the crossover

Thesis Process Book

MFA Design for Social Innovation
School of Visual Arts

The Crossover is our Master's Thesis Project completed at the Design for Social Innovation program at the School of Visual Arts, New York.

A project born during the Covid-19 pandemic, this book is a documentation of our year-long journey of closely working with the Indian disability community, amplifying their voices about authentic representation in the media and increasing disibility-visibility.

It's been a year of learning and unlearning, of love and reflection, of community and co-creation.

Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person,

but to make it the **definitive story** of that person.

Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie

Project Overview

Ableism is a system that places value on people's bodies and minds based on socially constructed ideas of normalcy, intelligence, excellence and productivity. These ideas are deeply rooted in anti-blackness, eugenics, colonialism and capitalism. This form of systemic oppression leads to people and society determining who is worthy based on a person's appearance and/or their ability to satisfactorily [re]produce, excel and "behave". Ableism is connected to all kinds of othering because it undergirds notions of whose bodies are considered valuable, desirable and disposable. Disabled people have been historically subject to ableism, facing deep forms of discrimination, stigmatization and invisibilization.

This project focuses on the inauthentic representation of disability in Indian films and its consequent impact on the increasing myths, misconceptions and negative associations of disability in the Indian society. There has been a significant lack of inclusion of disability in mainstream films, but when they are included, they are almost always dehumanized and stereotyped. By drawing on the prejudice, ignorance and fear that generally exists towards disabled people, filmmakers have used disability in their stories as a metaphor to evoke heightened emotions of sympathy, sadness, uneasiness, revenge, inspiration or mockery among audiences. This inadequate, misleading and grossly objectified portrayal of disability has led to long term negative impacts on the lives of disabled people and created a big gap between their lived reality and their societal perception.

The Crossover aims to reframe society's understanding of disability by encouraging young filmmakers to develop a critical eye to identify ableism and sensitizing the film industry to the gross misrepresentation of disability on-screen. By placing importance on confronting assumptions and deconstructing biases, it teaches filmmakers to recognize the power they hold in telling the story of an entire community and influencing the perception of disability in the Indian society.

Janvi (R) and Mahima (L) after their first Pfizer vaccine shot! Clicked in Brooklyn, May 2021

A little about us

Janvi Ghatalia

I am a researcher and designer from India, with a background in Industrial product design. Rooted in values of abundance, joy and belonging, I am committed to use design to create equity and social justice. I envision a world where people come together across differences.

Mahima Jaju

I am a design researcher and communication designer, with a background in liberal studies. I see my education in Design as a privilege, to be used to fulfill my social responsibility as a concerned and sensitive citizen. I have great confidence in the good that good design can do.

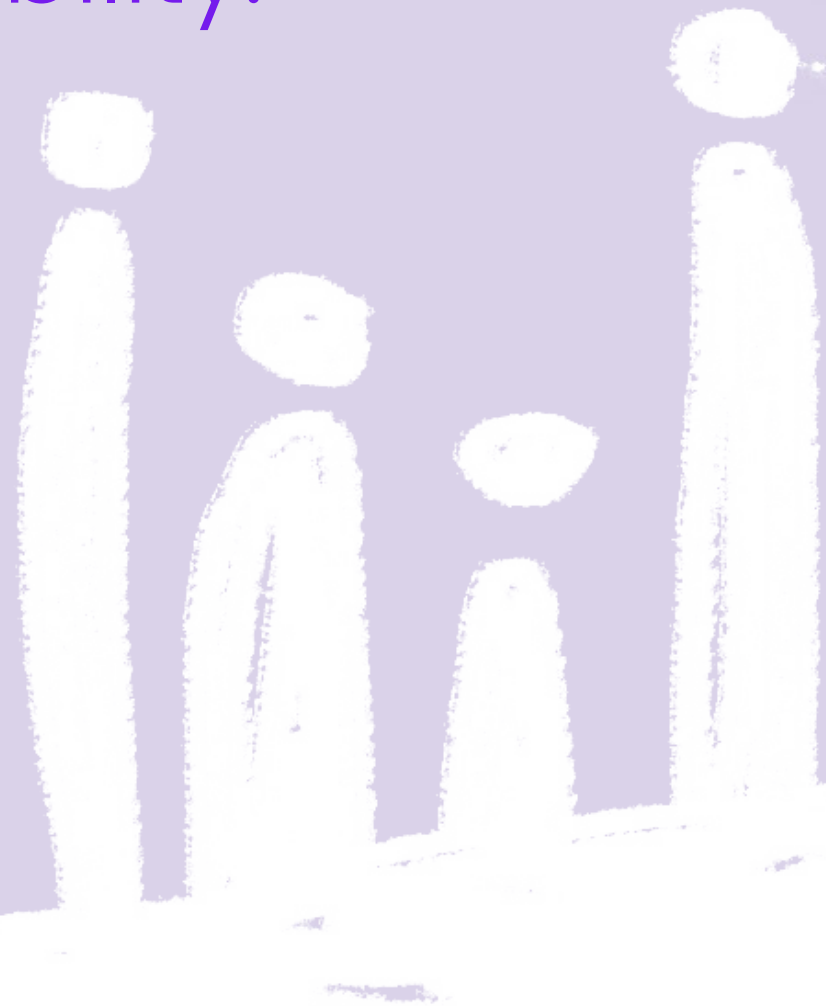# Contents

Setting context

Disability is the world's largest minority.

One in every four people live with a disability.

World Health Organisation

Defining Disability

Globally, according to the World Health Organization, disability has three dimensions: Impairment in a person's body structure or function, or mental functioning. Examples of impairments include loss of a limb, loss of vision or memory loss. Activity limitation, such as difficulty seeing, hearing, walking, or problem solving.

In India, acccording to The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016. "Person with disability" means a person with long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which, in interaction with barriers, hinders his full and effective participation in society equally with others.

But it is important to note that Disability is not a fixed category, but denotes a fluid and shifting set of conditions. "Disability is not a simple phenomenon and cannot be categorised in fixed ways." (Tarshi)

Definitions by their very nature tend to be very limiting and often over-simplify ideas in their attempt to offer clarity and focus. Dr. Anita Ghai, disability rights activist and academic, points out, "The definitional riddles in disability are extremely significant as they decide the fate of the person designated as disabled."

Disabilities range from physical to cognitive, visible to invisible, mild to severe. A person can have more than one disability, shaping their unique experiences. Given how complex disabilities can be, one thing to note here is that how disability is defined greatly influences what and who is included or excluded as a disabled person.

Our project does not focus on any one disability, but on the discrimination that the community faces as a whole.

Models of Disability

Distinct models of disability have been shaped by specific socio-cultural factors, the zeitgeist, and by those in power. Disability community and advocates have actively fought against stigmatising models, with the aim to create a societal shift towards more equitable and rights-based approaches. A brief summary of some of the models that have shaped the indian society (and been shaped by it) is as follows –

Moral/Fate Model

This model sees disability as a result of past sins. Disability is closely associated with guilt and bad luck. Although one of the oldest models, it is still significantly prevalent in parts of India, where there is great importance given to "karma".

This is a stigmatising approach to disability resulting in social ostracism and self-hatred." (Deborah Kaplan, Director, World Institute on Disability)

Medical Model

This model sees a person with a disability as a 'medical condition' that needs fixing and curing for them to live a fulfilling life or contribute as an equal member of society. Disability is seen as a personal tragedy.

This is a stigmatizing ableist approach that focuses on repairing the body to make it fit the prevalent notion of the body in society, often disregarding what disabled persons themselves feel or want." (Tarshi)

Social Model

This model locates the disability not in the body, but in the surroundings. It says "we are not disabled by our bodies, but the society around us". Disability here is a situation caused by social conditions, products and policies – it is a socially constructed disadvantage.

It has been criticised by the disability community because it invalidates their personal lived realities and also ignores a whole section of people with invisible disabilities.

Cultural Model

This model understands disability as "a category of lived experience that shapes a person's understanding of themselves, and their approach to the world. **In other words, it is an identity.**" (The Disabled List) Here disability is not seen or experienced as a personal tragedy or something that is limiting, but approached in the same way as any other cultural group. This model is gaining increasing acceptance in the disability community.

It is one of the more radical and equitable models of approaching disability. Our project lies here and aims to shift mindsets towards the cultural model.

Addressing Disability

Just like the many models of disability, specific cultural and historical nuances have shaped how disability has been addressed over time.

Historically, disability has been addressed by using euphemisms. While terms like "Retards", or "Freaks" are almost obsolete today considering how unquestionably stigmatizing they are, large chunks of society still continue to use euphemisms to address disability. For example: handicapable, special needs, differently abled, diffabled and disAbled. The community largely rejects all these words because they feel these euphemisms erase their reality, identity and experience.

In the recent years, global disability communities have preferred to be identified through the following two approaches-

Person-First Language or Person with Disability

This term emphasizes the humanity of the person being referred to, and de-emphasizes their "condition." (The Disabled List)

Academic, government, and charitable institutions (often times run by non-disabled people) have adopted and advocated for person-first language.

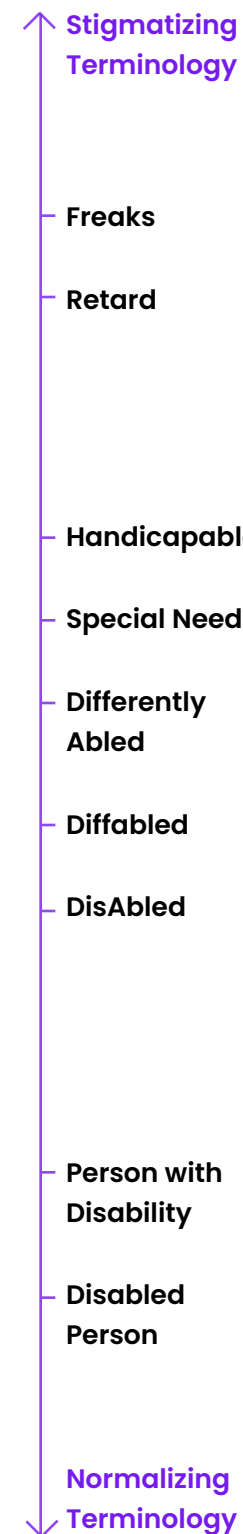## Identity-First Language or Disabled Person

This terminology sees disability as an identity and is rooted in the Cultural Model as it acknowledges the way one's experiences and identities are shaped by disability.

Many disabled people in India are today actively advocating for identity-first language. **#saytheword**

However, it is important to always remember that the **choice of what terminology should be used ultimately remains with the person living with disability.** We learnt that instead of assuming or choosing on one's own preferred term, it is important to always ask how a person with lived experience of disability wants to be addressed.

As our project aims to shift mental models towards the Cultural Model, we are using the term "Disabled People" as the chosen terminology.

↑ **Stigmatizing Terminology**

– **Freaks**

– **Retard**

– **Handicapable**

– **Special Needs**

– **Differently Abled**

– **Diffabled**

– **DisAbled**

– **Person with Disability**

– **Disabled Person**

↓ **Normalizing Terminology**

Disability in India

"Historically in India as elsewhere in the world, there has been a deep-rooted cultural antipathy to persons with disabilities. Throughout the ages, the disabled have been looked down upon with disdain, almost as if they were subhuman.

