Normalizing Disability: Tagging and Disability Identity Construction through Marvel Cinematic Universe Fanfiction

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Abstract: The exploration of identity is a common practice in fanfiction, and scholarship has consistently investigated this fan practice. Yet, despite the presence of disability and disabled characters in fanfiction, this aspect of identity exploration is only sparsely represented in scholarship. This article explores the intersection of disability studies and fanfiction studies through the lens of labelling and tagging, key elements of both fields. Labelling and classification in disability communities are often associated with medicalization, stereotyping, and erasure of individuality, while tagging in fanfiction provides a communicative framework between authors and readers. These differences in functions of labelling and tagging provide the foundation that enables tagging in fanfiction to function inclusively as a normalizing force, despite the problematic role of labelling in disability communities. Three trends in the ways disability is tagged in fanfiction are explored through a close reading of a selection of fanfiction from the Marvel Cinematic Universe: (1) disability is primarily tagged when it is a significant component of the plot, (2) the disability of canonically disabled characters is primarily tagged when that disability directly influences the plot of the story, and (3) mental disability/illness is significantly more represented than physical disability.

Keywords: disability; fanfiction; tagging; labelling; normalization

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Fanfiction is a space profoundly connected to the creation, exploration, and communication of identity. Within this community, fans explore their own identities as well as identities that are not fully explored in the canon of a fandom. Scholars of fan communities and fanfiction have recognized this exploration of identity and considered fans' representations of gender (Bury, 2005), sexuality (Green, Jenkins, Jenkins, 1998; Willis, 2006), and literacy (Black, 2013) identities. As the call for this special issue makes clear, one aspect of identity exploration in fanfiction that is not as explored in scholarship is disability. Though disability and disabled characters are very much a part of the canonical texts on which fanfiction is based — and are represented throughout fanfiction — there has been little scholarly consideration on the intersection between these two fields. This study explores that intersection through the lens of tagging and labelling — a key function and point of discussion in both fields — and its role in the normalization of disability in fanfiction. Labelling and classification in disability communities are often associated with medicalization, stereotyping, and erasure of individuality, while tagging in fanfiction provides a communicative framework between authors and readers. These differences in functions of labelling and tagging provide the foundation that enables tagging in fanfiction to function inclusively as a normalizing force, despite the problematic role of labelling in disability communities.

It is beneficial to pause here to define the concept of "normal" as it will be deployed in this article. As Davis (1995) notes in his work, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and*

the Body, the concept of the norm is well-entrenched in our everyday lives: we compare our academic performance to normal curves of learning, we tailor our behaviour to accepted socio-cultural standards, and we measure our health against average curves of wellness (p. 23). Despite this prevalence of "normalcy" in everyday life, the concept has only come into our language fairly recently and derives from the notion of the unachievable, socially constructed "ideal" body, the form to which every human must aspire but none can attain (Davis, 1995, p. 24-25). The ideal has since evolved into a conception of the average that statistically encompasses the majority of the population but remains ideologically loaded in ranking of particular aspects of the norm (i.e. intelligence) and the establishment of deviance from the norm (Davis, 1995, p. 29-34). Garland-Thomson (2002) echoes this conception of the socially constructed normal in her definition of the concept of the normate: "the corporeal incarnation of culture's collective, unmarked, normative characteristics" (p. 10). This concept emphasizes the way that an imagined ideal is represented in physical form for the purpose of sorting society into "normal and abnormal" (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 9). The small minority who falls fully within the normate, Garland-Thomson (1997) argues, are granted power and authority in society in part by othering and marginalizing those who fall outside of the boundaries of the normal (p. 8). In this article, I draw on this argument to define the "normal" as a broadly or narrowly but fundamentally socially constructed ideal that privileges a particular construction of the body and mind, and marks those outside this average as other. Normalizing, in relation to this definition, is the process or processes through which an experience or reality such as disability is made to be part of the normal.

Depicting the disability experience as part of "normal" life is not typical in mainstream media, which still often portrays and views it as "disenfranchised and socially isolated"

(Verlager, 2015, para. 3). Common or ordinary aspects of life become extraordinary, noteworthy, and, sometimes, inspirational when they involve disability (Verlager, 2015; Cottingham, Pate, & Gearity, 2015). As this study demonstrates through a sample from one fandom on the popular fanfiction platform Archive of Our Own (AO3), the application of disability-related tags to fanfiction demonstrates an attempt to normalize disability in the fanfiction community as part of a normal life experience. This attempt, while commendable and progressive, is not free from a privileging of specific disabilities and disabled experiences that mirror ongoing critiques of labelling and identity in broader disability communities[1]. In this article I will examine the use of disability-related tags in fanfiction as a productive space for understanding the disability identities — the way disability is constructed, understood, and framed positively and/or negatively within the space — produced in the fan community. Three trends in the ways disability is tagged in fanfiction are explored through a close reading of a selection of fanfiction from the Marvel Cinematic Universe: (1) disability is primarily tagged when it is a significant component of the plot, (2) the disability of canonically disabled characters is primarily tagged when that disability directly influences the plot of the story, and (3) mental disability/illness is significantly more represented than physical disability. These trends demonstrate an attempt to normalize disability as part of the normal experience, but also surface ongoing privileging of particular disability narratives.

