

International Symbol of Access: The perception of disability

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A Capstone project presented in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Policy Studies
Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences

Abstract

The International Symbol of Access (ISA) is one of the most recognized in the world and for last 45 years has been used to show the boundaries of accessibility. Arguably ISA has become a symbol of disability and not of accessibility. ISA's unrepresentativeness for all forms mobility impairment can suggest that any person using these designated areas of access must also require the use of a mobility assisting device or be subject to a process of validation based on stereotypical assumptions and preconceived notions surrounding disability. The misconceptions regarding disability shape the perceptions and expectations of society about physical disability, which leads to the questioning of whether or not an individual is actually disabled. To understand if the perception of disability is influenced by symbolism, a qualitative methodology was used to capture and record the immediate responses when viewing an image of ISA. The results of this study revealed that a majority of the participants envisioned an individual who is dependent or weak and rely on the use of an assistive mobility device.

Introduction

ISA's original intent was to serve as a method for communicating areas of accessibility through the identification and labelling of designated parking spaces, restrooms, entry ways and any other area where the public navigated in open space. However, through this process of labelling areas and directing people with physical disabilities, secondary meanings had emerged, including; increased recognition, awareness, boundary drawing and identity formation (Ben-Moshe and Powell 2007). These secondary meanings shift the emphasis toward the disability and away from the individual. Arguably ISA now signifies disability as much as it signifies accessibility (Ben-Moshe and Powell 2007). When designated areas of access are labelled

society becomes easily aware of the differences between those with physical disabilities and those without. A bathroom stall labelled by ISA becomes the disabled stall, an ISA labelled parking space becomes disabled parking, and widened entry way becomes the disabled entrance. Directing the physically disabled into labelled and reserved locations creates boundaries that raise awareness through the separation of these individuals from the majority group.

Boundary drawing can allow for society to begin building a mental profile containing characteristic imagery associated with individuals seen using an ISA labelled facility. Profiles being constructed may consist of stereotypical assumptions (Nario-Redmond 2010), and misguided perceptions, often influenced by mainstream society (Tregaskis 2000) or by the stigma associated with the disabled (Buljevac, Majdak, and Leutar 2012). These profiles may also be influenced by the concept of a synecdoche where one disabled individual's characteristics, generally the most severe, may be seen as a representation for all forms of physical disability. Any combination of these factors can attribute to the construction of a profile used for the purpose of validating whether or not an individual meets the requirements to use an ISA labelled area, furthering misconceptions about physical disability.

I argue that limited knowledge surrounding the categories of mobility impairments or physical disabilities are the cause of these misconceptions, since it can easily be assumed that when a person's disability is not visually apparent that they are not *really* disabled. Additionally, disabled individuals that do not visually meet this socially constructed mental profile, may feel as though they need to justify the authenticity of their disability to use an ISA labelled area to satisfy the stares and scrutiny of the non-disabled. An example of this is the use of accessible parking spaces. Individuals that have mobility impairments but do not require an assistive mobility device may be subjected to a process of validation and social comparison, where the

capabilities of people with mobility impairments are compared with the capabilities of the majority in society (Buljevac et al. 2012). Even physically disabled individuals who require the use of an assistive device, and that are entitled to use ISA labelled areas seek validation through this type of comparison. The problem with ISA is that it is unrepresentative, it only displays a single characteristic of mobility impairment and lacks representation for all other categories of physical disability. The unrepresentativeness of ISA promotes social comparison and leads to a process of one individual validating another individual's disability.

Currently, no studies have been identified which specifically address how symbolism or ISA itself affects the perception of disability. Existing literature focuses on the concepts related to social constructionism and their impacts on people with physical disabilities, but does not establish any link between these and symbolism. Gaps in the existing literature linking the concepts of perception and symbolism leaves room to examine, if ISA can affect an individual's perception of disability. This study seeks to examine and establish a link between these concepts through qualitative research methods.