They have been portrayed as medical anomalies, helpless victims and a lifelong burden on family and society."

Renu Addlakha, Disability Advocate

Disabled people in India face serious marginalisation, discrimination, stigamtisation and exclusion. They have been subject to economic and social injustices, violations of dignity and their very autonomy. More than 1 billion people face social exclusion and ill-treatment in every walk of life. Disability is seen as a tragedy that the person must bear by themselves.

As we prepared our research approach, we knew two things- This is a complex issue, which means that it can be approached from multiple, competing perspectives, it can be a symptom of other problems. There isn't an inherent logic to solving this. And second, this is a systemic issue, which means that this injustice is not due to a specific or isolated cause, but instead due to flaws ingrained in the overall system.

We wondered...

What is the **experience of being a disabled person** in India?

What might be the **root causes of the discrimination** they face?

But we are non disabled designers...

How can we make sure **we don't do more harm** by entering a community we are not a part of?

From the very beginning, we were aware of the fact that we are not inherently a part of the community we are working with. But soon after, we realized that not only were we outsiders, we were also a part of the very community that had mistreated disabled people. As two non-disabled designers and researchers on the project, our own assumptions, biases and conditioning was bound to influence our work. We often wondered.. Was it right for us to take up this project at all? Does our privilege as non-disabled people negate any merits of what we as social designers have to offer? Are we taking up too much space and hence, perpetuating a cycle of harm? Although these doubts continued to persist, two instances in particular helped us understand why it is absolutely crucial that non-disabled people too are a big part of bringing about change.

"Social change cannot be brought unless both sides of the problem work together."

Shampa Sengupta

When we expressed our doubts to Shampa Sengupta, leading Disability Rights Activist in India, she told us that "Social change cannot be brought unless both sides of the problem work together. For example, the women's rights movement has reached where it is today because men and women have worked together to understand and adopt feminism. Similarly, non-disabled are an important part of this problem. People who see the common equitable goal must work hand in hand. Having said that, it is important that non-disabled don't become the face of the community. Your involvement is necessary, but power must always lie with the community."

"Surrendering to the acceptance of privilege is difficult, but it really is all that is expected.."

Roxane Gay

We found her thoughts further echoed and built upon by Roxane Gay, in her book "Bad Feminist". She says "Surrendering to the acceptance of privilege is difficult, but it really is all that is expected...When someone writes from experience, there is often someone else, at the ready, pointing a trembling finger, accusing the writer of having various kinds of privilege...We would live in a world of silence if the only people who were allowed to write or speak from experience or about difference were those absolutely without privilege."

Research Principles

To create a tangible shift in the power we held, to help ground our intentions and make sure that we are creating more good, we developed a list of principles to guide us in this project –

We are Facilitators of their needs & desires.

They are the experts. We have to actively listen to them and draw insights from what they are saying.

We will always Ask, Not Assume.

It is okay to not know. We will ask questions, and cross-check all our assumptions.

We will include Diverse Voices.

Disability is complex and multi-layered. No two experiences are the same. No one person can speak for the entire community.

We will work Closely with the Community.

Every step and stage of the project must be co-created with the community. Ultimately, they should be the face of the project.

We will Pause, Reflect and Re-align.

As non-disabled people, we are bringing to this project a lot of conditioned biases and approaches to disability. We must act on what we are listening to from the community, not our assumptions.

We will always put People First.

Fighting for equal space is an exhausting and long ordeal for disabled people. We will respect their boundaries and their time. In our process together, we will make space for joy, friendship, and deep connections.

Drafting a Research Plan

Considering the nature of this complex issue, it was important for us to get a well-rounded understanding of the ecosystem surrounding disability in India. To do this, we drafted a plan to guide our research methodologies.

Usually, a good research practice is to understand the point of view from all the relevant stakeholders in a user's ecosystem. As we were mapping the ecosystem of a disabled person, we realised that parents, caregivers, health providers are significant stakeholders in a disabled person's life and we wondered if we should speak to them too. But since our project was focussed on the the discrimination disabled people face from non disabled society, the opinion of anyone other than disabled people themselves would lead our research in the wrong direction. Although the experience of parents, family members and other stakeholders would definitely provide crucial information, to keep our findings centered to the real needs of the community, we decided to focus our research methodologies on the first-hand lived experiences.

Disability activists

Articles by disabled authors

Disability literature

Disabled members of disability orgs

Disability social media

Disabled person

Disabled self advocates

Research Snapshot

30
disabled people & disability activists

4
disability organizations

27
interviews

6
community ideation sessions

40+
hours of digital ethnography

8+
hours of prototyping

Stepping into the lives of disabled people

Reserach Objectives

What are the personal and social experiences of living with a disability in India?

What are the differences in the experience of disability across gender, age and socio-economic backgrounds?

What are the long term impact of discrimination on the daily lives of disabled people?

Reserach Methodology

We began the research process with one-on-one interviews with disabled people. Since we wanted a random and diverse set of interviewees, we put out a call on our social media to connect with disabled people who were willing to speak to us about their experiences. We were creating spaces where interviewees could be sharing personal and vulnerable moments of their lives and we wanted to acknowledge this sensitivity in how we designed the interview.

Interview Guide and snapshots

Design Considerations

1. Most of our preparation time was spent in drafting a personalized questionnaire guide for each interview. We were mindful that the kind of words we choose and the way we frame our language was respectful and open enough for the interviewees to respond however they wished.

2. At the beginning of each interview, we let the interviewee know that they were free to answer or skip any question as they felt comfortable.

3. Since different people prefer different ways of addressing disability, we asked each interviewee where they would like us to use person-first language (person with disability) or identity-first language (disabled person).

Synthesis Process post-interview

Clustering → **Colour Coding** → **Insight Formation**
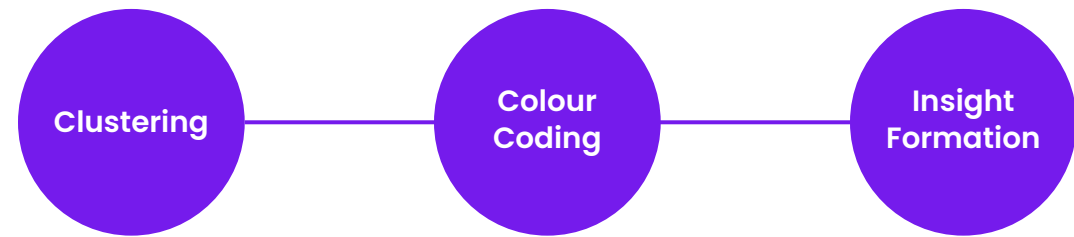
They shared with us experiences of growing up, of family and friendship, of love and dating, of how they see and understand their disability and how others behave with them. They told us various instances when they were treated unequally, and what they hoped society understood about disability. Formal interviews soon transitioned into 2-3 hour-long rich conversations and gave us an insight into the first-hand accounts of the intimate, personal lives of disabled people.

Immediately after each interview, we would listen to the recording again, and put every quote/thought on MIRO, Online whiteboard collaboration platform. By moving post-its around similar themes, we would create clusters of the common patterns that emerged through the conversation and add our own initial thoughts, doubts, follow-up questions alongside these clusters.

By moving post-its around similar themes, we would create clusters of the common patterns that emerged through the conversation and add our own initial thoughts and follow-up questions alongside these clusters.

To clarify how many people were sharing these responses, we assigned one color per person. In this way, we knew that the most colorful clusters were the strongest as it included many voices.

The emerging patterns helped us in understand the various sources, deeply-conditioned responses, and multiple instances of discrimination in their daily lives. **We gained insights on how they see themselves vs how non disabled people treat them.**

How disabled people see themselves

We heard –

My disability is a part of me. I would't change a thing about it. This is me!!

A disabled life = disablity + personality. You can't separate the two.

People should get to know what disability really is. And for every person it is different.

Call me disabled. Not differently abled, not specially abled. I am disabled and proud to be so.

This means –

Disabled people see their disability as a part of their identity and culture.

People don't talk to me directly. What can be a bigger violence than to be made to feel non-existent.

I hope people can just stop assuming things about us.

Society has very basic doubts about us. Discrimination is the result of basic unawareness.

Since they've not met a lot of disabled people, they don't know how to process any atypical body.

They want people to stop assuming and get to know them.

Maybe I am not good enough, Even if I am, I have to prove people wrong all the time. Accepting myself becomes a big challenge."

Sometimes I end up thinking that people are correct – my partner must really be a saint to be dating someone like me.

Because of constantly receiving discriminatory behaviour, some disabled people have internalised ablesim.

How non-disabled people see them

Comments *non-disabled people make at them* –

"You must have done something wrong in your previous life."

"What a waste of investment. Would have been better off dead."

"How will he enjoy life? Let him sit here and herd the cows."

"No, you can't because you are disabled."

This means –

Non-disabled people see disability as a tragedy.

"Who will ever marry you? Can you even have sex??"

"Disabled women can not handle menstruation."

"How will you be a good enough wife, mother and caretaker?

"Don't invite disabled people to weddings. They bring bad luck."

Years of conditioning and superstitious beliefs have formed many misconceptions about disability.

"You are an amputee. How come you play football?? WOW"

People who don't know me well are afraid of me. They run away at the first sight- since it's "abnormal

""Oh wow, you are so inpiring! You got 98% despite being disabled."

Eye opener for me. I had gone on a date - but the girl got petrified, and ran away when she saw me.

Their understanding of disability is flawed. and in extremes – either pitiful or inspiring, saintly or evil, scary or helpless, asexual or hypersexual.

Disability community and culture

Research Objectives

How does the community interact and support one another?

How do disabled people fight every-day ableism?

What is the culture of the community?

Research Methodology

The interviews gave us rich information and insight into the lives of disabled people But when two non-disabled researchers ask questions to a disabled person over a zoom call, there are high chances of biases and power to come in the middle of authentic research. We wanted to observe disabled people in their own settings and spaces. As we were conducting this research amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, we were unable to do so in person. So instead, we chose to observe online spaces where disabled people were actively sharing their thoughts, connecting with each other and discussing various disability and non-disability related issues.

We found out that disabled people have been using social media as a tool to co-develop their identities, and co-produce distinctive forms of disabled culture and it is also a place where disabled activists, writers, scholars and artists have begun to accumulate political and cultural power. In a world where non-disabled gatekeepers have kept the disability community at the margins, online spaces have been a community builder and connector.

Considerations

The insights gained from the interviews as well as the online spaces were mostly generated by those members of the disability community of India who have access to the internet, have knowledge of using social media and/or have the privilege and power of feeling safe while calling out injustices. Most of these were educated, young and middle-upper class indians living in urban cities. We are aware that the challenges we were identifying were specific to this target group and would differ with varying socio-economic backgrounds

We started following Instagram accounts of disabled people, activists, and orgs. Here, we got a glimpse of their daily lives, choices, opinions, interests and hobbies, that may or may not have been directly related to disability. We observed how a lot of young indian disabled people were using this platform to bust myths about disability, holding Q&A sessions, and creating humourous and educational content surrounding ableism. While some accounts acted as support groups for disabled people themselves, some were specifically aimed at non-disabled people.

