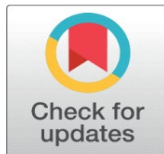
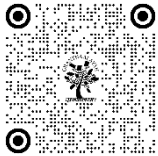


# CHALLENGING CONVENTIONAL HEROISM: REDEFINING HEROISM THROUGH THE REPRESENTATION OF DISABLED SUPERHEROES IN DAREDEVIL AND X-MEN

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## ABSTRACT

Disability representation in films is often viewed as a means of inspiring and evoking emotions from able-bodied audiences. Disability activists have long challenged these ableist norms and called for greater recognition of the diversity of human experience. The representation of characters like Matt Murdock and Charles Xavier from the American superhero films Daredevil (2003) directed by Mark Steven Johnson and X-Men (2000) by Bryan Singer has evolved to offer audiences more thought-provoking narratives that transcend simplistic notions of good versus evil. By portraying Matt and Charles Xavier as disabled superheroes, these stories challenge traditional conventions of heroism. This study analyzes how Matt and Charles Xavier disrupt the perception of heroism, particularly in the science fiction genre, thereby examining how their representation emphasises that disability does not hinder heroism or the ability to make a difference. This study combines the fields of disability studies and science fiction to challenge and showcase how the science fiction world is an inviting home for disabled characters and fans. This paper highlights how these characters, despite their physical disabilities, are depicted as powerful, determined, and capable of performing incredible feats and challenge conventional ideas about non-normative bodies in the science fiction genre. This paper concludes that such portrayals can provide disabled audiences with a sense of connection and validation through characters who share similar experiences. Seeing themselves positively reflected in fictional narratives can contribute to a stronger and more positive self-identity. Such characteristics can be included in the world of literature and movies as protagonists with persistence and resilience.

**Keywords:** Film, Representation, Physical Disability



## 1. INTRODUCTION

People with disabilities often denied the opportunity to fully participate in the activities of the socio-cultural system to which they belong. The physical and social barriers that cause this deprivation result from ignorance, indifference, and fear. Disabled people are often excluded from social and cultural life because of such attitudes and behaviours. This approach can be problematic because rather than seeing disability as a natural variation of human experience, it empowers the idea that having a disability is inherently bad and requires correction. Representation of disabled bodies in different film genres is important so that both

the physically challenged and the non-disabled audience who see disabled bodies on the screen can feel that they are not different and can have the same opportunities as others. As a result of the ongoing development of technology and rising screen time, representation has the capacity to influence how we think and understand disabilities. Increasing diversity in the media can dispel common misconceptions regarding people with disabilities. A person's disability does not define them, and it is essential to emphasise this to children and young people, particularly when society and the media tend to marginalise them.

Superhero movies have captured the imaginations of audiences worldwide, offering thrilling tales of extraordinary individuals. Superheroes are often depicted with idealised physiques characterised by muscular bodies and impressive physical strength. These exaggerated bodies symbolise power, vitality, and invincibility, reinforcing the notion that they are extraordinary beings. In recent years, there has been a growing demand for more diverse and inclusive representations of superheroes. Efforts have been made to showcase superheroes of various body types, ethnic backgrounds, and identities, reflecting a more representative and authentic world. Among the myriad of iconic characters that have graced the silver screen, two characters - Matt Murdock (Daredevil) and Charles Xavier from the films [Johnson \(2003\)](#) and [Singer \(2000\)](#) stand out for their groundbreaking representation of disability in the superhero genre and thought-provoking narratives. They seek to promote inclusiveness among people with disabilities and have emerged as powerful examples of how disability does not define one's capabilities or worth. Movies offer diverse perspectives, rather than creating characters whose plots revolve only around their disabilities. By transcending traditional conventions of heroism, these characters challenge the preconceived notion of what it means to be a superhero. 'Daredevil', released in 2003, and 'X-Men', released in 2000, are American superhero films that have left an incredible mark on the genre and popular culture. Both films introduced audiences to extraordinary characters grappling with their identities, facing internal conflicts, and challenging traditional notions of heroism.