Background

The Architectural Barriers Act of 1968 required that facilities designed, built, or altered with federal funds be made accessible by eliminating barriers that prevented access for wheelchair users and those with mobility impairments. Following the reconstruction, different variations of signs and symbols were used as an attempt to communicate these new areas of accessibility. Without a standardized design, the use of multiple symbols created confusion and ineffectiveness in communication (Ben-Moshe and Powell 2007). Within the same year, a worldwide disability advocacy organization, known as Rehabilitation International (RI), formed

a committee and hosted a global competition to gather proposals for a standardized design that would serve as the new symbol for accessibility. This design needed to be practical, self-descriptive, simple, and could not convey secondary meanings (Ben-Moshe and Powell 2007). A pictogram style image of a wheelchair, displayed in a white outline within a black square was selected, before it could be implemented a head was added to the figure for aesthetic purposes and to emphasize personhood. The finalized design would now be known as the International Symbol of Access.

Literature Review

Studies have been conducted on socially constructed concepts that examine their underlying origins and show the impacts they have on people with disabilities. Studies on stigmatization have shown that it has defined the disabled by attributing them some distinguishing and undesirable characteristics, resulting in the perception of them as a minority group, leading to segregation (Buljevac et al., 2012). Studies conducted on perception regarding disability show that they are influenced by mainstream expectations of appearance, behavior and economic performance, and that these factors constitute a misconception creating barriers for people with disabilities (Tregaskis, 2003; Dahl 1993). The concept of stereotyping is a result of society's tendency to create "normal" groups while labelling the "others". A consistent set of beliefs about the disabled population has created stereotypes of dependent, passive, incompetent and poor (Minow, 1990; Nario-Redmond, 2010). The use of symbols can also impact perception, symbols can tell stories that have the ability to grip imaginations and psyches, while also having the capacity to convey multiple meanings (Stone 2012). All of these concepts play a vital role in

helping to understand different aspects of disability and their effects on disabled people. To help paint a better portrait each of these concepts will be examined in further depth.

Symbolism

The concept of symbolism is at the foundation of the research question. The International Symbol of Access (ISA) serves as an iconic symbol, and one of the most recognized in the world. Scholars are currently questioning ISA's usage and meaning, asking: does ISA symbolize accessibility or symbolize disability? Stone (2012) explains that a symbol is anything that stands for something else, its meaning depends on how people interpret it, use it, or respond to it. Symbols can exemplify a synecdoche, which are figures of speech in which a part is used to represent the whole. Ben-Moshe and Powell (2007) argue that ISA signifies disablement as much as it signifies access. The authors explain that use of ISA has formed secondary meanings and created, 1) elements of recognition, 2) awareness and 3) boundary drawing. Recognition of a disability establishes boundaries between the disabled and non-disabled. Raised awareness can be viewed as a negatively connoted tool since the disabled may require accommodations to access particular spaces. Boundary drawing designates the areas where disability can exist, highlighting physical differences. Their article concludes by stating that every aspect of ISA that promotes inclusion can be countered with an aspect of exclusion.

Marginalization can also be attributed to the secondary meanings resulting from the use of ISA, specifically the element of boundary drawing. Burgstahler and Cory (2008) address the concept of marginalization. They explain that accommodations serve to marginalize students because those with disabilities are required to access campus in different ways from those who do not have disabilities. They use the example that when the main entrance to a building is not

accessible due to the presence of stairs, it is socially isolating for the student who must separate from a group who are using the stairs. The stairs in this example are the boundaries. The scenario of the student who is required to separate from the group is how awareness is raised, which then leads to the recognition of that student's disability. However, not all disabilities are clearly visible. These studies show how symbolism goes beyond the surface of what is visually displayed. ISA has become a part of everyday life in the sense that it is located almost everywhere people navigate in open space. It has become embedded into our society and its meaning depends on how it is interpreted. For the non-disabled ISA may just be a trivial image that is often overlooked, but for the disabled it can be the difference between inclusion and exclusion.