Disability in India
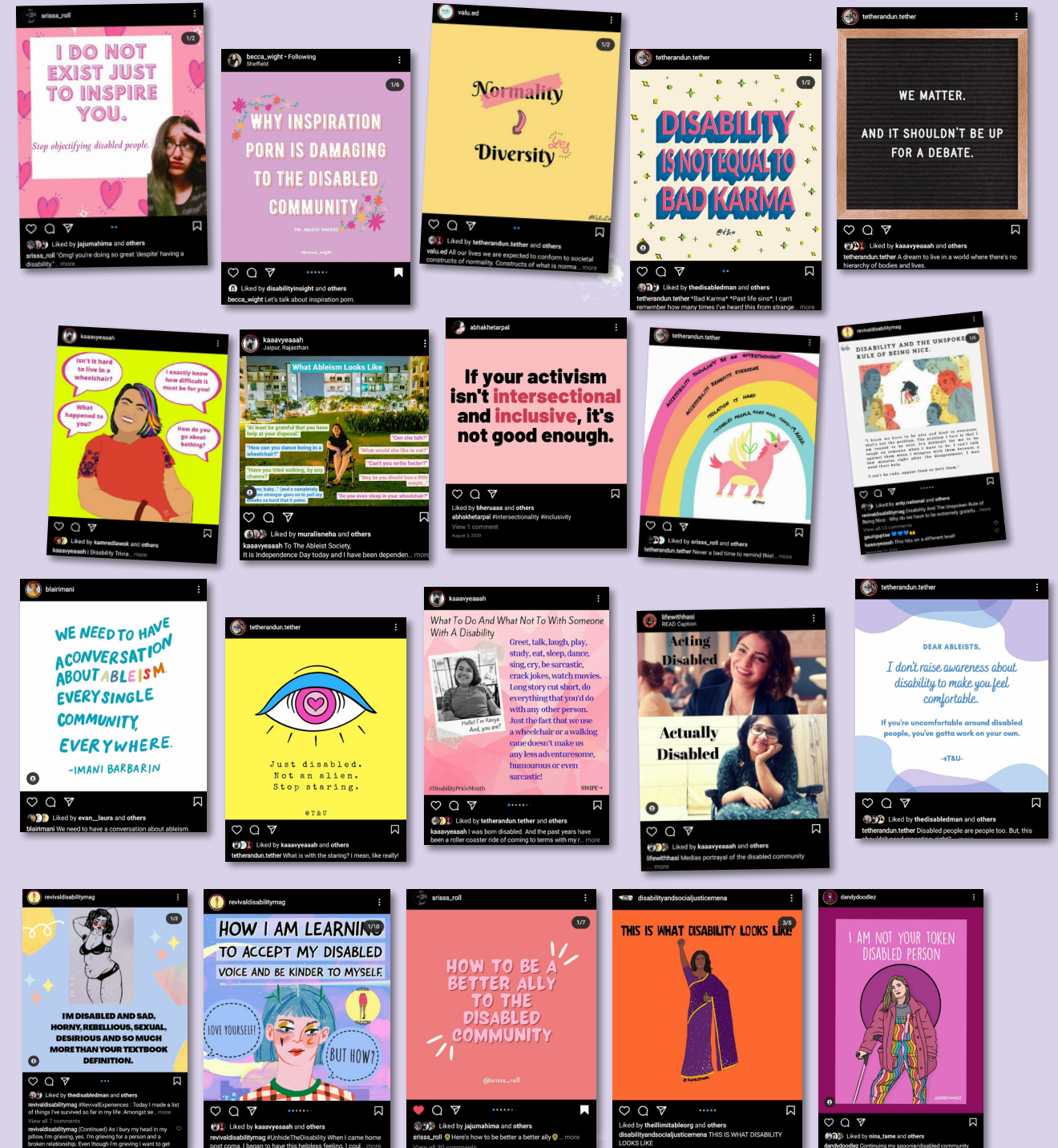
On twitter, we used popular hashtags like #DisabledJoy, #DisabledAndCute, #HotPersonInaWheelchair, #DisabledandProud #AcademicAbleism #DisabledIndian #divyaang etc to know what conversations around disability are taking place. We found many prominent disabled activists, writers and organizations who were using the 140 character tweet format to share their views on ableist systems, policies and campaigns, share their personal experiences as well as advocating for disability justice.
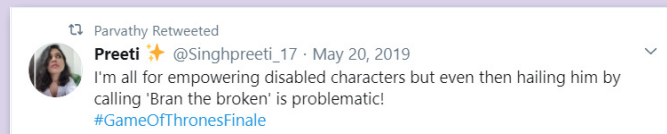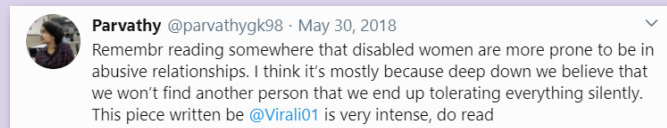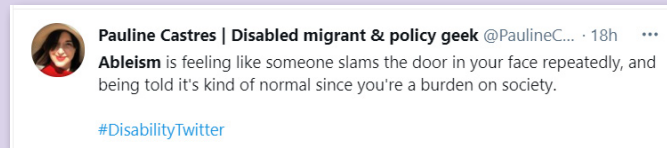
Through our online research, we found out about an Indian disability group called Revival, founded by Anusha Mishra. After closely following Revival's instagram page which regularly posted content related to disability sexuality and intersectional ableism, we decided to reach out to them. Anusha invited us to be part of Revival's Whatsapp group which was a space for disabled people and non-disabled allies to chat about all things disability.

Nipun Malhotra ✔ @nipunmalhotra

Joined Tinder, got 1 right swipe, things heat up, she googles me, calls me 'inspiring' - things cool off #DisabledIndian #NotHerFault

1:33 PM · Dec 11, 2016 · Twitter for iPhone

Parvathy Retweeted
Dr. Malvika Iyer ✔ @Malvikalyer · Dec 3, 2019
17 years ago, when I was lying on the hospital bed, I heard a bunch of women whisper, "Did you see that new girl in the general ward? What a shame! She must be cursed as now her life has now come to an end."
#WorldDisabilityDay #InternationalDisabilityDay #IDPD2019 #Disability

345   2.6K   12.7K

Show this thread

Dr. Malvika Iyer ✔ @Malvikalyer · Dec 3, 2019
Replying to @Malvikalyer
That was the very first time I cried my eyes out. Not when I saw my amputated arms covered in blood. Not when I saw the doctors drilling iron rods inside my leg. Not when I was battling for my dear life.
7   68   512

Dr. Malvika Iyer ✔ @Malvikalyer · Dec 3, 2019
I was labeled the disabled girl with no future. The naive 13 year old mind inside me was ready to believe their verdict on my life and had it not been for the unconditional support of my family and friends, I'd have given up.
3   72   473

Dr. Malvika Iyer ✔ @Malvikalyer · Dec 3, 2019
The most critical barrier people with disabilities face is the invisible barrier of attitudes. Attitudes are so significant that they represent more of a barrier to people with disabilities than any functional limitation caused by the disability.
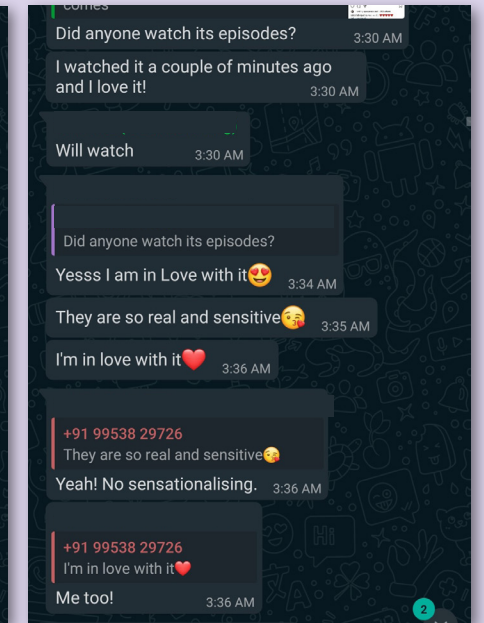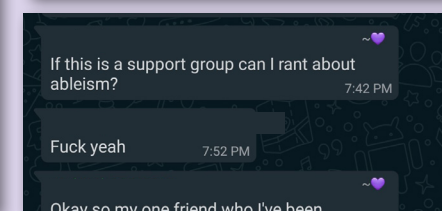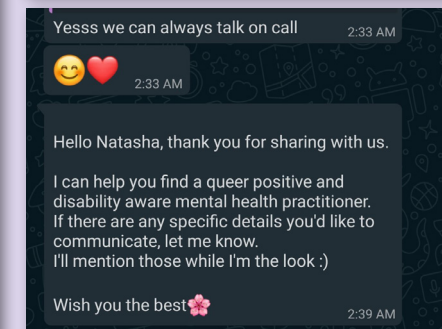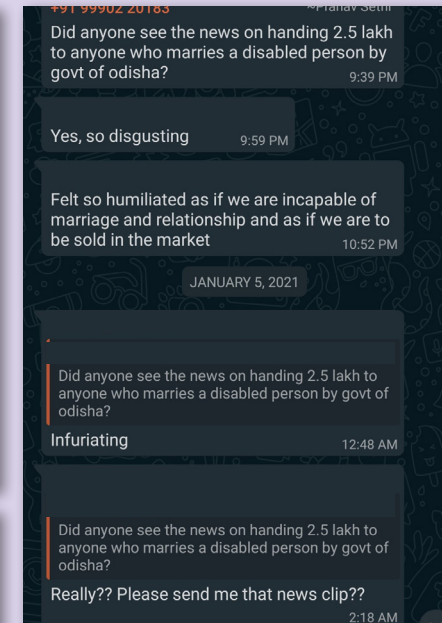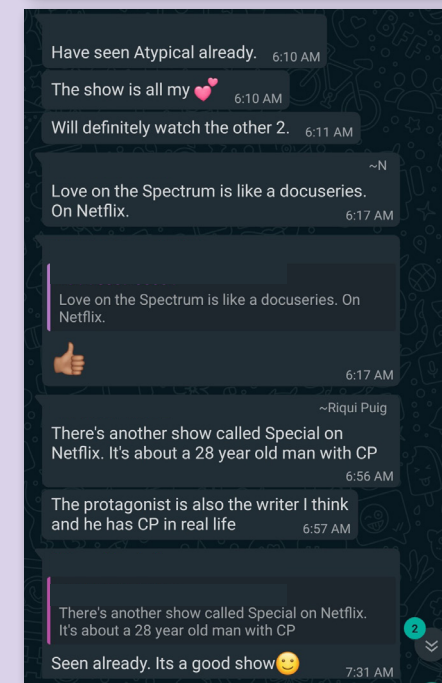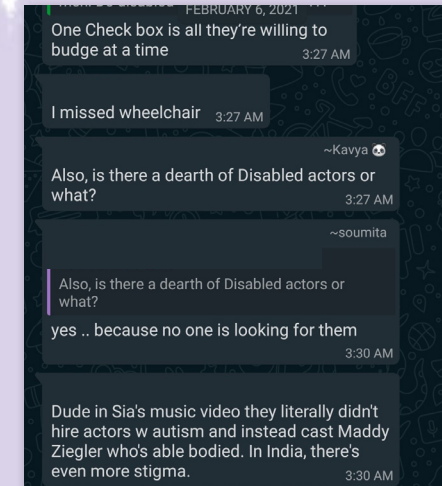#InternationalDisabilityDay
2   117   543

Dr. Malvika Iyer ✔ @Malvikalyer · Dec 3, 2019
Mental illness is seen as a curse, although it is something that each one of us undergoes in varying degrees of intensity. Most people don't take treatment for mental illness due to the fear of stigma, isolation or rejection.

