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Acting the part: A thematic analysis of the experiences of actors with disabilities

Jouer le rôle : une analyse thématique des expériences des acteurs en situation de handicap

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Abstract

Portrayals of disability in film and television are often unauthentic and stereotypical, influenced by perceptions of disability in society and the lack of disability representation in the industry. Actors with disabilities encounter unique barriers in the industry that limit their acting opportunities. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of actors with disabilities in the Canadian film and television industry. Nine actors with physical or sensory disabilities who had experience acting in the Canadian film and television industry were recruited through social media posts. Participants completed individual semi-structured interviews discussing how their disability has affected their work as an actor. Interviews were transcribed, then coded using a thematic approach. Six participants engaged in a focus group to discuss and expand on preliminary findings. Two main themes were identified: (1) the unique experiences of actors with disabilities working in the industry; and (2) the impact of industry professionals' perceptions of disability on the experiences of actors with disabilities. Many actors experience inadequate accommodations, inaccessible work sites, stigma, and being limited to disability specific roles. As a result, actors with disabilities have implemented strategies to improve their success when faced with social and physical barriers in the industry. Authentic representation was identified as the necessary strategy to overcome barriers and create more equitable experiences for actors with disabilities. A transformation of current perceptions of disability within film and television is necessary to achieve authentic representation and create a more accurate perception of disability in society.

Résumé

Les représentations du handicap dans les films et la télévision sont souvent non authentiques et stéréotypées, influencées par les perceptions du handicap dans la société et le manque de représentation du handicap dans l'industrie. Les acteurs et actrices handicapés rencontrent des

obstacles uniques dans l'industrie qui limitent leurs possibilités d'exercer ce métier. Le but de cette étude est d'explorer les expériences d'acteurs et d'actrices handicapées dans l'industrie canadienne du cinéma et de la télévision. Neuf acteurs et actrices ayant un handicap physique ou sensoriel qui avaient de l'expérience dans l'industrie canadienne du cinéma et de la télévision ont été recruté·e·s par le biais de publications sur les réseaux sociaux. Au moyen d'entretiens individuels semi-structurés, les participant·e·s ont discuté de la manière dont leur handicap a affecté leur travail en tant qu'acteurs/actrices. Les entretiens ont été transcrits puis codés selon une approche thématique. Six participant·e·s ont participé à un groupe de discussion pour échanger sur les résultats préliminaires et les enrichir. Deux grands thèmes ont été identifiés : (1) les expériences uniques des acteurs et actrices handicapées travaillant dans l'industrie et; (2) l'impact de la perception du handicap par les professionnel·le·s de l'industrie sur les expériences des acteurs et actrices handicapées. Plusieurs se heurtent à des enjeux d'accessibilité, à des lieux de travail inaccessibles, à de la stigmatisation et sont cantonnés dans des rôles spécifiques au handicap. En conséquence, les acteurs et actrices handicapées ont mis en place des stratégies pour améliorer leurs chances de succès face aux barrières sociales et physiques de l'industrie. La représentation authentique a été identifiée comme la stratégie nécessaire pour surmonter les obstacles et créer des expériences plus équitables pour les acteurs et actrices handicapées. Une transformation des perceptions actuelles du handicap au cinéma et à la télévision est nécessaire pour parvenir à une représentation authentique et créer une perception plus juste du handicap dans la société.

Keywords

Actors with disabilities; Qualitative research; Stigma; Workplace accommodations; Film and Television; Disability representation

Acting the part: A thematic analysis of the experiences of actors with disabilities

Very few film and television programs include characters with disabilities (GLAAD, 2021; Smith, 2020). When characters have disabilities, they are often portrayed in negative, stereotypical, and unauthentic ways (Barnes, 1992; Lane, 2019; Longmore, 1987). Most characters with disabilities are played by actors without disabilities, sparking calls for more genuine representation of disability in film and television (Black & Pretes, 2007). However, actors with disabilities experience a variety of barriers that prevent them from being cast in film and television programming (Raynor & Hayward, 2009). A further understanding of how actors with disabilities experience working within the Canadian film and television industry, and the ongoing challenges and barriers they encounter, is needed to develop recommendations to improve disability representation in the industry.

Past work exploring the experiences of actors with disabilities has highlighted barriers that actors with disabilities regularly face and the “adaptive strategies that help them deal with disability on a practical level” in the context of their work (Breedon, 2012, p. s19). Raynor and Hayward (2009) conducted focus groups with high-paid actors with disabilities and identified three barriers experienced by this group: (1) being considered only for disability-specific roles; (2) inaccessible work and audition sites; and (3) fear that disclosing disability and/or asking for accommodations would reinforce stigma and stereotypes, reducing opportunities to be cast in roles. However, there was a lack of transparency regarding research methods used, thereby limiting understanding of how these conclusions were reached.

Breedon (2012) interviewed nine actors with physical disabilities located in Southern California. This ethnographic study identified six strategies to overcome barriers (see Table 1). However, it is limited by the focus on the experience of community building and peer connection

for actors with disabilities (Breedon, 2012). Overall, a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the experiences of actors with disabilities in the Canadian film and television industry is needed to improve representation of diverse groups in film and television and increase opportunities for actors with disabilities.

