

Disability in mass media through children's eyes: Primary school students' perceptions of media portrayals of people with disabilities

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Abstract

Media representations of people with disabilities often rely on simplified or stereotypical narratives that do not reflect everyday social realities. Such portrayals may reinforce pity-based or charitable perspectives and contribute to the persistence of social distance and misunderstanding. Against this background, the present study explores how primary school students perceive the way disability is presented in mass media. A pilot study was conducted between October and December 2025 with 154 sixth-grade students attending primary schools in the region of Attica, Greece. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire adapted for children aged 11–12 years. The study examined students' interest in disability-related information, the media sources through which they are informed, their emotional responses to disability-related media content, and their evaluation of media attitudes toward people with disabilities. Findings indicate that the majority of students express a clear interest in being informed about disability-related issues. Television remains the primary source of information, while digital media and social networking platforms are also frequently reported. Students largely perceive media portrayals of people with disabilities as characterized by pity, yet they strongly believe that accurate and objective media coverage could substantially improve their own attitudes and behaviors toward people with disabilities.

Keywords: disability, media, children, representation, media literacy.

Deficiência na mídia de massa pelos olhos das crianças: Percepções de estudantes do ensino fundamental sobre as representações midiáticas de pessoas com deficiência

Resumo

As representações midiáticas de pessoas com deficiência frequentemente se baseiam em narrativas simplificadas ou estereotipadas que não refletem as realidades sociais do cotidiano. Tais representações podem reforçar perspectivas de pena ou caridade e contribuir para a persistência do distanciamento social e da incompreensão. Nesse contexto, o presente estudo explora como estudantes do ensino fundamental percebem a forma como a deficiência é apresentada nos meios de comunicação de massa. Um estudo piloto foi conduzido entre Outubro e Dezembro de 2025 com 154 estudantes do sexto ano do ensino fundamental matriculados em escolas da região de Ática, Grécia. Os dados foram coletados por meio de um questionário estruturado adaptado para crianças de 11 a 12 anos. O estudo investigou o interesse dos estudantes por informações relacionadas à deficiência, as fontes midiáticas pelas quais eles se informam, suas respostas emocionais aos conteúdos midiáticos relacionados à deficiência e sua avaliação das atitudes da mídia em relação às pessoas com deficiência. Os resultados indicam que a maioria dos estudantes demonstra claro interesse em se informar sobre questões relacionadas à deficiência. A televisão permanece como a principal fonte de informação, enquanto as mídias digitais e as plataformas de redes sociais também foram frequentemente mencionadas. Os estudantes percebem amplamente as representações midiáticas de pessoas com deficiência como caracterizadas pela pena; entretanto, acreditam fortemente que uma cobertura midiática precisa e objetiva poderia melhorar substancialmente suas próprias

atitudes e comportamentos em relação às pessoas com deficiência.

Palavras-chave: deficiência, mídia, crianças, representação, alfabetização midiática.

1. Introduction

The representation of people with disabilities in mass media has long been a subject of critical discussion within the social sciences, education, and disability studies. Media narratives do not merely reflect social reality; they actively participate in shaping public perceptions, attitudes, and expectations. In many cases, disability is framed through medicalized, charitable, or emotionally charged perspectives that emphasize limitation, dependency, or exceptionalism rather than everyday social participation (Goodley, 2017). Such portrayals may unintentionally reinforce stereotypes and contribute to the marginalization of people with disabilities (Barton, 1996; Shakespeare & Watson, 1997; Tregaskis, 2002).

Contemporary social approaches emphasize that disability is not solely an individual condition but a socially constructed experience shaped by environmental, cultural, and institutional barriers. Within this framework, mass media function as powerful social actors. Their choices regarding visibility, language, and framing can either challenge or reproduce dominant stereotypes. At the same time, more recent research highlights that disability visibility is increasingly negotiated across traditional and digital media, where representations may both reproduce and challenge normative discourses (Cocq, 2020).

Children constitute a particularly important audience in this discussion. During the later years of primary education, students are already exposed to a wide range of media content while simultaneously developing critical thinking skills and social awareness (Lemish, 2009). Media representations encountered at this stage can significantly influence early attitudes toward difference, diversity, and social inclusion (Ellis & Kent, 2017).

In recent years, children's media environments have expanded beyond traditional mass media. Alongside television and print media, digital platforms and social networking services have become integral to everyday media consumption. This shift is relevant not only because of increased screen time, but also because digital spaces reshape how social issues are discovered, framed, and shared, often through short-form or user-generated content. Research on media literacy and disability further indicates that the inclusion of children and youth with disabilities—and disability-related perspectives more broadly—remains an evolving and underdeveloped area in media literacy research, despite its growing importance (Sousa, 2022).