In the Marvel Comics universe, these characters are powerful examples of overcoming adversity and fighting for what is right, transcending their physical differences to become symbols of hope and inspiration. Their stories continue to captivate audiences and showcase the depth and complexity of human experience within the realm of superheroes. 'Daredevil' follows the journey of Matt Murdock, a blind lawyer with heightened senses, who dons a red suit at night to become the vigilante known as Daredevil. In 'X-Men', audiences are introduced to a diverse group of mutants, led by the enigmatic Charles Xavier, also known as Professor X portrayed as a disabled man. Charles Xavier is depicted as a powerful telepath and telekinetic mutant in a wheelchair. Both films offer thought-provoking narratives that delve into complex moral dilemmas, human flaws, and personal struggles. 'Daredevil' showcases the character's blindness not as a limitation but as a source of strength, demonstrating that disability does not hinder heroism or the ability to make a difference. Similarly, Charles Xavier exemplifies diversity in the X-Men series as a wheelchair user, challenging the traditional depiction of superheroes as able-bodied individuals, advocating marginalised communities, challenging stereotypes, promoting inclusivity, and showcasing the power of empathy and compassion. Thus, 'Daredevil' and 'X-Men' have left a lasting impact, inspiring audiences and paving the way for a new era of superhero storytelling that celebrates diversity and challenges traditional norms. This paper will delve deeper into the representation of disability in Daredevil and X-Men, employing film theory to analyse the camera angles and shots used to depict characters' disabled identities. By understanding the cinematic

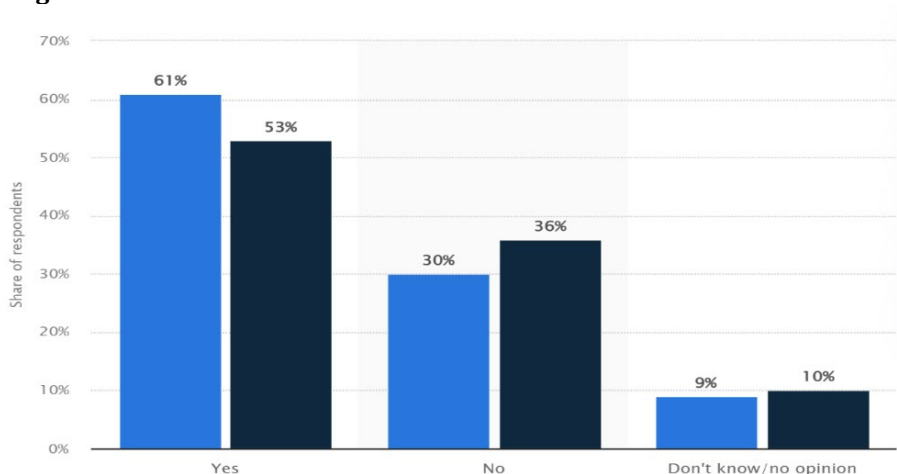
techniques employed to emphasise heroism, we can gain valuable insights into how such portrayals contribute to a more inclusive and empowering representation of disabled individuals in the science fiction genre.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

To analyse the portrayal of disabled characters, Matt Murdock and Charles Xavier, the study employs film theory as the primary analytical framework. This study utilises film theory and collects data from various camera angles and shots used to depict Matt Murdock and Charles Xavier's disabled identities in the films of [Johnson \(2003\)](#) and [Singer \(2000\)](#). Specific scenes and sequences that showcase the characters' disabilities and heroism will be noted for further analysis. The analysis explores how each character's representation challenges traditional heroism and contributes to thought-provoking narratives in the science fiction genre. This study will discuss how the use of camera angles and shots contributes to the portrayal of disabled characters as powerful, determined, and capable of performing incredible feats, challenging conventional ideas about non-normative bodies in the science fiction genre. The paper concludes by summarising the key findings of the analysis and reflecting on the significance of positive disability representation in science fiction. It also highlights how such portrayals can provide a sense of connection and validation to disabled audiences, and contribute to a more positive self-identity. This methodology aims to uncover the complexities of disability representation and its impact on challenging traditional heroism in science fiction.

