

Super. Human. Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games audio-visual advert (2020)

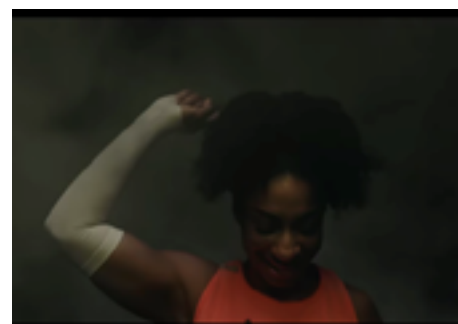
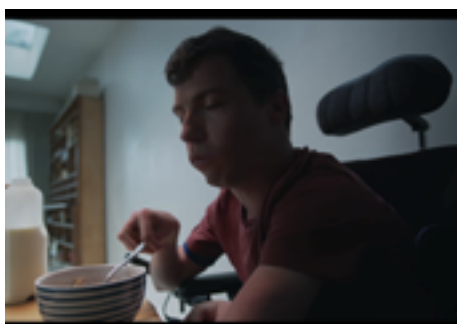


Image from *Super. Human. Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games Trailer* / Channel 4 / youtube.com

AS component 1: Investigating the media

A level component 1: Media products, industries and audiences

Focus areas:

- **Media language**
- **Representation**
- **Audiences**
- **Media contexts**

PRODUCT CONTEXT

- The advertisement *Super. Human.* was created to promote the 2020 Paralympic Games by Bradford Young, the Oscar nominated cinematographer and the first African American cinematographer to be nominated for an award in 2017 for his work on the film *Arrival*.
- It was devised and created by Channel 4's in-

house creative agency 4Creative and produced by Serial Pictures and Somesuch, a global production company. The trailer is the third campaign for the Paralympics undertaken by Channel 4, who were broadcasting the event, and was part of a bigger campaign including posters and social media.

- The advertisement explores the sacrifices made and the trials endured by Paralympic athletes in preparation for the 2020 Tokyo Paralympic Games.

PART 1: STARTING POINTS – Media language

Consider the codes and conventions of the advertising form and how media language influences meaning:

- All advertisements employ a recognisable repertoire of elements of the advertising form but will also have a set of conventions

specific to their sub-genre. The aim of charity advertisements, and those designed to raise awareness of issues and events, is to have an immediate impact upon the audience to make them take notice; therefore, these advertisements need to be more memorable and hard-hitting.

- The producers of this sub-genre of advertisements are very aware of **compassion fatigue** and so will often aim to make advertisements that offer a different perspective on the issue or event, usually one that is more positive and upbeat. This approach is evident in *Super. Human.* with the use of **audio codes**. The choice of the soundtrack of *So You Want to be a Boxer* from Buggy Malone effectively communicates the struggles of the disabled athletes whilst giving the advertisement a positive feel. The more typical conventions, for example a voice-over and dramatic music, appear at the start of the advertisement, but rapidly change to the alarm and the realities of daily life. Sound effects underscore the music, emphasising the battle of training including grunts, groans and tape being applied.
- Advertisements have a limited amount of time to convey their message and so rely on **technical codes** and **editing** to do this rapidly. This advertisement uses close-up shots of expressions to engage the audience and to portray aspects of disability in a non-victim way, emphasising that this is part of their lives. For example, a range of shots are used to convey the strength and determination of the swimmer Ellie Simmonds, cutting between an establishing shot showing her alone in the pool, a close-up of her putting on her swimming goggles, a low angle shot creating power and an extreme close-up of her eyes connoting concentration. **Slow motion** is also used to show the cycling track crash combined with muting the sound for a more dramatic effect.
- **Visual codes** also communicate meanings. The **iconography and settings** are related to the athlete and the sport, for example Ellie Simmonds putting on her goggles in the pool, or training in the gym, but these settings are juxtaposed with domestic scenes of everyday life as a disabled person, suggesting the normality of their situation. **Gestures** communicate frustration, competition and celebration, visually

highlighting the result of the hard work.