Table 1

Breedon's (2012) Six Strategies to Overcome Barriers as Actors with Disabilities

Strategy	Definition
1. Community building and peer connection	Acknowledging the distinctive challenges and needs of performers with disabilities.
2. Performing vitality	Consciously projecting attributes of health and activity when auditioning or working in the industry.
3. Disability disavowal	Acknowledging the impact of a particular illness or injury on functionality, but mindfully rejecting the label disabled. Avoiding requests for disability accommodations that, although legal under California and United States law, could result in stigma and future exclusion.
4. Maintaining a repertoire of responses to discriminatory encounters	Being prepared to deflect and change stereotypes with humor or by other means such as advocacy, and refusing to play roles that stereotype disability.
5. Creating touchstones of support through friends and family	Providing resources and a buffer of relationships, experiences, and beliefs to mitigate the effects of disappointments and discrimination.
6. Professional diversification	Engaging in ancillary activities to acting (e.g., voice-over work, casting, editing, and motivational speaking) to keep in the game.

The social model of disability (Oliver, 1983) helps with understanding how the environment impacts participation. Social and structural factors (e.g., prejudicial attitudes,

inaccessible buildings, and limited modes of transportation and communication) can isolate and exclude people with impairments from full participation in society, thus resulting in oppression and the experience of disablement (Berger & Lorenz, 2016; The Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation [UPIAS], 1975). These factors perpetuate the belief that disability results in both lesser social status and life experience (Berger & Lorenz, 2016). Therefore, disability is a social construct resulting from the relationship between people with impairments and disabling environmental factors within society (Shakespeare, 2013).

According to the theory of transactionalism (Dewey & Bentley, 1949) people and their environments are co-constitutive and transact through one another, creating a person-environment whole (Dewey & Bentley, 1949). Therefore, change in one dimension (e.g., person or environment) can elicit change in the other dimension (Aldrich, 2008). Further, engagement in meaningful activities is a transaction that can support the functional relationship of the person-environment whole (Dickie et al., 2006). If this relationship is disrupted, engagement in activities is affected, and changes within the relationships are necessary to re-establish functional coordination (Aldrich, 2008). This perspective highlights the impact the environmental context can have on an individual's engagement in activities as they go about their daily life.

This paper uses the social model of disability and the theory of transactionalism to explore the experiences of actors with disabilities in the Canadian film and television industry. The primary research question is: What are the experiences of actors with disabilities while auditioning and working in the Canadian film and television industry? Secondary research questions include: What are the barriers and facilitators experienced by actors with disabilities?; what are potential strategies to improve opportunities for actors with disabilities in Canada?; and who are key stakeholders who could assist with improving diversity in the Canadian film and

television industry? This study will add knowledge about (1) the experiences of actors with disabilities during the auditioning and work process and (2) potential solutions and strategies to overcome structural and contextual barriers experienced by actors with disabilities that will improve their employment opportunities and diversity in the industry.

Methods

Following approval from an institutional research ethics board, actors living with physical or sensory disabilities who had experience in the Canadian film and television industry were recruited to participate in semi-structured interviews. Student researchers posted a recruitment flyer on social media (e.g., Twitter and Facebook). Individuals and organizations working in collaboration with actors with disabilities were also sent the research advertisement to share with their networks. Participants were invited to a one-time interview by web-conferencing if they were over the age of 18, had experience acting in the Canadian film and television industry, and identified as living with a physical or sensory disability.

Nine participants from across three Canadian provinces completed interviews that lasted approximately one hour each (see Table 2). Participants were asked about how their disability factors into their work in the industry; barriers they encountered as an actor with a disability; supports they use to improve success in the industry; how disability is typically portrayed in film and television; and what can be done to improve the experiences of actors with disabilities. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. One interviewee utilized the chat feature on Zoom (Zoom Video Communications Inc, 2016) to complete the interview. Identifying data (e.g., participant names) removed from transcripts and files were saved to a secure institutional server. Following the individual interviews, participants were invited to an

online focus group to review preliminary findings and provide feedback, concerns, and suggestions to the authors. Each participant received a \$10 gift card for their participation in the individual interview and were entered into a draw to win a \$20 gift card for participation in the focus group.

Table 2

Participant Characteristics

Identified Gender	<i>Male: 3 Female: 6</i>
Age	<i>Range: 28 to 52 Average: 39</i>
Ethnicity	All participants identified as white / Caucasian / white settler
Acting Experience	<i>Range: 2 years to 31 years Average: 25.3 years*</i>
Location	Alberta (2) British Columbia (4) Ontario (3)
Disability	<i>Onset: At birth: 7 participants Later in Life: 2 participants</i> <i>Disabilities identified by participants:</i> Amputee (2) Cerebral Palsy Ehlers’s Danlos Syndrome Deaf or Hard of Hearing (2) Blind Little person (2)

*Excluding outliers (e.g., 2 and 4 years in industry are considered outliers)

Analysis

The transcripts were analyzed using an iterative thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The transcribed interviews were uploaded to Dedoose (2021), a cloud-based software used to support mixed-method research. One student researcher completed initial coding, while the second reviewed the coding, made edits, and added any additional codes. Descriptive codes were developed through open coding, meaning that categories or themes were derived directly from the interview data. Generating meaning began by clustering codes to begin to identify themes through axial coding processes to create child-parent code relationships. As interviews progressed, the analysis focused on identifying key themes, with new codes being added and/or themes being re-worked to accurately capture the experiences of actors with disabilities. Both student researchers reviewed the coding process with their supervisor for further input and development. The focus group provided an opportunity for member checking by asking each participant to review the identified themes and confirm accuracy and appropriateness of themes and visual representations (see Figure 1) to describe their experiences in the film and television industry.