Stigma, Perception & Stereotyping

Buljevac, Majdak, and Leutar (2012) researched the stigma of disability. The authors state that stigma has historically been synonymous with disability, carrying a negative connotation due to the physical attributes associated with disability. Their study found that when disabled persons' limitations are easily detectable it becomes stigmatizing, because it is perceived as a sign of ill health. Barg, Armstrong, Hetz and Latimer (2010) found that stigmatization towards individuals with a disability is present among children, and that it is the perception of disability, not the reality, that leads to stigmatization. Kondrat and Teater (2009) examined the stigmatization of people with severe mental disabilities. People with mental disabilities experience stigmatization through their interactions in public and through self-stigma. Self-stigma is defined as the process where individuals expect to be discriminated against by society, in turn, they hold prejudicial beliefs about themselves. Murphy, Scheer, Murphy, and

Mack, (1988) discussed the differences between the disabled and categories of other stigmatized groups. Their discussion highlights that unlike most other stigmatized identities, devalued by society, disability is a position that can be acquired by anybody, regardless of other characteristics. Most disabled people acquired their conditions through accident or illness and many of them became impaired after they were already adults and had lived part of their lives with normal bodies (Murphy et al. 1988).

While many studies assert that stigmatization of the disabled can often have powerful effects on self-identity, a study done by Cahill and Eggleston (1995) provided different results. While examining the stigma of physical disability from the experiences of wheelchair users they found that public treatment towards wheelchair users was both positive and negative, and that the experiences of wheelchair users was not always easily classified as accepting or rejecting, kind or cruel. These uncertainties and inability to classify all experiences suggest that a wheelchair user's place in social life is more than just that of a stigmatized person.

These studies show that the concept of stigmatization can stem from society's perception of disability and in turn manifest into a self-identity where the individual expects to be discriminated against. Stigmatization is a social construct formed from the attitudes that society holds towards people with disabilities, however, not all experiences of the disabled have been the same.

Studies suggest that the perception of disability has been influenced by mainstream expectations and media portrayals. A mental image or the way in which individuals interpret and understand something, can be argued as the driving force behind perspectives held towards people with disabilities. Traditionally, the mainstream perception of disabled people is that they are individually deficient because of their impairments (Tregaskis 2000). Disability scholars

have demonstrated that disability is an artificial and exclusionary social construction which penalizes people with impairments, who do not conform to the mainstream expectations of appearance, behavior, or economic performance (Tregaskis 2000). Dahl (1993) discusses the effect of mass media on public opinion and public perception of the disabled. Her article states that the attitudes, beliefs, and misconceptions of society constitute a major barrier for people with disabilities. Dahl continues by stating that it has been a convention of all literature and art that physical deformity, chronic illness, or any visible defect symbolizes an evil and malevolent nature and monstrous behavior. Film and television have also employed the metaphor of the disabled as helpless victim (Dahl 1993). Research into the relationship between physical attractiveness and crime in the various media found that physical ugliness and physical differences are often associated with depictions of violence and crime (Dahl 1993).

Antonak and Livneh (2000) examined methodological and psychological measurements used to determine the perceptions toward people with disabilities. Their research coincides with the previous studies on the aspect that full acceptance of people with disabilities by the non-disabled may not occur. They state that to make this determination it must first be possible to obtain conclusive answers concerning the relationship between these attitudes and the acceptance and integration of persons with disabilities into society, and will require innovative experimental methods and psychometrically sound instruments that are reliable, valid, and multidimensional. Studies have also examined the perception of disability by the non-disabled. MacDonald and Hall (1969) found that, in conflict with the previous studies, that the nondisabled generally perceived disability as being less debilitating socially than other personal-social dimensions including; vocational, parental, and marital.

A widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person, otherwise known as stereotyping, is a concept linked to perception and stigmatization of the physically disabled. Within this link it seems to follow that perception leads to stigma which leads to stereotyping. Stereotypes are generally perpetuated indefinitely and can be considered a by-product of ignorance. It can be argued that it is society's lack of understanding about the various forms of mobility impairment that leads to stereotyping. Nario-Redmond (2010) researched the cultural stereotypes of disabled and non-disabled men and women. The problem identified is that there are a consistent set of beliefs about the disabled population. A free response methodology was used to capture these beliefs from disabled and non-disabled participants. The results of this study showed that the most frequent stereotypes of disabled men and women were that of dependent, incompetent, and asexual. Disabled men and women were both characterized as unattractive and weak, passive and heroic. The difference between disabled men and women are that men were more likely to be stereotyped as angry, inferior, and lazy while the women were more frequently stereotyped as vulnerable, socially excluded, and poor.