Labelling, Clinical Paradigms, and Classification

Labelling and classification are contentious in disability communities. Historically, labelling and classification have been the tools of medical diagnosis, but ones that are linked

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[1] No judgement of any specific authors or their works, whether referenced in this article or elsewhere in fandom, is intended. This article seeks to make commentary on trends within the fan community as a whole without passing any kind of judgement on individual members of that community.

with the perception of disability as "a 'problem' anchored in the bodies of people with impairments" (Bishop and Sunderland, 2013, p. 184) that must be fixed. This medical model of disability is the most prevalent way of understanding disability; yet in medicalizing disability as a problem of the body, mainstream society fails to provide space to critique systemic discrimination and barriers of access that disabled people often face (Withers, 2012, p. 31-34). Contemporary scholars, activists, and members of disability communities have therefore interpreted labelling as a process of stereotyping, discrimination, and erasure. This minimizes the individuality and identity of those with disabilities by lumping large and diverse groups together — for example, assuming that all individuals with a particular physical, mental, or intellectual disability experience the world in the same way or have the same needs. Labelling and classification similarly force people into often narrowly defined boxes by collapsing the differences inherent in individuals and their disabilities into singular definitions that do not represent the individuals' realities or needs. Disabled individuals thus often face characterizations of themselves or their disabilities that are not defined by their lived experiences (Aston, Breau, & MacLeod, 2014; Davis, 2014; Verlager, 2015). The imposition and subsequent suppression of individual identity is further exemplified in the privileging of particular kinds of disability narratives in popular discourse, a convention that many disability studies scholars have struggled against. Milner (2011), a disabled scholar who writes about how her own disability narrative does not conform to the accepted conventions, describes these privileged narratives as removing the voice of the disabled individual and following "rhetorical structures that reinforce conventional, discriminatory attitudes and systems" (Milner, 2011, para. 6). This characterization is echoed in the work of other scholars like Dolmage (2013). He also points to how generalized narratives about disability can support ableist stereotypes, writing that these myths work "to

mark and construct disability as surplus, improper, lesser, or otherwise *other*" (p. 31) and serve

to "condition our understanding of disability (and thus of all identity and all bodies)" (p. 31).

At stake in this perception of disability is the construction of normal people as ideal and

the identities of the disabled as "tragedies in need of intervention" (Withers, 2012, p. 31),

resulting in a perception of disability that acts as an "oppressive force on the lives of disabled

people" (Withers, 2012, p. 54). Disabled people finds themselves demonized, marginalized, and

erased from the mainstream as a result of this medicalized model of disability (Withers, 2012).

Labelling and classification, thus, participate in both undermining the identities and experiences

of individuals with disabilities, as well as separating them from the "normal" experience. I use

this lens to foreground how tagging, which may seem to act as a form of labelling, functions

differently in fanfiction.

Tagging and Classification in Fanfiction Spaces

Tagging is a fundamental component of the classification system of many major

fanfiction archives. This functionality — which Johnson (2015) calls a "folksonomy" and defines

as "an assembly of user-generated metadata created collaboratively" (para. 1.4) — provides a

framework for authors to provide potential readers with information about the stories in the

archive. AO3, one of fandom's largest archives, supports a free-tagging system where tags are

largely unmoderated, and created and applied by authors to their own stories. Other major

fanfiction archives such as Fanfiction.net (a multi-fandom archive similar to AO3), Ink Stained

Fingers (a Harry Potter archive), and Teaspoon and An Open Mind (a Doctor Who archive) offer

users a controlled vocabulary of tags from which to choose (Johnson, 2015). The freedom

afforded by the free-tagging structure on AO3 can more accurately express writers' perspectives

and engagement with themes in their work (such as identity) than more restrictive systems could, which is the reason for its use as the data source in this study.

Tags on AO3 take the form of short strings of text — a single word or a short phrase — that give information about the story that can include genre, characters, relationships between two or more characters, trigger warnings, story content or plot, and commentary from the author. AO3 imposes few restrictions on the formatting, length, content, and number of tags (except as defined by the site's "Terms of Service") and does not alter tags except under specific, limited circumstances. This user-controlled system makes it possible for users to create and assign many disability-related tags to their stories including tags for specific disabilities (i.e. "blind character," "deaf character") and behaviours related to societal response to disability (i.e. "ableism"). Such tags are not supported in archives with controlled vocabularies, like Fanfiction.net, where available tags are typically limited to character names, relationships, and genre.

The possibilities available to users in controlled-vocabulary archives such as Fanfiction.net represent a top-down structural approach to tagging where the available options are determined by a small group of users at the top (the site administrators) and filtered down to the larger user-base. While users can still freely attach additional information in story summaries and author's notes, a more restrictive system like a controlled vocabulary more closely mimics labelling of disability in the medicalized sense: limited options imposed by a distant authority that do not necessarily represent the unique realities of the individual experience. Free-tagging models, by contrast, are more user-centric: users are free to create any tags that they want or need and, in the case of AO3, such tags become codified into the site's metadata infrastructure when enough users make use of them. In this system, users have the power and possibility to

more freely express explorations of identity such as disability. Tagging on AO3, therefore, functions primarily through a bottom-up collective approach by participants, where individual users can influence collective classification schemes. This allows tagging's classificatory nature to function differently than labelling and to more clearly demonstrate the more normalized positioning of disability within fanfiction communities.

Disability Tags in MCU Fanfiction

The complete corpus of online fanfiction comprises millions of works in thousands of fandoms. This study draws its evidence from the fanfiction of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) on AO3 as an example of practices in the broader community. Though MCU fanfiction on AO3 is only one portion of the significantly larger collection of fanfiction work, drawing from this large and popular section of the fanfiction community can provide insights that are more broadly generalizable to other fandoms and fanfiction communities. Built on the collection of superhero movies, TV shows, and comic books that began with *Iron Man* in 2008 and by 2017 numbers almost 50 individual works, the MCU canon is globally recognized and successful. As of December 2015, it is the top grossing film franchise worldwide and two of its films, *The Avengers* (2012) and *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), hold the records for the fifth and seventh highest grossing individual movies worldwide respectively (Box Office Mojo, 2015). With a canon this popular, it's no surprise that the MCU fandom is equally massive, spanning conventions, cosplaying, commentary, and transformative works such as fanfiction. On AO3, over 152,000 individual stories (as of January 2017) have been posted in the "Marvel Cinematic Universe" category, which includes all works published in the categories of any of the individual components of the franchise. Analyzing the tagging of disability in MCU fanfiction is of particular interest to disability studies, and its intersection with fanfiction, because MCU is a

canon about superheroes and other beings/individuals who are exceptional and supra- or superhuman in some way. Both its canon and its fandom may, consequently, address difference in greater depth.