Pauline Castres | Disabled migrant & policy geek @PaulineC... · 18h
Ableism is feeling like someone slams the door in your face repeatedly, and being told it's kind of normal since you're a burden on society.
#DisabilityTwitter

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shivangi Retweeted
Kathryn Woodcock @safeandsilent · Sep 17
We're deaf, not "hearing impaired".
Your discomfort with the word "deaf" doesn't matter. Ask yourself why you're uncomfortable. Maybe stop using "deaf" as an insult when you're peeved about someone's inattentiveness or obstinacy.

> **Gregory Mansfield** @GHMansfield · Sep 17
> Medical staff:"How long have you been differently-abled?"
> Me:"Do you mean disabled?"
> Medical staff:"I don't like that term. It's too negative."
> Nondisabled people don't get to choose how disabled people identify themselves.

Parvathy @parvathygk98 · May 30, 2018
Remembr reading somewhere that disabled women are more prone to be in abusive relationships. I think it's mostly because deep down we believe that we won't find another person that we end up tolerating everything silently. This piece written by @Virali01 is very intense, do read

---

Parvathy Retweeted
Preeti ✨ @Singhpreeti_17 · May 20, 2019
I'm all for empowering disabled characters but even then hailing him by calling 'Bran the broken' is problematic!
#GameOfThronesFinale

Just got treated like shit at an airport (again) for being disabled. I was chided for supposedly "making decisions" for the official (by telling her the LEGAL manner in which to check someone like me) and called "uncooperative" for not accepting a baseless strip search. (1/n)

9:44 AM · Feb 2, 2019 · Twitter for Android

254 Retweets   31 Quote Tweets   314 Likes

Antara @AntaraT · Feb 2, 2019
Replying to @AntaraT
Even after the ETD was clear, I was checked 3-4 times head to toe (my shoulders, underarms, etc) and given a full pat down check ("it's procedure, not everyone comes in with an artificial leg") and then publicly yelled at for trying to "teach someone how to do their job" (2/n)
1   27   55

Whatsapp Chatroom with 58 members

Helping each other navigate through internalized ableism

Discussing disability in media

Calling out everyday ableism

Taking action, self organizing

Building community spirit

Sharing moments of joy and laughter

Disability Justice leaders

Research Objectives

How are disability orgs and advocates working towards disability justice?

What are the strengths and weaknesses of current initiatives taken towards inclusion and social integration?

What is the current state of disability in India at a systemic level?

Our Learnings

In India, this discrimination against disabled people is significantly shaped by superstitions, religion and the strong belief that non-normative bodies and minds are the results of past sins and disabled people are sinners. Indian Disability rights acts have been around since 1995, but the state's inefficient and ignorant attitude has kept the needs of the disability community at least priority. This lack of proper implementation of disability laws and policies makes matters much worse. Disabled people are often compared to broken, dysfunctional, damaged goods, in need of saving. They are neither included in decision-making, nor considered as end users when designing systems, policies or products. Indian activists and organizations are still fighting for basic human rights, accessibility & infrastructure, and disability-visibility.

"Disability has to be weaved in the academic discourse at the school and college level. Just like we study about gender, we must study about disability as well."

"It is important to actively expand the circle of people who are aware ableism. If converted people only talk to converted people, we are not going to move forward."

Anita Ghai

Indian Disabled Academic and Disability Rights Activist working on sexuality, education & health

"The state doesn't have any role in the life of an indian disabled person. India passed the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act only in 2004. It has been very difficult for the government to see disabled people as citizens. Basic education is also not considered. Indian systems are not designed in a way that makes disabled people feel safe and independant."

Shampa Sengupta

Indian Disability Rights Activist, Sruti Disability Rights Centre

"Empathy refies power structures, prescribed emotions and silences the recipient. The empathizer or the saviour becomes the protagonist. This relegated the disbaled person."

"Non-disabled are tarined to look away from disabled people, never to look back."

"Not everything needs saving. Some things just need to exist."

Alex Haagaard & Liz Jackson

Disablity Rights Activitsts, Critical Axis, The Disabled List

"Disability is a tragedy."

Non-Disabled Community

Ableist systems and years of conditioning have **suppressed and invisibilized** the realities of disability.

"Disability is an identity."

Disabled Community

There is a big gap between societal perception and lived realities of disability.

Although the Indian disability movement has been fighting for their rights, dignity and equal space, the stigma around disability continues to exist. Due to the lack of infrastructural accessibility and poor implementation of disability laws, the most common associations to disability are limited to spaces where non-disabled people hold a position of privilege, which reinforces the misconception that disabled are always dependent on their help. For example, hospitals, poor on the streets, charity organizations, inspirational speakers and most importantly, the way they ar represented in the media.

Indian cinema is an integral and influential aspect of Indian culture. Films play a significant role in shaping habits & belief systems and the way millions of Indians see each other.

Non-Disabled Community

Films

For a vast majority of people films are often the only places where they actually see and 'meet' disabled people.

So, the **'kind' of disability-visibility** they create is extremely important.

Disabled Community

Disability
in Films

Image: bloodydisgusting.com

Films have been **grossly misrepresenting** disability.

Despite being the most diverse film industry, Indian cinema has produced very few films about disability. But in these films, disability is hardly ever portrayed in a positive light and almost always shown as a tragedy that needs fixing and saving. Experiences of disability are objectified and used as a metaphor for punishment, mockery, inspiration or sympathy.

Because of the great influence that films have on Indian culture, these misrepresentations significantly contribute to power asymmetry, reinforce existing biases, and invisibilize the lived realities of disability.

Today, most films that include disability are written by non-disabled people who draw on their ablesist assumptions. Here are some examples of how disablity has been portrayed in Indian films –

1813 Indian films / year in 41 languages across 21 film Industries

Unicef, 2018

Films are at the heart of Indian culture.

For example

Koi...Mil Gaya (2003)

Role & usage of disablity

Koi.. Mil gaya (2003) is the story of a 20-something year old boy named Rohit, who was born with a developmental disability. He is ridiculed, and tormented at every phase in his life. People around him constantly make him feel inferior and incapable. His life drastically turns around when an extraterrestrial alien comes to earth and rids him of his disability. Rohit becomes physically stronger, intelligent and charming. A girl who was previously antagonistic towards him, suddenly finds him extremely desirable and wishes to marry him. This film gives the message that one's life can only be rich and satisfying if they are non-disabled.

Zero (2018)

Role & usage of disablity

Zero revolves around Aafia, a scientist with cerebral palsy who wants to marry Bauua Singh, a man with dwarfism because she thinks nobody else will ever marry her. Even though the film is a love story about two people with disabilities, it is sending the message that a non-disabled person loving a person with disability is impossible. Bauua also challenges aafia to pick up a pen. She is shown crawling and struggling to prove herself and a huge audience then claps for her. This story teaches audiences to find disabled people as an object of inspiration when they are able to do the most trivial tasks despite their disability.
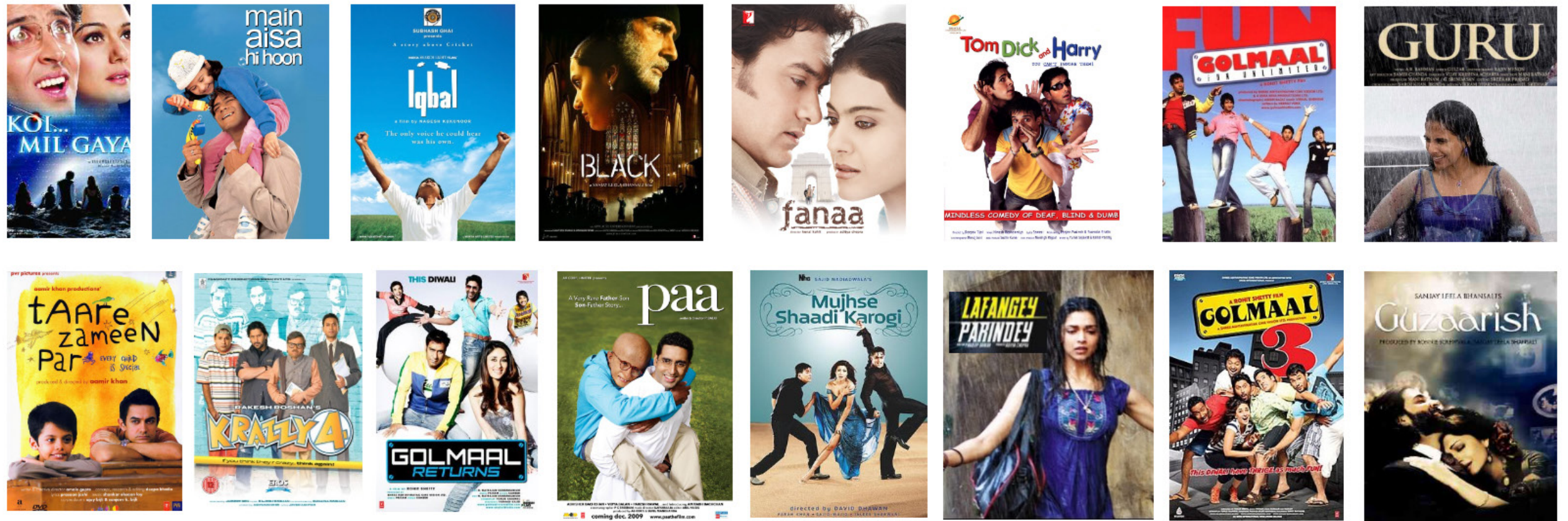
1957

Time and again, disability has been used as a metaphor for

Inspiration, Comic Relief, Punishment, Tragedy & Pity.

Most of these films are made without including any disabled perspective during the writing, casting or production phase.

When an industry repeatedly produces stereotypical representations, these stories

become the only known narrative of disability.

2021

46

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Co-creating representation practices

Disability Community —— **What are disability people saying about their representation?** —— Filmmakers

**Session with
Revival Disability Organisation**

We decided to reach out to members of the Revival disability group and invited them to be part of an online ideation session. Our intentions were two fold –

1. Discuss the portrayal of disability in films. What are the characteristics of authentic and inauthentic representations?