Labelling is another term, similar to that of stereotyping, also producing similar affects. Hatton (2009) researched the labelling effect, finding that the effects of labelling on the individual will nearly always be detrimental, and that structural oppression, which is created by society, attaches a meaning to physical and mental variation based on a common perception of normality. Ho (2004) discusses the concept of labelling regarding learning disabilities of children. Her essay argues that a commitment to inclusion and equality requires an acknowledgement of the various categorization problems of disability. The label of "learning disability" may provide benefits and legal protections, but not everyone accepts this label as morally neutral. Keeping the historical oppression of the disabled in mind, not everyone wants to

think of or label themselves as disabled (Ho 2004). The concept of stereotyping results from a lack of understanding and a misconception about disability. The act of labelling may be deemed necessary when used in a specific context, but can result in unwanted categorizations with detrimental effects.

Social Constructionism & Language

The theory of social constructionism is at the center of how society perceives disability, and how their perceptions can be influenced through symbolism. One of the principal assumptions of social constructionism is that through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life our versions of knowledge become fabricated (Burr 2003). Social constructionists are concerned with language due to how it is constantly changing and how the meaning of words can vary, influencing the ways we think about the people or concepts to which specific language refers. Burr (2003) suggests that rather than viewing language and thought as two separate phenomena they should be viewed as single inseparable component because language provides the basis for all of our thoughts. She describes how the use of language is the medium by which individuals produce and construct the experiences of ourselves and each other. Burr provides a an example to help illustrate her point, which is that other languages use different words to describe the same concepts, “the words we use to refer to concepts are just a convention - any word would do as long as everyone uses the same one.”

The language shared between individuals is how ideas begin to be constructed based on one’s particular versions of a situation or event, known as discourse. Discourse is defined by Burr (2003) as a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, or statements, that when put together produce a particular version of events. According to this definition there will

always be multiple discourses of the same interaction or event, each being interpreted in a different way depending on the individual. The construction of these discourses can have different implications because each discourse is the claim to the truth of what an object, event, or meaning really is or should be. When applying discourse to the idea of disability it can be argued that disability is not physiological, but rather it is social. Whether or not someone is considered to be ill or disabled is dependent on society's criteria which is based on the particular norms and values of the dominant social group in society.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) state that the social world is constructed by human action and interaction. They claim the relationship between individuals and society operate in two directions, human beings are continually constructing the social world, which in turn then becomes a reality to which they must respond to. However, even though humans may construct the social world, they cannot construct it in any way they choose. This is because at birth humans enter a world that is already constructed by others preceding them.

These studies have examined the origins and effects of individual concepts regarding disability, including; symbolism, stigma and stereotypes. Their results are consistent in the aspect that all have powerful impacts on the disabled and that they are generated from society. It can be inferred from prior research that the disabled are constant subjects of social comparison and mainstream expectations established by "normal" groups. The negative effects experienced by the disabled from these perceptions and attitudes are being perpetuated without any answers for how to reduce or eliminate their effects. When used in the context of disability, the concept of language can have different meanings. Morris (2001) recognizes and explains the differences of how language is used to interpret the experiences of the disabled. She explains that the commonly used and interchangeable terms of disability and impairment have been redefined in

Britain by the disabled people's movement. The term "disability" is not to mean impairment, but is used to refer to the disabling barriers of prejudice, discrimination and social exclusion. The author asserts that the language currently used to define disability does not allow the disabled to accurately describe elements of oppression and discrimination. Zola (1993) analyzed the language of disability to bring awareness to the power of words which condition attitudes. Zola states that a name has always connoted some aspect of one's status and that language, naming, or labelling are used as a mechanism by the dominant group to keep others in place. It can be drawn from his article that once the term disability is used to describe an individual, society can deny the validity of anything which they might say, do, or stand for because society devalues people with disabilities. Frey and Upchurch (2000) cite that disability terminology exists in and is given meaning through a cultural framework, but that more research needs to be done in order to create a cognitive and attitudinal change in the members of society about the disabled.

Disability related language can have different meanings depending on geographical location. Regardless of location, the words used to describe an individual with a disability can be seen as a method used by dominant groups as a way to keep power. Implications from the use of language of those in positions of power can be tied to mainstream values, beliefs and expectations shown to be responsible for perpetuating the concepts of stigma, stereotypes and perception.