Figure 1

Visual representation of findings presented by researchers at the focus group.

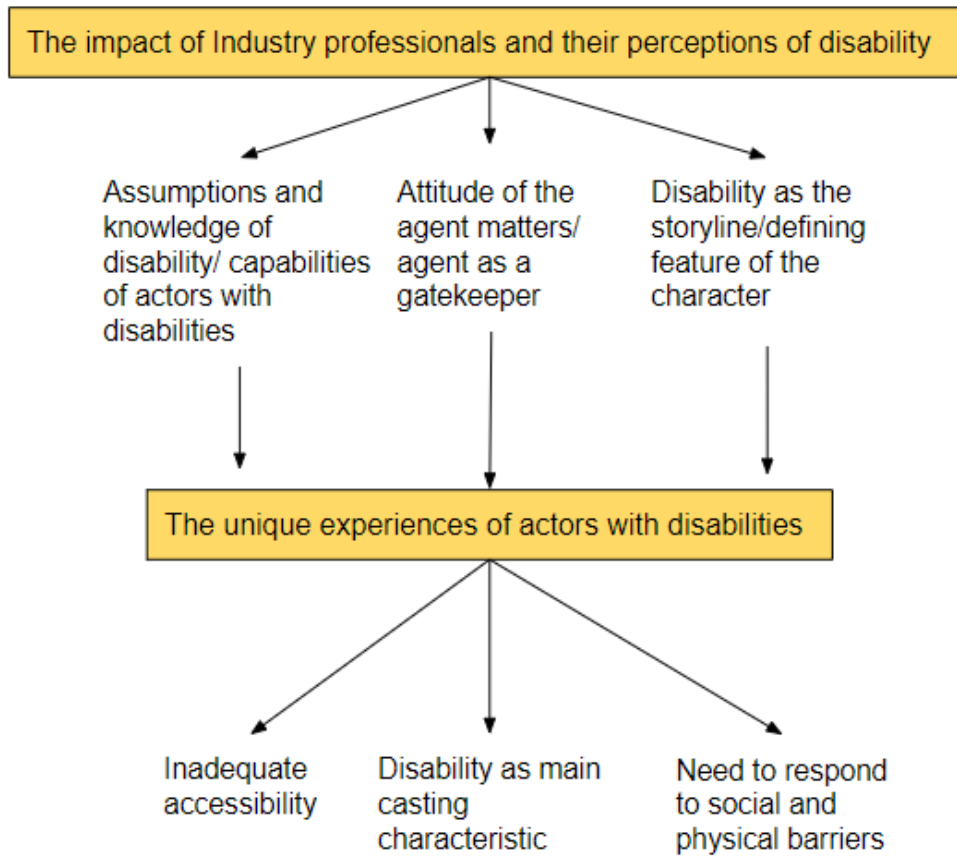


Image description. At the top of the image is the theme “The impact of industry professionals and their perceptions of disability” written in black font inside a yellow box. From the centre of the box are three black arrows pointing downwards (with one slightly left, one straight down and one slightly right), each to a different subtheme. Subthemes are written in a black font on a white background. The left-most subtheme reads “assumptions and knowledge of disability/ capabilities of actors with disabilities.” The centre subtheme reads “attitude of the agent matters/ agent as a gatekeeper.” The rightmost subtheme reads “disability as the storyline/ defining feature of the character.” Each of the subthemes has a black arrow from the bottom centre of the text box pointing straight down and connecting to the theme “The unique experiences of actors with disabilities.” This theme is also written in black font on a yellow background. Three black

arrows point from the bottom centre of the theme to each of the subthemes. The subthemes are again written in black font on a white background. The leftmost subtheme reads “Inadequate accessibility.” The centre reads “Disability as main casting characteristic.” The rightmost subtheme reads “need to respond to social and physical barriers.”

Results

Two broad themes are identified as capturing the primary influences on the experiences of actors with disabilities in the Canadian film and television industry: (1) the unique experiences of actors with disabilities, and (2) the impact of industry professionals and their perceptions of disability. Both themes consist of three sub-themes that further capture these experiences (see Table 3). Following the themes, strategies proposed by actors with disabilities to improve the industry are discussed (see Table 4).

