International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences
Vol-11, Issue-6; November-December, 2026

Peer-Reviewed Journal
Journal Home Page Available: https://ijels.com/
Journal DOI: 10.22161/ijels

Feeling the Unseen: Affective Landscapes of Disability in Global Advertising

Anupama Andrew

Research Scholar, Department of English, All Saints' College, University of Kerala, India

Received: 16 Oct 2026; Received in revised form: 10 Nov 2026; Accepted: 13 Nov 2026; Available online: 18 Nov 2026
©2026 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Abstract— *Advertisements play a huge role in how we perceive difference, far more directly than academic texts. They reveal how inclusion and normalcy are marketed to the public. This paper examines how contemporary advertisements construct affective landscapes of disability across global and Indian media. In the field of advertisements, technology, human emotions, and visibility intersect to redefine how audiences "see" difference. The paper analyses advertising narratives such as Nike's "Go FlyEase," Samsung's "Good Vibes" and "Hearing Hands," Nescafé's "RJ Rishi," Apple's "The Greatest," and Microsoft's "We All Win." These advertisements mobilise affect to evoke empathy, nostalgia, wonder, and at times, estrangement. The representations of disability invite viewers to experience the world through alternate sensory registers like sound, touch, or emotion, thus pushing inquiry into an affective encounter. This paper argues that these advertisements function as affective archives that protect collective memories of bodily difference, accessibility, and care. By transforming disability into a shared emotional experience, these commercials map new landscapes of inclusion that are both personal and political. Advertisements such as Google's "Javier in Frame," Tommy Hilfiger's "Adaptive Clothing," Cadbury Dairy Milk's "Sign with Fingers Big & Small," and the "Evenbreak" and "Assume That I Can" initiatives demonstrate how global capital activates inclusion to fabricate aspirational narratives of independence and innovation. Through the frameworks of Sara Ahmed and Brian Massumi's Affect Theory, W.J.T. Mitchell's Visual Culture, and works by Disability Studies scholars such as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Alison Kafer, and Ato Quayson, this paper explores how spectatorship itself becomes an affective act. The study proposes that global disability advertisements cleverly constitute visual terrains where empathy, accessibility, and desire converge. These affective landscapes compel audiences to feel the unseen, remember differently, and reimagine the politics of seeing beyond sight.*

Keywords— ***Global advertising, affective landscapes, disability representation, media and memory, affect and visibility***

Introduction

How exactly do advertisements teach us to feel? From billboards and television screens to YouTube videos and Spotify playlists, advertising has become an inescapable presence in everyday life. Once, more visible on television, which was then the most accessible form of entertainment, advertisements have now infiltrated every digital space that we inhabit. Whether we scroll, stream, or game, we are constantly invited, and sometimes compelled, to watch and listen. Advertisements have an enormous receptive power. It shapes public emotions, tastes, and perceptions more profoundly than academic and political discourse. As visual culture saturates our screens, advertisements no longer merely sell products; they sell feelings, worldviews, and ways of seeing. When disability enters this visual field, it often stimulates a range of emotions, consumed through the lens of pity, admiration, discomfort, or inspiration. Yet, a growing number of advertisements, both global and Indian, have begun to reimagine how difference is visualised and felt. Today, brands do more than just promote products; they

craft affective encounters that invite audiences to see beyond sight. In doing so, they reveal how disability becomes a roadmap for exploring empathy, accessibility, and human connection in the marketplace of emotion.

This paper examines how contemporary advertisements construct affective landscapes of disability, taking into consideration notable advertisements such as Nike's "Go FlyEase," Samsung's "Good Vibes" and "Hearing Hands," Nescafé's "RJ Rishi," Apple's "The Greatest," Microsoft's "We All Win," Google's "Javier in Frame," Tommy Hilfiger's "Adaptive Clothing," Cadbury Dairy Milk's "Sign with Fingers Big & Small," and the "Evenbreak" and "Assume That I Can." Here, spectatorship itself becomes an affective act, where feelings, technology, and visibility intersect to reanalyse how audiences engage with corporeality. Advertisements do not passively reflect social values, but they play an important role in actively fashioning how disability is remembered, felt, and circulated as emotion. This paper positions these global disability advertisements as affective archives, seeking to understand how disability moves from visibility to feeling.

Theoretical Framework

The idea of affective landscapes begins with the premise that emotion is not a private feeling. Instead, it is a social and spatial force that travels between bodies, images, and environments. As Sara Ahmed argues in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), emotions "stick" to objects and subjects, shaping collective attachments and the ways people inhabit the world (Ahmed 11). Advertisements rely on this circulation of feeling, where affect becomes a visual and sonic language. Interestingly, this guides how audiences relate to what they see and hear, creating a senscape where emotion is designed, distributed, and consumed.