Data & Methods

Data collection

27 male and female students were recruited during spring quarter of 2015, from a classroom on the University of Washington Bothell campus, located in Bothell WA. The students were asked if they would like to take a brief questionnaire, and were informed that participation was voluntary. The participants were not informed ahead of time what the subject or topic of the questionnaire was. The students who opted to participate received a copy of the questionnaire face down and were asked to wait until all other participants had received one. Each copy of the questionnaire had two pages, each page contained an image and two corresponding open ended questions, for a total of two images and four open ended questions. Demographic data was not collected in order to help promote more honest answers from the participants. Page 1 displayed a pictogram style image of ISA (see appendix A), and page 2 displayed a reserved parking space sign, also showing a pictogram style image of ISA (see appendix B).



Acknowledgement

The methodology used in this study was influenced by Michelle R. Nario-Redmond's research on *Cultural stereotypes of disabled and non-disabled men and women: Consensus for global category representations and diagnostic domains*, (2010).

When the session began the participants provided responses to the 2 open ended questions, which were; when you see this symbol what is the first thing that comes to mind?, and describe in detail the individual that first comes to mind when you see this symbol.

Data analysis

The open ended descriptions gathered from 27 participants totaled 108 responses. 10 themes were generated through a closed coding method by sorting key terms into predesignated categories, to ensure representation for all of the data recorded from the questionnaires. An analysis on the descriptive frequency distributions of all theme categories was performed. A table listing the frequencies and percentages of the emerging themes was created to present a portrait of the characteristics associated with the perception of the International Symbol of Access.

Results

Challenges

One of the biggest challenges of this research was generating enough themes to represent all of the participant's responses, and proved to be more difficult than anticipated. Theme categories were generated by assigning key words chosen from each of the responses. An overarching category which best encompassed multiple responses with similar context was selected. For example, the theme category Dependent was used to represent any response were a participant used the word, "wheelchair", "cane" or "needs assistance". The category Appearance was used to capture any response were a participant would describe the physical appearance or movement of an individual, words including "Grandma", "Gray hair" or "Shuffling gait" would be placed in

this theme category. The category of Other was used to place words or phrases that didn't fit within the parameters of the more easily definable themes, for example, a response of "Free parking, jealous!" or "Gary from Remember the Titans" would be placed into the Other category. The categories of Disabled and Handicap were intentionally left this way due to the high rate of responses using these words and no other overarching theme category could be decided on as a suitable substitute.

Descriptive Frequencies

Figure 1 represents a list of the generated themes used to capture the responses of each questionnaire. The top 3 emerging themes that appeared when participants were asked what is the first thing that comes to mind when seeing the International Symbol of Access included, Disabled, 18.5%, Handicap, 18.5%, and Handicap & Dependent, 11.1%. These 3 themes were the most frequently mentioned and totaled 48.1% of all responses.