Table 3

Theme Breakdown

Experiences of Actors with Disabilities in the Film & Television Industry					
Theme 1: The unique experiences of actors with disabilities			Theme 2: The impact of industry professionals and their perceptions of disability		
Subtheme 1: Inadequate accessibility	Subtheme 2: Disability as the main casting characteristic	Subtheme 3: The need to respond to social and physical barriers	Subtheme 4: Stigma associated with disability	Subtheme 5: Attitude of the agent matters	Subtheme 6: Disability as the storyline/focus

<p>Descriptor 1.1: Consequences of poor accessibility Descriptor 1.2: Physical barriers Descriptor 1.3: Lack of accommodations</p>	<p>Descriptor 2.1: Disability-specific roles Descriptor 2.2: Not getting opportunities because of disability Descriptor 2.3: Some opportunities for non-disability specific roles</p>	<p>Descriptor 3.1: Responding to lack of accommodations Descriptor 3.2: Responding to social barriers</p>	<p>Descriptor 4.1: Misconceptions about ability to play role due to disability Descriptor 4.2: Fear and/or uncomfotableness with disability Descriptor 4.3: Progression of diversity / inclusivity</p>	<p>Descriptor 5.1: Focused on actor’s disability Descriptor 5.2: Looking past the disability</p>	<p>Descriptor 6.1: Disability-focused storylines that are unauthentic/stereotypical portrayals Descriptor 6.2: “Why can’t I just play a friend, café worker...” Descriptor 6.3: Do not need to disclose or explain disability</p>
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The Unique Experiences of Actors with Disabilities

This theme directly addresses the current and past experiences of actors with disabilities in the film and television industry. Actors with disabilities appear to encounter disability-specific barriers, resulting in their distinct individual experience in the industry.

Inadequate accessibility

Accessibility and accommodations were common topics of discussion for actors with disabilities. For actors who use mobility aids, physical accessibility of both the audition sites and sets are typically areas of concern. While going for auditions, participants noted that there are often no elevators. In fact, participant 6 shared her experience of an audition for amputees, including leg amputees, where the building had no elevator to reach the audition room on an upper level. This reveals the lack of consideration of the needs of actors with disabilities which can prevent them from even being seen for an audition and feeling like they belong.

Common physical accessibility concerns on sets are the stairs (e.g., staircases, trailer steps) and the far distances between washrooms and craft food services, which are often accessed

via gravel roads. Equipment like cords and wires on the ground can restrict the capacity of actors who use wheelchairs to maneuver independently. The actor is then forced to ask for help or accommodations. Participant 3 identified she had to “wait for somebody to either move [the wires] or put something over them” when on a set in her power wheelchair. These barriers can impact their ability to get food, use the washroom, and move around the site.

Transportation to and from auditions or sets is another challenge noted by participants that impacts realistic opportunities for actors with disabilities. Concerns with transportation include financial, physical, and disability-specific concerns. Transportation concerns are particularly problematic when auditions or sets are outside urban centres as many participants noted that they are unable to drive long distances and/or pay for transportation, thus further limiting their opportunities within the industry.

Actors with disabilities also spoke to the lack of accommodations provided during auditions and while on set. Sensory disabilities (e.g., deaf/hard of hearing or blind) increased challenges with communication. Participant 5 explained her experience with inaccessible paperwork:

Some of the biggest barriers I've had is with paperwork. You know, none of that is ever available in an accessible format, especially stuff that you're signing. And it's like 'here's your copy and here's my,'- you know the old carbon copy thing. A lot of companies still do that stuff and you show up and it's like, well there's no way I can read this and so you either have to ask somebody to read it to you or you just go 'well I've signed a couple of these before I'm sure they're not going to be that much different from the other one' and you just, you know, you sign your life away.

Further, participant 5 expressed difficulty with receiving sides in pdf format which is not screen reader accessible. This participant noted that “nobody wants to send it to me in a word document” which would alleviate this problem. Additionally, for actors who are hard of hearing, listening to instructions on set may be difficult, and ASL interpreters are rarely made available. Overall, the lack of accommodations reduces opportunities and the quality of the performance of actors with disabilities. Participant 7 explained:

...[it] was an outdoor set and I could hear absolutely no instructions whatsoever. So, if I wasn't following somebody there's no way I was going to hit any kind of a mark and be in the right place and doing the right thing. So, that's a pretty big barrier.

Lastly, several participants expressed a lack of space for rest and relaxation on set. Actors shared experiences of fatigue and pain due to long days on sets with minimal time for rest and/or no areas designated for rest. For example, participant 3 noted: ‘There was nowhere for me to, like, lay down and rest and stuff... I can usually stay in my chair for pretty long, but some days I was there for, like, more than 12 hours.’

There are consequences resulting from inadequate accessibility. When difficulties arise as the result of poor accessibility (for example an actor in a wheelchair not being able to get to the audition site), accommodations may suddenly become necessary. Participant 2 described how this unfolded when one of his auditions was in an inaccessible building and the casting director had to quickly accommodate his needs by moving the audition down to the lobby:

I've actually had them come with, like, a handycam or something and actually have like the videographer- and that's been when they're, when they're being reasonable- come down to, like, the lobby area and then just set up like a pseudo thing for me because they realize the big ‘whoopsie.’

