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**Ella Houston. (2024). *Advertising Disability*. Abingdon, UK. ISBN:
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As someone who has lived with a hearing disability all my life, I research and regularly reflect on how advertising portrays disabilities. Over the years, I vividly recall ads that promised to “fix” hearing loss with technology, often featuring non-disabled actors who exaggerated their impairment, only to be “cured” by the product. Such portrayals left me feeling angry, misunderstood, and misrepresented. Ella Houston’s *Advertising Disability* addresses this very issue: how disability is commodified, simplified, or poorly represented in advertising—even when the goal is to support people with disabilities.

Building on an ever-growing body of scholarship on disabilities in advertising, Houston’s analysis is both refreshing and necessary. The book offers a comprehensive exploration of how advertising shapes societal perceptions of disability, identity, and belonging. It is a must-read for scholars, activists, and practitioners seeking to understand the dynamics of disability representation and the urgent need for authentic and empowering portrayals in the advertising industry.

Houston’s book examines how meanings around disability are created, circulated, regulated, and consumed through advertising. While cultural disability studies have often focused on media such as film, literature, and television, advertising has received less attention despite its significant role in shaping societal norms. Houston argues that

advertising influences how both disabled and non-disabled people understand identity and belonging. She emphasizes the need for critical assessments of disability representation in advertising and delivers this through a rich combination of textual and semiotic analysis of advertisements and interviews with disabled women in the US and UK. These perspectives shed light on the socio-cultural and economic forces shaping disability portrayals in capitalist societies.

Her focus on disability in advertising is particularly important in a media-saturated world. Advertising, as she notes, does far more than sell products; it plays a crucial role in constructing cultural norms that determine inclusion and exclusion in public life. While advertising scholarship has long examined issues related to race, gender, and class, Houston shifts the spotlight to disability, showing how it intersects with these identities and impacts perceptions of community and belonging. Advertising, she demonstrates, is a powerful medium for both reflecting and shaping cultural understandings of disability, for better or worse.

Houston's book, structured around six main chapters alongside an introduction and conclusion, offers a compelling critique of ableist portrayals in advertising while encouraging readers to think about how the industry might empower disabled individuals and communities by challenging exclusionary norms and creating inclusive narratives. Through a sharp lens, she examines how advertisements across history, from the 18th century to the present, have contributed to the marginalization of disabled people by promoting narrow ideals of beauty, health, and productivity. As she aptly states, "advertisements often trivialize rather than transform disabling barriers in society" (p. 18).

This exclusion has not only shaped societal perceptions of who belongs but has also reinforced systemic barriers, even as advertisers tout their modern “pro-diversity” efforts.

Houston’s critique dives into charity advertising—what she terms “sadvertising”—to expose how these campaigns exploit pity to solicit donations. By depicting disabled people as helpless victims awaiting rescue, these ads perpetuate stereotypes that position disability as a personal tragedy rather than a societal issue rooted in systemic inaccessibility. Such portrayals serve non-disabled audiences by making them feel virtuous for their contributions while reducing disabled individuals to passive recipients of aid. Houston writes, “Disabled people resent assumptions that they live in a state of ‘residual existence,’ barely surviving and lacking the things that non-disabled people take for granted,” (p. 41). Her insights importantly call for a fundamental shift in how disability is framed—toward narratives that emphasize rights, contributions, and empowerment.

Equally critical is Houston’s critique of pharmaceutical advertising’s treatment of mental health, which she argues reduces complex experiences to simplistic binaries. These ads often portray pre-medication life as bleak and hopeless, while post-medication life becomes vibrantly idealized. This commodification of mental health, Houston explains, marginalizes systemic issues and promotes consumption as the sole solution. By framing mental illness as something that must be “cured,” such advertising reinforces stigma and narrows societal understanding of wellness. Houston challenges practitioners to adopt more holistic, compassionate representations that honor the multifaceted nature of mental health struggles, ensuring their messaging does not alienate or oversimplify.

Humor, a particularly sensitive tool in disability representation, also comes under Houston's scrutiny given its prominent place in advertising work. She contrasts the effective use of "crip humor"—crafted by and for disabled individuals—with careless ableist jokes that perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Humor, when thoughtfully employed, can build community, challenge exclusionary narratives, and foster a sense of belonging. However, Houston rightly warns of the risks when humor is wielded irresponsibly, noting that it can isolate or demean its intended subjects. Her nuanced perspective stresses the importance of context and audience understanding, offering a roadmap to navigate the complexities of using humor when including disabilities in advertising.

Given that beauty and fashion have historically not often been associated with disabilities, I was pleased that Houston turned to disabilities in beauty and fashion advertising, especially how the commodification of disabled bodies in these spaces has evolved. Although the inclusion of disabled models in mainstream campaigns is often celebrated as revolutionary, she critiques how these portrayals frequently mirror non-disabled beauty standards, which sanitizes disability rather than challenging societal norms. By focusing on conventionally attractive models, Houston importantly shows readers that advertisers miss opportunities to expand perceptions of beauty and difference. This is where her interviews with disabled women are especially revealing about the ambivalence that comes with advertising's representations of disabilities: some interpret them as empowering, while others see them as reinforcing limited visions of disability. As Houston notes, "Disabled people derive multiple, conflicting meanings from

advertisements,” which challenges the notion that visibility alone is sufficient for progress (p. 99).

Houston’s examination of the “supercrip” narrative, particularly in the rise of disabled influencers, uncovers how stories of resilience are commodified for corporate gain. The supercrip narrative, which celebrates disabled individuals for overcoming seemingly miraculous odds, may appear empowering to some people, but it often reinforces neoliberal ideals of self-reliance. By framing personal triumphs as inspirational, Houston is keen to remind that advertisers shift focus away from systemic inequities that marginalize disabled people. Therefore, the book is effective because it calls for greater balance, advocating for narratives that highlight structural barriers and systemic change rather than simply individual success. Houston’s insights prompt practitioners to consider amplifying disabled voices authentically without exploiting their stories for profit.

Throughout her analysis, Houston skillfully integrates critical theory with real-world examples, blending historical context, semiotic analysis, and insights from disabled individuals. Her work challenges readers to reconsider how advertising constructs narratives about disability and its potential to foster inclusivity and empowerment. By addressing the industry’s shortcomings and suggesting pathways for improvement, Houston reminds us that advertising should be responsible for dismantling barriers and reshaping public perceptions of disabilities and dismantling barriers—and that we readers should do something about it.

Houston concludes with a compelling call for more meaningful representations of disabilities in advertising and stresses that while progress exists, much of it remains

superficial. Her book offers a blueprint for scholars, activists, and practitioners to find ways to create authentic and empowering portrayals rooted in disabled people's lived experiences. For scholars, Houston provides a strong foundation for future research, particularly on advertising's role in shaping perceptions of disability. Activists can use her critiques to advocate for more responsible portrayals, while practitioners in creative industries can use her insights to develop campaigns that move beyond pandering tokenism and other harmful tropes.

Advertising Disability is essential reading for understanding how advertising shapes perceptions of disability. While further research is needed in disability advertising studies to better understand the experiences of disabled people working in the industry, Houston's book provides a needed critique of past shortcomings and a compelling vision for incorporating disabled voices to create a more inclusive and equitable future in advertising.