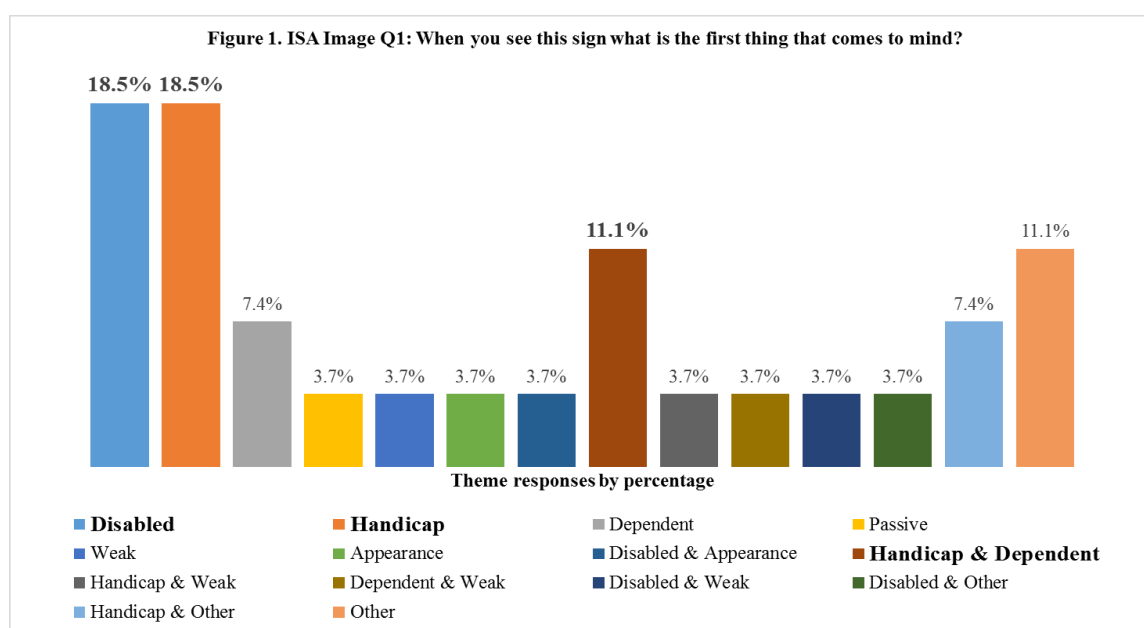


Figure 2 represents the themes that appeared when participants were asked to describe in detail the individual that first comes to mind when they see ISA. The top 3 emerging themes that appeared were; Dependent, 40.7%, Dependent & Weak, 14.8%, and Passive, 7.4%. These 3 themes were the most frequently used and represent 62.9% of all responses.

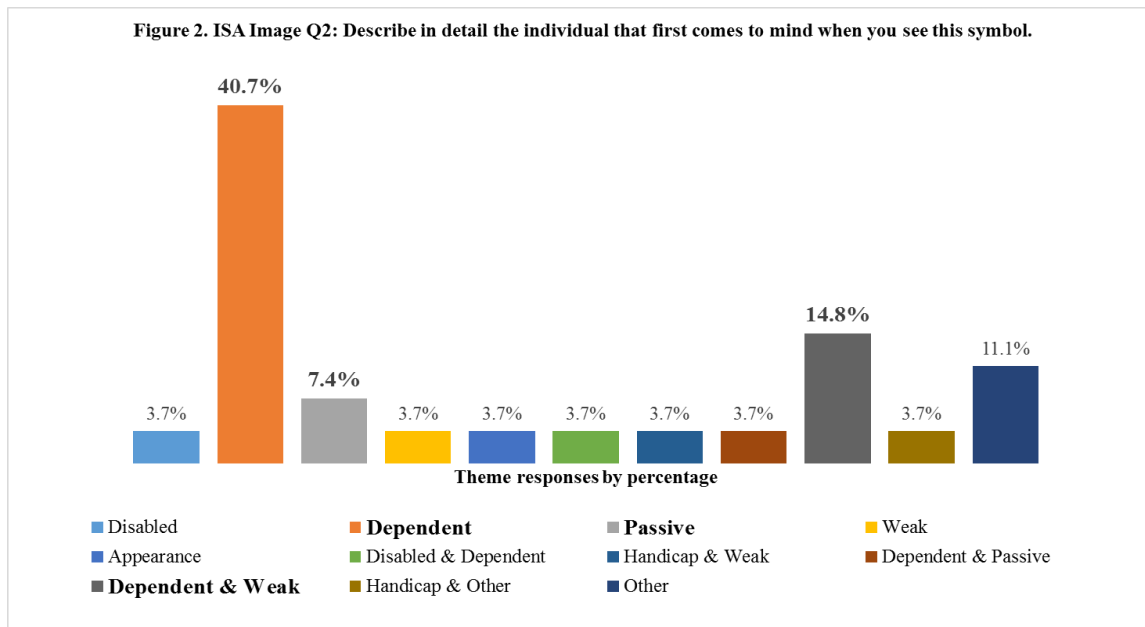


Figure 3 represents the themes that appeared when participants were asked to describe in detail the individual that first comes to mind when they see a reserved parking sign displaying an image of ISA. The top emerging themes which appeared when participants were asked, what the first thing that came to mind was when seeing this image, included; Dependent, 11.1%, Disabled & Other, 11.1%, Handicap, 7.4%, and Disabled, 7.4%.