Brian Massumi expands this framework by defining affect as "pre-personal intensity," a sensation that precedes recognition (Massumi 23). In disability advertising, such intensity is conveyed through gestures, slow-motion visuals, and sound cues. For instance, the trembling of a hand, a vibration, or a confident step in a prosthetic shoe. Such representations trigger bodily responses before the viewer rationally processes what is being shown. This is a perfect example of understanding how advertising operates not through argument but through visceral, embodied persuasion.

If affect shapes the emotional atmosphere, visual culture provides the ideological frame. W. J. T. Mitchell famously notes that landscape is "a medium of cultural expression," not a neutral genre (Mitchell 5). Advertisements thus function as affective landscapes where emotion, technology, and power converge, setting disability as an aesthetic and ethical encounter. This forces the viewer to confront both its artistic beauty and its moral meaning. In this way, the entire presentation happens within the visual codes of global marketing and consumer culture.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, in *Staring: How We Look* (2009), identifies staring as both a gesture of power and a potential opening for recognition (Garland-Thomson 9).

Advertising exploits this tension by turning the stare into an affective device that demands attention. Alison Kafer's concept of "crip futurity" adds another layer, imagining futures that resist ableist ideas of progress (Kafer 28). Many contemporary advertisements focus on technoableism, for example, hands-free shoes or adaptive interfaces. This reveals how modern companies equate the idea of inclusivity with just inventing and selling new products.

Advertisements often oscillate between normalizing and sentimentalizing disability. It generates emotional nervousness that compels viewers to address their own habits of seeing. Ato Quayson's theory of "aesthetic nervousness" clarifies the unease produced when disability is represented within normative visual systems (Quayson 15).

Together, these perspectives position advertisements as an affective and visual system that reflects and shapes cultural memory. It creates an environment where the act of viewing itself is considered as an emotional, ideological, and participatory encounter. This framework builds the analysis that follows, tracing how selected global and Indian advertisements transform disability into a landscape of affect, where empathy, technology, and the politics of visibility intersect in contemporary media.

Revisioning Global Advertisements

The advertisements selected for this study collectively reframe disability as an emotional and sensory experience rather than a fixed identity. They generate what may be called "affective landscapes," the spaces that invite viewers to feel, listen, and sense in different ways. These visual texts do not simply represent disability; they stage engagements and experiences that merge affect with technology and spectatorship. This helps generate new modes of seeing and feeling difference. Three affective tendencies recur across the selected advertisements: the reinterpretation of vision through sound and touch, the techno-optimism of accessible futures, and the commodification of empathy within global consumer culture.

Aural and Emotional Landscapes

The "Nescafé RJ Rishi" (2016) advertisement opens not with a product shot but with the voice of the protagonist, Rishi, a visually impaired radio jockey, who speaks directly to the audience. His world is rendered through the intimacy of sound, i.e., breath, laughter, silence, and so on, inviting the viewers to inhabit a space where listening becomes a form of seeing. The advertisement exemplifies what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls the "politics of staring": it reverses the gaze by making the blind subject the one who perceives most deeply. Here, affect works through sound instead of sight. As Brian Massumi notes, affect

precedes meaning. The body instantly feels an intensity before the emotion becomes nameable. The warmth in Rishi's tone, the rhythm of his laughter, and the modulation of silence operate as pre-cognitive triggers. The viewer feels a connection even before thinking about the protagonist's physical difference. By privileging aural perception, Nescafé RJ Rishi ad constructs an affective landscape of sound, displacing vision as the dominant sensory mode.

Similarly, Samsung's "Good Vibes" (2019) and "Hearing Hands" (2015) ads introduce a mobile app that enables deaf-blind users to communicate through a

Morse-code-like vibration system, transforming touch into language. In this case, affect becomes both aesthetic and ethical. These advertisements challenge ocularcentrism and create immersive spaces that prioritise listening and touching as means of inclusion.

Ultimately, audiences learn to accept and value nonvisual modes of communication, building an atmosphere of care.

Techno-ableism leading to Techno-optimism

Advertisements such as Nike's "Go FlyEase" (2021), Apple's "The Greatest" (2023), Microsoft's "We All Win" (2019), Google's "Javier in Frame" (2024), and Tommy Hilfiger's "Adaptive Clothing" series tend to reimagine disability through accessible design, positioning innovation as a form of liberation.

Nike's "Go FlyEase" advertisement showcases a hands-free shoe that is specifically designed and customised for people with limited mobility. The idea of the brand was to stage empowerment by transforming the shoes into an act of personal liberation. Viewers experience excitement and possibility before consciously identifying the ad's accessibility message. Yet this exhilaration is double-edged. While the ad celebrates its innovative design, it also reflects what Alison Kafer critiques as "neoliberal futurity," a vision of accessibility that focuses on fixing the individual rather than bringing about structural change.

