

“Den attraktiven Millionär und weniger den depressiven Durchschnittstypen mit Holzbein”: Writing and Discussing Disability in German Web Fiction and Forums¹

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Abstract: This paper examines the narrative construction of disability in German web fiction by analyzing four web fiction texts as well as a forum discussion on the depiction of disabled characters in (web) fiction. Focusing on why disabled characters are included or excluded, which impairments are preferred, and what functions they serve in shaping the plot, the analysis draws on Mitchell and Snyder’s (2000) concept of ‘narrative prosthesis’ – the use of disability for narrative or metaphorical purposes – while the forum analysis explores the linguistic construction of asymmetric categories of ‘human differentiation’ (‘Humandifferenzierung’, Hirschauer 2023). The findings suggest that in web fiction disability is indeed employed to initiate the plot or to mirror a character’s inner conflict on a physical level either at different levels and in different ways. The forum discussion reflects asymmetrizing language that both reproduces and critically reflects negative concepts of the life with disabilities genre.

1. Introduction

The media representation of disabled characters is a well-established area of research in disability studies (cf. among many others Harris and Baskin 1987; Zola 1987; Mitchell and Snyder 2000; Bérubé 2005; Cheyne 2019). While numerous studies examine the narrative functions of disability, analyses of how linguistic structures relate to epistemic frames remain scarce. Moreover, disability in web fiction has received little to no scholarly attention so far. This paper examines both the functions of disability within the plot and the linguistic structures through which these functions are realized in web fiction. According to Bérubé (2005: 570), disability demands a story, regardless of “[w]hether the disability in question is perceptible or imperceptible, a matter of a congenital illness or of a degenerative disease, an effect of aging or the object of the inconceivably rude query *How did you get that way?*”.

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In my literary-linguistic analysis, I adopt a holistic approach to the topic, making it possible to identify underlying processes and linguistic structures of asymmetrization and othering. Online self-published literary works are especially suitable for this type of analysis, since they are not subject to editorial review and therefore reflect language in a more unfiltered form.²

In section 2.1, I present an analysis of four pieces of web fiction published on Wattpad, a website and mobile app where users can publish unedited texts and exchange feedback via comments. As a theoretical framework, I employ Mitchell and Snyder's (2000) concept of 'narrative prosthesis', according to which physical and sensory impairments have narrative functions in literary texts. These functions are compared across the selected works. In section 2.2, I analyze a meta-discussion by web fiction authors on disabled protagonists in a writers' forum, focusing on which impairments are considered most 'suitable' for fiction and why. I also examine the question to what extent disability leads to an asymmetrization of characters in terms of body, achievement of romance, or life design. The two analyses are discussed comparatively in section 3.

2. Disability in Web Fiction: An Empirical Approach

2.1 Disability in German Wattpad Fiction

This section explores how disability is conceptualized, functionalized, and negotiated in literature through the portrayal of disabled protagonists, drawing on the framework of narrative prosthesis. Mitchell and Snyder (2000) identify a double function of disability in literary texts: "as a stock feature of characterization and [...] as an opportunistic metaphorical device" (47). Disability thus serves both as a means of character differentiation and as a driver for a literary plot. The authors outline a typical narrative pattern revolving around disability:

first, a deviance or marked difference is exposed to a reader, second, a narrative consolidates the need for its own existence by calling for an explanation of the deviation's origins and formative consequences; third, the deviance is brought from the periphery of concerns to the center of the story to come; and fourth, the remainder of the story rehabilitates or fixes the deviance in some manner. This repair of deviance may involve an obliteration of the difference through a "cure," the rescue of the despised object from social censure, the extermination of the deviant as a purification of the social body, or the revaluation of an alternative mode of being. (53–54).

Apart from setting the plot in motion and providing it with a reason to develop, disability also serves as a symbol or image for an abstract theme, often

² Online platforms follow specific rules for posting and reading stories, particularly when it comes to violence, sexual content, and youth protection. Many web authors also internalize genre conventions from what they read or work with lay beta readers – but there is no professional proofreading or editorial process involved.

equating the physical with moral deviance (e.g., the disabled Captain Ahab in *Moby-Dick*) or with some other condition to be fixed or cured.

In the following, four fictional texts from the publication platform Wattpad are analyzed in view of how disability is framed within them and to what extent narrative prosthesis³ is employed. Most texts published on the platform are works of fiction, with the most popular genres being romance, teen fiction, and fan fiction. As of 2020, Wattpad had over 665 million story uploads, with 70% of its user base being female. While no official age statistics are available, it appears that the majority of users are teenagers or young adults.³ I chose this platform primarily because it allows users to search for specific motifs or tropes via the tags assigned by authors. The stories were selected based on the search terms *Behinderung* ('disability'), *Handicap*, *Rollstuhl* ('wheelchair'), and *blind*, which led to stories with the respective tags or titles. Another reason is the interactive character of the platform: "[...] Wattpad assists the shift from a culture of consumption to a culture of production and participation" (Kurt et al. 2025: 3000). The content of the stories thus triggers immediate feedback from readers that also can be analyzed.

For this analysis, I selected four German-language stories published within a short period of time (after 2018). I chose two stories that focus on mobility impairments and two that focus on blindness as this also allows for a comparison between the two types of impairment. In all four narratives, the disabled characters serve as protagonists, and their impairments are neither congenital nor age-related, but caused by accidents. Two of the stories are written in the first person, while the other two employ a third-person narrator with (partly variable) internal focalization. I also selected two male and two female protagonists to examine potential gender differences. The only information available about the authors is what they chose to share on their Wattpad profiles. Sources have not been edited, and spelling and grammatical mistakes are by the authors.

For the analysis a combination of close and wide reading (cf. Hallet 2010) was used. This Cultural Studies approach to literary texts, which combines detailed structural text analysis with epistemic frameworks and cultural contexts at the time of text production, aligns well with methods of cultural-analytical linguistics that identify culturally meaningful linguistic patterns (cf. Schröter, Tienken and Ilg 2019). In addition, I analyzed the comments posted below them to explore how readers respond to the texts' representations of disability.

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wattpad>. Accessed 5 November 2025.