At the same time, scholarship examining disability representation in “made-for-children” television continues to highlight limited and often non-representative visibility, even in contexts where inclusive programming might be expected (Carmel et al., 2024). Within this context, the present study explores how sixth-grade students perceive the relationship between mass media and disability. It investigates students' interest in disability-related information, the media they identify as primary sources of information, their emotional responses to disability-related media content, and their evaluations of media attitudes toward people with disabilities. Digital media platforms are not neutral environments, as algorithms and platform structures influence which social representations become more visible, normalized, or marginalized within online environments (Krämer & Conrad, 2017). Consequently, disability-related content circulating through social media may both challenge and reinforce existing stereotypes.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Participants

The pilot study was conducted between October and December 2025 and involved 154 sixth-grade students (69 boys and 85 girls). A convenience sampling approach was used based on school accessibility and voluntary participation. Participants were recruited from public schools located in urban areas of the Attica region, Greece.

Table 1. Distribution of participants by Gender.

Gender	n	%
Boys	69	44.8
Girls	85	55.2
Total	154	100.0

Note: n = 154. Source: Author, 2026.

Participants were aged between 11 and 12 years. Students' familiarity with disability is presented below.

Table 2. Familiarity with disability.

Category	n	%
Friend	4	2.6
Family member	10	6.5
Classmate	8	5.2
Acquaintance	42	27.3
None	90	58.4
Total	154	100.0

Note: n = 154. Source: Author, 2026.

2.2 Ethics and research with humans

The study was conducted in accordance with institutional and national ethical standards for research involving human participants. Written informed consent was obtained from parents/guardians of all participating minors before questionnaire administration. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and no identifiable or sensitive personal data were collected. According to local institutional regulations in Greece regarding low-risk anonymous educational survey research, formal IRB approval was waived by the school administration. Verbal assent from the participating children was also obtained before participation.

2.3 Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire adapted for children aged 11–12 years. The questionnaire was based on instruments previously used in studies on disability and media representation and was modified to ensure age-appropriate language, clarity, and comprehension. The instrument consisted of two demographic questions and ten closed-ended questions examining interest in disability-related information, sources of information, emotional responses, and perceptions of media attitudes toward people with disabilities.

As the study was designed as an exploratory pilot study, the questionnaire primarily aimed to capture general patterns of students' perceptions rather than to function as a psychometrically standardized scale. Before administration, the wording and structure of the questionnaire were reviewed to ensure suitability for the target age group.

2.4 Procedure

Questionnaires were administered during regular school hours with the cooperation and authorization of school administration and classroom teachers. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Students were informed about the purpose of the study in age-appropriate terms and assured that there were no right or wrong answers. Completion time was approximately 15 min.

2.5 Data analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and chi-square (χ^2) tests of independence to examine associations between variables such as gender, interest in disability-related information, emotional responses, and familiarity with disability. Statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

3. Results

3.1 Interest in disability-related information

The majority of students expressed a positive disposition toward being informed about disability-related issues.

Table 3. Interest in disability information.

Level of interest	n	%
Not at all	0	0.0
A little	29	18.8
Quite a lot	109	70.8
Very much	16	10.4
Total	154	100.0

Note: n = 154. Source: Author, 2026.

Gender differences were observed, with girls demonstrating significantly higher levels of interest than boys.

Table 4. Interest in disability-related information by gender.

Level of interest	Boys n (%)	Girls n (%)	Total n (%)
Not at all	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
A little	12 (17.4)	17 (20.0)	29 (18.8)
Quite a lot	57 (82.6)	52 (61.2)	109 (70.8)
Very much	0 (0.0)	16 (18.8)	16 (10.4)
Total	69 (100.0)	85 (100.0)	154 (100.0)

Source: Author, 2026.

A chi-square test of independence revealed a statistically significant association between gender and interest in disability-related information, $\chi^2 (2) = 15.60, p < .001$.

3.2 Sources of information

Television was identified as the primary source of information about disability, followed by the internet.

Table 5. Media Sources of information about disability.

Media source	n	%
Television	102	66.2
Print Media	5	3.2
Internet	43	27.9
Radio	4	2.6
Total	154	100.0

Note: n = 154. Source: Author, 2026.

Students who reported using the internet frequently referred to social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok as sources of disability-related content.

3.3 Emotional responses to disability-related media content

Most students reported limited emotional burden when exposed to disability-related media content.