Most of the participants described how their requests for accommodations or assistance were met by production assistants (PAs) and assistant directors (ADs) on set. Once they are aware of the needs of actors with disabilities, these assistants will continue to check-in on the actors while on set, showing openness to their needs and a desire to make the set accessible. For example, participant 9 highlighted:

... PA's are usually our friends, the AD's too...PA's more tuned in on what's happening cuz of the walkie talkies. Some are willing to learn ASL. They look it up on Instagram or YouTube videos. That's what happened on [name of show].

Disability as the main casting characteristic

The social barriers resulting largely from industry professionals' perceptions of disability affect the types of roles actors with disabilities are considered and cast for. Actors with visible disabilities seem to be considered mainly for disability-specific roles as opposed to any other character where the disability is not the focus:

The only auditions I've had so far are more for people with disabilities roles, not really just regular roles. Which I kind of find is a bit... excluding people. Because why couldn't a person with a disability play a normal role, you know?... Playing any ordinary person?... A friend or a sister or something like that. (Participant 3)

Participants shared moments in which their disability had caused industry professionals to deny them roles. Some actors have been explicitly told they will not obtain a role due to their disability, while others described their belief that in the absence of their disability they would book more roles. Additionally, when actors with disabilities do not get a role, they often hypothesize that their disability was a contributing factor, rather than their acting skills or abilities. Participant 9 explained:

... his producer contacted me and we had a few amazing exchanges back and forth on twitter. Then one day I said okay, I use ASL and can speak and I was on [show name].

And then she said ‘oh?’ And I said ‘I’m deaf.’ And that was the end of that.

The need to respond to social and physical barriers

As a result of the physical and social barriers encountered in the industry, actors with disabilities have developed strategies to address barriers like poor accessibility and lack of accommodations. One approach was befriending people on set to meet their accessibility needs. For example, befriended people (e.g., wranglers, PAs, ADs, other actors, etc.) help actors with disabilities obtain food from craft services, receive instructions on set, and identify locations of relevant and important sites on set. Participant 2 described how he befriends helpful people on set to ensure his needs are met:

If I’m doing background work, I usually befriend the wrangler or the casting person in the morning. And then they’ll be like ‘you know what, come lunchtime, like if you want me to, I’ll get a tray and I’ll, like, I’ll serve your lunch for you, if it’s easier so that you can...’ which is not great, but it’s awesome that they are willing to offer that support.

Expressing needs is another way actors with disabilities respond to barriers, and most actors felt comfortable expressing needs and asking for help. Specific needs varied based on the individual actor, their specific disability, and barriers on set. Common requests included asking for an accessible trailer, having a couch to rest on, sighted guide assistance, sitting down in between takes, and help accessing food. Thus, expressing needs is important for receiving adequate accommodations. Participant 4 recalled requesting a space to rest:

I was always pretty vocal about stuff and sort of to advocate for myself in medium ways.

So, I remember actually doing a series of commercials for [brand name] and they did give

me like a little space and then I said I need to lie down and I remember I got a couch and then they got me a masseuse.

Some actors with disabilities, although comfortable with asking for accommodations, reported concealing their needs at times:

I don't have a problem asking for things. Sometimes I will just try to fight through it [the pain] just because I don't want to be a hassle... I would just rather just be in pain and sore if I know I don't have to work the next day instead of trying to be like 'alright scene is over, bring me my leaning cane' or something. (Participant 1)

However, participant 7 explained discomfort asking for accommodations and how he would try to manage himself:

I find rather than asking for accommodations... [I] try to be able to supply them accommodation [on my own]. And sometimes, they do find on site that there are certain things I can't do and they didn't realize it, but we usually work around it.

Actors with disabilities must adapt and problem solve in instances where their needs are not met (e.g., converting a pdf to a word file). This highlights the need for actors with disabilities to personally respond to social and physical barriers, and the extent these actors will go to do their job. For example, participant 3 described reducing her liquid intake to decrease the likelihood of needing to use the washroom while on set because of the inaccessibility of the facilities and the barriers she has encountered in the past.

Some actors found that networking with industry professionals was a way to overcome social barriers in the industry. Networking included connecting with agents, other actors/performers with disabilities, and attending different acting classes. Connections with other actors or performers with disabilities created opportunities to form relationships, partnerships,

and build support within the film and television community. Participant 8 spoke about the importance of connecting with other performers with disabilities:

Getting to connect with other folks and being able to have that, like, allies has been really important to me to feel, yeah, supported in this journey and to live, again, authentically as a disabled person trying to navigate this industry and that it's okay; I don't need to hide or pass in order to be successful. And by successful, I just mean working, like, I just want to work and make a living, you know, doing what I do.

Some actors have experience as disability consultants on set, which allows them to make connections within the industry in a different role. Additionally, networking acts as self-advertisement as industry professionals begin to recognize disability communities and provide opportunities for more actors with disabilities. Participant 5 described the benefits of networking:

I do as many things as I can to network and build supports. Different people, different countries. I'm on Facebook pages I'm on- I take acting classes regularly for anybody who's teaching them that I think has an interesting perspective. So, I'm always stretching my muscles and, you know, I get involved in film challenges and meeting different people... And it works because people come to me and they go 'hey I'm doing a thing for this whatever, do you want to be involved?' and so now I'm in a point of my life where people come to me looking for me to participate in their stuff and I don't have to go looking for them, which is a really lovely place to be.