## 3. POWER OF MEDIA

Media messages were previously considered static and unchanged throughout the communication process. Negative images and notions of individuals with disabilities are reinforced through media channels [Hardin & Hardin \(2004\)](#). As Stuart Hall contends, the message delivered on the screen is often not the same as that received by the viewer, and communication is deliberately skewed. The way people with disabilities are perceived and treated in society is greatly influenced by their representation in media. Without proper representation, individuals without disabilities may be uncertain how to interact with or speak to people with disabilities. This highlights the significance of accurate and positive portrayals of disabilities in the media. In February 2019, an online survey of 2203 U.S. participants aged 18 years and above was conducted to identify the percentage of adults in the United States who considered themselves fans of superhero films stratified by gender. The data were published on Statista.com. As per the data, although most of the respondents were fans of superhero movies, it was found that such movies were slightly more popular among male respondents (61%) compared to 53 percent of women [Fans of Superhero Movies in the U.S. 2019, by Gender. \(2019\)](#).

**Figure 1****Figure 1** Graph on Superhero Fans Based on Gender

Source <https://www.statista.com/statistics/979251/superhero-film-fans-us-by-gender/>

Because Superheroes demonstrate prosocial behaviours, leadership, and a variety of positive attitudes, they have the capacity to influence viewers. Filmmakers have recently initiated superior moves by portraying physically disabled characters as superheroes. People often respect superheroes because they have strong moral codes and serve as role models that others should imitate [Kinsella et al. \(2015b\)](#). According to a recent online survey report of the Morning Consult published on 10 December 2021 a poll was conducted in November 2021, among 2,200 participants in the U.S. enquiring about the preference for diversity in superhero movie leading characters. The results indicated that the majority of respondents would like to see more representation of individuals with disabilities, women, and black people in these films [Meyers \(2021\)](#). The success of Daredevil and X-Men in comics has translated into their influence on other media forms. They have inspired numerous adaptations, including television shows, films, and video games, which further spread their impact on popular culture. These adaptations have helped introduce these characters to wider audiences and solidified their cultural significance. They shaped the portrayal of superheroes in various media and influenced the storytelling approaches to subsequent superhero projects. Thus, with the introduction of disabled superheroes through various media platforms, an underrepresented group of viewers can witness one of them on screen with superpowers who are otherwise often barred from leadership positions. Disabled superheroes also help normalise disability by fostering a culture that accepts and embraces differences. It promotes a society in which disability is viewed as a natural part of human diversity. By embracing these characters as powerful and inspiring heroes, media can challenge conventional ideas about non-normative bodies and create a more inclusive and diverse landscape in literature and movies. Through this exploration, this paper hopes to foster a greater appreciation for the potential and resilience that lies within all individuals, regardless of their physical abilities, and celebrate the uniqueness of the human experience.

### 3.1. MATT MURDOCK - THE VISUALLY BLIND SUPERHERO

Daredevil is a famous comic book collection that began in the Seventies and later became a movie starring Ben Affleck. The movie portrays the character of 'Matt

Murdock', who lost his sight as a young boy because of a radioactive substance caused by an accident. The accident made his other senses stronger and heightened to superhuman degrees. Matt then trains himself to use his physical disability as his power. The scene in which young Matt trains himself after losing his eyesight uses various camera shots to portray his determination and the development of his heightened senses. This scene showcases Matt's journey from a recently blinded young boy to the beginning of his transformation into the superhero Daredevil. The camera shots used in this particular sequence include (i) Close-up Shots: The scene starts with close-up shots focusing on young Matt's face as he wakes up in the hospital bed after the accident, leaving him blind. These close-ups capture the fear and confusion in his expression by setting an emotional tone for the scene. (ii) POV Shots: As Matt begins to explore his surroundings, Point-of-View (POV) shots are used to depict his sensory experience. The camera adopts Matt's perspective, emphasising the importance of other senses in navigating the world. (iii) Tracking Shots: As young Matt starts to walk around the room, tracking shots follow his movements, accentuating his determination to adapt to the new reality. These shots also create a sense of intimacy, allowing the audience to connect with Matt's experiences.

