus, other forms such as infrastructural and intellectual accessibility should be areas of interest. Finally, this relationship should be studied with regard to different forms of intersectionality, across varying geographical, cultural and economic contexts and amongst different age groups.

### **CONCLUSION**

In viewing representation and accessibility in tandem with each other, this study has been able to explore some of the elements that contribute to an overarching system of oppression towards visually impaired individuals. Clearly, it is theoretically broad and thus treads a fine line between attempting to contextualise complex processes and oversimplifying them, and thus it is important to acknowledge this. Furthermore, it is important to note that the situation for visually impaired individuals within the UK has significantly improved over time and will inevitably continue to do so with both technological advancements and evolving social attitudes.

In spite of this, this research has explored and combined the themes of a tradition of hiding disability, societal perceptions and issues in accessibility to make the argument that there is a co-constitutive relationship between representation and accessibility. In its simplest form, it is the media representation that works to shape societal perceptions, beliefs and attitudes towards the visually impaired community. Where this community remains underrepresented and misrepresented, it has a negative impact on the experiences faced by visually impaired individuals and can contribute to others doubting these individuals, and in some cases these individuals doubting themselves. Yet, attitudes towards accessibility can work to inhibit the levels of accessibility that can be reached, and in the instances where accessibility is not available, certain negative stereotypes such as vulnerability, dependency and isolation can be reinforced. Furthermore, where accessibility is lacking, it can work to inhibit opportunities such as job prospects of the visually impaired, particularly relevant here would be the ability for such individuals to reach high positions in the media as to be able to represent themselves. It is important to note that many companies are making an active effort to diversify their staff, including diversity schemes for disabled individuals. Yet, persistent processes of socialisation that question the capabilities of those who are visually impaired, have much more subtle but entrenched effects that can impact their prospects. This can be heightened by the tedious nature of accessibility as it is, which can impact the propensity for employers, and other institutions to make services, facilities and information accessible.

It is education, exposure and discussions about such systems, that will induce change. Where progress regarding disability and visual impairment has been made, the trajectory is much slower than it ought to be. Davis argues that disability is the missing term in the race, class and gender triad (Davis, 1995). Here he discusses how the oppression faced by individuals with a disability are not spoken about to the same extent or on the same level as race, class and gender. Where there is little attention to disability, a change in the nature of media representation will contribute to the inclusion and ultimate integration of the visually impaired community. However, so long as the discourses discussed within this dissertation persist, the visually impaired community and the issues they face will remain 'Out of Sight, Out of Mind'.



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# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A: TOPIC GUIDE

### 1. VISUALLY IMPAIRED RESPONDENTS

- What forms of media do you engage with the most? For example movies, tv shows,

#### **Representation:**

- What is your understanding of representation?
- Is representation important to you? How much do you think it matters?
- What role do you think representation, a lack of representation or misrepresentation plays within society?
- Do you feel stereotyped? What role does stereotypes play in your life?

#### **Disabled representation:**

- What are your thoughts on the representation of the disabled community in the media?
- Are there any common representations that you can think of? Or any stereotypes?
- Do you feel that you can relate to any of the representations of disability/ the disabled community, that you have seen in the media?
- How do you feel about the word disability as a label?

#### **Blind representation:**

- If you think of blind people in the media what do you think of?
- Do you feel represented in the media?
- Out of the representations of the blind and visually impaired community in the media, do you feel that these representations are accurate and representative of your own experience? Can you relate to these representations?
- Have you watched any films or tv shows that include or feature a blind or visually impaired individual? If so, what were your thoughts?
- Do you feel that the blind or visually impaired community are accurately represented in the news or other media forms?
- What do you think are common depictions of blind/ visually impaired individuals in the media?
- Do you think that blind actors should play blind characters?
- How do you think that such representations of the blind community impact societal understanding of the community or individuals from the community?
- What would you like to see in the media, and how would you like to be represented or portrayed in the media?

**Accessibility:**

- What is your understanding of accessibility?
- Do you use any accessibility features to gain access to media? If so what do you use?
- Do you face any difficulties with accessibility? What are they?
- How do you think accessibility can be improved? What is the greatest hole in accessibility for you?
- Do you think that there is enough of a conversation about making services, the media, information and so on accessible?

**Society:**

- What are your thoughts on societal understanding of the blind community?
- If you do experience societal biases, what do you think is the cause of this?
- How do you think societal bias can be overcome?

**Media and society:**

- What are your thoughts on how the media and society interact?
- Do you think that one impacts the other more and if so which one? And how?

**2. SIGHTED RESPONDENTS**

- What forms of media do you engage with the most? For example movies, tv shows, news, social network, books, radio, podcasts etc.

**Representation:**

- What is your understanding of representation?
- Do you think all communities are adequately represented in the media?
- Is representation important to you? How much do you think it matters?
- What role do you think representation, a lack of representation or misrepresentation plays within society?
- do you feel stereotyped? What role does stereotypes play in your life?
- Do you feel represented in the media?

**Disabled representation:**

- When you think of disability, what do you think?
- Have you ever thought about the representation of the disabled community in the media?
- Are there any common representations that you can think of?

- Do you feel that these representations of disability or disabled individuals are ever relatable?

### **Blind representation:**

- If you think of blind people in the media what do you think of?
- Do you feel that there is sufficient representation of the blind community in the media?
- Can you think of anything in the media where a blind individual was involved?
- Out of the representations of the blind and visually impaired community in the media that you have seen, do you feel that these representations give you a greater understanding of their experience?
- What do you think are common depictions of blind/ visually impaired individuals in the media?
- Are the characters or individuals relatable?
- Do you think that blind actors should play blind characters?
- How do you think that such representations of the blind community impact societal understanding of the community or individuals of the community?