The Impact of Industry Professionals and their Perceptions of Disability

Participants described an overriding assumption industry professionals (producers, directors, casting directors, and agents) have about disability and how these assumptions impact experiences of actors with disabilities and their representation in film and television.

Stigma associated with disability

Stigma towards disability in the Canadian film and television industry is persistent, and dramatically influences experiences of actors with disabilities. Stigma can reinforce the image of actors with disabilities as less capable, which negatively impacts their experiences in the industry. Actors expressed being perceived as unable to play a role because they have a disability, highlighting limits constructed by industry professionals:

A lot of people, one, don't think I can do the job. Even if they think I could do the job, like the acting job, they question themselves about how I'm going to hit marks, how I'm going to make eye contact, you know whether I'm going to follow the stereotype of [being blind]. (Participant 5)

Further to this point, participant 2 addressed his experience with industry professionals being unable to envision how a role can be adapted for a characters or actors with disabilities:

... well, I'm not able to jump but I am able to still convey the emotion that you're looking for in that- like, if I'm super excited and I can still throw a fist in the air, you know, that kind of thing.

Additionally, it was identified that roles with disabilities are typically background roles rather than principal roles. Stigma reduces the availability of opportunities, especially since actors without disabilities are often hired to play principal characters with disabilities. These circumstances result in the portrayal of characters with disabilities in either inaccurate or stereotypical ways. It is the perspective of disability as a burden, problem, or disadvantage that continues portrayals of characters with disabilities without consultation with the disability community, or without preference for actors who can authentically portray the role.

Actors also expressed that industry professionals have inaccurate assumptions of what disability looks like. These assumptions resulted in actors not ‘fitting into the box’ of perceptions held by industry professionals about disability. These experiences highlight the lack of flexibility within the industry. For example, participant 6 reflected on her experience:

I’m either just not disabled enough which, like, okay? Or I’m either too disabled, or it’s not the right disability they’re looking for. Like, oh yeah, like ‘we want someone who is, like, in a wheelchair’ or something, you know, ‘but you’re just missing limbs.’

A sense of discomfort and fear from industry professionals towards actors with disabilities was recurring in the experiences described by the participants. Several participants noted that they missed out on auditions because their agents or casting directors were unable to envision them in the role. Some participants described how some casting directors were explicit in stating they would not hire actors with disabilities. For example, participant 2 noted that he was told, “there’s no way that we would ever hire you anyways because of your disability.” Other participants noted that casting directors had concerns about liability on set (e.g., emergency situations with actors who use mobility devices such as wheelchairs) without consideration for the ways such concerns could be mitigated. Therefore, participants largely dismissed these concerns as excuses and a way to rationalize the industry’s lack of attention to hiring actors with disabilities.

On a more positive note, participants identified that there is progression towards diversity and inclusion in the film and television industry. While more industry professionals indicate interest in authentic casting and representation, there is ample room for growth and progression, as the experience of disability is often left out of diversity and inclusion initiatives.

They’re all talking about inclusivity in, like, film and TV. But I feel that a lot of the discussion is more about, like, race and, like, gender identity as opposed to like this

whole group of people with disabilities who don't even really get talked about in the conversation of inclusiveness. (Participant 1)

Attitude of the agent matters

Actors with agents addressed the importance of their agent's attitude and perception of disability to their success in the field and their consideration for various roles. Some agents struggle to see past the disability and do not submit actors with disabilities for characters without disabilities. Participant 3 expands on this idea by describing how her agent wanted a comprehensive demo reel (a video compilation of an actor's work) while not providing opportunities to create a demo reel:

[The agent] said, because I have a lack of, like, demo reels stuff and acting experience it's difficult for her to put me up for a normal audition. But I feel like a lot of people with disabilities would have that issue because they may not have had that many roles to begin with because ... not very many actors with disabilities are being hired for different roles.

Further this idea of only seeing an actor for their disability was highlighted by Participant 1 while looking for an agent:

When I submit to agencies the common response is 'you're too similar to another actor on our roster and we don't want you to have to compete for roles.' Which I always find kinda weird because we are two different people- just because we are the same height doesn't mean anything. I mean, two actors who are 6 feet tall who both have blonde hair will be very different people and actors.

Additionally, agents' misconceptions about the abilities of actors are transmitted to other industry professionals which has the potential to further perpetuate the stigma within the

industry. The relationship with an actor's agent is important to ensure the agent has an accurate understanding of capacities:

It comes down to their [the agent's] attitude of you first cause if they have, any way, a misunderstanding of what you're capable of they actually might pass that misunderstanding along to the casting director. Like, they might talk to that person and be like 'well actually no he has a real challenge with stairs' and it's like, "'well, no I don't, I can get up there, but you didn't ask me that question,' you know? (Participant 2)

Fortunately, some participants indicated they have supportive agents who send them for roles that are not disability specific. In these situations, actors with disabilities have opportunities to play a variety of roles which can begin the process of creating an accurate and informed image of disability within the industry. Participant 8 spoke to the support from her agent:

When I first started working with [the agent] too, I... asked her like ... 'are we going to really focus on [my disability] or not?', and she said 'well we'll put - certainly it will be in your resume and out front, but we're going to put you forward for other things,' so that's good.