Title (German/ English Transla- tion)	Year(s) of Publi- cation	Narrator/ Perspective	Summary	Tags Given by the Author
Liebe im Rollstuhl ~ 'Geht' das überhaupt? 'Love in a Wheelchair ~ Can It 'Go' Anywhere?'	2018	first-person; internal focalization	Jo (short for Johanna) is a student and a talented competitive swimmer and regularly takes part in tournaments – until she and her family are involved in a car accident that kills everyone else involved. Jo survives and uses a wheelchair due to paraplegia. Together with her best friend, she moves to Rome for a while, where a romance begins to develop between her and Alex, one of her flatmates. However, it later turns out that Alex only approached her because he had accepted a dare – to sleep with a girl in a wheelchair. After a period of heartbreak, the two finally talk things out, and it becomes clear that Alex's feelings were genuine and that he was blackmailed by the people behind the bet. They reconcile in the end.	behinderung bestefreundin freundschaft gefühle iatlienisch italien jungefrau leben liebe meer menschen menschlich-keit querschnitts-gelähmt querschnitts-lähmung rom romantik sandstrand sonne sprache traurig

				unfall
Handicap – Ich kämpfe um dein Herz”⁴ ,Handicap – I'll fight for your heart'	2023	third-person; variable internal focalization	A year after a car accident in which her fiancé was killed, Daria starts a new job at a rescue station in Cologne. Since the accident, she has been unable to move her legs, although they are still sensitive to touch. From the very first moment, her colleague Franco makes romantic advances toward her. Daria is not opposed but finds it hard to trust. After her colleagues examine Daria, it turns out that her paralysis is psychosomatic. Daria undergoes another round of rehabilitation in Bern. When Franco picks her up on her last day there, she greets him wearing high heels. They confess their love for each other and move in together at Franco's apartment.	asds aufstreife aufstreifiediespezialisten diespezialisten francofabiano oliverdreier teamdelta112
The blind Badboy	2016–2018	first-person; variable internal focalization	Due to an accident, the teenager Leke, known as a “bad boy,” has become blind (visual acuity 0.05). As a result, his eyes have taken on a lighter color. Fearing social exclusion, he conceals his impairment from his classmates. He wears sunglasses and uses ultrasonic implants to navigate his environment. When a new student, Shy, joins his class, romance	badboy blind highschool jugendliteratur liebe teenager

⁴ Although this story is a fanfiction based on a popular German docu-fiction depicting fictional police operations (*Auf Streife – Die Spezialisten*), its characters are not part of the main cast.

			develops between them after initial conflicts.	
Blind Shades	2023–2024	third-person; variable internal focalization	After the war against Voldemort, Harry Potter returns to Hogwarts for his final year. Just as he begins to realize that he is gay – and that he has fallen in love with Severus Snape – he gets into a heated argument with the Potions Master and suffers a fall that leaves him with a head injury. The accident damages his optic nerve, and Harry loses his sight. Unable to participate in regular classes, Snape brings Harry to his home and tutors him privately. Over the following days, Harry learns to become independent through various magical and non-magical aids that help him overcome structural barriers. An ex-partner of Snape, who is also blind, supports him both as a role model and as a trainer. At the same time, Snape and Harry acknowledge their romantic feelings for each other, and a relationship develops between them. When they have resolved all their personal conflicts and Harry has overcome his self-doubts, he regains his eyesight after sleeping with Snape.	angst blind boyxboy dark draco fanfiction fanfiktio harry harrypotter hogwarts liebe malfoy potter romance romantik severus- snape snape snarry trauer

Liebe im Rollstuhl: Overcoming the Stereotype

In *Liebe im Rollstuhl* – ‘*Geht das überhaupt?*’, everyday life in a wheelchair is well researched. At times the text almost reads like a non-fiction guide: Chapter 2, for example, describes the various procedures at the airport for wheelchair users. Ordinary everyday barriers – such as swimming in the sea or getting around in crowded places – are addressed, but never overly dramatized. The story engages with the protagonist’s impairment in a nuanced and thoughtful way. The reader is informed that she carries out normal tasks, such as doing housework. Some characters mock her, while others respond with routine familiarity, do not give her any special attention, or meet her self-doubt with outspoken acceptance. The protagonist experiences a realistic inner struggle, as the accident has made her less independent than before. All negative assessments of the impairment occur not on the level of the narrator, but of the characters – either through negatively framed mockery or in the protagonist’s own self-doubt. In Chapter 3, Jo doubts that her flat mate would want to start a relationship with her because of her disability and his lifestyle:

Was will der denn mit einer Frau wie mir? Er ist Italiener, er liebt es an den Strand zu gehen, im Meer zu baden oder andere sachen zu machen die ich nicht machen kann.

(What would he want with a woman like me? He’s Italian, he loves going to the beach, swimming in the sea, or doing other things I can’t do.)

The comparison to “einer Frau wie mir” (a woman like me) particularly draws attention to Jo’s assumptions about Italian men’s expectations of women and evokes, but does not specify, restrictions on life with a disability. In Chapter 5, the comparison reappears in the form of “ein Mädchen wie ich” (a girl like me). However, the protagonists’ doubts are immediately countered by her friend, who offers a different perspective:

Jo, was soll das denn jetzt? Hör auf in Selbstmitleid zu baden. Wenn er dich wirklich liebt, liebt er dich auch mit deiner Behinderung – ganz einfach. Sonst ist er's einfach nicht wert, so eine wunderbare Frau wie dich zu haben.

(Jo, what’s that supposed to mean? Stop wallowing in self-pity. If he really loves you, he’ll love you with your disability – simple as that. Otherwise, he’s just not worthy of having such a wonderful woman like you.)

Chapter 5 revisits the same conflict through a dialogue between the female lead and the male protagonist/love interest:

Mir geht es nicht um das Aussehen einer Frau sondern um ihren Charakter, um ihre Augen und alles andere nur nicht das Aussehen und der Rollstuhl ist nunmal ein Teil von dir, aber genau so habe ich mich in dich verliebt. seit [sic!] dem ersten Tag als wir geredet haben ist das so.

(I don’t care about a woman’s looks, I care about her character, her eyes, and everything else – just not her appearance. And the wheelchair is simply

a part of you, but that's exactly how I fell in love with you... ever since the first day we talked, that's how it's been.)