2. Co-create ideas for filmmakers to resist ableism and improve representation. How can filmmakers write more authentic & inclusive stories?
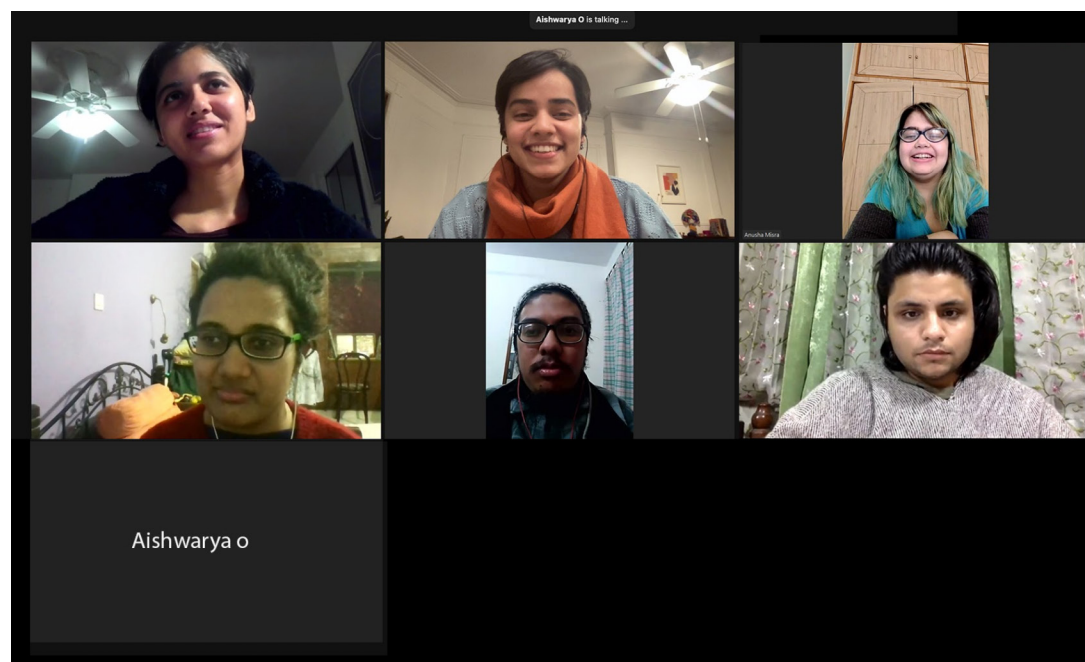
Considerations while designing the session

Designing for Accessibility

To be considerate of the disabilities that are present in the room and make sure the space, our language, the tasks and tools are accessible and inclusive for all, we informed the participants beforehand about the kind of activities we will be doing and asked if there were any specific accessibility tools that we can provide for them. We made the neccessary arrangements to suit their needs.
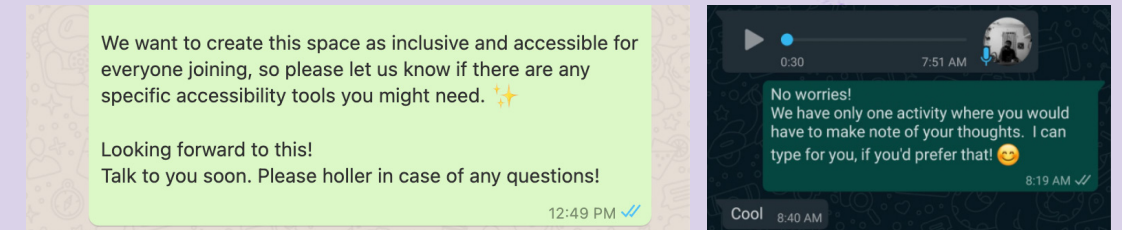

Designing for Community

We knew that since the group was formed during the Covid-19 pandemic, most of their members had never met each other in person. It was important to create a space where participants get to know each other and feel comfortable in the meeting. We incorporated an ice-breaker round where everyone introduced themselves and shared why they were excited to join this session. We also set up community agreements to leave all inhibitions at the door and welcome all small and big ideas.

Designing for Creativity

Since the agenda of the session was to come up with as many ideas as possible, it was important to remember that this was a group of non-designers and that they may not be habituated with thinking out of the box. We wanted to encourage the thought that everyone is creative and create an informal non-judgemental space. We incorporated a short warm-up activity to loosen thinking muscles & boost creativity.
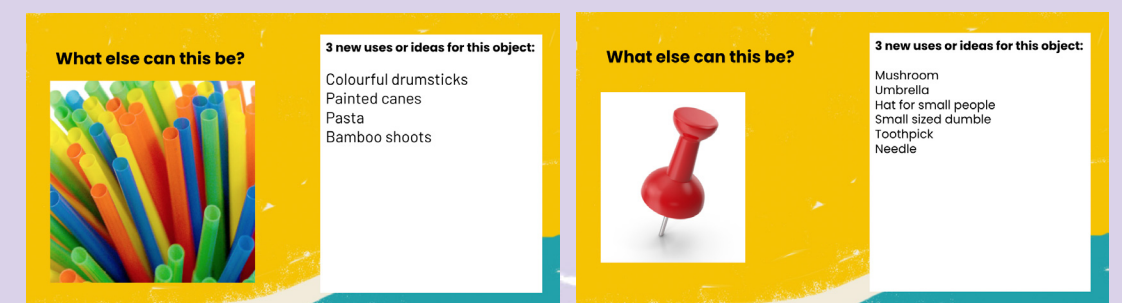
How are films misrepresnting disability? What needs to change?

disabled people are sexual beings too

The discussions we had were full of examples of how disabled characters in films were completely unrelatable and disrespectful. They began pointing out the most common mistakes that films tend to make repeatedly, which reflected the biases and misconceptions society has. And they also shared characteristics that they hoped filmmakers included while creating stories of disability, which reflected the ideal shift in the perception of disability.

Disability is an identity

Don't center the whole world around disability.

understand what empowerment really means

Two people with the same disability have vastly different experiences

Have more THOUGHTFUL disability representation

Disability is a very important part of our life, but we think of other things too

Don't reduce disabled experiences

Don't give us undue attention

Don't put us under one umbrella

Stay away from inspiration porn

Don't underestimate our capacities just because we are disabled

Characters should be multilayered

Inter-sectionality is so important

Don't try to cover all issues of disability in one movie. Go deeper.

There is no less disabled more disabled

Normalize visuals of disabled people in love

We have so many interlinked identities

Don't see disability as a mission

Why are we either villains or childish

do filmmakers not know that we are a part of the audience??

how your characters respond to the disabled character teaches the audience how to respond to us

Don't infantilize disabled people

Disabled people should be part of every film.

Just stay away from stereotypes

Don't make disability to further the narrative

I can be sad for reasons that have nothing to do with my disability. filmmakers need to get that.

Carefully think of minor characters with dis. not just main leads.

People don't assume that we also watch films.

Disability is not a state of mind

There are invisible disabilities too

just like gender and age can not be separated, you can not separate our identity from our disability

Dont fix disability

Don't talk over us

We don't need to be saved.

There are no levels of disability to compare

films mostly only include visible disabilities. What about invisible ones??

Stay away from comical representations

Why are disabled people always mocked at

Give us the space and agency to talk and make decisions

In the attempt to normalize disability, real challenges are ignored.

try to show the real complexities of disability, not made up assumptions

By the end of the session, we ended up with a large pool of do's and don'ts of disability representation. We wanted to make these rich learnings easily understandable, memorable, and actionable for filmmakers. We noticed that many of these points were similar to the terms created and used by disabled people worldwide when calling out ableism, for example Liz Jackson and Alex Haagaard's initiative **Critical Axis, Sins Invalid Principles of Disability Justice**.

our lives are not all dull dark lonely

So, with the help of these existing terms, we categorized similar points into groups and developed a list of disability tropes to avoid and disability concepts to adopt.

Disability Tropes to Avoid

Medical Model

It sees people as disabled by their bodies. Disability is something that is wrong or damaged in the person and must be cured and fixed. A disabled body is nothing more than a body that needs intervention and fixing.

Gift Recipient

It presumes that disabled people are unable to contribute to society in any way. Non-disabled pity them and must take on the role of being the saviour with high amounts of selflessness and moral character.

Human Fade

It states that disabled people's entire lives are focussed on their disability and the challenges that come with it. It ignores any other facets of their personality or lived experiences.

Isolation

It is assumed that disabled people must lead lonely and sad lives. Isolation treats disabled life as a personal tragedy. They must be cut off from all social circles, have no friends and always alone

Desexualisation

Desexualization is the inability to see disabled people as worthy of love and care. Showing them as lacking desire or being desired. Thinking that romance is absent from their lives.

Inspiration Exploitation

It objectifies disabled people as inspirational figures. Disabled people are thought of as superheroes for partaking even in ordinary activities such as eating, brushing their teeth, or studying.

Infantilization

It shows disbality —whether physical, intellectual, or developmental — marked by of incapability. Characters are treated in condescending and patronizing ways.

Desexualisation

It uses disbaled people as comic relief. They are the butt of jokes. Other characters make fun of their ways of talking, walking, living, participating.

Disability Concepts to Adopt

Cultural Model

Disability is not a personal tragedy, but an identity, culture and larger community. Disabled bodies do not need fixing.

Cultural Pluralism

Stories show disabled people as multifaceted people. Their disabilities do not receive undue attention. They are presented just as non-disabled people would be.

Disability Sexuality

Disabled people have agency in sexual interactions. Romance and love is an active theme in their lives.

Social Connect

Disabled people are seen as active members of the larger social community. They interact and contribute meaningfully and equally as non-disabled people.

Disabled Audience

Disabled people are seen as active audiences and users of products, services and systems produced.

Reality Retained

Reality Retained depicts lives of disabled people as complex, but ultimately positive or neutral. They neither stigmatise disability, nor flatten out their complexities.

Crip Humour

Includes elements of ironic self-deprecation intended to challenge nondisabled expectations, or to communicate shared experiences. Crucially, disabled people retain agency within the joke—they are never the punchline.

Diversity

Disability is a spectrum. One of the agendas of increasing disability representation is to increase the kinds of disabilities thata are shown. Include visible, invisible, physical and cognitive disabilities.

How can non-disabled filmmakers achieve authenticity?

We learnt what non-disabled filmmakers must understand about disability but since they do not have lived experience, we wondered how they could achieve this level of authenticity in their representation.
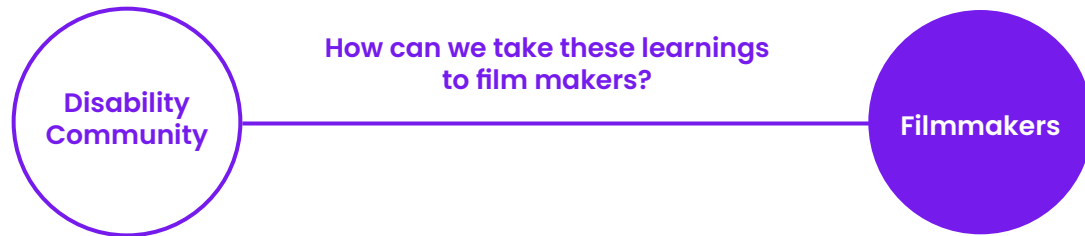
The community members expressed very clearly that filmmakers who don't have lived experience of disability, can only have assumptions. To create authentic representation, they have to involve disabled people from the very beginning.

"Filmmakers who do not have lived experience of disability can only have assumptions. They have to involve us in the process from the very beginning."

Through this discussion, we learnt that this involvement can take many forms from co-writing the story with a disabled person, to cultivating a practice of asking, not assuming, to reading disability literature and educating themselves. The most important point here is for filmmakers to realize that they need to take effort in engaging with disabled people.

Meet more disabled people

Ask us, don't assume

Hang out with disabled people

Join social media groups with disabled people

make friends with disabled people

Build personal relationships

Watch movies with us

Call us up like you would call any other person

Co-create with us

Involve us

Hire disabled scriptwriters

Have someone with disability on the team.