Methodology

I first became interested in the tagging practices of MCU fanfiction because I was a long-time fan of the canon and participant in the fandom but a new scholar in the field of disability studies. The lens of disability studies gave me new avenues to explore my scholarly interest in fanfiction, and my long-time interest in fanfiction provided the foundation for engaging with scholarship in disability. This study came about as I explored the intersection of these two interests, and where I found, as this special issue calls out, a gap in existing scholarship.

I began by collecting a small sample of work from the MCU fandom. Though the MCU fandom is comprised of many smaller fandoms — each movie and TV show, for example, has its own subsection on AO3 — AO3 also establishes a heading for the megafandom of MCU. Under this heading, all works within every smaller fandom are accessible from the same place. To get a range of stories from across all of the MCU fandoms, I selected my sample of work from this megafandom heading. In order to elicit a selection of tags, yet not go beyond the possible scope of my research for this article, I capped the number of works of fanfiction that I collected at 100. Although a small sample, it serves as representative for a preliminary analysis into the tagging practices within the MCU megafandom. To avoid prioritizing one fandom, character, or tag above others, I chose the 100 most-recently updated works under the MCU megafandom heading on December 1, 2015. While this data selection does limit the sample to a particular time period, the stories selected represented the breadth of the MCU fandom and were not generated in

response to a particular writing prompt or challenge that might have otherwise skewed the nature of the narratives. These 100 stories provide a sample for this article through which we can see demonstrated patterns in the use of disability-related tags.

I analyzed the tags of each story and identified each tag that related to disability and its treatment. In determining whether or not a tag "qualified" as relating to disability, I included every tag that explicitly referenced disability or could implicitly be connected to disability. For the purpose of this study, I define tags relating to disability as including physical disability, intellectual disability, mental disability or illness, and treatment of disability and mental illness, and I was generous in my determination of whether a tag should be included or not, drawing from words, phrases, and concepts commonly associated with these aspects of disability in scholarship, media, and public discourse. I included tags that were obviously connected to disability (i.e. "Disabled Character") as well as tags that were more ambiguously connected (i.e. "no metal arm") and tags that referenced mental illness, which is not always associated with disability. I also included tags such as "Anxiety", "Insecurity", "Self-Confidence Issues", and "Self-Esteem Issues." On their own, these tags might not be considered a mental illness or disability but, in the context of this sample, they were often used in conjunction with other tags, such as "Mental Health Issues," which were more definitely classifiable as disability related.

Of the 100 stories analyzed, 16 included tags for disability, with a total of 55 tags between them. There were 34 unique disability-related tags and 9 tags that were attached to more than one story. The tags I drew from this sample (see table 1) ranged from the general (i.e. "Disabled Character") to the diagnostic (i.e. "depression") to the symptomatic (i.e. "suicidal thoughts") to the socio-cultural (i.e. "poor treatment of mental patients"). Though there was a wide range of disability represented in these tags, most referred to mental health issues. The four

characters explicitly named in these tags represented a mix of those who are represented as explicitly disabled in the MCU canon and those who fandom has interpreted as potentially experiencing disability because of their canonical experiences. The characters explicitly disabled in MCU canon who appear in these tags are Bucky Barnes (amputation in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*) and Clint Barton (deafness, which does not appear in MCU canon but does appear in some comics on which that canon is based). The characters sometimes assumed to be disabled by fandom who appear in these tags are Steve Rogers (assumed PTSD based on experiences in WWII and near-death experience in *Captain America: The First Avenger*) and Tony Stark (assumed PTSD resulting from torture in *Iron Man*). The following tags and their frequency were identified in the sample:

Tag	Frequency	Tag	Frequency
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder	8	Disabled Character	1
Flashbacks	4	Electroshock	1
Suicidal Thoughts	4	lobotomies (implied)	1
Depression	3	Mental Institutions	1
Recovery	3	mute!Bucky	1
Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism	2	no metal arm	1
Anxiety	2	Panic Attacks	1
Insecurity	2	poor treatment of mental patients	1
Mental Health Issues	2	Self-Confidence Issues	1
Alternate Universe - Mental Institution	1	Self-Esteem Issues	1
Anxiety Disorder	1	Self-Harm	1
Anxiety Attacks	1	Steve Rogers Has PTSD	1
bad mental institutions	1	Straitjackets	1
Bucky Barnes Has PTSD	1	Suicide Attempt	1
Bucky's Prosthetic Arm	1	Therapy	1
Deaf Character	1	Tony Stark Has Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder	1
Deaf Clint Barton	1	Triggers	1

Table 1. A table showing the distribution of the frequencies of the disability-related tags located in a 100-story sample of MCU fanfiction.

In order to draw out the trends in fanfiction tagging practices, I used critical discourse analysis of the tags and story summaries, informed by my more than 15 years of experience as a fan in online fanfiction communities and participation in the MCU fandom since its inception, to consider the kinds of tags and disability identities represented in this fanfiction. [2] Select story summaries are quoted in this article, all with permission from their respective authors. I was guided in my analysis by questions of how and why disability was tagged and how those tagging practices were situated in relationship to the content of the stories in the sample.

Disability Trends in MCU Fanfiction

Using this selection as a sample, I analyzed trends in the prevalence of certain kinds of disability tags by more closely reading the relations between tags and the stories to which they are attached. The ways disability is and is not tagged in MCU demonstrates three trends in how fanfiction authors tag disability in their work: (1) disability is primarily tagged when it is a significant component of the plot, (2) the disability of canonically disabled characters is primarily tagged when that disability directly influences the plot of the story, and (3) mental disability/illness is significantly more represented than physical disability.