Additionally, some actors choose to go unrepresented to reduce chances of being typecast to disability-specific roles. This further reinforces the impact agents have on actors with disabilities.

Participant 5 explained:

I'm very choosy right now because there's a couple of agents that would like to have me but they are- they have a disability roster and I'm not sure that I want to be necessarily pigeonholed to just going out for auditions for characters with disabilities... I would like to find myself with an agent who's like 'okay you can enter both worlds.'

Disability as the storyline / focus

When discussing the portrayal of disability in film and television, participants expressed concerns about how a character's disability is typically central to the storyline and a defining feature of the character. Additionally, these storylines portray disability in unauthentic ways, further pushing the stereotypes of disability to consumers. Participant 6 stated: "The storylines we tend to get for like movies and stuff, people with disabilities, it's like we're either a huge inspiration and that's the whole point. Or like we're sad and have nothing to live for." The participants agreed that when they receive a description for a role of a character with a disability, the description almost always focuses on the disability. Thus, it appears that aspects of the character that make them complex and realistic, including their personality and behaviours, are often forgotten in the script. As discussed by participant 1:

With people with disabilities it seems like the disability is part of their character as opposed to just being a café worker or being a librarian. It's like 'wants a little person or wants somebody who you know walks with a cane or crutches or whatever'; I think that's sort of the identity of the character as opposed to just something that is part of them.

Several participants noted that it is not necessary to explicitly comment on a character's disability, much like any other feature. Rather the participants expressed a desire for industry professionals to understand and recognize that disability does not require the spotlight.

Strategies to Improve Experiences of Actors with Disabilities

During interviews, actors were asked how the industry could improve experiences of actors with disabilities and the portrayal of disability in film and television in Canada. Authentic representation was proposed as essential to begin this process. More visibility of diverse disabilities on screen was put forth as an important way to normalize disability, and to start

discussions of advocacy regarding hiring actors with disabilities to play diverse characters, including characters with disabilities:

Now, like, when people see somebody with a disability they think ‘oh that persons got a disability’ because they don't see it that much. But the more you see something the less out of the ordinary it is. So, if like you know, you see a show and there's little people or whatever, people with wheelchairs or whatever, and they're just a regular person and that disability isn't a part really of the character, if that happened more then I think it would be more acceptable. (Participant 1)

Authentic representation includes hiring actors with disabilities to play characters with disabilities, increasing the amount of background and principal characters with disabilities, focusing less on the disability when characters have a disability, and putting actors with disabilities in roles that are not disability specific. For improving the experience while auditioning and on set, the needs of actors with disabilities must be considered (see Table 4). Overall, recommendations include informed and updated training for all industry professionals on accommodations and considerations for roles, auditions, and sets to ensure safe work environments that create more authentic narratives of disability on screen.

Table 4

Actions proposed by participants to improve authentic representation.

Actionable steps to Achieve Authentic Representation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Formal procedures such as education and training about disability, diversity, and inclusion.• Acting training for actors with disabilities so they can book more jobs.• Training industry professionals to think about needs/accommodations of actors with disabilities beforehand.• Engaging the disability community in the film and television industry and encouraging people with disabilities to become writers, producers, casting directors, etc.• On-set consultation by disability consultants to increase accessibility.• Culture change that creates a preference for authentic casting.• Access to transportation to ensure workers can get to their job; particularly for those people who rely on public transportation and other transportation services.• Having designated <i>helpers</i> on set to support actors with disabilities and others who might need it.• Training actors to advocate for their own needs.

Discussion

All participants expressed barriers encountered in the industry that resulted from being an actor with a disability. They spoke to their approach to mitigating and overcoming some of the barriers they have experienced. Further, participants expressed a need for more authentic casting in film and television and expressed a hope that this would normalize disability and improve society's perceptions of disability.

Our results are largely consistent with the existing literature on the experiences of actors with disabilities. For example, Raynor and Hayward (2009) also reported on limiting actors with disabilities to disability specific roles, inaccessible work and audition sites, and lack of accommodations for actors with disabilities on sets. Similar to our findings, Breeden (2012)

suggested connecting with other industry professionals as a strategy to overcome social barriers and challenge exclusionary practices. These similarities suggest that experiences identified in this study are not unique to the Canadian film and television industry. Although the fear of disclosing disability that was reported by Raynor and Hayward (2009) was not found in our study, our sample was limited to actors with physical and sensory disabilities, which are typically hard to conceal. Therefore, the participants in our study had fewer options for disclosure.

Actors with disabilities in both studies described inequitable opportunities in the industry that limited authentic portrayal of disability. Our findings advance the existing literature by (1) examining these issues through the lens of the social model of disability and transactionalism, and (2) identifying strategies and actionable steps to promote authentic representation of actors with disabilities in the context of the existing trends towards diversity and inclusion.