The author's lexical and syntactic choices underline their aim to create a linguistically-reflexive, non-discriminatory text and a non-ableist perspective on the protagonist's disability: Several months after her accident, Jo narrates: "Mir geht es gut, abgesehen davon, dass ich im Rollstuhl sitze und meine Beine nicht spüren oder bewegen kann." (I'm doing well, apart from the fact that I'm in a wheelchair and cannot feel or move my legs.) (Chapter 2) The normalized treatment of Jo's impairment is reflected in the syntactic structure: in the main clause, the narrator states that she is fine, while only the subordinate clause mentions the exceptions.

In the phrase "Wenn er dich wirklich liebt, liebt er dich auch mit deiner Behinderung" (If he really loves you, he loves you with your disability) (Chapter 3), Jo's best friend opts for the preposition "with" instead of "despite". The love interest tells Jo: "Alles stimmt [...] und der Rollstuhl ist nun mal ein Teil von dir, aber genau so habe ich mich in dich verliebt." (Everything is alright [...] and the wheelchair is just a part of you, but I fell in love with you just as you are.) (Chapter 5) In the phrase, "Ich meine ich habe es schon genug schwer einen Partner zu finden der meinen Rollstuhl akzeptiert" (I mean, it is difficult enough for me to find a partner who accepts my wheelchair) (Chapter 7), the reference to the wheelchair as a metonymy for Jo's impairment linguistically highlights that it is not Jo as a person who might be rejected, but rather the everyday barriers that shape her life and prevent her from swimming or going on walks.

It is only in the context of the bet Alex participated in that the text employs categories such as "mit einem Mädchen im Rollstuhl" (with a girl in a wheelchair) (Chapter 7) or "mit einer Behinderten" (with a disabled person) (Chapter 8), thereby de-individualizing Jo and reducing her to a mere specimen.

Disability (in accordance with Mitchell and Snyder: 2000) appears in the story both as a catalyst and as an obstacle to the romantic plot. It serves as the initial reason Alex approaches Jo, but it also creates conflict when she discovers the bet. For Alex, the romance begins with Jo being perceived as a specimen of the 'woman in a wheelchair', but it culminates in his recognizing and loving her as an individual.

Handicap – Ich kämpfe um dein Herz: "Cured by love"

In *Handicap – Ich kämpfe um dein Herz*, Daria's male colleagues at her new workplace questioning her about the circumstances of her disability and scrutinize her abilities: "Darf ich fragen, wodurch du auf die Reifen gekommen bist?" (May I ask how you ended up on the tires?) (Prologue). She responds with quick-witted remarks to counter their sexualizing and patronizing behavior:

"Bitte packt mich nicht in Watte nur wegen dem Rollstuhl, ich sage, wenn ich Hilfe brauche."

(Please don't wrap me in cotton wool just because of the wheelchair. I'll let you know if I need help.) (Prologue)

A later scene contains the following dialogue:

"Darf ich dir einen Kaffee mitbringen, schöne Frau?" Daria entzieht ihm ihre Hand und erklärt "danke, aber ich bin durchaus in der Lage, mir den Kaffee selber zu holen."

("May I bring you a coffee, beautiful lady?" Daria pulls her hand away and replies, "Thanks, but I'm perfectly capable of getting the coffee myself.") (Prologue)

Over the course of the story, the male protagonist Franco acts in an intrusive manner and repeatedly crosses boundaries – for instance, by pushing Daria's wheelchair without asking, lifting her from it, touching her physically, and eventually lifting her onto his lap.

Similar to *Liebe im Rollstuhl*, Daria initially believes that her male love interest could not possibly be attracted to her because of her mobility impairment. Franco repeatedly reassures her that he loves her regardless of her disability:

"Du redest Blödsinn Daria. Ich versuche dir gerade zu sagen, dass dir mein Herz bereits seit gestern Mittag gehört [...] und ich werde verdammt nochmal um dich kämpfen."

(You're talking nonsense, Daria. I'm trying to tell you that my heart has belonged to you since yesterday noon [...] and I will damn well fight for you.) (Chapter 1)

Unlike *Liebe im Rollstuhl*, however, Daria's impairment is psychosomatic. By the end of the text, she can walk again, and her body is no longer marked as deviant. The narrative goes even further, showing that she has undergone eye surgery and no longer needs glasses, which functions as a form of overcompensation for physical deviance or an overachievement of bodily normativity. However, the social stakes of disability are emphasized when she pretends that her rehabilitation treatment was unsuccessful in a conversation with a colleague and reports that subsequently Franco distanced himself from her. The romantic plot concludes with a sex scene that would not have been possible in this form if Daria's lower body had remained paralyzed. Within the narrative's logic, the replacement of the wheelchair with high heels can be read as a symbol of regained femininity; however, this symbolism also reflects and reproduces normative conceptions of femininity and able-bodiedness.

In contrast to *Liebe im Rollstuhl*, in *Handicap – Ich kämpfe um dein Herz*, Daria's disability functions not only as a catalyst for the plot but also as a metaphor: her psychosomatic impairment represents her inner turmoil and emotional inaccessibility, which is ultimately 'fixed' by Franco. Once Daria opens her heart to him – making her emotions accessible – her body likewise becomes accessible to him, culminating in their first sexual intercourse.

Handicap contains several lexical and syntactic choices that highlight ableist views of life with a disability underlying the text. With the phrase "[I]hre Freunde haben sich mittlerweile abgewandt nachdem klar ist, dass sie im Rollstuhl endet" (Her friends have turned away since it is clear that she will end up in a wheelchair) (Prologue), the narrative frames the distancing of Daria's friends as a tragic consequence, while at the same time the text itself constructs her disability as a limiting condition forming a dead end in Daria's life.

As in *Liebe im Rollstuhl*, the protagonist states the de-individualizing expression "Was will er mit einer wie mir?" (What would he want with someone like me?) (Prologue) when referring to herself as a potential partner for Franco. However, while in *Liebe im Rollstuhl* such negative concepts stem from Jo's fear of rejection and are repeatedly contradicted by other characters, in *Handicap* they also appear to be articulated at the level of the narrator, presenting disability as inherently limiting and socially disqualifying rather than as an individual concern.