Disability in/as Plot

Disability is tagged predominantly in fanfiction when it plays a central role in the plot of the story and, therefore, serves as the key identity of relevance in the formation of the world of

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[2] I recognize that further disability-related tags exist within fanfiction in this fandom and while consideration of these tags influenced the discussions of trends in this article, they were not represented in the limited sample used as an example in this study.

the story. In many cases, the summary of the story alone indicates the role disability plays in the plot of the story. For example, this summary of arxiver's (2015) "Life is better with friends" — a story in the *Captain America* fandom within MCU and focused on Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes — positions mental illness as a key component of the story in contributing to the positions of the story's two main characters and the story's setting:

> Steve arrives at the mental hospital feeling like his life could never get better. This changes when he quickly befriends another patient. The John Doe doesn't speak, but he starts to open up to Steve. Perhaps together they can recover.

In this summary, we see the necessity of disability to the story's plot: the story is set in a mental institution and involves a relationship between two characters who are experiencing mental health issues as patients of the institution. The summary's disability-centric focus is reinforced by three disability-related tags associated with the story: "Alternate Universe – Mental Institution", "Suicide Attempt", and "mute!bucky." In this example, the summary and the tags reinforce each other and the necessity of disability to the plot of the story. Tags can also suggest disability as a key plot element when the summary is ambiguous or does not clearly relate to disability.

In my sample, 11 of the 16 stories that include disability tags position disability as a driving force in the plot of these stories in the story summary. Three further stories deal with disability as the main plot, or represented as a significant plot point in the story, though it is not explicitly evident from the summary. This demonstrates that tags for disability are used to indicate that disability or a disabled character form a central component of a story. Disability is tagged because it has importance in the narrative of the story.

Canonically Disabled Characters

Disabled characters — with either physical disabilities such as the blindness of Matt Murdock (*Daredevil*) or mental illness such as the PTSD of Jessica Jones (*Jessica Jones*) — often also appear in stories where disability is not tagged. When a story includes a canonically disabled character[3], disability is often not tagged in fanfiction unless that disability is also a key plot element in the story. In MCU, there are several canonically disabled characters that are likewise represented in fanfiction as disabled: Matt Murdock (Daredevil) is blind, Jessica Jones has PTSD, and Steve Rogers (Captain America), before receiving the super-soldier serum, had a host of physical disabilities. While not explicitly portrayed as deaf in MCU, Clint Barton (Hawkeye) is canonically deaf[4] in some Marvel comics, and is often portrayed that way in fanfiction. However, these canonical disabilities are rarely tagged in fanfiction. For example, in the sample, blind character Matt Murdock is tagged in eight stories, yet there is not a single tag for "blindness" or "blind character." Furthermore, no disability tags of any sort are associated with any of the stories that include Murdock as a character in the sample. In works across the MCU fandoms where Matt Murdock is tagged as a character, less than 25% of those works include tags that could refer to his physical disability[5]. An example of this trend of a story with a canonically disabled character and no disability tags is visible in the summary of "you always fall for the rascal (or the guy who's got a little bit of the devil in him)" by kayteedancer (2015) in the *Daredevil* fandom. It does not include tags for Murdock's canonical blindness because despite that blindness clearly being an aspect of his character, it isn't central in the story itself:

[3] A character who is depicted as being disabled in the original text (or canon) of the fandom.
[4] In both the comics and in fanfiction, Clint Barton is most often portrayed as physically deaf and culturally hearing.
[5] These tags include "blindness," "blind character," "canon disabled character," "disability," "disabled character," and "physical disability."

"Who are you?" Darcy asked curiously as the man dropped his hands.

"Just a good Samaritan," the man replied, shifting from side to side a tad uncomfortably.

"Someone who didn't want to see a pretty girl like you mugged."

"A vigilante then," Darcy continued, not allowing herself to react to the compliment. "A vigilante I haven't heard of? New to the scene, are you?"

"You could say that," he hummed, leaning against the wall. "I've been… helping over the years. It's just been recently that they gave me a name."

Something clicked in Darcy's brain. "The Devil of Hell's Kitchen," Darcy breathed.

Five times Darcy met the Devil of Hell's Kitchen, and the one time she met Matt Murdock.

This story is clearly not depicting an alternate universe[6]; Matt Murdock is here characterized as the same vigilante of *Daredevil* canon, and the story's posted chapters portray his canonical blindness. Yet the story includes no tags for disability. In the context of this story, where Matt Murdock is acting in his superhero persona of the Daredevil, his blindness would impact his actions in the story, as it does in canon. Though fans of the series will know this character is blind and readers of the story, whether they have existing knowledge of the fandom or not, can see this character's blindness represented in the narrative, his disability is unmarked in the tags of the story. It does not drive the specific action of this plot, which is instead driven by the relationship between Darcy Lewis and Murdock. Disability is a normalized part of this character

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[6] "Alternate universe" refers to a genre of fanfiction in which something is fundamentally changed from the original canon, such as a change in setting (i.e. the MCU characters in space) or plot (i.e. particular events didn't happen or happened differently).

and part of the normal experience of this character in this fandom. The disabled identities constructed within the fandom, therefore, are ones in which disabled experiences are not "out of the ordinary" and are therefore not tagged as notable except under specific circumstances.

When canonically disabled characters are tagged in fanfiction, it is primarily because their disability plays a significant role in the plot of that particular story. As with the previous examples where disability is key to the story's plot, the role of disability is often evident or inferable from the story's summary. For example, whitchry9's (2015) "Here's to living life miserable" — a story from the *Daredevil* fandom focused on Matt Murdock and Foggy Nelson — includes the following summary:

> Matt realizes he may be a bit depressed, but he figures that's just a side effect from hearing so much suffering every night.
>
> He's not sure what's up with Foggy though, and he's determined to find out.
>
> AKA the best damn avocados, on their journey through mental illness together. Also, law school and vigilantism.