- The **narrative** follows the lives of the Paralympians and their battles through training. The sequence where the athlete is trying to sing 'Happy Birthday' to his daughter on a mobile phone whilst training on a bike reinforces the clash between the sport and the family and further establishes the athletes as real people.
- There are also some more stylised sequences constructed to convey meaning. The dream sequence reappears later in the advert and is edited with a Channel 4 news clip announcing the postponement of the Games. The impact of this is shown as the athletes fall 'over the edge'.
- The advert also uses **humour** to convey information, for example, the image of the hamster on the wheel and the 'puke bucket' are recognisable visual signifiers of struggle. The animated sequences also insert aspects of the comic into what is a gruelling regime.

Consider theoretical perspectives Semiotics – Roland Barthes

- As advertisements have to communicate meaning rapidly, they use recognisable codes and conventions that signify messages for audiences to decode. In this advertisement, consider the connotations of the signs used. Clothing is used to rapidly place the athletes within their sport, for example, the track cyclist's clothing or the swimming costumes contrast with the athletes in their everyday life, such as the hospital clothing when the woman is giving birth or casual clothing when the wheelchair user tries to access the café. These signs serve to illustrate aspects of the lives of the people and creates realism.
- Consider how the advertisement also uses signs and codes to challenge the creation of myths around disability.

A level only:

Structuralism – Claude Lévi-Strauss

- How texts are constructed using **binary oppositions**. The images of gruelling training regimes are contrasted with the celebratory images at the end of the advertisement when success is achieved.

- A further **visual binary opposition** is created between the dreamlike sequences with dramatic images, music and the rich colour palette, and the reality conveyed through ambient lighting and the strident sound of the alarm clock.
- Animated and archive footage are included in opposition to real-life actions to introduce humour and reinforce the narrative.
- The **on-screen graphic** ‘To be a Paralympian there’s got to be something wrong with you’ creates a **conceptual binary opposition** between audience perception of Paralympic athletes and the reality. It challenges how language is used set against the reality of the positive images in the advertisement. It is this opposition that the audience is encouraged to reflect upon. ‘The juxtaposition between being a Paralympic athlete at the peak of your powers and being unable to get in a cafe for a drink is pretty shocking. And tells the story in a very simple way.’

(<https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/theyve-nailed-again-channel-4-unveils-super-human-campaign-tokyo-paralympics/1722076>)

PART 2: STARTING POINTS – Representation

Product context:

Super. Human. is the third of Channel 4’s advertising campaigns for the Paralympic Games. It will be useful to look at the other two campaigns and consider the different approaches that have been taken by the channel in their representation of disability.

Launching the campaign, Lynsey Atkin, 4Creative’s Executive Creative Director, said: ‘Following the last two Paralympics adverts was no small task – they exploded attitudes around disability Yet we spotted an opportunity to present Paralympians in a way they hadn’t been shown before – by pointing a camera at the realities of their lives, and, as with any elite athlete, the sacrifices they make in pursuit of greatness..... collectively these choices paint a story of mental determination, not of disability.’

(<https://www.televisual.com/news/watch-c4s-paralympics-campaign-super-human/>)

The decision was therefore made to change the focus of a previous campaign ‘Meet the Superhumans’ and instead in the 2020 campaign to emphasise the ‘Human’ rather than the ‘Super’ and to juxtapose the images of the training regime with those of the everyday lives of the athletes, with the intention of making them relatable to audiences.

Consider how and why particular social groups may be under-represented or misrepresented.

- Dominant groups in society largely control what is produced and as a result, minority groups tend to be marginalised, creating an unrealistic view of the contemporary world. This advertisement attempts to address the marginalisation of certain social groups, in this case, those with disabilities. Its aim, reflecting the ideology and ethos of Channel 4, is to give a voice to those who are not usually represented positively in other areas of the media.
- The positive representation of disability in the advertisement and the coverage of the games changed attitudes. According to YouGov research, 65% of viewers felt that the coverage of the Paralympics had a positive impact on their perceptions of disabled people. 82% of viewers agreed disabled athletes were as talented as able-bodied athletes (<https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/theyve-nailed-again-channel-4-unveils-super-human-campaign-tokyo-paralympics/1722076>).

Consider how representations are constructed through processes of selection and combination:

- Choices have been made by the producers of the advertisement to create representations that challenge accepted ideas regarding disability and disabled athletes in particular.
- The advertisement actively avoids negative stereotypical representations of Paralympians as victims to be pitied, or heroes, ‘superhumans’, to be viewed in awe. Instead, the representations create a realistic, ‘blood and guts’ feel to the advertisement. The representations cover both genders and give a different view of the world of disability to that of ‘having something wrong with you’.