Table 6. Emotional burden when exposed to disability-related media content.

Frequency	n	%
Never	2	1.3
Rarely	101	65.6
Sometimes	39	25.3
Often	12	7.8
Always	0	0.0
Total	154	100.0

Note: n= 154. Source: Author, 2026.

Gender differences were observed, with girls reporting higher emotional sensitivity than boys.

Table 7. Emotional burden by gender.

Emotional burden	Boys n (%)	Girls n (%)	Total n (%)
Never	2 (2.9)	0 (0.0)	2 (1.3)
Rarely	50 (72.5)	51 (60.0)	101 (65.6)
Sometimes	17 (24.6)	22 (25.9)	39 (25.3)
Often	0 (0.0)	12 (14.1)	12 (7.8)
Total	69 (100.0)	85 (100.0)	154 (100.0)

Source: Author, 2026.

A chi-square test of independence confirmed a statistically significant association between gender and emotional responses, $\chi^2 (3) = 13.13, p < .05$.

3.4 Association between familiarity with disability and interest in disability-related information

An association was examined between students' interest in disability-related information and their reported familiarity with disability. Higher levels of familiarity were generally related to higher reported interest in being informed about disability-related issues.

Table 8. Association between interest in disability-related information and familiarity with disability.

Familiarity	A little n (%)	Quite a lot n (%)	Very much n (%)	Total n
Friend	0 (0.0)	2 (50.0)	2 (50.0)	4
Family member	1 (10.0)	5 (50.0)	4 (40.0)	10
Classmate	4 (50.0)	4 (50.0)	0 (0.0)	8
Acquaintance	12 (28.6)	26 (61.9)	4 (9.5)	42
None	12 (13.3)	72 (80.0)	6 (6.7)	90
Total (n)	29	109	16	154

Source: Author, 2026.

A chi-square test of independence indicated a statistically significant association between familiarity with disability and interest in disability-related information, $\chi^2 (8) = 28.29, p < .001$.

3.5 Media attitudes toward disability

Students primarily perceived media attitudes toward people with disabilities as characterized by pity. Smaller proportions identified understanding of problems, admiration, or indifference.

Table 9. Students' perception of media attitudes toward disability.

Perceived attitude	n	%
Sympathy	6	3.9
Indifference	20	13.0
Understanding of problems	25	16.2
Pity	70	45.5
Awkwardness	5	3.2
Admiration	13	8.4
None of the above	9	5.8
Don't know/No answer	6	3.9
Total	154	100.0

Note: n = 154. Source: Author, 2026.

3.6 Perceived impact of media information

An overwhelming majority of students believed that accurate and objective media coverage could help them relate better to people with disabilities.

Table 10. Perceived contribution of accurate media information.

Degree of contribution	n	%
Not at all	0	0.0
A little	1	0.6
Quite a lot	91	59.1
Very much	62	40.3
Total	154	100.0

Note: n = 154. Source: Author, 2026.

4. Discussion

The findings of the present study indicate that primary school students demonstrate a genuine interest in disability-related issues and recognize the influence of mass media on their perceptions. This is important because media exposure during late primary school years may contribute to the formation of early attitudes toward difference, inclusion, and social participation (WHO, 2022). The prominence of television as a primary information source highlights its continued relevance, even within a media environment increasingly shaped by digital platforms and social media.

Students' perceptions of media portrayals as pity-oriented align with longstanding critiques in disability scholarship regarding simplified, medicalized, or emotionally framed representations of disability (Barton, 1996; Goodley, 2017; Shakespeare & Watson, 1997). Such portrayals may contribute to stigma formation by presenting people with disabilities primarily through vulnerability, dependence, or exceptional achievement, rather than through everyday participation and equal citizenship (Goffman, 2001). In this sense, the findings support the need to move beyond pity-based narratives and toward more balanced and rights-based representations.

The gender differences observed in students' interests and emotional responses should be interpreted cautiously,

but they suggest that boys and girls may engage differently with emotionally framed media content. Rather than treating emotional response as a weakness, this finding may indicate different forms of sensitivity, social learning, and media interpretation. Future studies could explore whether such differences are related to broader patterns of socialization, empathy development, or classroom experiences concerning diversity and inclusion.

The association between familiarity with disability and interest in further information reinforces the importance of exposure and social contact in shaping attitudes. From this perspective, media may function as a form of indirect social contact, especially for children who do not personally know people with disabilities. However, the educational value of such mediated contact depends heavily on the quality of representation. If disability is presented mainly through pity or exceptionalism, media exposure may reproduce social distance rather than reduce it.