Apple's "The Greatest" deepens this uncertainty. Featuring disabled users, including blind, deaf, and mobility-impaired creators, the ad narrates autonomy through the voice of a blind protagonist. It begins in darkness, then bursts into vibrant scenes of a musician composing, a designer sketching, and a parent playing. The rhythm of editing mimics an emotional heartbeat, aligning affect with inclusion. Apple's impressive mastery transforms accessibility into a sort of aspiration, where the audience is made to feel awe, rather than being sympathetic. Through W. J. T. Mitchell's lens, this results in a form of visual power, where the advertisement produces an aspect of seeing and feeling that is choreographed by technology.

Tommy Hilfiger's "Adaptive Clothing" similarly markets inclusivity as a lifestyle.

The advertisement features models with diverse disabilities who navigate their daily tasks and portray their lived experiences. The narrative of the ad constructs what Ato Quayson might call "aesthetic nervousness," a tension between the ordinary and the extraordinary. While the campaign visualises freedom, it also romanticises struggle, converting difference into a fashion statement. Disability here is projected as both visible and stylised, a desirable diversity that sustains the brand's global modernity.

Across these examples, Kafer's "crip future" is absorbed into what Sara Ahmed describes as the "happiness narrative": the promise that inclusion and positivity will lead to social harmony (Ahmed 13). Even if the affective tone sounds hopeful, the politics are complex. These advertisements extend empathy through innovation, but at the same time they risk reducing disability to a performance of productivity. The affective landscape of technology is then one of ambivalence, which is simultaneously liberatory and commodified.

Empathy as Commodity

Ads such as Cadbury Dairy Milk's "Sign with Fingers Big & Small" (2022), Evenbreak's (2023) employment initiatives, and "Assume That I Can" (World Down Syndrome Day, 2024) remodel the politics of inclusion into narratives of encouragement and belonging. These advertisements do not merely appeal to sentiment; instead, they activate empathy to expand the boundaries of social visibility.

Cadbury's ad portrays a father and daughter communicating in sign language while sharing chocolate. The exchange of gestures becomes a metaphor for recognition itself. The product is secondary to the connection it enables. Sara Ahmed's idea of affective economies resonates here, that emotions circulate between subjects and objects, shaping

how relationships are felt and remembered (Ahmed 45). This circulation produces a gentle pedagogy of awareness, in place of reducing empathy to consumption. Viewers are invited to listen differently, to recognize communication beyond speech.

Similarly, "Evenbreak" and "Assume That I Can" advertisements explicitly advocate for employment and self-independence for individuals with disabilities. Their tone is polished and purposeful, appealing to moral conscience while maintaining aesthetic appeal. While they inhabit the corporate space of advertising, these initiatives also reclaim it as a site of education and attitudinal change.

These campaigns operate within what Alison Kafer might call crip futurity. They project images of inclusive futures, where differences are not accommodated but celebrated. The market becomes, paradoxically, a vessel for social transformation, a platform where visibility generates understanding, not pity. These campaigns can be understood as affective interventions other than solely considering them as commodified empathy. They play a role in transforming the emotional register of advertising from pity to pride, from sympathy to solidarity. While their form is commercial, their affective resonance exceeds it, helping the audience acknowledge that disability is not a deviation but a part of human variation.

Conclusion

To understand advertisements as affective landscapes is to see them not entirely as marketing strategies but as cultural archives of feeling. They hold and transmit collective memories of how disability is seen, sensed, and perceived at particular moments in time. In a world saturated with images, advertisements become shared emotional spaces where the public negotiates empathy, awareness, and a sense of belonging. Their affective charge lingers beyond the screen, shaping the ways in which disability is remembered, discussed, and lived in everyday culture.

Advertisements act as mnemonic terrains, teaching audiences how to recall disability not as a deficit but as diversity. Disability is often experienced through an ongoing interaction between bodies, technologies, built environments, support systems, policies, and social expectations. When Cadbury's "Sign with Fingers Big & Small" transforms a small domestic moment into a cultural gesture of recognition, or when Nike's "Go FlyEase" reimagines mobility as a design element, these images enter the collective emotional memory of a generation. They remind us that memory is not only cognitive but also sensory, felt through sound, texture, gesture, and rhythm. Affect thus becomes a mode of remembering; an emotional continuity that ties one advertisement, one viewer, one social shift to another.