While this summary does not specifically reference Murdock's blindness, the story's tags include the tag "Blind Character" and the presence of Murdock's canonical blindness in the story could be inferred by references to "hearing so much suffering" instead of "seeing." For readers familiar with the fandom, this phrase references Murdock's enhanced senses and suggests that the story is set in the universe of *Daredevil* canon. The reference to "vigilantism" similarly suggests the canonical world of the TV show where Daredevil is a lawyer by day and a vigilante by night in New York City, while references to Murdock being "depressed" and going on a "journey

through mental illness" make it clear that mental health is a key component of the plot, supported by the inclusion of several tags that explicitly reference mental health.

This indication of mental health as the core of the plot is further emphasized by the association the author makes between Murdock's depression and his pursuit of vigilante justice and enhanced senses — which he developed in the same incident that blinded him[7]. The phrase "he figures that's just a side effect from hearing so much suffering every night" calls to mind, for readers familiar with the fandom, both Murdock's enhanced sense of hearing and his nighttime activities as a vigilante. Though the author does not explicitly suggest Murdock's blindness as the cause of the depression referenced in the story summary, his depression is framed as being associated with aspects of the character — enhanced senses and vigilant activities — that *are* linked to that blindness in the show's narrative. The exploration of a non-canonical mental illness may be related to the tagging of disability in a story, but Murdock's canonical disability remains key to the plot of the story. Its relevance is supported through the use of tags for "Blind Character" and "Disabled Character" in addition to tags for mental illness.[8]

Physical and Mental Disability

When disability is represented in the tags of MCU fanfiction, that disability is more often mental disability than physical disability. In the sample, of the 55 tags overall, 46 were related to mental disability — representing 84% of the tags in the sample. Of the remaining nine tags, four

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[7] A stereotype often used in fiction that includes a disabled character who is blind or deaf is that this character compensates for that disability by developing extraordinary acuteness in another sense. While there is evidence that some level of compensation does occur for some disabled people, it does not occur to the level to which it is often represented in fiction. Extraordinarily acute senses in disabled characters have become a disability trope or stereotype, and this trope is visible in *Daredevil* in Murdock's development of enhanced hearing after being blinded. This narrative and the resulting abilities of Murdock's character are replicated in the show's fanfiction.

[8] I focus specifically on Murdock canonical blindness in this analysis. While mental health issues are canonical in the *Daredevil* comics, their presence is less explicitly referenced in the TV show, especially in reference to the main characters.

were associated with physical disability ("Bucky's Prosthetic Arm", "Deaf Clint Barton", "Deaf Character", "no metal arm") and five were ambiguous and could be associated with either physical or mental disability ("recovery" (appeared three times), "Disabled Character", and "mute!Bucky"). In all of MCU fanfiction on AO3, "Mental Health Issues" are tagged over 6,000 times, while "physical disability" is tagged less than 150 times. The summaries quoted above include canonically disabled characters (arxiver, 2015; whitchry9, 2015) and make reference to mental illness, but only one makes reference to physical disability. This discrepancy between the representations of mental and physical disability in disability tags suggests a privileging of a particular kind of disability narrative — one in which mental disability is significantly more represented than physical disability — in the MCU fanfiction community.

However, it must be acknowledged here that the particular composition of MCU canon, in which more characters are explicitly and visibly represented with physical disability (i.e. Murdock's blindness) than mental disability, may play a role in the prevalence of this trend in this fandom. Fanfiction authors often use fanfiction as an opportunity to explore identities and stories that are under-represented in canon. A canon that more visibly includes physically disabled characters might therefore result in more exploration in fanfiction of unexplored mental disability, since physical disability is more expected and therefore unremarkable. However, further research with a larger sample and encompassing more fandoms would be necessary to confirm this potential explanation of this trend and to explore the impact of other factors, such as

assigning characters a physical and/or mental disability or illness for the purpose of whump or hurt/comfort stories[9].

The mental disability that appears most frequently in MCU fanfiction tags also demonstrates the privileging of a particular kind of disability: mental health issues such as PTSD are tagged more often than mental, intellectual, or developmental disabilities[10]. In fanfiction, mental illness is heavily represented, while intellectual and development disability is nearly invisible. For example, the only tags in the sample that might apply to intellectual disability — tags such as "Mental Institution" or "therapy" — are those ambiguous enough to apply to both categories. This difference in prominence suggests that a certain kind of mental disability — mental illness — is privileged in fanfiction. The privileging of these particular narratives problematizes the normalizing activities of fanfiction by contributing to a construction of the disabled identities in this community as one that excludes a significant portion of the disabled population.

Tagging and the Construction of Disabled Identity in MCU Fanfiction

Tagging uses in the MCU universe suggest that fanfiction writers do not position a disability identity as *other* or outside of the idealized average. Such othering typically occurs in the construction of the "normate" or idealized average when identity or experience is separated into categories of normal and abnormal, with the abnormal being marked (Garland-Thomson, 1997). Instead of marking disability as abnormal, however, the fanfiction community's use of

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[9] Hurt/comfort: Fanfiction stories that focus on physical and/or emotional pain caused to a character and the care given to that hurt character by another. "Whump" is a genre of hurt/comfort that focuses more heavily on the "hurt" aspect.

[10] Despite the existence of "mental illness" and "mental disability" as classifications both diagnostically/medically and culturally, there is not a clear definition of either, nor is there agreement about how particular conditions should be classified.

selective tagging suggests attempts to normalize disability and the experiences of people with disabilities as part of the normal world of the readers. By largely leaving disability, including the disability of canonically disabled characters, unmarked in story tags, fanfiction writers demonstrate a construction of disability that sorts it into the category of the unmarked normal.