Matt is taught by his father that self-pity is bad and the only disability in one's life is a 'bad attitude' which makes the personality of an individual and shares a silent promise with each other "To never give up - To be fearless" (00:12:50). Matt's skills and abilities are improved through constant practice. He connects with his surroundings in the same manner as his healthy companion. This is crucial because it conveys the message that people with disabilities can perform the same job as any other person. The Low-angle shots employed in the training scenes portray young Matt from below as they engage in physical exercises and training. This technique conveys a sense of strength and determination, highlighting his desire to overcome adversity. His physical disability is not the whole of his character; his ethics, fighting skills, and intellect have become more crucial for him "I trained my body and my senses, I was the boy without fear" (00:13:53-00:14:14). Matt finishes his degree in law and commits his life to battle treachery in New York City as a lawyer during the day and as 'Daredevil' at night. Matt trains himself to govern and use his exquisite human senses like a lie detector by tuning in to pulses, smelling sweat, tears, and feeling changes in internal heat level. All of these senses allow Murdock to recognise individuals via the precise patterns of their heartbeat. He transformed the grievous mishap, leaving him dazzled into a superhuman. When such depictions are represented by a superhero, viewers can be inspired to accept diversified human bodies as part of society. Therefore, abstract heroes should be inspiring and should inspire folks to strive for their qualities [Tesser \(1988\)](#).

Murdock, as a criminal offence fighter, eventually positions himself in conflict with the law lord Wilson Fisk. Murdock used his ability to expose Fisk's crook crimes and put him behind the bars. Daredevil represents a new superhero with a physical disability as a part of him, just like any other stereotypical 'heroic or inspirational' superhuman without a disability. Matt is also able to form emotional connections with other characters in the film, particularly with Elektra Natchios, which adds depth to his personality and makes him more relatable in terms of his desires for love and connection who is killed later. Throughout his life, Matt faced numerous losses and challenges, but Matt's resilience and determination have consistently driven him to protect and uphold justice, even at great personal cost, and is known as a "Man without Fear!". Thus, Matt is depicted as a multifaceted character, balancing the weight of his losses with a deep commitment to make a positive difference in the lives of others. His struggles and losses make him a compelling and

relatable superhero, showing that even in the face of adversity, one can rise to be a symbol of hope and strength. Daredevil's portrayal as a character with a disability, challenged stereotypes and provides representation for individuals with visual impairments. His story emphasises that disability does not hinder heroism or the ability to make a difference. The movie provides hope to a group of people who feel alienated by society. Matt is not just a ground-breaking hero despite his difference. He is powerful because of his differences, proving that being disabled does not prevent you from dwelling on the lifestyle you want. Disability does not need to mirror weaknesses.

### **3.2. CHARLES XAVIER – THE PARAPLEGIC SUPERHERO**

In contrast to the majority of Marvel's fictional characters, Charles Xavier is the most acknowledged disabled science-fiction personality depicted on the screen in the X-Men series. Charles, otherwise known as Professor X, his character and his wheelchair-bound status are significant elements of his identity and have been portrayed consistently in various X-Men comics, animated series, and movies. In the introductory scene of Charles, the camera reveals him, using a high-angle shot to capture him from behind, observing the discussion centred on human concerns about mutants. Where Senator Robert Kelly is shown holding a public hearing on 'The Mutant Problem' raising the idea of introducing a Mutant Registration Act. The scene includes close-up shots of Professor X's face, showing his focused and attentive expressions as he listens to the proceedings. These close-ups highlight his intelligence and empathy, allowing the audience to connect with his characters at a deeper level. The scene occasionally incorporates wide shots to show the entire meeting room, depicting Xavier as an observer, among other attendees. This framing reinforces his role as an influential figure in the mutant world—someone who is well-respected and has a significant presence.