Instead of directly naming Daria's wheelchair as an assistive device, the author employs paraphrastic and metonymic expressions, such as "Menschen mit Bereifung" (people on wheels) (Prologue). "Darf ich fragen, wodurch du auf die Reifen gekommen bist?" (May I ask how you ended up on the tires?) (Prologue), and der "Unfall [...], der mich in dieses Ding gebracht hat" (the accident [...] that brought me into this thing) (Prologue). The blending of body and wheelchair – realized through nominal and prepositional phrases – also enables a reading of Daria and the wheelchair as a single entity. At the same time, this proximity to the assistive device is dissolved later in the narrative, as the wheelchair is later replaced by high heels.

The blind Badboy: Disabled only on Paper

The blind Badboy tells the story of Leke, a teenage boy who keeps his visual impairment (visual acuity 0.05) a secret from his schoolmates. I chose this story because the interaction between author and readers on Wattpad not only reveals the author's conception of disability, but also how this depiction is received and negotiated by readers. From the beginning, commentators are consistently critical of how the story portrays the protagonist's blindness. They point out that, although Leke is presented as internally focalized throughout the narrative, the narration often describes things he would not be able to perceive:

Jetzt mal Klartext. Wie zum Teufel soll der Kerl bitte wissen, dass sie ihm mit hochgezogener Augenbraue "hinterher guckt"?

(Let's be real. How the hell is the guy supposed to know that she's "checking him out" with a raised eyebrow?)

Readers also question the internal logic of his attendance at a regular school while none of his classmates are aware of his blindness. The author addresses this criticism at considerable length, stating that they acknowledge these concerns but do not wish to restrict the narrative to the protagonist's perception. Thus, while Leke is impaired 'in theory', he is not really portrayed as disabled –

neither on the level of focalization nor in the development of the plot. Later in the story, he is even given implants providing a form of bat-like echolocation, enabling him to navigate more easily without a white cane. Their permanent integration into his body frames him as possessing near-superhuman abilities. The story presents disability solely as a plot device, not as a means of character-building: Leke's blindness primarily functions as a secret to be kept and as a source of tension within the romantic plot. In no way is it portrayed as an inherent aspect of Leke's character, nor does the story aim for realistic representation.

Leke's disability is also tightly bound up with his masculinity: he hides his blindness because he is afraid it will make him appear weak and undermine his maleness. He is invested in maintaining the story's eponymous bad boy persona, and his secret only reinforces that image – the emotional distance he cultivates becomes part of the act:

"Wer wäre ich schon, wenn alle wüssten, dass ich blind war? Ein armer, bemitleidenswerter Freak, der versuchte, einen Badboy zu mimen und cool zu wirken. Nein danke."

Who would I even be if everyone knew I was blind? Just some pathetic freak people pity – a guy pretending to be a bad boy and trying to look cool. No, thanks.) (Chapter 1).

In the passage Leke considers himself a potential nobody if people found out he was blind, that he would lose his reputation, and that with an impairment he could only pretend to be cool but never truly achieve that status. It also serves as an example of how the text links physical impairment with deviance and psychological illness. Leke fears being perceived as a "freak" by his classmates if they discover his blindness. When Shy, the female love interest, speaks to him about being ready for the "Klapse" (nut house) (Chapter 5), the protagonist reflects on how she unknowingly touched a nerve, reinforcing the interplay of psychological and physical vulnerability. A reader takes up this presumption by commenting critically: "Nein, du wärst einfach blind, habibi, das hat nichts mit Freak zu tun" (No, you would simply be blind, habibi; that has nothing to do with being a freak).

Like *Handicap – Ich kämpfe um dein Herz*, the story contains devaluating phrases such as "Mich, den Krüppel mit den Vampiraugen" (Me, the cripple with the vampire eyes) (Chapter 7) and "Ich werde nie erfahren, was Liebe ist" (I will never experience love) (Chapter 9). Until very late in the narrative these expressions are neither challenged nor contradicted and reflect a strongly negative, dehumanizing conception of life with a disability, portraying the protagonist as alien, inhuman, and fundamentally unlovable. This representation is marked by a tendency toward exaggeration, which amplifies these perceptions. When Leke finally tells Shy the truth about his blindness, she narrates that she sees him as "kaputt" (broken), but "auf seine Art glücklich" (happy in his own way) (Chapter 60). Leke explains that he imagines what the people around him do or what they look like because he does not want to talk to darkness: "Zumindest stellte ich mir das so vor. Ich wollte nicht einfach nur mit

der Dunkelheit reden" (Chapter 20).⁵ This mirrors the common metaphor of blindness as darkness. Accordingly, the author responds to a critical comment about perspective thereby privileging visual perception over other sensory modalities: "Einerseits will ich dem Leser klar machen, dass er blind ist, andererseits finde ich, dass man die Geschichte ohne bildliche Darstellung eintönig, kalt und fade wirken lässt" (On the one hand, I want to make it clear to the reader that he is blind; on the other hand, I think that without visual description, the story becomes monotonous, cold, and bland). According to Paterson (2013: 160), himself visually impaired, conceptualizations of blindness are shaped by the fact that "[w]hat sighted people imagine [...] remains irrevocably entwined with darkness, an asymmetrical non-duplication of experience that forms a potentially misplaced cornerstone for readerly empathy."

As in *Liebe im Rollstuhl*, when the protagonists reconcile, Shy tells Leke that she likes him precisely because he is different (Chapter 61) and that she can be sure he fell in love with her character rather than her physical appearance. She even frames his ability to judge people by their inner values as "eine unheimlich schöne Gabe" (a remarkably beautiful gift) (Chapter 61), suggesting that Leke may, in this way, perceive more than others do (cf. section 2.1.4). While this contradicts the way the narrative and Leke's own self-assessment have so far presented his disability as a form of 'lack', it may simultaneously be read as a form of othering.

Blind Shades: Blindness as Identity Crisis

Blind Shades is a Harry Potter fanfiction⁶ that develops a romance between an of-age Harry and the potions teacher Severus Snape.⁷ Harry is blinded by an accident, but the story makes it clear from the beginning that there is hope that his optic nerve may regenerate. Parts of the text written from Harry's perspective highlight his experiences and perceptions as he adapts to blindness:

"Achtung", kam es wieder von Snape, welcher kurz stehenblieb und Harry wusste, dass sie die andere Straßenseite erreicht hatten. [...] "Jetzt kommen drei Stufen", sagte er und Harry, der sich inzwischen recht sicher fühlte, nickte. Sie stiegen die Treppe hinauf und nur Augenblicke später wurde Harry in einen Flur geschoben und hörte, wie eine Tür geschlossen wurde.