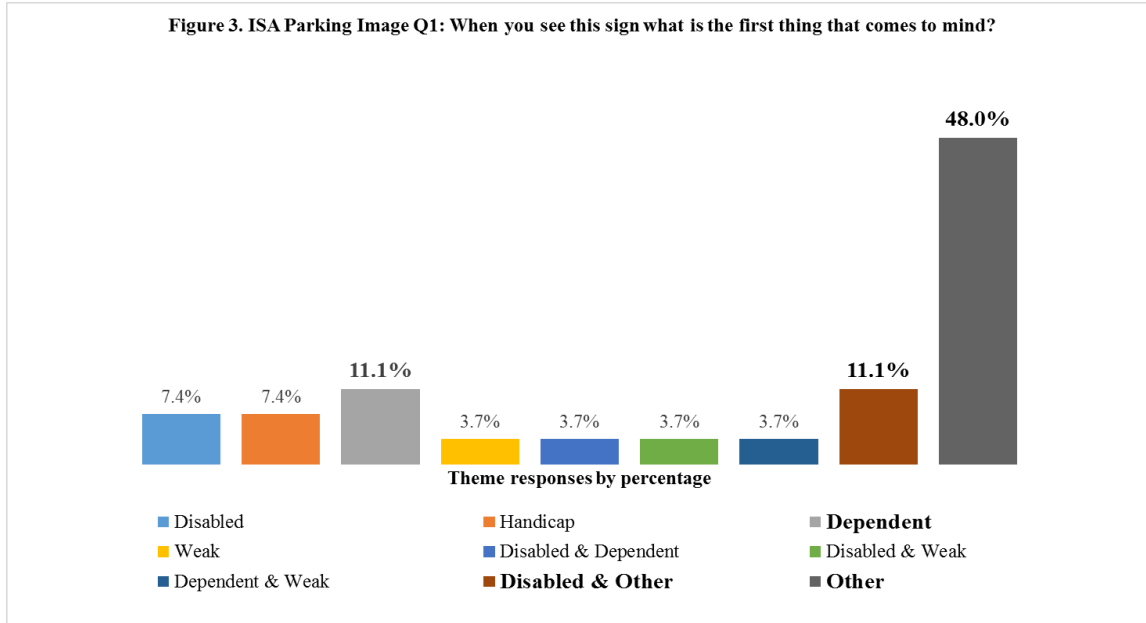
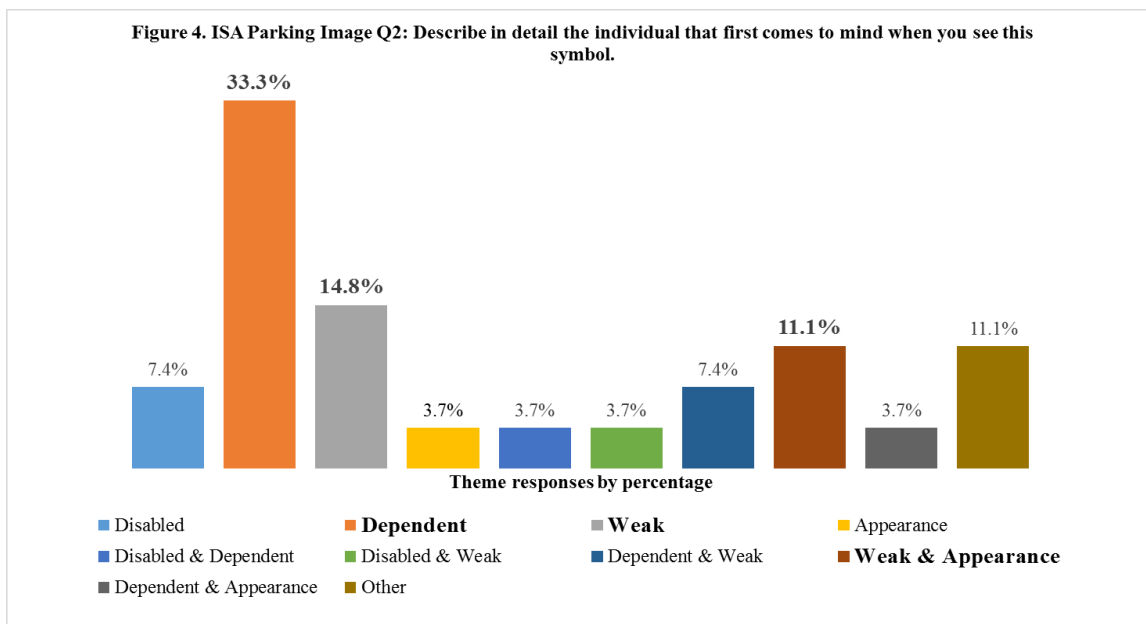