This construction of disabled identities as part of the ordinary identity in MCU fanfiction is counter to what some disability scholars see as the typical treatment of disability in creative works. Ferris (2007), describing crip poetry in his essay "Crip Poetry, or How I Learned to Love the Limp," writes that it "comes from the outside, it comes from the abnormal, it is centered in the experience of being out of the ordinary" (para. 2). Garland-Thomson (1997) similarly argues that literary characters with disabilities "remain on the margins of fiction as complicated figures or exotic aliens whose bodily configurations operate as spectacles, eliciting responses from other characters or producing rhetorical effects that depend on disability's cultural resonance" (p. 9). This is the position in which people with disabilities are cast in many narratives, whether fiction, poetry, or nonfiction: disability exists beyond the "ordinary" or normal experience. However, the disability-related tagging in this sample of MCU fanfiction demonstrates an attempt by fanfiction writers to bring disability into the normal experience as part of the common practice in the fanfiction community of exploring marginalized and excluded representations (i.e. disability, race, gender, sexuality). Disability only needs to be remarked on (or tagged) when, like any other element of a story, it is central to the story that the author is trying to tell. This is the purpose of the tagging system on platforms like AO3: to enable authors to identify key components of their works as part of a classification and to enable users to search for specific texts with elements of interest to them (Johnson, 2015). However, I must address whether the mere act of tagging disability in a story separates it from the non-disabled, able-bodied (or normate) experience,

much as labelling is often seen to do within the realm of disability — that tagging and labelling are performing the same function in different contexts. I argue that they are not.

Yes, disability is marked in certain stories through the use of tags. However, this act of tagging disability does not remove it from the normal. Unlike labelling, tagging does not confine works to set boundaries or apply group labels that don't fit or devalue the individual identity. In disability studies, labels are often associated with negative stereotyping, used as a tool to make negative, value-based judgements about individuals to whom the labels are applied (Aston, Breau, & MacLeod, 2014). However, tagging in a fanfiction space does not carry the same value-laden function as labelling. Critically, unlike in the broader context of labeling where labels are applied to individuals by others (Cologon, 2016), tags are self-selected by authors. This process of tagging does not remove the potential for tags to be used to re-inscribe both positive and negative stereotypes of disability by individual authors. It does, however, give authors considerable flexibility to define their own selves and their interpretations of a disability identity and experience. Enabling self-definition allows for tagging to take on some of the more positive aspects of labelling: the ability of a label to engender a feeling of pride and membership in the disability community. Labels can accomplish this when they are re-appropriated from the outsider perspective of medicalization and stigmatization, and reshaped by those within the community. Tagging functions almost solely in this individual and community-defined space by making users the authority. Tagging thus enables a greater expression of identity from within the community. The tagging practices in MCU fanfiction demonstrate this capability by constructing a less stigmatized or devalued identity for disability.

The tagging practices for disability in MCU fanfiction work to value and recognize disability identities by normalizing them in fanfiction. By remarking on disability only in certain

cases, this act of tagging positions disability as generally part of the normal. Disability and disabled characters become just another possible tag that can be added to a story, another classification in a system that enables authors to tag anything and everything. When disability is tagged, or called attention to, in stories where it forms the central focus of the narrative, tagging functions to highlight or give voice to the experiences of disability in that story. In this way, despite differences in the value-laden between tagging and labelling, they share a characteristic: the possibility in fandom spaces for labelling to assist in articulating experience and/or accessing resources, such as allowing readers to locate particular texts in the fandom (Cologon, 2016). The ability to more easily find stories that include disability can help readers find narratives that resonate with their experiences, contribute to their explorations of their identities, and access identity representations they respond to. Thus both the marking of disability in particular situations and the unmarked disability in many others serve to normalize disability within the fanfiction community. We cannot, however, claim that disability is fully normalized within fanfiction as the community remains influenced by trends of stigmatizing and stereotypes in popular culture and discourse outside the community. Stereotypical narratives remain within fanfiction and while disabled identities are certainly explored within this space, there remains room for increased representation within fanfiction. This room for growth helps illuminate the influences behind the fanfiction community's practices in normalizing identities like disability.

The normalizing of disability as part of the fanfiction experience for readers and writers is a reflection of the nature of fandom: fanfiction enables and encourages fans to explore aspects of their own and/or other identities that are not reflected in the canonical material or in their lived reality. In the introduction to *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture and Identity*, Harris (1998) notes that this exploration — what she calls self-invention — is a key motivation for fans, with

fandom providing "an opportunity to live in and through a set of symbols that are expressive of

ones aspirations rather than 'reality'" (6). Fans use fanfiction as a space to explore not only

alternative interpretations of the plot and characters of a fandom, but alternative interpretations

of identities including race, gender, sexuality, and disability. Online spaces can be particularly

powerful and empowering places for exploring disabled experiences (Björnsdóttir &

Sigurjónsdóttir, 2013). Describing her own discovery of fanfiction, Alicia "kestrell" Verlager

(2005) wrote that she asked herself, "Where do readers and writers with disabilities go to find the

stories which reflect their unique experiences? What stories shall serve as models for these

readers and writers for telling their own stories?" (para. 20). Verlager further claims that her

reaction to finding fanfiction was a sense that she had found her community, had found the group

of people that let her explore this aspect of her own identity. Sasha_feather (2010) describes a

similar experience of coming to fanfiction as a way of exploring her own disabled identity in

conjunction with the show *Battlestar Galactica*:

> We cannot rely on canon sources to provide these [disabled] characters because they do
>
> not currently exist or are extremely rare in the sources we are engaged with. Instead, as
>
> writers and artists, and especially as people who understand what it is like to live at the
>
> margins of society, we must create such characters by putting more of ourselves and our
>
> own lived experiences into our fiction. (para. 3.2)

Sasha_feather writes of feeling disappointment with the narrative arcs *Battlestar Galactica* gives

to its disabled characters, specifically the character of Felix Gaeta. Fanfiction becomes the place

where she writes a more satisfying narrative arc and a more accurate portrayal of disability than

fandom has provided. She uses her own identity as a person with a disability to explore a fandom

that she loves. This nature of fanfiction as a space for exploring identity suggests a key reason

why this community works to bring disability and disabled identities into the normal experience: it is a space where the exploration of these marginal identities is encouraged. Examining the disability-related tags demonstrates the results of this culture; by tagging disability only when it is a significant plot point and by tagging canonically disabled characters as disabled only when their disability is relevant to the narrative, fanfiction writers instruct us to read disability as part of the normal conventions of the community. However, we cannot yet say that disability has come completely in from the margins.

