

Person 1: The only disability in life is a bad attitude.

Person 2: Your excuse is invalid.

Person 3: He asked her to prom *even* in her condition.

Person 4: Before you quit, try

Person 5: Excuses. Let's hear yours again.

Me: These quotes were all used as captions under photos of people who have disabilities. The intent of these was likely to inspire, motivate, or encourage. But what these images and words do is exploit people who have disabilities for Internet points. These images are all examples of inspiration porn. Stella Young coined this term in 2012. She is a wheelchair user and a disability rights activist. She describes inspiration porn as, quote, an image of a person with a disability. Often a kid doing something completely ordinary, like playing or talking or running, carrying the caption like your excuse is invalid. It's there so that nondisabled can put their worries into perspective. It's there so that non disabled can look at us and think, well, it could be worse. I could be *that* person. End quote.

Me: Hello, my name is Mimi, and this is the final episode of a three part series. In this episode, we'll be talking about inspiration porn and how detrimental this concept can be to people with disabilities and to your own life or mindset. I talked to Mike Longo, a Jackson Hole Moose hockey player who volunteers his time to Teton Adaptive. Mike was curious as to how thinking someone is inspirational could be framed as being offensive.

Mike Longo: I mean, on the one hand, I do think that a lot of these people that we work with disabilities, I think they are an inspiration in being able to bounce back from things, but I think it's more so in their optimism. So I mentioned my friend's dad. It was Christopher Reeve, and he started the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation, and I did a bunch of work with them before I moved out here. And you saw these people running marathons on crutches and wheelchairs, that's a pretty incredible feat, but I can't help it inspires me. But I feel like the way that you framed it should be a negative somehow?

Me: It's not wrong to be inspired by someone, especially when it's a personal relationship. But it is a problem when you use the image of a random person with a disability to get Internet points. And as Joe Stone, a C seven [partial] quadriplegic and director of mission at Teton Adaptive discusses with me, he explains a good way to differentiate inspiration porn from actual inspiration.

Joe Stone: I try to really stay away from this conversation as much as possible because not in a way that it's a bad question, but more because it's so up to how everybody else, how they feel about their disability, how they feel about the word inspiration. It's up to interpretation. So I have found some people that it's actually legitimately, very challenging for them to get up for the day and go and go to the grocery store and come back home. And for them, it's so much work. That when you compare it, which comparisons the destroyer of fun. But when you compare that, even though comparison is not great, it's like, yeah, I mean, for that person to get up and do everything they just did and make it to the grocery store back, I don't want to say it's inspiring, but it definitely wasn't easy for them. It definitely was way more challenging than most other people have with that. So it's one of those where if you're only looking at a person and thinking it's inspiring because they have a disability, then that's where we need to shift the mindset.

Me: Anthony Swentosky, who works for Teton County School District number one and deals with curriculum, has a great point that goes hand in hand with Joe's comments about inspiration porn being an issue when you're inspired just because the person has a disability.

Anthony Swentosky: So if someone's disabled, they're having some form of success and there's like a surprise that they're having success or congratulatory success that seems patronizing.

Me: Let's return to Joe finishing his thoughts on the challenges of defining what inspiration porn is.

Joe Stone: But if what they're doing is actually inspiring and they just happen to have a disability, I feel like that's like the safe ground of it actually being inspiring, but it's a challenging one. I don't know that anybody can really define it very well. Stella Young did a pretty good job with it. She kind of coined that whole term, but even still, it's got like... I see it different than she does. For me, it's all about context. So if somebody is coming out and saying something, even if they use the wrong word, even if they use handicapped over a person with a disability, if they're bringing the good energy and they're positive and they're stoked and they're happy and they're trying to be nice, it doesn't bother me. And also age, if you're an 80 year old person using the word crippled, well, that's way different than a 20 year old. That's the language they used when they were younger. So context and age, I think, are two areas that are worth reading into before getting offended. And generally speaking, if someone's just trying to be nice, I don't let it bother me. And I get it all the time on trails. Well, it's not inspiring to see you out here. That's not worth me turning that into a negative situation. They're just

trying to be nice. So it's also not worth my time to say, correct them and tell them about inspiration porn and have this... I'm just trying to go mountain biking.

Me: Corbet's Couloir is a famous and notoriously hard ski run located at Jackson Hall Mountain Resort in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Many skiers and snowboarders attempt this ski run in order to prove their ability level. In 2011, a man named Chris Devlin-Young completed the first unassisted sit ski descent down the chute, followed by Trevor Kennison in 2019. I spoke with a classmate of mine, Kai McClennen, about his thoughts on these feats.