This issue becomes even more complex in digital environments. Social networks such as TikTok and Instagram may reproduce stereotypes through emotional framing, algorithmic visibility, and short-form content designed to attract attention. At the same time, these platforms may also create opportunities for self-representation, disability advocacy, and the sharing of lived experience by people with disabilities themselves. Recent research suggests that platforms such as TikTok can function as spaces where people with disabilities challenge stereotypical representations and communicate forms of lived “disability expertise” through user-generated content (McNally et al., 2024). Similarly, work on social media self-representation shows that digital visibility may both reproduce dominant frames and create counter-discourses that challenge stereotypes (Cocq, 2020).

The Greek sociocultural context is also relevant. In educational and media environments where disability has often been associated with charity, personal tragedy, or individual struggle, children may encounter limited opportunities to critically examine how such representations are constructed. This highlights the need for media literacy practices that help students identify stereotypes, question emotional manipulation, and recognize the difference between pity-based representation and inclusive visibility.

The results, therefore, point to the relevance of inclusive media education. Media literacy should not be limited to the technical understanding of media messages but should also include critical reflection on representation, language, stigma, and social participation. A systematic review mapping media literacy research related to children and youth with disabilities highlights both the importance and the relative scarcity of this research area, suggesting that inclusive media literacy approaches require further development and implementation (Sousa, 2022). In this context, schools can play an important role by helping students critically interpret media portrayals of disability and develop more informed, respectful, and inclusive attitudes.

Finally, the present study supports calls for responsible media practices that move beyond pity-based framing. For media professionals, this means presenting people with disabilities not only as objects of sympathy or admiration, but as active social subjects with diverse experiences, roles, and voices. For educators, it suggests the importance of classroom activities that combine media literacy with inclusive education, allowing students to discuss how disability is represented and how these representations influence social attitudes.

5. Study limitations

The present study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, it was conducted as a pilot study with a regional sample of sixth-grade students from Attica, Greece; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to the wider student population. Second, the study followed a cross-sectional design and captured students’ perceptions at one specific point in time. Third, the data were collected through a self-reported questionnaire, which may be influenced by social desirability bias or by students’ individual interpretation of the questions. Fourth, the study did not include qualitative interviews or open-ended responses, which could have provided deeper insight into how children understand and interpret disability-related media content. Finally, some statistical comparisons involved small frequencies in certain categories, and the results should therefore be interpreted with caution. Future research could include larger and more diverse samples, qualitative methods, and further analysis of children’s engagement with social media platforms.

6. Conclusions

The present study indicates that primary school students demonstrate a clear interest in disability-related issues and are aware of the influence of mass media on their perceptions. The findings highlight the importance of accurate, balanced, and inclusive media representations in shaping more informed attitudes toward people with disabilities. At the same time, the study suggests that pity-oriented or emotionally simplified portrayals may

contribute to the reproduction of stereotypes and social distance.

The results also emphasize the growing importance of media literacy within contemporary educational contexts. As children increasingly encounter disability-related content through television, social media, and digital platforms, schools may play a significant role in helping students critically interpret media representations and develop more reflective and inclusive perspectives. In this regard, inclusive media education may contribute not only to critical media awareness but also to broader goals of social inclusion and respect for diversity.

Finally, the study highlights the need for further research examining how children interpret disability-related representations across evolving digital media environments, particularly social networking platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. Future studies could benefit from larger and more diverse samples, qualitative approaches, and comparative analysis across different sociocultural contexts.

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8. Authors' Contributions

Stefanos Loukeris: The author designed the study, collected and analyzed data, and wrote the manuscript.

9. Conflicts of Interest

No conflicts of interest.

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PARENTAL INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear Parents/Guardians,

We kindly ask for your permission for your child to participate in the following questionnaire-based study. The purpose of this research is to investigate how students perceive disability in relation to mass media representations.

Your consent is valuable for the collection of the necessary research data. Participation is voluntary, and the questionnaire is anonymous. No personal data concerning your child or your family will be disclosed or published. You may withdraw your child from the procedure at any time without any consequences.

Thank you for your cooperation

Stefanos Loukeris, PhD/ Date

PARENT/GUARDIAN DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I consent to my child's participation in the research process by completing the questionnaire.

Parent/Guardian Signature / Date

Funding

Not applicable.

Institutional Review Board Statement

According to local institutional regulations in Greece regarding low-risk anonymous educational survey research, formal IRB approval was waived by the school administration.

Informed Consent Statement

Written informed consent was obtained from the parents/guardians of all participating minors.

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