Professor X is depicted as one of the most dominant: an Omega Level mutant with enormous power and exceptional telepathic ability. He has outstanding psychic powers, along with the skills of mind reading, to inflict pain and body paralysis in others, astral projection, and detection of different mutants within a small radius. As he grew older, he became a respected geneticist and Professor of Psychiatry, holding PhD degrees in the fields of genetics, biophysics, and psychology. He dedicated his life to helping mutants and promoting peaceful relationships between mutants and humans. As head of the Xavier Institute for Higher Learning, he trains young mutants to control their power and become the next generation of X-Men. The movies emphasise Professor X's exceptional leadership skills. The camera often employs steady and smooth movements when focusing on Professor X, which reinforces his composed and confident demeanour as a leader. These stable shots convey that he is in control of the situation and is able to make sound decisions, even in challenging circumstances. His associations with his students developed from a mentor/student relationship to that of a father/child. Many Eye-level shots are utilized when characters interact with Professor X, treating him as an equal. This camera angle shows that he respects others' perspectives and actively listens to their ideas. It fosters a sense of approachability and open communication, which are essential traits for an effective leader. He consistently figures out how to be receptive and authoritative and has never manhandled his blessings. Charles battles eagerly for the peaceful co-existence between humans and mutants. His disability did not prevent him from attaining his dreams. Xavier is determined to make his existence's purpose for the protection of humankind from mutants and for the safety of mutants from mistreatment. He says "Any dream worth having is a dream worth

fighting for". Professor X's wheelchair-bound status served as a representation of individuals with disabilities in popular media. His character challenges stereotypes and promotes the idea that disability does not define a person's worth or capabilities as he says "Just because someone stumbles and loses their path, doesn't mean they're lost forever" [Filmey Box. \(2022\)](#).

A depiction that frequently occurs in media with disabled characters is that their inability is the primary focal point of storylines. The most amazing component of Xavier's portrayal is that his incapacity does not depart for plot convenience. Throughout the movie, he stays in his wheelchair and the explanation behind his loss of movement is not examined as it is not something for the characters to 'settle.' Here, the director does not consider relieving Professor X as the viewers do not have a clue as to why Professor X is disabled, and it does not make a difference to the viewers since it does not make a difference to the character Professor X. He does not spend his time sulking and imagining that he is incomplete because he is in a wheelchair. He has demonstrated on numerous occasions that paraplegia is not a block to his values as a man. Professor X has been a major media influencer throughout the series and his character is outstanding as a paraplegic in a wheelchair. He showed that power and strength can be measured from multiple points of view.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the journey of both Matt Murdock and Charles Xavier reminds us that disability is just one aspect of a person's identity. Their disability does not overshadow the complexity of their character, strength of their spirit, or impact of their actions. They challenge the idea of an infallible hero and instead present flawed and conflicted characters who grapple with their own limitations and make difficult choices in the face of challenging circumstances. Both Matt and Charles face significant challenges and adversities related to their disabilities. Their determination, resilience, and ability to rise above their circumstances can inspire disabled audiences to overcome their own obstacles and embrace their strengths. They challenge stereotypes associated with disability by portraying that disabled individuals can be powerful, intelligent, and capable of making a significant impact in the world. These challenges preconceived notions about disability and encourages a broader perspective on the diversity of human experiences.

The representation of Daredevil and Charles Xavier pushes the boundaries of superhero narratives, showcasing the power of diverse storytelling and multidimensional character development. Audiences are exposed to heroes who are flawed, conflicted, and more relatable. This shift in representation redefines the concept of heroism, emphasizing that disability or other perceived differences do not diminish one's capacity to make a positive impact. Both characters have contributed to the evolution of the superhero genre by expanding its boundaries and introducing complex storytelling elements. Their narratives, driven by moral ambiguity and exploration of personal and societal themes, are inspiring and influence the portrayal of superheroes and their stories.

In summary, Daredevil and X-Men, led by Charles Xavier, have had a lasting impact on popular culture and the portrayal of superheroes. Such portrayals of disability are significant, as they enable one to acknowledge one's inability and are a type of treatment for the disabled and non-disabled, pondering where their capacity would dwell. At a point when all you find in the media are negative generalisations, sending particularly harmful messages to children and young people. The scientific fiction world is genuinely an inviting home for characters with

different bodies as well as fans with disabilities. There is nothing superior to seeing yourself in a positive light, which is what these characters accomplish for our community. Thus, representation matters and having prominent disabled characters like Daredevil and Charles Xavier in popular media increases the visibility of disability. It acknowledges the presence and contributions of disabled individuals to society, which can foster a sense of recognition and belonging.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

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