### **Accessibility:**

- What is your understanding of accessibility?
- Have you ever thought about how blind or visually impaired individuals access information or the media? How easy do you think it is for blind or visually impaired individuals to access the media?
- Do you know about any accessibility features for blindness or visual impairment?
- Do you think that there is much of a conversation about making services, the media, information and so on accessible particularly regarding the blind community?

### **Society:**

- How often do you encounter blind or visually impaired individuals, and when you do, do you notice yourself seeing them differently to able-bodied individuals?
- Do you feel that you have much understanding of the blind or visually impaired community?
- Do you think that there is a societal bias towards blind and visually impaired individuals and if so, what do you think is the cause of this?
- Do you think that if there was a shift in and a greater extent of representation, you would have a different perception of the blind or visually impaired community?

### **Media and society:**

- What are your thoughts on how the media and society interact?
- Do you think that one impacts the other more and if so which one? And how?

## APPENDIX B: CODING FRAMEWORK

Below is a table used to code the interviews. It is organized by theme, main codes and an illustrative quote. Please note, the sighted and visually impaired respondents were analysed separately and hence were coded in separate tables.

Visually Impaired Respondent		
Theme	Main Codes	Illustrative Quote
Hiding Disability	Underrepresentation	'no, I literally can't even think of any TV show that I watch where people are visually impaired, but then I do know a lot of visually impaired people in my actual life, so no I don't really think it is represented well.' (Respondent 2)
	Misrepresentation	'Or they start doubting that you're visually impaired because you don't wear classes because you don't actually look any different from anyone else, I don't have a cane myself I don't wear glasses I dress differently to how they expect me to dress, I can engage with just as much things as an able sighted person can so I think if it's already kind of misrepresented it doesn't look very good on the people who then break that mould of actually, what they actually see as the person' (Respondent 3).
	Institutionalisation	'well I felt that I had a representation that because of my disability I'm not able to go to a normal school' (Respondent 5)
	Hiding one's own disability	'I still do think that lots of people with a disability do feel like they have to hide it, because I was hiding it for as long as I could, but then I got to a stage where it was so obvious, so I just stopped hiding it, and I felt better since I stopped hiding it' (Respondent 1).
Societal Perceptions	Low levels of Understanding	'society's thoughts about blind and persons with disabilities are very, very, very poor, and really I mean, needs so much improvement' (Respondent 4)
	Societal Bias	'there's huge discrimination and interestingly this discrimination is, unfortunately you have implicit and explicit discrimination and you can have someone explicitly discriminating against you but also you can have institutions most especially, implicitly discriminating against you and it becomes very frustrating especially if you are meant to enjoy the same opportunities and

		privileges as every other person has to but unfortunately you cannot because you're blind, it becomes very frustrating' (Respondent 4).
	Capabilities	'I think there can be a lack of understanding about what you are able to do as well, like I remember there was that news article about someone accusing someone of not being blind because they were using a phone' (Respondent 2)
Accessibility	Accessibility as great or terrible	'I guess things are either really fine, like a news article, you can zoom in as much as you want or they are just not... yeah I don't know. It's either people think about it or they don't so it either works or it doesn't' (Respondent 2).
	Accessibility seen as charity	'usually it is presented as if, like, we are always asking for things to be done, we are always asking for a lot, but we should be told most of the things we've been asking for are just things that we need as people with disabilities to survive and thrive in life' (Respondent 4).

<b>Sighted Respondents</b>		
<b>Theme</b>	<b>Main Codes</b>	<b>Illustrative Quote</b>
Hiding Disability	Underrepresentation	'I can't say that I have seen much representation of it in the things that I watch or the news that I watch, and I think if they do there isn't like a blind character as the focal point they are just on the side.' (Respondent C)
Societal Perceptions	Low levels of understanding	'I would say probably like in terms of most physical disabilities I have a lack of knowledge and understanding of that and probably it's on me as well to not actively go out and learn more about it but at the same time I guess it's also like a lack of knowing people around me who are like that made me less aware' (Respondent E)
	Negative perceptions of disability	'So I haven't really come across many blind people in my life, I guess, I don't know, I think you always kind of think... I don't know, I wouldn't say that I feel sorry for them but I always like I don't know actually. I think I would feel very grateful for the position that I am in to have sight, that is what I am trying to say' (Respondent C)
	Role models	'I can see why a blind person might think there's not really any kind of role model for me, society might not see me and being productive or beneficial in society and they can probably feel it that they're on the sideline.' (Respondent D).

	Capabilities	'I think I would say that people who would focus on the fact that they were disabled than their ability to act or their ability to do other things like for example if a writer or a presenter is disabled they would focus more on the fact that oh by the way he's an amputee' (Respondent E).
Accessibility	Low levels of understanding towards accessibility	(Asked on how visually impaired access the media) 'No I don't think I have really thought about it to be honest. I mean it can't be easy, it must be harder than for everyone else.' (Respondent A)  'because I myself don't suffer from a visual impairment I don't have a full understanding of all the ways that media platforms have adjusted or haven't adjusted for it' (Respondent B).
	Accessibility as Charity	'So for instance seeing a BBC presenter who's blind, I would then think wow BBC has gone to a lot of effort to put that together, that's very very compassionate. And also look at how great they are at reporting in their job, you know.' (Respondent D)

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