- The narratives are centred around real people, but through re-presentation, a **representation of reality** is constructed focusing specifically on the challenges that the athletes face. The filming, editing and audio codes combine to construct a representation of this social group, raising awareness and creating positive representations of the Paralympians as athletes first, rather than disabled people ‘doing their best’.
- In constructing the representations as they have in *Super. Human.*, the producers have aimed to avoid the stereotypes of disabled athletes as having to ‘overcome’ their disability in order to achieve success, instead celebrating them as high-performance athletes in their own right.
- Consider how the representations are constructed through media language. **Close-up shots** of the athletes and their challenges during training and their home lives create positive representations of ordinary people who eat their breakfast, give birth, and play the drums, with whom the **audience** can positively associate. The fast-paced editing enables the advertisement to highlight a range of narratives and athletes with different disabilities, disciplines, and challenges.

Consider theoretical perspectives: Stuart Hall’s theory of representation

According to Hall, meanings are communicated through signs. This is very true of the advertising form where easily recognisable signs rapidly communicate meaning to an audience in a short space of time. For example, expressions of endurance and struggle are easily recognisable and understood.

This advertisement goes some way to address Hall’s assertions that stereotyping occurs when there are inequalities of power, and that excluded groups, such as the disabled, are constructed as different. In the advertisement, the focus is on the athletes as ordinary sports men and women striving to achieve a goal. The athletes are three dimensional and distinct from each other; therefore, the advertisement avoids simplifying their representations.

David Gauntlett’s theory of identity

In addressing an under-represented social group, the advertisement gives visible recognition to those with disabilities and allows disabled people to see themselves represented positively in the media.

Super. Human. offers audiences a more **diverse and inclusive range of identities** and broadens general understanding of what it means to be disabled as an athlete and in everyday life.

However, many would argue that the Paralympics in itself is not enough to redress the balance and indeed, many disabilities are not featured in the games.

PART 3: STARTING POINTS – Audiences

The target audience for this advertisement is a relatively broad demographic, including Channel 4 viewers who largely fall into the 16–34 age bracket; fans of sport; and those who desire to see more inclusive representations of social groups, of which they may be a member, from a channel whose remit states that it ‘appeals to the tastes and interests of a culturally diverse society’ (www.ofcom.org.uk).

Consider how the advertisement targets, reaches and addresses its audience.

- The use of **personalisation** will reach the audience. *Super.Human.* deals with real, human stories focusing on the day-to-day struggles of being an athlete in training and disabled. The individual narratives are constructed to encourage the audience to identify with the athletes and their lives.
- The **technical codes** include a lot of close-up shots, some of which are uncomfortable, for example, the popping of the blister. It also gives the audience access to views with which they may be unfamiliar, such as the attaching of a prosthetic blade, all of which hold their attention. The editing cuts between the athletes’ gruelling routines and clips of cartoon moments, lightening the mood and engaging the audience through humour.
- The **audio codes** address the audience. The soundtrack is a recognisable song from the musical *Bugsy Malone*, *So You Want To Be a Boxer*. The choice of this upbeat, stirring tune grabs the audience’s attention with its connotations of struggle and hard work paying off. Older audiences will be familiar with the film from which it is taken. Other audio codes suggest struggle, heavy breathing and grunting and these are juxtaposed with sounds from

everyday life, such as a woman in childbirth and a baby crying.

- The **unique selling point** is the ‘showing’ of the athletes’ stories. There is no voice-over and no graphics moralising on the plight of the disabled. Instead, there is an attempt to give a realistic portrayal of the lives of disabled athletes. The audience are left towards the end of the advertisement with the words ‘To be a Paralympian there’s got to be something wrong with you’, encouraging them to examine their own misconceptions of disability in the light of what they have just viewed.
- The advertisement was successful in reaching its audience. Channel 4’s Paralympic coverage was viewed by 20 million people, a third of the UK population, 22% of whom were 16-34 years of age. The marketing campaign reached 81% of the UK population. The Paralympic Games attracted 2.6 million viewers accounting for the biggest Channel 4 weekly share of TV viewing since 2016 and the largest daytime share since 2012 (<https://www.channel4.com/press/news/channel-4s-coverage-tokyo-2020-paralympic-games-reaches-20-million-viewers>).

