

THE RISE OF DIVERSITY IN THE MCU

by Michaela Manfull
mmanfull438@g.fhdschools.org

The discussion about diversity when it comes to the film industry mainly focuses on gender and race, with a slightly newer focus on LGBTQIA+, but rarely on the concept of mental health/illnesses or physical disabilities. While Marvel is nowhere near a perfect example of how a company should show diversity through their films, their comics have been improving, and slowly but surely, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is trying to catch up.

According to an interview with Paul Terry, the co-author of *The Story of Marvel Studios: The Making of the Marvel Cinematic Universe*, the Marvel Studio's mantra is "never stop plussing." 'Plussing' is not saying that an idea is bad or wishing it was something else, but instead accepting it as a starting point and building from there. This is what Marvel has been doing and should continue to do with their characters, especially when it comes to representation of gender, race, mental illnesses, LGBTQIA+ and physical disabilities.

CHARACTER GENDER & RACE

When it comes to films, it should be shocking to very few Marvel or non-Marvel fans that the first non-white lead was *Black Panther* in 2018 and the first female lead was *Captain Marvel* in 2019. Both of these films performed very well in the grand scheme of Marvel releases, with *Black Panther* placing third of their 74 films in box offices and *Captain Marvel* placing eighth, encouraging Marvel to increase the amount of diverse characters and ideas they presented in their films and shows in the following years. In the MCU's 2021 spurt, which included a total of four films and five Disney+ shows, seven had main characters that were either not white, not male, or neither, significantly adding to the amount of diverse projects in the MCU.

Of course, there is more to gender and race than just a main female character or a main non-white character. While Kamala Khan in 2022's *Ms. Marvel* may not have been the best way to approach her storyline, it still brought in new, clear representation for Pakistani-Americans and was able to tell the story of the Partition, which many viewers may not have known much about beforehand. So far, she has only appeared in *Ms. Marvel* and *The Marvels*, but fans are excited to see what the MCU does with her character next.

FILM DIRECTOR GENDER & RACE

For a long while after the first MCU film, every director of a Marvel movie was a white male.

Some people don't understand just how big of a deal diversity behind the camera can be. While seeing characters on the screen can be important, the directors are the ones making sure that each character is treated as they should be. It took Marvel nine years to allow a non-white male to direct and over a decade for a female director. The timeline shows just how far away the films are from each other.

2008
First MCU Film
Jon Favreau, *Iron Man*

2017
First Non-White Director
Taika Waititi, *Thor: Ragnarok*

2019
First Female Co-Director
Anna Boden, *Captain Marvel*

2021
First Solo Female Director
Cate Shortland, *Black Widow*
& First Woman of Color Director
Chloé Zhao, *Eternals*

LGBTQIA+

The LGBTQIA+ community has been fighting for fair representation for years and the MCU would ultimately gain many fans if their characters are handled well. Along with that, a brand as large as Marvel has the chance to make LGBTQIA+ relationships and orientations more conversation-friendly in many homes across the US and the world, showing people that if heroes can be queer, real people can too. At long last, Marvel has begun introducing more LGBTQIA+ characters into their MCU films and shows. Granted, there are not very many of these characters, especially not main characters, but there are still a few worth noting.

MENTAL ILLNESSES

Mental illnesses and mental health may seem to be one of the least likely things to be portrayed in superhero films and shows, but it turns out that most of the MCU's protagonists face some sort of issue with their mental health at one point or another.

This is not only because of the toll that going through battles and wars has on people in general, but also because Marvel tends to use mental illnesses as a way to humanize their heroes more and give them a "weakness," as opposed to showing other aspects of their lives. This is by no means the correct way to give characters multiple dimensions, and Marvel is moving away from it as of recently, but this is how they have generally approached it in the past.

In the 2022 series *Moon Knight*, Marvel took a dive into Marc Spector, a man who suffers from Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). With most things, there were a few aspects that got Hollywood-fied by Marvel, but they did hire a psychologist in order to grasp it the best they could and managed to get some things right as well. Along with that, there are a multitude of characters that have confirmed mental illnesses amongst multiple movies and shows throughout the MCU, some of which are listed below.



Thena
Dementia



Loki Laufeyson
Borderline
Personality Disorder



Gamora & Nebula
Childhood Trauma



Wanda Maximoff
Trauma & Grief



Moon Knight
Dissociative
Identity Disorder

Q&A: PHYSICAL DISABILITY REPRESENTATION IN THE MEDIA

A question & answer session with Joe Henke, one of the program coordinators for FHSD's alternative learning department.

Q: Do you think the way Marvel and the film industry as a whole has been representing more groups of people is going in a positive or negative direction and why?

"I would say mostly positive in my opinion. There's a variety of different people and it can be hard to work with and around all of the different licenses that are out there."

Q: Is there any specific Marvel character, movie, or show that you think presented physical disability representation in a very good way?

"Even though he isn't from the actual Marvel universe, Professor Xavier uses a wheelchair and is still one of the most powerful mutants. Along with that, there are other characters who are in Netflix shows but not the MCU like Daredevil who is blind. It's really cool to see the different aspects of characters in movies and shows that are brought to life."

PHYSICAL DISABILITIES

Physical disabilities are debatably the most overlooked part of diversity in the MCU. The main source of physical disability representation that Marvel has produced has been through the use of deaf and hard-of-hearing characters, all of which were in films and shows released in 2021. These include Clint Barton, aka Hawkeye, from the original Avengers group; Maya Lopez, aka Echo, from the series *Hawkeye*; and, of course, Makkari from the *Eternals* movie.

These are great strides in representation of physical disabilities, but when paired with the fact that there are currently only three other confirmed characters in the MCU- Dr. Strange, who lost use of his hands in a car accident only to have the plot point somewhat overlooked later in his appearances in the MCU; Bucky Barnes with his bionic arm; and Dr. Jane Foster in *Thor: Love and Thunder*, who battles stage four cancer throughout the course of the movie- it really shows how little Marvel focuses on them.