Despite fanfiction authors' attempts to construct disabled identities as part of the normal and normalized experience of fanfiction, the disabled identities that they collectively construct are not without problems. Tagging in MCU fanfiction demonstrates the privileging of particular disabilities and disability narratives: some disability narratives are vastly over-represented in fanfiction, while others are all but invisible. What little scholarship currently exists about disability *within* fanfiction echoes scholarship about disability in narratives *outside of* fanfiction: disability narratives often privilege certain kinds of narratives or certain stereotypes about disability. Disability and fanfiction, thus, have a complicated relationship:

> While it is not difficult to find fan fic featuring disabled characters, often these works have problems. Tropes within fan fic tend to fetishize or romanticize disability, such as by using a disabling event as a simple plot device to bring two characters emotionally closer. (Sasha_feather, 2010, para. 3.2)

Disability is, as Sasha_feather (2010) notes, not difficult to locate in fanfiction. However, the disabled identities created in MCU fanfiction privilege a particular kind of disability narrative: one focused on disability as a plot point, on mental disability to the exclusion of physical

disability, and on mental illnesses to the exclusion of mental disabilities. This is the same kind of privileging that Milner (2011) criticizes in her work on the ways disability narratives can follow well-worn arcs that limit voices of other disability experiences and help to reinforce stereotypes. Sasha_feather (2010) furthers highlights the problematic role of fetishizing disability, which can problematize the normalizing of disability in fanfiction by solidifying a normal that exploits disability for narrative purposes.

Many fan writers recognize this privileging and its problems. Verlager (2007) writes about how her platform for the stories she wanted to tell about the ordinary aspects of her life seemed like "a point of confrontation between the stories I wanted to tell about myself, and the stories other people, including traditional media producers, wanted to tell about me" (para. 3). Like Verlager (2007) and Milner (2011), many authors with disabilities find difficulty in expressing their own stories and in reading stories of disability written by others. They are often challenged by limited or inaccurate portrayals in both popular culture and in fanfiction. Under her blogging pseudonym kestrell, Verlager (2005) writes that she has "come to feel increasingly aware of the exclusion of positive representations of PWD[11] from stories by both serious literature and mainstream media" (kestrell, 2005, para. 5). They find their experiences are not represented both because of the presence of stereotyped narratives and because of a representation of experience different from their own. Disabled authors who are also fanfiction writers often cite this lack of positive or accurate representation as one of the reasons that they turn to fanfiction (kestrell, 2005; Sasha_feather, 2010). However, the disabled identities constructed in fanfiction do not fully address the concerns driving authors and readers with disabilities into these spaces.

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[11] "people with disabilities"

The disabled identities constructed in the MCU fanfiction community still privilege particular kinds of narratives and disabilities: mental disability is privileged over physical disability and mental illness is privileged over intellectual disability. There are several possible contributors to the trends of privileging particular disability narratives in fanfiction. The first is the differences in the ways different kinds and levels of disability are stigmatized. There is considerable research demonstrating the people with disabilities face varying levels of stigmatization from the general public (Corrigan, 2005; Crisp, Gelder, Rix, Meltzer, Rowlands, 2000). However, different disabilities are stigmatized differently and research has shown that factors such as the type and severity of the disability can affect how individuals with disabilities are perceived (Gaebel, Zäske, and Baumann, 2006; Wahl, 2012). For example, individuals with mental illnesses that are perceived by the public as more severe because of their diagnostic level, the perceived intensity of the required treatment, and the perceived possibility of violent behaviour, such as schizophrenia, may be more stigmatized than those with mental illnesses perceived as less severe, such as depression (Gaebel, Zäske, and Baumann, 2006). Such trends of stigma are likely to influence the privileging of particular kinds of disability narratives; disabilities that are less stigmatized among the general population and/or have a less visible or profound impact on a person also seem to be the more commonly addressed in fanfiction.

The privileging of mental illness in particular may also be a reflection of the prevalence of narratives in popular culture about real and fictional individuals experiencing such illness. Depictions of mental illness are common in both our news media and the fictional content we consume. One study, for example, found over 550 individual items of content that included references to or characters displaying mental illness in television programming for a single month (Philo, Secker, Platt, Henderson, and McLaughlin, 1994,). When individuals with mental

illness are represented in our media, the portrayal is often negative — they are presented as

unstable, dangerous, and unattractive (Philo, Secker, Platt, Henderson, and McLaughlin, 1994;

Wahl, 2009) — though research has also shown more recent trends towards more positive

representation (Harper, 2008). Our preoccupation with mental health and illness in other forms

of media might influence a similar preoccupation with such themes and narratives of disability in

fanfiction.

The exploration of mental illness might also be explained by its relative non-existence in

MCU canon. While physical disabilities such as blindness and deafness exist in the canon,

mental illness is hinted at for several characters but rarely explicitly encoded. In their pursuit to

explore the unexplored corners of canon, fanfiction writers often delve into an area that canon

suggests but never explores. Many fanfiction writers make the logical assumption that certain

characters' experiences in MCU canon — Tony Stark's torture by Ten Rings shown in *Iron Man*,

Bucky Barnes imprisonment by HYDRA shown in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* —

would result in mental illnesses such as depression and PTSD, reading disability into the

canonical narrative. However, it is the prevalence of the exploration of this particular disabled

identity in fanfiction that reveals the privileging happening in the broader disabled identities

being constructed via MCU fanfiction. Here applications of tagging continue to have parallels

with tensions in disability studies about the functions of labelling. Just as tagging, like labelling,

can normalize disability by making it unremarkable except when the experience is specifically

and focally articulated, tagging also shares the pitfall of labelling in its ability to enable restricted

narratives and stereotypes that do not encompass the breadth of experiences and identities

(Cologon, 2016). While the position and normalizing of disability in online fanfiction as part of

the normal does move disabled identities in from the margins it occupies in mainstream fiction,

the privileging of particular disability narratives continues to construct identities that reflect

societal stigma, popular culture representation, and stereotyped narratives.