("Careful" came Snape's voice again as he briefly stopped, and Harry knew that they had reached the other side of the street. [...] "Now there are three steps", he said, and Harry, who by now felt fairly confident, nodded. They

⁵ See also "Ich kann nicht mit dem Nichts reden, verstehst du? Das Nichts ist dunkel" (I cannot talk to nothingness, you know? Nothingness is dark) (Chapter 62).

⁶ Both original fiction and fanfiction – non-commercial texts about characters based on existing media or real persons – are published on Wattpad and can be classified within the same literary genres.

⁷ Neither the story nor its characters problematize the fact that, although Harry is of age, Snape is still his teacher and thus holds a position of power.

went up the stairs, and only moments later Harry was pushed into a hallway and heard a door being closed.) (Chapter 5)

There are also passages that illustrate his despair and refusal to accept his impairment:

Er konnte einfach nicht so leben. Er musste einfach wieder sehen, egal wie.
(He just could not live like that. He just had to see again, no matter what.)
(Chapter 5)

Shortly after Harry arrives at Snape's home, the narrative introduces spells that can aid blind people, although only a limited number of wizards are able to perform them. Severus Snape is presented as one of these exceptions, which increases Harry's dependence on him and structurally initiates the romantic plot. These magical aids adopted from the original novels reduce barriers to mobility within the narrative world. For example, a modified version of the Accio spell allows objects to be drawn toward a person in a controlled manner. Similarly, magical transportation systems such as Apparition (a teleporting spell) and the Floo Network (a means of traveling from fireplace to fireplace) eliminate practical barriers to travel. Since these modes of transportation are part of the wizarding world's infrastructure, the world itself can be considered inherently more accessible. Later, Harry learns a spell that allows him to visualize objects in his mind. At this point, it becomes unclear whether Harry can still be considered disabled – although his optic nerve no longer functions, the spell allows him to interact with the world almost as if he could see. In effect, he 'sees', but not physically, similar to the bat-like echolocation in *The blind Badboy*.⁸

The story also introduces another blind character: Tim, a physiotherapist and Snape's former partner who lives fully independently and thus functions as a foil to Harry. He can be read as embodying what Harry is striving to achieve. At the same time, as Snape's ex-partner, he serves as a narrative device that positions Snape as the most experienced figure to guide and support Harry. In the comments, readers respond positively to Tim: "ich mag Tim sehr, toller Charakter" (I really like Tim, great character).

Harry's blindness can be read metaphorically: Caused by Snape's inner turmoil and the consequent physical transgression, it represents both Harry's identity crisis – he cannot see who he really is – and the unresolved conflict between the two characters. Harry gains trust in Snape through his vulnerability as a blind person. On a plot level, Harry's blindness functions as a key to opening Snape's emotions; for instance, it enables the summoning of Snape's ex-partner Tim to mediate between them. Similar to *The blind Badboy*, at the end of *Blind Shades*, there are several instances in which characters tell Harry that they

⁸ After the spell has been introduced, however, Harry barely makes use of it and instead relies on his other senses.

believe he 'sees' more than sighted people do – that is, has the qualities of a blind seer or prophet (cf. Paterson 2013: 165):

"Weißt du", sagte er leise, während sein Blick über Harrys Gesicht glitt, "es gibt Momente, in denen ich fast vergesse, dass du nicht sehen kannst." Harry hob überrascht den Kopf, seine blinden, grünen Augen suchten Severus' Gesicht, als könnten sie ihn doch irgendwie wahrnehmen. "Warum?", flüsterte er. "Warum denkst du das?" "Weil du so viel siehst", antwortete Severus. "Auf eine Art, die weit über das Offensichtliche hinausgeht. Du fühlst, du verstehst ... manchmal glaube ich, dass du mehr siehst, als ich je könnte." ("You know," he said quietly, his gaze wandering across Harry's face, "there are moments when I almost forget that you can't see." Harry lifted his head in surprise, his blind green eyes searching Severus's face as if they could somehow perceive him after all. "Why?" he whispered. "Why would you think that?" "Because you see so much," Severus replied. "In a way that goes far beyond the obvious. You feel, you understand... sometimes I think you see more than I ever could.") (Chapter 20)

At the end, however, after Snape and Harry have resolved their conflicts and become partners, they sleep together for the first time – and immediately afterward, Harry's sight returns. Later, a healer explains that hormonal changes can sometimes trigger physical reactions, which might have reactivated the optic nerve. Similar to *Handicap – Ich kämpfe um dein Herz*, Harry's blindness is framed as being 'cured' through his reconciliation with Severus Snape and devotion to him. The text even comments on this narrative function at a meta level when Draco Malfoy – another character from the novels – remarks: "Oh, also war es ... die Magie der Liebe, ja?" (Oh, so it was the magic of love, right?).

Like *The blind Badboy*, the fanfiction draws on the metaphor of darkness: "als er versuchte, sich in der Dunkelheit seiner Blindheit zurechtzufinden" (as he tried to find his way in the darkness of his blindness) (Chapter 9). Although Harry learns spells and strategies to live independently, the plot recurrently confronts him with situations in which Snape has to assist or rescue him, thereby linking his blindness to helplessness. For instance: "Harry war gefangen, blind und hilflos in dieser dunklen Ecke der Stadt" (Harry was trapped, blind and helpless in this dark corner of the city) (Chapter 14). Overall, however, *Blind Shades* rarely conveys ableist views of life with blindness.