Kai McClennen: Now that you tell me what it is, I've definitely seen that before. I'm thinking about that skier who was in Kings and Queens of Corbet's the other... couple of years in the paraski. And that's hard because I don't know, I feel like people can be inspired by that, but maybe not make it inspiration just based on their disability, like focus on what else they can do in their personality and their work ethic and be inspired by that. And maybe also not comparing it to what you said... like if they can do it with a disability, then anyone can do it because that kind of takes away from their own work ethic and their own great qualities.

Me: Joe also shared his perspective with me on the first sit skiers down Corbet's.

Joe Stone: Inspiration porn is a really interesting topic because it's complicated and it's also up to interpretation and it's up to each person to decide what they think is okay for people to use the word inspiring versus not, or putting people... or using them in social media for certain reasons versus not. What I've kind of dialed in on for myself is if someone's doing something and it's only inspiring because they have a disability, then maybe that's where you back off on the inspiration porn side of things. You're using the word inspiration in general, and then if somebody is doing something that you're like, that is just impressive. Like Corbet's using a sit ski and jumping into Corbet's like Trevor did, that's impressive just in general. And then you add a sit ski and all that, and it gets even more impressive. And so it's because sit skiing is hard, right? And it's never been done before. It's the first ever. So you start stacking things up and you're like, this is a lot of really kind of big things all coming together in one moment. That's pretty inspiring.

Me: When talking to Drew Akins, another Jackson Hole Moose hockey player, he reflects on how society normally doesn't take others' opinions or feelings into consideration, especially when it comes to something like inspiration porn.

Drew Akins: You don't stop to think how the person that has the disability feels about those videos because they're like, well, why am I being compared to an able body

person? I did this. Why can't that just be enough? And why does it have to be... like everyone has to be able to relate to it. All the people that are non disabled have to like, oh, well, they have to see how they can benefit from it.

Me: I talked to Pierre Bergamin, a T. Seven paraplegic, and John Zandler, who is an amputee, and they both reflected on their opinions about inspiration porn. They both agreed that the topic can be complicated, but they also don't feel as strongly that inspiration porn is a bad thing.

Pierre Bergman: That's like one I need to do more research myself on it to be honest. And I've heard people talk about it, and I understand how it could be frustrating. Maybe I'm just still so new to it. It kind of just feels nice still. Like when people were like, you're inspirational. I'm like, thanks. It's like cringy to hear. I understand where people can come from, but it's like I kind of don't mind doing people like, yeah. I was like, yeah, it is pretty cool what I'm doing, but I don't know. I'm sure there's, like, negative connotations and there's definitely people just like, there's definitely people who just follow me on Instagram because I inspire them, which is weird and creepy, but whatever. I don't really care. I get a handful every post [Instagram comments] and I feel really great about them. And I'm like, not great. Some of them are gross, but I don't take offense to any of it. I understand people are just like, holy crap, that's crazy. Didn't think you could do that.

Me: Here's John's perspective on inspiration porn.

John Zandler: Somebody was telling us, I'm not sure who was telling us about she was out skiing with a friend who was disabled, and this person who was also out there skiing came up to her and said, this is really... you're just amazing to really inspire me. And I've had people come up and say that when I'm out skiing. I guess you can really look at that two ways. You can look at this person being amazed what you can do being disabled, or you can take a look at them and say, I'm no different than anybody else. I should be able to go out there and see why you think I'm any more important or any different. But I guess I've never really taken anything negative to that. Actually, I appreciate it. People say, you're really doing a lot to get out here and still be as active as you can. But I know that some people would take that maybe as a derogatory statement.

Me: At the end of the day, inspiration porn is a tricky concept. Everyone has different opinions, and it's going to differ from person to person. Inspiration porn definitely has the most gray area. Out of all the topics that we covered throughout this three part podcast series, there are a few takeaways that I'd like to leave you with. Yes, most of these topics are not black and white, and that's okay. Like, the people I interviewed for

my project stated, be curious and ask the right questions. Listen. Listening is a huge component to understanding another person and finally, be kind. While it sounds cheesy, kindness does go a long way. Thank you for listening, and I hope you learned something new that you can start applying to your life. A huge shout out to everyone who helped me with my project. Thank you to Joe Stone, Pierre Bergman, John Zandler, Steffan Freeman, Drew Akins, Mike Longo, Claire Tempest, Christy Fox, my mom Karen, Pete Ginsbury, Rachel Coppola, Pier Trudelle, Anthony Swentosky, Sean Hannfin, Kai McClennen and my peers and teachers at school. I cannot thank you enough. And I couldn't have done this without you. Thank you.