The disabled identities revealed through these tags also privilege disability that is a

central component of the plot of a narrative. This trend, as I have discussed, moves disability into

the normal by leaving disability unmarked in many cases. However, it also problematizes the

construction of disabled identities by focusing attention on places where disability stands out.

Fiction that predominantly uses disability tags when disability is a central component to the plot

of the story tells stories *about* disability, not stories in which disability has a place in normal life

or in which a disabled character goes about a normal life. Writes Sasha_feather (2010), "It is rare

to find a character who is living and working, struggling with her or his disabled body, having

relationships, perhaps developing a disabled identity" (para. 3.2). The tagging of disability when

it has plot relevance reflects this focus away from day-to-day experiences. Of the 16 stories in

my sample that included tags for disability or disabled characters, only one seemed to be in the

vein of a day-in-the-life story that had a disabled character living their life, dealing with their

disability, and having a relationship. While other pieces of fanfiction may include disabled

characters and present this day-to-day lived experience of disability, they are often not tagged as

such. It is therefore more complicated for readers seeking these specific kinds of texts to locate

them, or for a reader browsing through the archive to identify this day-to-day lived experience

within a text that they are considering reading.

Implications

It is this communication with potential readers that highlights the importance of the

recognizing trends in the construction of the disabled identities within fanfiction tagging in the

MCU fandom. Tags in AO3 are one of the primary avenues of communication between authors and potential readers. As metadata, they provide a system of classification and enable searchability within the archive (Johnson, 2014). The identity that they construct becomes the identity that potential readers consume and, as the identity becomes part of the conventions of what and when to tag, reproduce in their own work. It is therefore necessary that we, as scholars and as fans, remain critical of the work done in this community and the identities being constructed.

Fans and fan writers recognize the need for exploration of disability and the disability narrative, and the dearth of these representations in mainstream narratives. In normalizing disability and the experiences of people with disabilities through practices such as tagging, they aspire to deconstruct the othering of the idealized normate and broaden the boundaries of what can be taken as the unmarked normal. They draw on the capacity of fanfiction for identity exploration and take steps towards inclusivity to position disabled identities as human and deserving of fandom love and attention. They also recognize the problematic depictions of disability and construction of disabled identity in the narratives that do exist: "We need stories which go beyond metaphoric meanings of disability" (kestrell, 2005, para. 13). Yet the disabled identities constructed in the tags from a sample of fanfiction from the MCU fandom are still privilege certain kinds of disability narratives about specific disabilities. The implication of this understanding is that for all the efforts fanfiction authors have gone to bring disabled identities into the normal experience of fanfiction, there is still room for further exploration. Fanfiction writers create transformative works for many different reasons, but it is my hope that, for those who do so out of a desire to bring the disabled experience into a fandom or to explore their own

disabled identity, this research will provide a point and platform of critical reflection that will enable greater insight into disability within the fan community.

Generalizing Disability Analysis to the Broader Fanfiction Community

I recognize that such a limited sample — a relatively small number of stories as a lens, a single fandom, a single fanfiction platform — cannot fully include all of the ways disability and disabled characters are represented in fanfiction. A closer examination of the stories themselves could generate insight into how disability is not only tagged but handled within authors' works. Comparison between fandoms might provide insight into the impact different prevalence and portrayals of disability in canon have on fandom representation. A broader scope of fandoms examined through the lens of a larger sample of texts would likely enable a more nuanced understanding of disabled identities being constructed. This broader scope might necessarily also consider the differences in the ways tags are enabled and function on different fanfiction platforms such as Fanfiction.net, where tagging is more limited and prescribed, and Tumblr, where tags can also function as a method of blocking specific content.

These differences between fandoms and across platforms prevent firm generalization to the entire fanfiction community. However, my own experiences in fanfiction suggest that despite these differences, there is some sense of a shared, global fanfiction culture and community, with a shared sense of purpose and values. I would therefore argue that the trends that I have drawn can be considered in the context of the broader fanfiction community. While certain fandoms within the broader community might exhibit a less or more problematic construction of disabled identities, the community as a whole, and tagging as a practice within the community, exhibits an approach towards disability that reflects broader societal concerns about the portrayal of

disability, the construction of disabled identities, and the privileging of certain narratives about disability. However, these trends also exhibit fan writers attempting to normalize disability, to bring it into the "ordinary" experience, and to treat disability and people with disabilities as normal instead of abnormal.

Conclusion

In their pursuit of the exploration and representation of disabled identities, fanfiction writers have, through the tagging system in AO3, positioned disability as part of the normal experience of fanfiction. However, critical reflection on the disabled identities that they have created problematizes this effort by revealing a privileging of a particular kind of disability and disability narrative and a tension in the many ways tags can function. As a space of open exploration, fanfiction has therefore more work to be done to make the normalized experience of disabled identities one that is accurate and inclusive. Further scholarship into these intersections can bring additional nuance and deeper understanding to this preliminary study. This further work will also support the exploration already being performed by fan writers in the community. Exploring disabled identities is something fan writers want to — and are — doing.

It is not only right, but necessary, that both fanfiction and disability scholars follow these writers into the exploration of an intersection that sheds light on identity and community construction in two new and evolving fields. Together fan scholars and fan writers can remain critically reflective of their work, while recognizing the progressive aims of fanfiction towards a community where nothing is out of the ordinary.

Acknowledgements

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