Disability consultant

Cast people with disabilities

Have disabled people play disabled roles

Co-write the story with a disabled person

Do Proper research

Read disability literature

Read and watch content that we appreciate

Write stories with disability

Read personal accounts, memoirs written by us

Watch films with good representation

Compare indian and international films

Read our movie reviews

Understanding filmmakers' mindsets

How can we take these learnings to film makers?

Disability Community — Filmmakers

Having learnt what disabled people demand from films, we wanted to understand a filmmaker's process of writing a story and identify an entry point in their system to actualize the points discussed in the session with Revival.

For this, we reached out to young filmmakers and a filmmaking professor. We told them about how the disability community has been speaking up about their representations, and showed them examples of popular films that had done a bad job. They also shared with us the possible challenges that filmmakers might face in achieving authentic disability representation.

Understanding the journey of Scriptwriting

Janvi Ghatalia (she/her)

We learnt 3 main things from this session –

We heard –

"I don't think I ever noticed how films are misrepresenting disability"

"There is still some discussion and awareness about the stereotypes of gender and sexuality in film industry but hardly any about disability"

This means –

Filmmakers are unaware about impacts of misrepresentation of disability in indian films.

They need more discussions about disablity representation

"If I had to make a film right now about disability, I wouldn't know how to go about it. I dont want to cross the line or offend disabled people"

"How can we write about a disabled character without focusing on their disability? It is the often the main feature of that character"

They are confused and unsure about how to approach disability during film-making process

They need to be taught about how to write authentic representation

"Story ideas come from people, situations, patterns that I see around me. I then build their background and try to retain what I wanted to say through my story. I already assume that I have an idea of the story. I don't want real life facts to intrude that"

"I cannot morally police my students as to what kind of stories they should write"

Assumptions of disability remain unchecked in the pursuit of creative liberty

They need to interrogate their assumptions and check their biases

What if learning how to authentically represent disability is made part of learning how to make a good film?

What if young filmmakers are sensitized to ableism **before they enter the industry** so that they can be agents of change and shape the films of tomorrow?
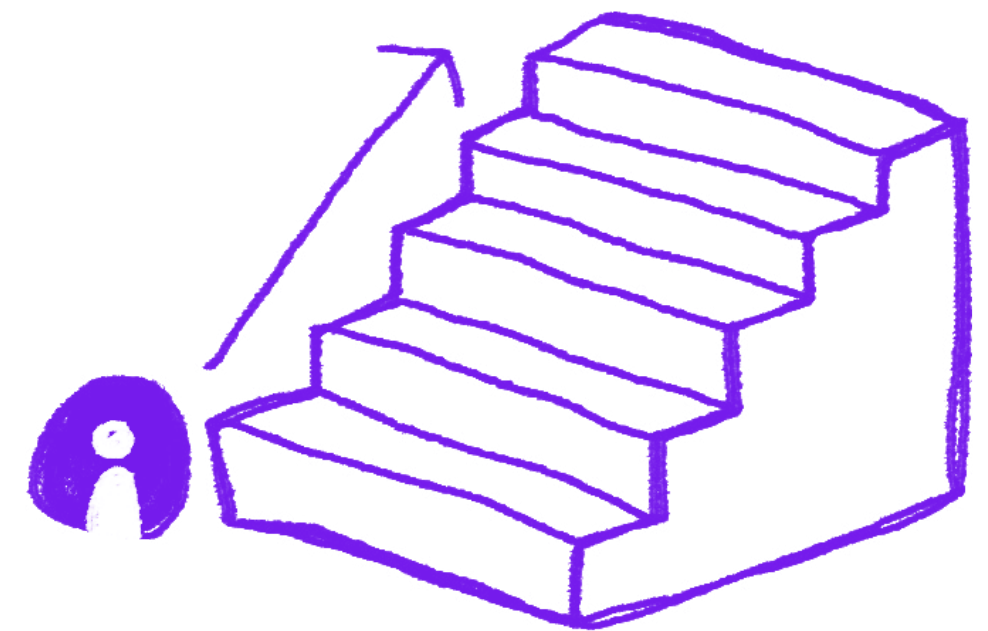
To create a shift in the way disability is represented in films, we decided to target people who will be willing to learn and unlearn, who are open to new practices and methodologies and who have the zest and energy to work towards creating a better future **– Students.**

How might we make non-disabled film students -

Interrogate their assumptions

Engage in dialogue about disability

Learn how to create authentic stories

Ideating with disability community

To stay true to the voices of the disablity community and to make sure we center disabled perspectives, we decided to form a core design team by partneirng with a disablity advocate and a disabled film critic. We got together from time to time to ideate, discuss and refine ideas, and share findings and learnings. Preeti and Rachit helped us not only in keeping our own non-disabled biases in check, but were our anchors in measuring the success of any idea.

Preeti Singh
Disablity Advocate

Rachit Raj
Film Critic & Writer

Brainstorming ideas
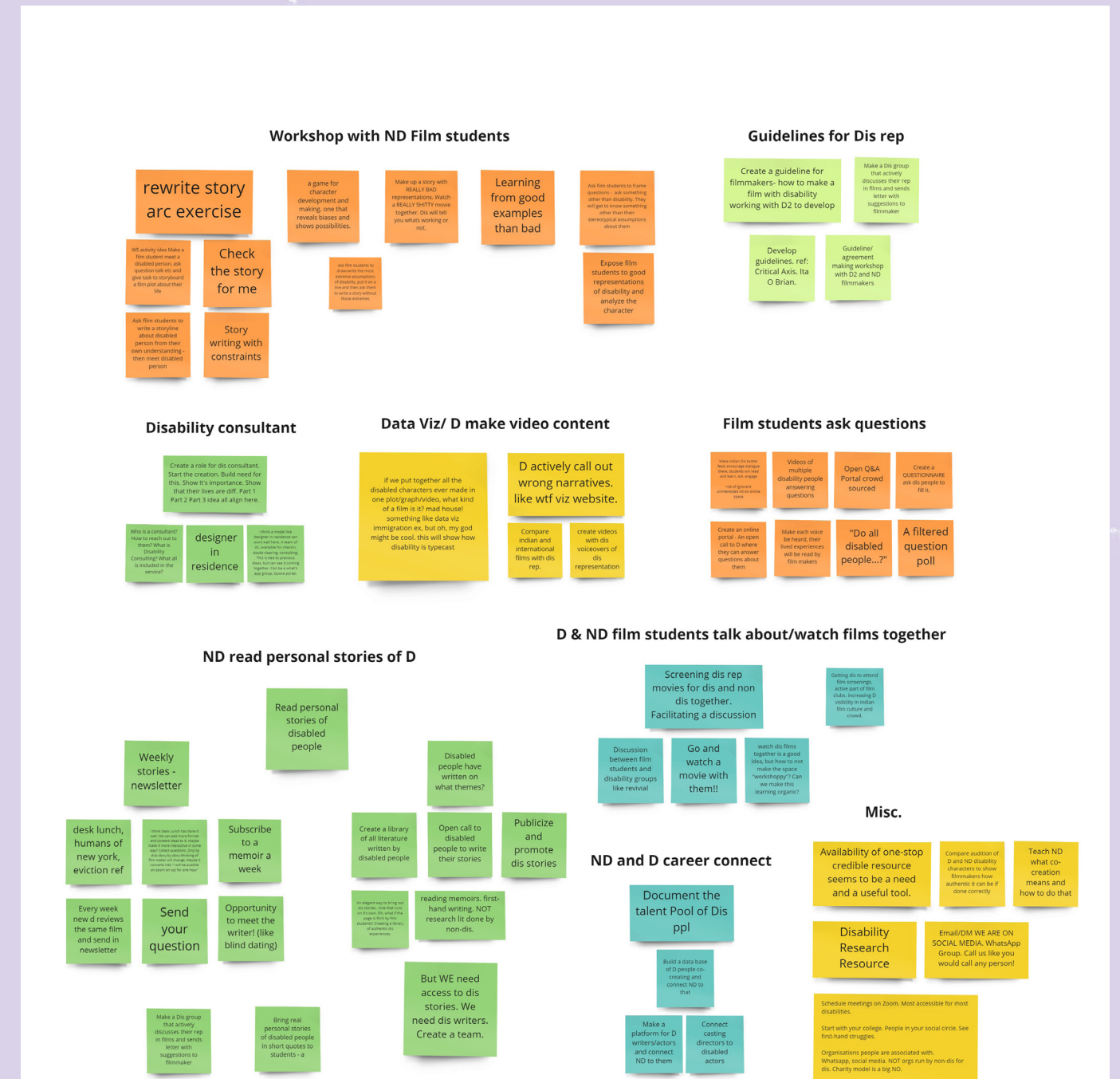
Prototyping our ideas with film students

Our prototypes were designed keeping two main goals in mind–

1. Increased care and owndership from the creators about the impacts of the stories they write

2. Increased authentic representation of disabled characters in films

To test different ways to make this possible, we partnered with our undergraduate college, MIT Institute of Design, Pune, India. We held two prototype sessions, a week apart, with 4 film students from the Film and Video Department.

Plan of Action for the Prototype

Workshop 1	Activities	Intention
	Write a story about disability	To bring to surface their default assumptions about disability
	Learn about stigmatizing tropes to avoid	To educate about stigmatizing tropes and center voices of the disablility community
	Analyze existing inauthentic representations	To learn how to identify tropes in different styles and realize their impact
	Check your own story for bias and correction	To self reflect and self correct, to experience that they didn't even know they didn't know

Workshop 2	Activities	Intention
	Write a story about disability	To bring to surface their default assumptions about disability
	Learn about normalizing concepts to adopt	To learn what authentic representation looks like, to challenge own conditional thinking
	Analyze existing authentic representations	To learn what authentic representation looks like, to challenge own conditional thinking
	Meet disabled creator of the chosen representation	To realize the importance of co-creation and including disabled people in the process
	Conduct digital ethnography on Instagram	To further reveal the gaps in their perception and reality of disability
	Check your own story for bias and correction	To self reflect and self correct, to experience that they didn't even know they didn't know

Prototype Workshops

ACTIVITY 1

What

Write a story about disability

We started our prototype session by asking the participants to write a short story that included a disabled character. We wanted to give a prompt that had just enough details for them to think of basic plot – a clear starting, middle and end. The focus was more on the plot of the story and not so much on the way it was written. 2 examples of prompts we tested were –

1. Think of a story with a disabled character either in a school, a hospital, or at a shopping mall.

2. Think of a story with a disabled character.

Why

To bring to surface their default assumptions about disability

TEST QUESTIONS

Is writing an effective tool to help expose their implicit assumptions and biases about disability?

In their story, has disability been shown as something negative or positive?

How much detail in the story is needed to reveal their biases?

Is there an apparent pattern in the disabilities they have included and their plotlines?

ACTIVITY 2

What

Learn about negative & positive tropes with explanations from the disability community

We next introduced them to what the disabled community is saying about their representation. With the help of Critical Axis and our research interviews, we developed lists of negative tropes to avoid and positive tropes to adopt. Each trope was paired with a trope name, theoretical definition, and why the community loves it/hates it.

Why

To educate about stigmatizing and amplifying tropes and center voices of the disability community

TEST QUESTIONS

Are they able to understand why these representations are damaging/amplifying?