Comparison

The comparison of the four fictional texts has shown that the concept of narrative prosthesis can indeed be applied to web fiction. In some cases, a character's impairment fulfills a narrative purpose, functioning either as a trigger or an obstacle that sets a romance plot in motion (*Liebe im Rollstuhl*, *Handicap – Ich kämpfe um dein Herz*, and *Blind Shades*), or as a secret to be kept (*The blind Badboy*). However, the type of plot that emerges can vary significantly: while in *Liebe im Rollstuhl* the narrative revolves around overcoming self-doubt

and meeting prejudices, *Handicap – Ich kämpfe um dein Herz* and *Blind Shades* focus on the protagonist overcoming the disability itself – with the help and love of a partner. *The blind Badboy*, in turn, treats disability mainly as an obstacle to romance – not because it makes the love interest hesitate, but because she is not supposed to know about it, which leads to several embarrassing situations for Leke. Impairment can also be used as a metaphor for inner turmoil and identity crisis: blindness may represent an inability to 'see' oneself, while not being able to walk can symbolize an inability to overcome trauma or open up to others. Only *Liebe im Rollstuhl* and *The blind Badboy* treat disability as an actual character trait – Jo struggles with self-doubt about meeting Alex's expectations as a partner, and Leke's bad boy image benefits from his hiding his blindness. Additionally, the stories support three tropes regarding narratives of cure defined by Cheyne. These tropes "occur repeatedly in romance novels with disabled protagonists: the concluding cure; the non-disabled partner as agent of cure; and the disabled protagonist who feels unworthy of love" (2019: 143), with the first and second represented by *Blind Shades* and *Handicap – Ich kämpfe um dein Herz*, and the third by *Liebe im Rollstuhl*, *Handicap – Ich kämpfe um dein Herz* as well as *The blind Badboy*. The romantic partner as the key to the protagonists' cure, according to Cheyne, serves as "a narrative habit that locates agency with the nondisabled person and reinforces disability's associations with passivity and inability" (2019: 143). This also shows that web fiction follows the same patterns as traditional romance books. However, where Wattpad fiction differs from print media is in the way readers can actively criticize unrealistic depictions of disability (*The blind Badboy*).

Both *Handicap – Ich kämpfe um dein Herz* and *The blind Badboy* employ language that constructs a negative concept of disability, although *The blind Badboy* later contradicts this at the level of the narrative. *Liebe im Rollstuhl* uses such language only in contexts where it is immediately framed as harmful to the protagonist. By contrast, *Blind Shades* contains little to no negative conceptualizations.

2.2 Metapragmatic Commentary on Characters with Disabilities

While the previous section analyzed the representation of disabled characters within fictional narratives, this section shifts the focus to the metapragmatic negotiation of such representations among readers and authors. It examines how characters with impairments are linguistically negotiated in a broader discussion on a German internet forum. In doing so, I investigate the extent to which the reading and writing preferences expressed by authors of fictional texts reflect processes of differentiation with regard to the 'value' attributed to disabled characters. For the analysis, I will use the sociological framework of 'human differentiation' as currently developed by the transdisciplinary Collaborative Research Centre (CRC) 1482 *Human Differentiation*. The CRC examines cultural practices of differentiating between human beings (and groups of human beings). The concept of human differentiation

takes several steps back from presupposing human kinds. It focuses on the processes of differentiation (re)producing human categories, features, and memberships in the first place. People are locked into certain social affiliations – for example, in imagined communities (e.g., nations, ethnic groups, religious denominations) or ascribed classes (e.g., genders, 'races,' age groups) – by continuous self and external categorizations. Human differentiation consists of diverse processes that accumulate, mutually reinforce one another, and 'featurize' humans (Hirschauer 2023: 3).

The framework of human differentiation offers an alternative to intersectionality studies (see, for example, Crenshaw 1991; Garland-Thomson 2013). According to Hirschauer (2014: 176), intersectionality research does not consider forms of differentiation that are not related to inequality and is insufficiently complex in that it reduces the simultaneous interaction of multiple differentiations to the dimensions of gender, race, class, and – in more recent research – disability and sexual orientation. Categories can be understood as linguistic manifestations of processes of human differentiation. They are, of course, not always perceived as symmetrical. *Asymmetrical categories* may be "enriched with evaluations and portray the alterized side as possessing a different *value*. Hence, they differentiate according to not only similarity but also to better/worse, superior/inferior, that is, according to value and rank" (Hirschauer 2023: 14). Disability is not only one of the master human differentiations, but also one that inherently evokes notions of normality and deviance – and, consequently, of (d)evaluation. Linguistic means of asymmetrical differentiation include evaluative categories (nouns and adjectives), deagentivizing syntactic structures as well as expressive language. The following analysis therefore examines not only the narrative reasons authors give for including or excluding disabled characters but also how these characters may or may not be asymmetrically positioned to their able-bodied counterparts. The discussion thread analyzed in this section ran from 2015 to 2021 and contains 145 posts, most of which address the topic in considerable detail. The participants include both regular readers and hobby writers, some of whom have already published their work commercially. Forum discussions within specific communities provide particularly valuable data for observing reflexive commentary, as they combine lay and semi-professional perspectives and often feature explicit reflections on writing choices, reader expectations, and the moral implications of representation. In consultation with the data protection officer of Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, the web address and the usernames have been anonymized. Additionally, only the English translations of the original posts are included in this paper. While this obscures the original German data, it ensures that neither the forum nor its users can be identified through a simple text search. For the analysis, I coded all posts with the software MAXQDA. The analyzed excerpts are marked in italics.

The characters discussed are not necessarily human; they may also be members of humanoid species or anthropomorphized animals. Both well-known literary texts and participants' own approaches to writing and reading are reflected upon. The field concepts discussed include 'Handicap' and 'Figuren mit Behinderungen' (characters with disabilities). The thread opens with the question of whether forum

users read or would consider writing stories featuring protagonists with impairments. In the post introducing the thread (1), prototypical fictional characters are discussed, along with linguistic expressions of deviations from these prototypes:

- (1) Anyone who browses through the freely available works – especially those dealing with love and relationships – will come across entire armies of handsome, perfect, rich men or teenage boys who fall head over heels (more or less) for ‘completely average’, yet stunningly beautiful, students/waitresses/high school girls. [...] That’s why this thread is also about exploring a kind of counter-narrative.