Yet these affective memories are not neutral. As W. J. T. Mitchell reminds us, every image is an instrument of power that tells us not only what we see, but how to see. The visual grammar of advertising continues to operate within the rules of capitalism, where inclusivity risks becoming a desirable commodity. However, realizing this does not erase the positive cultural work that such images can perform. Instead, it just makes us smart viewers who can spot these contradictions. Within the circuits of global branding, these ads mix human emotion with monetary benefits, and morals with business. This is precisely where their power lies, as they have the ability to both participate and disrupt the market's emotional quotient.

What these advertisements ultimately offer is a new kind of spectatorship that is participatory, embodied, and ethical. They prepare audiences to become affective witnesses rather than passive consumers, to engage with disability as a relational experience rather than an external spectacle. Sara Ahmed's theory of affective circulation helps us realise this shift that the emotions which move between bodies and screens can unsettle habitual modes of perception (Ahmed 10). When a viewer feels moved by a gesture, a vibration, or a voice, that affect becomes memory. In this way, disability advertising becomes both a reflection and a reimagination of social consciousness. It mediates how societies remember bodies, differences, and the politics of care. Within these affective landscapes, empathy revolutionises into awareness, and awareness into collective memory.

To reimagine vision, then, is to accept that seeing is never only optical. It is ethical, affective, and historical. The advertisements analysed in this paper remind us that visibility alone does not guarantee justice, but it can create the affective conditions for it. They challenge us to feel the unseen, to remember with care, and to reimagine inclusivity as a shared emotional practice. In their movement between memory and market, these visual texts offer continuity, an ongoing invitation to rethink how we see, what we value, and who we include in the collective picture of humanity.

REFERENCES

[1] Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2015.

[2] "ASSUME THAT I CAN | World Down Syndrome Day 2024." *YouTube*, uploaded by CoorDown, 14 Mar. 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9HpLhxMFJR8.

[3] Cadbury. "Cadbury Dairy Milk Fingers | Sign with Fingers Big & Small." *YouTube*, uploaded by Cadbury, 30 Aug. 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HV1hisoxNI.

[4] Campaigns of the World [@campaignsoftheworld]. Video of Apple's The Greatest Ad.

[5] *Instagram*, 3 June. 2023,

https://www.instagram.com/reel/CtDlh6OLK-v/.
[6] Evenbreak. "Evenbreak: Inclusive Job Board for Disabled People Channel 4 advert (BSL)." *YouTube*, uploaded by Evenbreak, 24 July. 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7sndnGVMWc&t=89s.
[7] Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Staring: How We Look*. Oxford UP, 2009.
[8] Google. "Javier in Frame." *YouTube*, uploaded by Made by Google, 3 Feb. 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wYPTZIFQoDQ.
[9] "Hearing Hands - Touching Ad by Samsung." *YouTube*, uploaded by DigitalSynopsis.com, 3 Mar. 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UrvaSqN76h4.
[10] Kafer, Alison. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Indiana University Press, 2013.
[11] Manohar D. Dugaje, Ramkrishna Mitra, S. Farhana Zabeen, K N Uma Devi, N. Nagajothi, V. Bhuvaneswari. "Communicative English Skill Development for Enhancing Graduate Employability" IEEE Xplore. 2026. https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/document/11649097/
[12] Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Duke University Press, 2002.
[13] Makhijani Simran, Dugaje Manohar. Enhancing Student Learning Outcomes: Evaluating Effective Educational Strategies for Academic Success. *CUESTIONES DE FISIOTERAPIA*. Volume 54, Issue 3, 2025. https://doi.org/10.48047/xvqrj747
[14] "Microsoft: We All Win." *YouTube*, uploaded by Ads of Brands, 6 Feb. 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kW46iX_2tFo.
[15] Mitchell, W. J. T., editor. *Landscape and Power*. 2nd ed., U of Chicago P, 2002. Nike. *Go FlyEase*. Advertisement. Nike, 2021.
[16] Quayson, Ato. *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*. Columbia University Press, 2007.
[17] Samsung. "Samsung Bixby Voice Assistant-MND mother helps daughter with #VoiceForever." *YouTube*, uploaded by ABM Samsung, 14 Sept. 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbVnQF0bt3Y.
[18] "Samsung Ads - India Good Vibes App: Caring for the impossible." *YouTube*, uploaded by Indian Ads Company, 9 Sept. 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cai4RWZI7Ps.
[19] "#StayStarted with NESCAFÉ | RJ Rishi's story." *YouTube*, uploaded by Nescafé India, 25 Aug. 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0tBqrioLag4.
[20] Tommy Hilfiger. "Independence | Tommy Adaptive | TOMMY HILFIGER." *YouTube*, uploaded by Tommy Hilfiger, 10 Oct. 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hEQx5Fy3ly8&t=1s.