Is the voice of the disability community getting communicated clearly?

Should this be lecture-style or do we need them to think of examples together?

What are some of their questions for each trope?

Are they finding positive tropes to be harder to understand?

Importance of Representation

You're too pretty to be on a wheelchair!

You are not worth living

Who will ever marry you?

Non-disabled Communities

Films

Disabled Communities

Thus, the _kind_ of disability-visibility films create is extremely important.
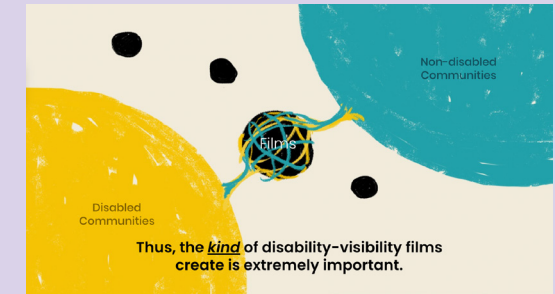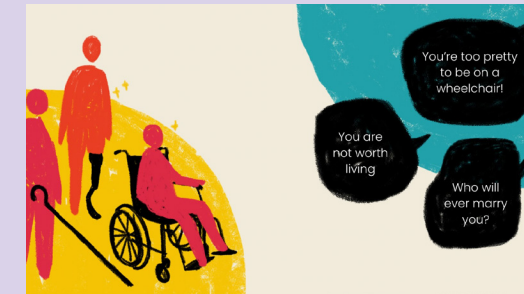
8 Stigmatizing Tropes to Avoid

1. **Medical Model**
   + States that people are disabled by their bodies.
   + Sees disability as something wrong, aims to fix it.
   + Disability is seen as a personal tragedy.

2. **Charity Model or Gift Recipient**
   + Disabled people can't contribute. They instead need to be saved and should perform gratitude.
   + Non-disabled people take on the role of saviors with high moral character.

We are not broken. Dont fix us.
Disability Community

Not all things need saving. Sometimes they just need to exist.
Liz Jackson
Disability Activist

8 Amplifying Concepts to Adopt

1. **Cultural Model**

   Disability is not a personal tragedy, but an identity, culture and larger community. Disabled bodies do not need fixing.

   Opposite of Medical Model, Charity Model, Human Fade

2. **Cultural Pluralism**

   Disabled people are "seen as multifaceted people and their disabilities do not receive undue attention. They are presented as non-disabled people would be".

   Opposite of Human Fade, Inspiration Porn, Charity Model

4. **Crip Humour**

   Includes elements of ironic self-deprecation intended to challenge nondisabled expectations, or to communicate shared experiences within the disabled community. Crucially, disabled people retain agency within the joke—they are never the punchline.

5. **Diversity**

   – Includes diversity in disability – invisible/visible, physical/cognitive
   – Includes diversity in class, caste, gender
   – Includes more than 1 disabled character

ACTIVITY 3

What

Analyze existing indian films through group exercises and meet a disabled writer

Next, we asked participants to watch a scene of a film, an advertisement or an episode which included a disabled character, keeping in mind the representation tropes. We created space for them to discuss what they were watching through reflection questions such as –

1. Does the film stigmatize or normalize disablity? How?
2. What message is this film giving about disbality?
3. What was the director's intention to include disbality in the narrative?
4. What might have been the different film making approaches when making representations the community finds authentic and inauthentic?

We next played an interview clipping of Rachit Raj (writer of the community-loved show 'Firsts') to talk about the importance of including disabled people in the process.

Why

To teach them how to identify these tropes in different styles and manifestations and their impacts on the community.

TEST QUESTIONS

Is using existing films an effective way to identify tropes?

Are they able to identify tropes in existing representations? In what ways?

What are the kinds of dicussions they are having?

Are they building off each other's opinions and ideas? Is this better as a group activity or should it be done individually?

Are they able to identify the importance of including disabled people in the film making process? How?

What is the effect of meeting the creator of a representation they have just seen?

Analyzing inauthentic representations

Analyzing authentic representations

Comparing representations

Hearing from a disabled writer

Rachit Raj

ACTIVITY 4

What

Step into the lives of disabled people through social media

We next invited participants to connect with diverse people with disabilities through their social media accounts to further reveal the gap between their assumptions and lived realities of disability. We selected accounts of people with different disabilities, professions, genders, and disablity advocacy. Each used their social media profiles for different purposes.

Why

To further reveal gaps in their assumptions of disability and its lived reality

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TEST QUESTIONS

What are the kinds of assumptions that are getting checked?

What are they noticing in these social media profiles?

Are they interested in following these handles in the future?

What is their immediate emotion?

ACTIVITY 5

What

Check your own story through these new lenses

The last activity was to go back to the story they wrote at the beginning of the workshop and review the story with a new critical lens to identify in which ways they themselves were using or not using the tropes.

We closed the sesison by asking them what what they had learned through the process. We put it in the following format –

When filmmakers do _____, they stigmatise disability. So when I write stories, I will do _____ so that _____.

Why

To self reflect and self correct, to experience that they didn't even know they didn't know

---

TEST QUESTIONS

Is going back to their story an effective way to measure their assumptions?

Are they able to identify stigmatizing tropes in their narratives?

What are their key learnings from the workshop?

What do they think they need to be able to write better strories?

Participant Reflections

Upon attending the workshop, students expressed how they were completely unaware about the way Indian films had been misrepresenting disability.

"I feel like a deer in the headlight. I had never realized that such popular films are creating a negative idea about disability."

They realized that all their stories either focussed on the struggles of disability or how the characters had overcome them.

"Oh, I didn't even know that I was using so many stereotypes. Now these terms are so apparent. I can see them everywhere!"

Students learnt that it is only possible to make authentic representations when they engage with people with disabilities.

"I cannot show people with disabilities on screen unless I involve them behind the screen as well."

They saw value in the prototype and longed for more such sessions and disablity resources.

"Now whenever I look at a film, I'm going to look at it in a completely different way."

"I'm very glad that I did this workshop. This should be compulsary in film schools."

"Can we get all the slides and worksheets used in these sessions?"

Hearing the participants' reflections, our co-designer Preeti said

"This is a continuous learning process. There can never be a perfect representation. But even if one person becomes aware of their bias, it can create a domino effect. The impact will be slow but this is very important work."

Prototype Insights

To measure the success of the prototype and draw insights from the experience, we next shared our prototype reuslts with our co-designers Rachit and Preeti. Together, we discussed the strengths and opportunities for growth to guide us refine the prototype.

What went well

Trope Names

Students had quickly begun using the trope names in their discussions. They were memorable and actionable.

Revisiting stories

Checking their own stories after learning & practicing proved to be an effective method to reveal their conditioned beliefs.

Armed with these insights, we developed our final intervention –

Considerations going forward

Grounding & Aligning

To set context around this work, we decided to initiate the workshop with discussions around the value of films and storytelling.

Continuous Learning

The workshop merely planted the seed of a thought. We decided to create resources that help students continuously learn.

Amplify existing resources

Disabled people have been creating content for a long time. We decided to push their work forward through social media.

Access to community

For students to directly listen and learn from disabled people, we decided to invite disability activists for lectures and Q&A sessions.

the crossover

The Crossover is an experiential learning program that equips non-disabled film students with tools to identify ableism and write stories that amplify disability.

The Crossover Goals

The Crossover helps film students develop a critical eye towards identifying ableism.

Since there is a dearth of disabled people in the film industry, there is no clear understanding of what kinds of representation are harmful and which ones are helpful. Students learn to recognize the truly authentic disability films from bad ones.

It makes students realize impacts of inauthentic representation & teaches them to care.

Representations that stereotype and stigmatize marginalized communities directly influence audiences and negatively impact the lives of disabled people. Students realize the power of storytelling in changing these narratives.

It ensures that the stories students write originate from people with lived experiences.

Authentic representation cannot be achieved until people with lived experiences are involved in the process. Students learn the importance of taking the appropriate steps and methods to engage with the disability community.

It provides tools to reveal and interrogate their own assumptions of disability.

The way we understand and approach disability is so deeply conditioned that we don't even realize it unless we actively confront them. Students realize the implicit beliefs on the basis of which they make decisions in their films.

The Crossover Elements

The Crossover Workshop — The Crossover Guide — The Crossover Lectures
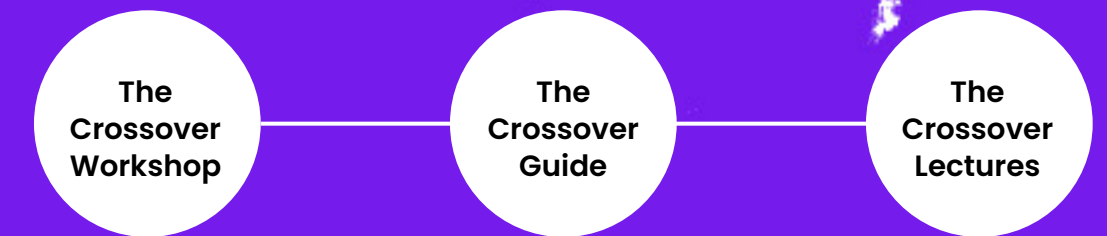
How does it work?

The Crossover runs as an independent platform which will be taken to various Indian film schools. The program is modular ie. the components can be adjusted to any film school's existing curriculum. It can work well as a one-time event as well as a monthly or quarterly program. The goal is to incorporate The Crossover as a compulsory course for all schools.

Who runs it?

The core team of the Crossover includes Preeti Singh, Rachit Raj, Mahima Jaju and Janvi Ghatalia. Because of the interactive nature of the program, it is important that the core decision-makers as well as the facilitators are people with lived experience of disability and committed to disability justice, so that they can push students in the directions that truly normalize disability, answer doubts and challenge their thoughts.

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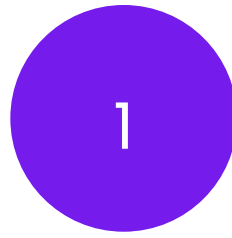
The Crossover Workshop

The crossover workshop is an introductory lesson for film students to understand disability representation & recognize ableist mindsets in themselves as well as in the film industry.

Purpose and Parts

From our research and prototypes, we learnt that students are deeply-conditioned in ableist ways. They don't even know that they don't know what they are doing wrong. For most students, this workshop would serve as a primary introduction into the lives of disabled people. The workshop has been designed in a way such that students go through a series of self-reflective activities to understand the power of storytelling and impact of representation of marginalized groups and learn about common disability stereotypes by self-checking and self-correcting. They are also taught how concepts that help normalize and amplify disability and the importance of including disbaled people in their process.