Particular attention is given to the romance genre, which is defined as stories focusing on one (or sometimes more) romantic couple(s) and ending on a positive note, either as a happy ending or ‘happy for now’.⁹ The comments reveal a broad consensus that readers of this genre tend to prefer idealized protagonists – physically unimpaired, conventionally attractive, and often portrayed as flawless. To begin with, it is of interest which deviations the participants in the discussion actually categorize as a ‘Behinderung’ (disability) or Handicap. The discussion is often unsystematic when it comes to whether the mentioned conditions actually impair the characters. Some posts clearly address how a character’s actions or participation are limited within the narrative – for instance, due to autism affecting social interactions or the loss of an eye in battle. Other posts discuss prosthetics modifying bodies after the loss of limbs. However, in science fiction and/or steampunk settings, such prosthetics can be framed positively as fashionable markers of uniqueness that fully compensate for the previous impairment and even enhance the user’s abilities. These cases can be classified as transhuman/superhuman (cyborgs) rather than deficient humanst becomes clear that the writers incorporate a variety of impairments into their narratives: The most frequently mentioned are blindness and visual impairment (14 mentions, including missing eyes), psychological disorders (14), mobility impairments (10), and other physical disabilities (8), followed by autism and speech impairments (5 each), deafness (4), and neurological disorders (3). Epilepsy, scars, dementia, and illiteracy were each mentioned once. Cognitive disabilities are notably absent from the discourse at this stage. Psychological conditions appear to be especially common in fictional representations, as they can function as plot devices, for instance, by complicating the development of a romantic relationship. At the same time, these conditions can be “resolved” or at least treated over the course of the narrative, thereby restoring the protagonist’s mental well-being – while their body consistently conforms to normative standards of attractiveness. The idea of the impaired protagonist as a catalyst for an engaging romance plot, along with the preference for invisible and “removable” impairments, mirrors on a meta-level the concept of narrative prosthesis identified in section 2.1. This becomes evident in the following posts (2) to (4):

⁹ <https://www.fanfiktion.de/p/genreadvice/0> (accessed 05 November 2025).

- (2) In my story [...], the protagonist [...] develops post-traumatic stress disorder. That doesn't necessarily make things easier when another character falls for him, since he's already kind of clueless when it comes to social stuff anyway.
- (3) Some time ago, I wrote about a protagonist who experienced severe childhood trauma, which led to social anxiety and agoraphobia. However, I started the narrative at a point where she had already reached a stage that allowed her to interact with her environment. Basically, she was 'healed', but there were still limitations and occasional relapses.
- (4) Psychological trauma or mental illness shows up more frequently (less often in fantasy, though), but in terms of appearance, everything is usually fine. Even in works where there's initial emphasis on the protagonists being 'completely normal', the film adaptations still end up showing standard beauties (e.g., Hermione in the *Harry Potter* novels).

One frequently used trope is the loss of an eye in warrior characters – a portrayal that still entails relatively little alteration of the body:

- (5) Of course, having only one eye makes sense for these kinds of characters, since it can serve as a striking marker of their past or general way of life – without giving them a much 'more visible' impairment within the narrative, like someone missing an arm or a leg.

One author (6), however, not only discusses representation at the character level, but even draws parallels between real human impairments and the traits of fictional species. In this way, identification occurs indirectly:

- (6) I can recognize some traits I'm familiar with as a neurodivergent person in the way elves are canonically described. For example, they have heightened sensory perception, many of them are obsessive about their interests, they experience strong emotions that they only learn to control over time and through focused meditation – and a few other things. It brings me joy to see traits I know well represented this way, and to portray them as the norm for my protagonist and two side characters.

Several comments appear to assume that if a disabled character is involved, this character's impairment inherently forms a central, if not the principal, element of the plot. There are, however, six posts that specifically criticize the narrative instrumentalization of disability, either by eliciting sympathy for these characters or by portraying their situations as something that needs to be 'fixed' by a romantic relationship; see (7) and (8) for selected examples:

- (7) Something I absolutely hate (and that you often find in romances) is when a disabled character is portrayed as being deeply depressed, with nothing and no one able to help them, just sadly vegetating, until suddenly that one character comes along – and after years of loneliness, that one person becomes their salvation, the sun comes out, and everything turns rosy and perfect. That's not healthy either, to tie all your happiness to one person, and a 'healing process' doesn't happen just because you look into a pair of bright green eyes...
- (8) Of course, dealing with this topic requires a great deal of sensitivity, and trivializing it is certainly completely out of place, but a constant boo-hoo-everything-is-so-tragic-and-my-protagonist-is-such-a-poor-tormented-soul approach doesn't really appeal to me.

Asymmetrization of disability is constructed linguistically within the posts through

1. **nominal categorization or adjectival description:** *den depressiven Durchschnittstypen mit Holzbein* (the depressed average guy with a wooden leg), *weniger typisch* (less typical)
2. **indirect marking of normality and deviance:** *stinknormal* (bog-standard) vs. *weniger typisch* (less typical), *sichtbare 'Defizite'* (visible deficits), *kosmetische Makel* (cosmetic flaws), *Horrorszenario* (horror scenario).
3. **evaluations of disability as a literary topic:** *Horrorszenario* (horror scenario), *diese Schrecklichkeiten* (these abominations), *schwere Themen* (heavy topics)

Regarding point 1: Asymmetrizations of character types become particularly evident when disability is conceptualized as a severe misfortune, inherently tragic, or a deficit. Overall, it is depicted as leading to a life of lesser value. I coded eleven expressions framing (life with) disability as negative, for instance:

- (9) The lives of people with disabilities are necessarily a compromise between what they were previously able to achieve in whatever field and the physical as well as psychological nothingness in which they reawaken after the accident. Many do not manage to return to life and instead break under their fate.
- (10) If he had not been abused as an icon, he would have been put out of his misery after the deed; see also: *Leute mit unsichtbaren Leiden* (people with invisible ailments); *Menschen mit einer Entstellung* (people with a disfigurement)

Turning to point 2: 14 passages construct norms and deviations regarding the characters' appearance, behavior, and lifestyle; see (11) and (12):

(11) I haven't written – and don't currently feel the need to write – about protagonists with physical or mental disabilities. Right now, I'm happy to let my protagonists struggle with whatever life throws at them. Ultimately, my ambition is actually to unfold completely 'normal' people in a way that lets readers empathize with their fears, vulnerabilities, and hopes – and see themselves reflected.

(12) But I haven't written that yet either. Maybe because it would require extra research. If I want to write a story about a totally ordinary girl, I don't need to do much research.'