Consider how audiences may interpret this advertisement in different ways.

- The *Super. Human.* advertisement sets out to challenge audiences’ perceptions of disability.
- Regular audiences of Channel 4 may be familiar with the approach taken by the broadcaster when promoting the Paralympics as the other two campaigns were successes in their own right. Alex Brooker, co-presenter of *The Last Leg*, who has disabilities himself, said: “For me, waiting for the Channel 4 Paralympics advert every four years is like waiting for the John Lewis Christmas advert.”
- Audiences would expect the advertisement to raise the profile of the event. Zaid Al-Qassab, chief marketing officer of Channel 4, said of the thinking behind the campaign, ‘The Paralympics has always been an afterthought of the Olympics. It was the first time that any broadcaster was making a meaningful attempt to elevate the

Paralympics on an equal footing. And the only way of doing that was to land it in public consciousness through something that would make you sit up and think totally differently.’ (<https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/theyve-nailed-again-channel-4-unveils-super-human-campaign-tokyo-paralympics/1722076>)

- The advertisement may make some audiences feel uncomfortable as it uses shock tactics to make audiences aware of the issues facing disabled people in their sport as well as in their everyday lives. For example, time lapse photography is used to show a bruise developing and there is a close-up shot of a blister being popped. Audiences may also be affected by seeing disabled rugby player Kylie Grimes unable to enter a café as her wheelchair cannot get over the step.
- The advertisement also challenged audiences to examine how they may use outdated language to categorise disabled people by the on-screen slogan at the end of the advertisement ‘To be a Paralympian there’s got to be something wrong with you’. The aim of this is to encourage audiences to see this as something positive and that being a Paralympian is something of which to be proud.

CONTEXTS

Social and Cultural

- Advertising campaigns, whether for consumable products, events or charities, reflect the concerns and issues of the society that produces them. In promoting the Paralympics and creating the trailer, Channel 4 is seeking to address the under-representation or misrepresentation of a particular social group.
- The advertisement seeks to focus on the fact that these are real people – ‘Human’ rather than ‘Super’ – which makes them more accessible to the audience.
- The representation of disability in this advertisement is affected by social and cultural circumstances. Channel 4 has taken the active decision to present the athletes neither as victims or as heroes, but just ordinary sports men and

women facing extraordinary challenges. This constructs a more compelling social narrative reflecting the appetite of the time for success stories that are accessible. This is evident at the beginning of the advert when the dream sequence is shattered, and real life begins.

question their assumptions and be more open to the representations in advertisements like *Super: Human.*, which offers a refreshing and more realistic perception of what it means to be disabled and one that challenges common preconceptions and mainstream values.

Consider theoretical perspectives: Reception theory – Stuart Hall

- The upbeat soundtrack, use of personalisation and positive representations of the event and the athletes as both ‘Super’ and ‘Human’, encourages an audience to accept the ideologies and **intended meaning** of Channel 4, the encoder, in creating the advertisement. The use of real people creates a preferred reading that the audience should invest in their narratives and subsequently watch the Paralympic Games.
- Some audiences may adopt a **negotiated position**, acknowledging the legitimacy of the encoder’s position, but may feel more distanced from the sporting theme of the event. However, this audience may be more open to the positive approach of the advertisement and examine their misconceptions about disabled people and their lives more generally.
- **Oppositional responses** may come from those who are not supporters of Channel 4 and its ethos of giving voice to those who are under-represented. They may be older, not regular viewers of Channel 4 or not interested in sport of any kind.

Cultivation theory – George Gerbner

- This theory suggests that audiences may have become used to the conventions of this sub-genre of advertising which raises awareness of a particular social group. Due to the repetition of certain codes and conventions, for example, the focus on the specific disability accompanied by a voice-over with serious mode of address, they may accept this view of the world and perhaps be somewhat ‘immune’ to their purpose.
- Alternatively, this advertisement can also be said to challenge Gerbner’s assertions. As a result of viewing advertisements whose aim is to raise awareness and give a voice to previously under-represented groups, audiences may