Exploring Experiences with the Social Model of Disability and Transactionalism

The social model of disability suggests that people with impairments are ‘disabled’ by social and structural factors, and inaccessible environments (Oliver, 1983; UPIAS, 1975), thus reducing their participation in meaningful activities. The perceptions that industry professionals have about disability limit opportunities for actors with disabilities through stigma, resulting in a lack of attention to building more accessible and inclusive audition sites and filming sets. If casting directors and agents cannot envision the actor in the part, or ways in which they could accommodate a wheelchair or mobility limitations on set, the actor will not be considered for the part. For example, inaccessible audition sites can prevent actors with disabilities from having the opportunity to showcase their acting abilities. The social model of disability suggests that removing physical and attitudinal barriers is needed to improve opportunities for actors with

physical disabilities. However, this model largely ignores the diverse embodied experiences of people with disabilities (Shakespeare, 2013). Further, physical accessibility, although necessary, is insufficient without social inclusion, as the pervasive stigma towards people with disabilities in the industry has a significant impact on the opportunities for actors with disabilities. Ideally, removing attitudinal barriers would promote both social and physical inclusion. Thus, a realistic understanding of disability in the industry that includes a focus on accessibility and diversity is needed to improve opportunities for actors with disabilities.

Disability is often seen as the main casting characteristic for actors with disabilities; however, actors without disabilities are often preferred to play these roles, further limiting opportunities. As highlighted in this context by Davis (2014), actors without disabilities are selected to play characters with disabilities because audiences are more comfortable knowing that even though the character has a disability, the actor does not. This sense of discomfort with the realities of disability and human diversity perpetuates the ableist practices and storylines in the industry. Further, disability storylines tend to focus on ableist perceptions of disability within society, rather than lived experiences of disability (Davis, 2014; Preston, 2016). This finding highlights the significance of attitudes, stigma, and accessibility in limiting diversity, inclusion, and authentic representation in film and television. As a result, there is an urgent need to promote a transformative change and find ways to break down stigmatizing attitudes.

Drawing on the social model and taking a disability perspective within the film and television industry allows the decentering of the “normal” mind and body from characters, actors, and other industry professionals (Ellcessor & Kirkpatrick, 2019). Disability should not be considered a barrier, but rather a catalyst of opportunity and possibility (Goodley et al., 2019). Disability increases opportunities to change the industry by engaging new voices, creating new

stories and narratives, and challenging existing power structures (Elcessor & Kirkpatrick, 2019). Thus, this perspective can strengthen the industry by building opportunities for diversity and inclusion. This begs the question: how can we shift perceptions of disability in the industry? Transactionalism will be applied to discuss how this shift can occur.

Transactionalism explains how an individual and the environment are interconnected and together impact choice, opportunities, and engagement (Dewey & Bentley, 1949), opening consideration for how a person with a disability can, in turn, affect the environment. Film and television can be used as a catalyst for change in the social and physical environment. Change in one domain can elicit change in the other domains (Aldrich, 2008). This study has revealed instances of change. For example, actors with agents who see past their disability receive more opportunities to audition for roles that are not disability specific (environment component). Actors who can implement strategies to ensure their needs are met on set (person component) experience less barriers. As industry professionals are exposed to the work of actors with disabilities in film and television, their perceptions of disability can shift, leading to more opportunities for actors with disabilities and increased expectation for authentic representation.

Participants also expressed the need for authentic casting to create more accurate perceptions of disability within society and improve the experience of actors with disabilities. To do so, participants suggested a variety of strategies. For example, education and training for industry professionals about disability, diversity, and inclusion. These interventions could produce more accurate perceptions of disability amongst industry professionals, thereby increasing opportunities for actors with disabilities in film and television. This authentic representation would then create a more informed image of disability within film and television and, in turn, society. It is crucial that a shift in the perception of disability within the industry

occurs to provide more equitable and inclusive work environments and opportunities for actors with disabilities.

Limitations

This study was limited to participants with physical and sensory disabilities. Thus, the experiences of actors with other types of disabilities are not represented in this study. As a result, additional research exploring a greater range of disabilities is needed to better understand the diverse experiences of actors with disabilities. Additional follow-up questions about the impact of inaccessible audition sites on capacity to secure roles were not asked and would add to the growing literature. Furthermore, Zoom was used to conduct interviews and unstable internet connections were occasionally experienced, which at times, impacted the quality of the transcripts. Thus, it is possible that relevant information was missed. Also, since all participants identified as white settlers and/or Caucasian, the intersections between disability and other identities, like race, gender, and sexual orientation are not captured in this study.

Conclusion

More actors with disabilities are needed in film and television as part of overall efforts towards better representation, diversity, and inclusion in the industry. However, many industry professionals have understandings about disability that result in inaccessible social and physical environments for actors with disabilities. This requires actors with disabilities to develop strategies to respond to these barriers to be successful. Authentic casting can open doors for actors with disabilities and create more informed perceptions of disability in society through film and television. Strategies that target the environment (e.g., education for industry professionals)

have the potential to improve perceptions of disability and advance equity, diversity, and inclusion in the industry, resulting in increased opportunities for actors with disabilities.

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