Quotation marks signal both an awareness of and a distance from the normativity implied by such labels; they mark the writer's ambivalence between reproducing and critically reflecting established linguistic patterns:

(13) But I like it when authors dare to develop characters who are less 'typical' and don't follow the usual pattern; see also: *gänzlich 'normale' Menschen* (completely 'normal' people); *sichtbare 'Defizite'* (visible 'deficits')

As for point 3: Such framings seem to lead some readers to avoid fiction dealing with disability, which aligns with previous research on the romance genre: "Writers and readers of romance understand it as a particularly emotive genre whose texts – and particularly their endings – aim to generate feelings of happiness, joyfulness, and hope for the future" (Cheyne 2019: 135; Radway 1991: 98). As Cheyne puts it: "Depictions of disability in romance novels are created and consumed in a society still dominated by tragedy-model perspectives, and thus ambivalent about whether disabled people are worthy or desiring of love" (2019: 139). The data supports this claim with comments suggesting that disability is perceived as incompatible with genre conventions:

(14) Entertainment novels [...] are usually read casually and are appreciated when they're light and straightforward and inspire daydreams. Maybe that's the Cinderella principle. In one's fantasies, one tends to wish for the attractive millionaire rather than the depressed average guy with a wooden leg, to put it dramatically. ;)

(15) I didn't quite understand the point that disabled people also love and everything else. I assume everyone knows that. But maybe not everyone wants to read or write about it, depending on their personal view of romance, interests, and fantasies.

(16) I don't like this topic. [...] As [Username] nicely put it: for me, heavy topics (*schwere(re) Themen*) basically don't belong in a romance either. I'd rather switch off and dream.

Several users explicitly reject disability as a theme in fiction, often linking this rejection to genre expectations:

(17) I don't want to put my protagonist through that kind of stuff because it upsets me myself (weird).

(18) Why should I put myself through those horrors, when reading for entertainment if they're already part of my life?

(19) I find it rather annoying when heavy topics are dealt with in romance novels.

(20) I just don't think you should say: The connection 'disability + cosmetic flaws' shouldn't be made. Unfortunately, depending on the case, they often go hand in hand.

Thus a negative conceptualization of (life with) disability also emerges through discourses that reject and negatively evaluate disability as a literary topic, for example by labeling it as diese Schrecklichkeiten (these abominations) or schwere Themen (heavy topics).

Taken together, the data shows that asymmetrization operates across several dimensions of evaluation:

Asymmetrization based on physical prototypicality: The fact that certain impairments are preferred in fictional characters is not only connected to the question of which function they fulfill within the narrative (e.g. autism as social obstacle) or in how far authors can empathize with them. It also reflects normative body images and deviations from them. Since certain impairments interfere less visibly with bodily norms, they are more easily integrated into genres that emphasize physical attractiveness.

Asymmetrization based on language ability: Cognitive impairments or speech disorders are completely absent from the discussion. While one post does mention a protagonist with a psychologically induced speech disorder, this character is still physically able to speak (similar to the protagonists' psychosomatic disabilities in Handicap – Ich kämpfe um dein Herz and Blind Shades in section 2.1). The fact that such characters are not considered as potential protagonists points to a differentiation regarding who is allowed to be a character and have agency within the fictional text.

Asymmetrization according to life concepts: Readers often distance themselves from characters with impairments because these characters are associated with negative emotions, suffering/dissatisfaction, and thus with negatively perceived life concepts. This points to a differentiation not only of bodily integrity but also of what constitutes a 'livable' or 'desirable' life within the romance genre:

Romance novels pledge that the future the central characters have secured is one that is desirable in at least three senses: it is the future that the protagonists want; it is one that the reader views as desirable for those characters; and it is a future where desire itself is central, since romance

novels almost always position a sexual relationship that is mutually satisfying (at a bare minimum) as an essential part of the HEA [happily-ever-after ending]. (Cheyne 2019: 140)

The asymmetric differentiation is established not only through what is shown, but also through what is left unshown.

3. Discussion and Outlook

The combined analysis of web fiction and meta discussions on storytelling and character construction reveals that what Mitchell and Snyder (2000) term narrative prosthesis plays a significant role both at the story level and in the structuring of narratives. In most cases, disability is not employed to create a diverse cast or for the sake of representation, but rather as a condition that triggers or reflects a character's inner conflict. The stories *Liebe im Rollstuhl* and *Blind Shades*, however, appear to have a secondary focus on portraying life with impairments and challenging stereotypes. In two of the four analyzed web fictions, the impairment portrayed is reversible and ultimately overcome. The language used in the four web fictions either constructs negative conceptions of disability or, at times, stages such perspectives only to have them rejected within the narrative.

The forum comments reveal both an awareness and a reflection of normative perspectives on human beings and literary characters as well as asymmetric categories. Asymmetrization of disabled characters is constructed linguistically through negatively connoted categories – nouns and adjectives – (depressed average guy with a wooden leg), indirect constructions of norm and deviance (less typical) and evaluations of the depiction of disability in fiction (heavy topics). Through stylistic devices such as quotation marks, the forum users distance themselves from asymmetrical constructions of disability, while at the same time expressing rejection toward disabled characters in fiction and especially in romance. Disability is frequently associated with physical abnormality, negative events such as accidents or illnesses, or with a burdensome or inconvenient life, rather than with independent and ordinary lives. The impairments most frequently discussed in the thread's comments are blindness and psychological disorders, both of which are depicted as not affecting the characters' outward appearance. The discussion also appears to be genre-specific: within the romance genre – which dominates not only web fiction but also the book market (cf. Wilcox 2025) – physical attractiveness seems to be particularly relevant in appealing to the target audience. This genre often represents variations of a single narrative pattern rather than distinct individual stories. Consequently, one could argue that the characters are not fully developed psychological entities but rather projection surfaces for readers' fantasies and expectations. Some authors, however, criticize the narrative functionalization of disability ("That's not healthy either, to tie all your happiness to one person, and a 'healing process' doesn't happen just because you look into a pair of bright green eyes...").

Combining literary analysis with the analysis of metapragmatic statements from the relevant speech community proved to be a highly fruitful approach.

Based on the findings from the forum posts, it would be desirable to further investigate stories tagged with trauma, PTSD, or autism. It should also be considered that stories without tags such as handicap or wheelchair may still feature disabled characters, without disability being the central focus of the narrative.

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