Figure 4 shows the most frequently used themes when the participants were asked to describe in detail the individual that first comes to mind when they see a reserved parking sign displaying an image of ISA. The top emerging themes that appeared were; Dependent, 33.3%, Weak, 14.8% and Dependent & Appearance, 11.1



Discussion

Summary of results

The results of this study indicate that ISA can have an influence on the perception of disability. When participants of the questionnaire were asked to describe in detail the individual that first came to mind when seeing an image of ISA, 40.7% of responses envisioned an individual that is dependent on an assistive mobility device, and 14.8% of responses described an individual who is feeble or unable to walk. Over half of all the responses, 55.5%, suggest that these particular stereotypes are the defining characteristics of an individual who uses an ISA labelled facility or area of access. Additionally, the most commonly word used throughout all of the responses was “wheelchair”. This signifies that the first thing that people notice when seeing this image is not the individual themselves but the device they are “supposed” to be using, which further places an emphasis on the disability. If the majority of individuals expect to see these characteristics or associate them with an image of ISA then anyone who is disabled but that does not match these characteristics may be subject to a process of validation through social comparison, making the individual feel as though they need to justify the authenticity of their disability.

Researcher Positionality

This research was both informed and motivated by personal and professional interests. As an individual with a physical disability, which could be considered to be “invisible” or not visually apparent I routinely encounter situations where I am the subject of social comparison and often need to justify the authenticity of my disability, particularly when parking in a disabled parking space. All of these occurrences has led me to question what it is that society believes to be the

definition of disabled. My only conclusion was that it had to be the symbol associated with its designated area, displaying an image of a wheelchair. ISA makes it incredibly easy for someone who isn't disabled to look at that image and compare it to the person using the area or facility. It then follows that if an individual does not match the image then they must not be eligible to use it. This way of thinking is incorrect and is why I decided to pursue what it is that society perceives disability to be when looking at an image of ISA.

Having now explained my own personal circumstances it should be noted that some of the decision making processes, in terms of how particular words were selected from the responses, the themes that were generated to represent those responses, and how the results were presented, were decisions that undoubtedly reflect my own experiences as a disabled person. This action has in no way altered the original responses obtained from the participants or prevented any of the responses for being represented in this research. The data chosen to represent in the research was solely based off of the highest percentages recorded but was however interpreted from my own point of view.

Validity concerns

I am confident the research design used to represent the nature of this particular study is adequate. The primary data collected through this methodology can only be interpreted in a few different methods. The only notable concern may be with how the themes were generated and if this method accurately accounted for each individual response. The other concern pertains to external validity. This study was conducted on the campus of a small university, using a small sample size.

Future research

The results from this study have shown that there is a strong likelihood that a person's perception can be influenced through imagery and symbolism. However, additional research will be needed in order to gain increased accuracy of these preliminary results. To achieve this, a larger sample size is needed, demographic information should be incorporated and the categories and themes generated should also be refined. Adding a combination of these three elements would help to ease concerns related to the methodology and external validity of the results. The second area for future research would be a replica of this same study, including the incorporated revisions previously mention, but featuring an alternate image of ISA (see appendix C and D).

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Appendix

A. Questionnaire, Page 1 (ISA), questions 1 and 2.



When you see this symbol what is the first thing that comes to mind?

Describe in detail the individual that first comes to mind when you see this symbol.

B. Questionnaire, Page 2 (ISA parking sign), questions 1 and 2.



When you see this symbol what is the first thing that comes to mind?

Describe in detail the individual that first comes to mind when you see this symbol.

C. Alternative image of ISA.



D. Alternative image of Parking Sign.