01	**Introduction to Disability & Films**	04	**Learn representation concepts to adopt**
02	**Write a story with a disabled character**	05	**Analyze disability films**
03	**Learn stigmatising tropes to avoid**	06	**Check your story for stereotypes**
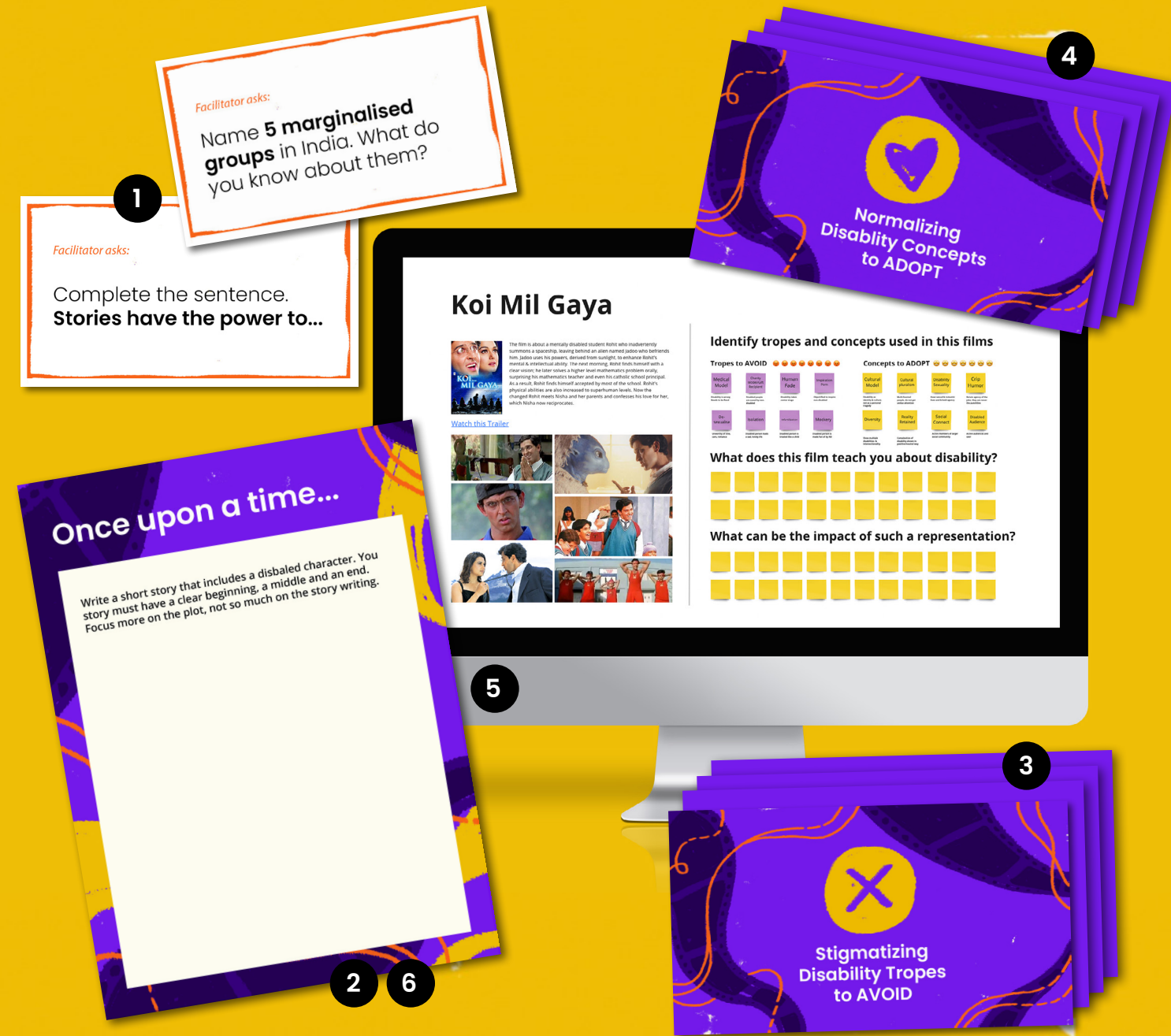
2

The Crossover Guide

The Crossover Guide serves as a tool for self reflection to be used by students when they write stories with disabled characters.

Purpose and Parts

From our prototypes, we learnt that students received a basic understanding of disability representation in the workshop but they need some ways to check their thinking when they are actually writing stories. The Guidebook serves as a reference point for authentic representation and a self-reflection tool for students to understand ableist practices and learn how to avoid them. It provides a theoretical understanding of the key concepts of disability representation.

01 **Detailed explanations of stereotypical tropes to avoid**

02 **Detailed explanations of amplifying concepts to adopt**

03 **Examples & critique of Indian films using these tropes**

04 **References to must-know disability activists**

05 **Self-reflective questions to check the writer's approach to disability**

The Crossover Lectures

3

The Crossover offers a series of interactive guest lectures about disability representation in the media conducted by disabled people themselves.

Purpose

From our research and prototypes, we learnt that there is a need for more conversations around disability representation and more filmmakers listening to the voices of disabled people. The guest lectures serve as a platform for disabled people to talk about their work, the value of co-creation as well as discuss disabled characters from various films. Through engaging discussions and critique and Q&A sessions, this monthly event becomes a space for students to continue learning good filmmaking practices and connect with other budding filmmakers committed to the same cause.

Lectures by Disabled Creators

To promote the work of disabled writers, actors, filmmakers.

To show students examples of good disability representation.

To provide students access to creators for inspiration, connection and mentorship.

Lectures by Disabled Advocates

To amplify the disability movement.

To discuss the importance of authentic representation.

To bring the nuances of disabled experiences to light.

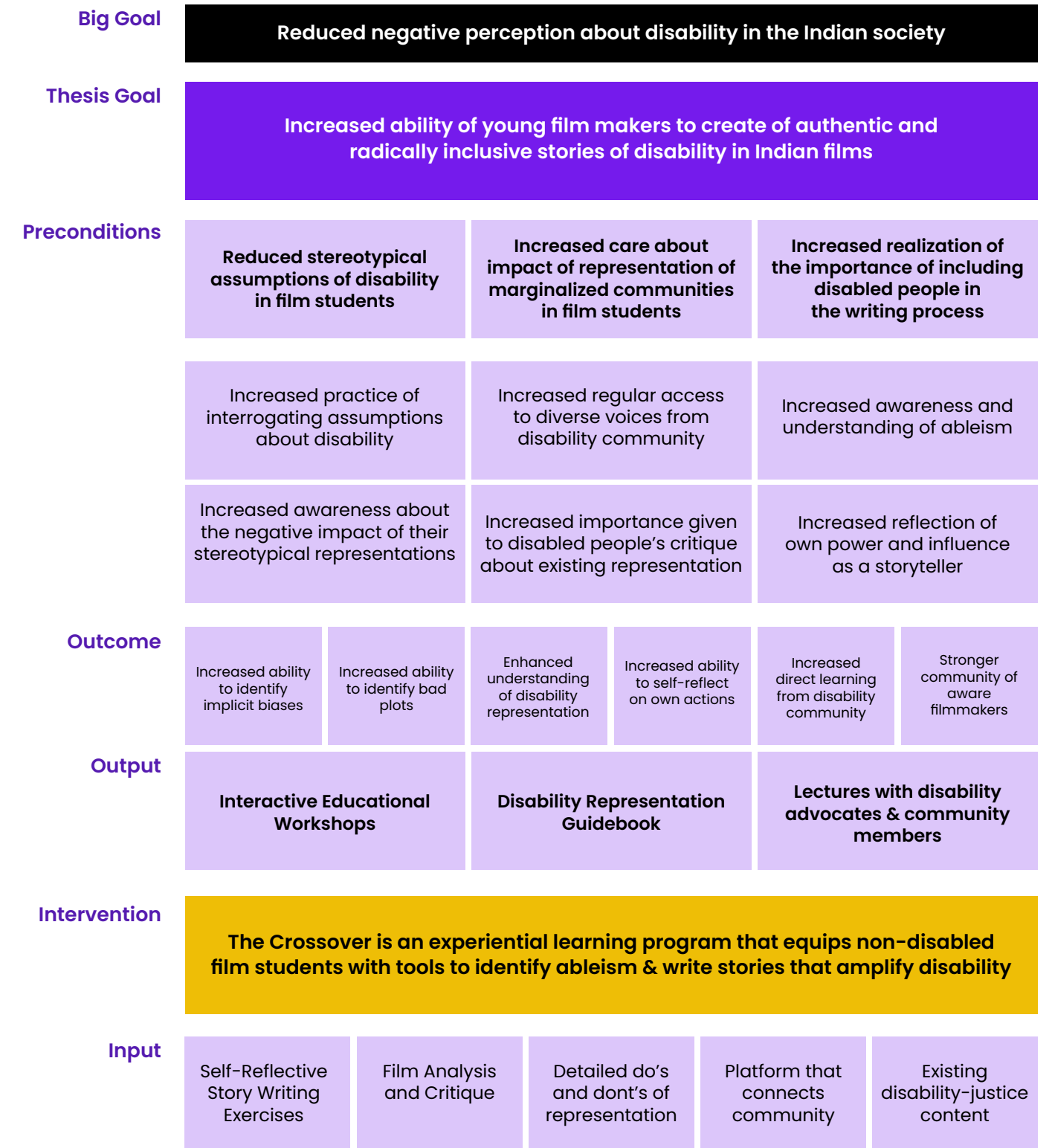These images are only for representation purposes

India produces 1800 films every year.

That is 1800 opportunities to change the narrative of disablity.

The Crossover is a project co-created with disabled people and it will only be true to its aim if it continues to be run by them. Looking forward, we plan to invite more disabled people into The Crossover team and work with them to reach as many film schools of India. A program like The Crossover has potential for massive growth – from hosting disability film festivals to making disability studies a mandatory part of film education, we have a long way to go. We see a future where young non-disabled filmmakers work hand-in-hand with disabled people, excited to create authentic stories and work together to amplify disability!

The Crossover has become much more than a thesis project for us. It has taught us what it means to acknowledge our privilege and use our power to create systemic change. It has transformed the way we approach design and work with communities that we are not a part of.

Theory of Change

Big Goal	Reduced negative perception about disability in the Indian society		
Thesis Goal	Increased ability of young film makers to create of authentic and radically inclusive stories of disability in Indian films		
Preconditions	Reduced stereotypical assumptions of disability in film students	Increased care about impact of representation of marginalized communities in film students	Increased realization of the importance of including disabled people in the writing process
	Increased practice of interrogating assumptions about disability	Increased regular access to diverse voices from disability community	Increased awareness and understanding of ableism
	Increased awareness about the negative impact of their stereotypical representations	Increased importance given to disabled people's critique about existing representation	Increased reflection of own power and influence as a storyteller

Outcome	Increased ability to identify implicit biases	Increased ability to identify bad plots	Enhanced understanding of disability representation	Increased ability to self-reflect on own actions	Increased direct learning from disability community	Stronger community of aware filmmakers

Output	Interactive Educational Workshops	Disability Representation Guidebook	Lectures with disability advocates & community members
Intervention	The Crossover is an experiential learning program that equips non-disabled film students with tools to identify ableism & write stories that amplify disability		

Input	Self-Reflective Story Writing Exercises	Film Analysis and Critique	Detailed do's and dont's of representation	Platform that connects community	Existing disability-justice content

Acknowledgements

Kara Meyer
Thesis Advisor

Thank you for being our anchor, our thought-partner and friend. We always left our weekly meetings with new questions, ideas and motivation to keep going. We couldn't have done this without you, Kara.

Miya Osaki
DSI Chair

Thank you for always extending support whenever needed. Thank you for leading by example, for leading with such grace, and for leading with always a big smile.

Preeti Singh & Rachit Raj
Co-Designers

Thank you for always guiding us so gently through what sometimes felt like an abyss. Thank you for sharing your experiences with us and for making this project your very own.

Big big big thanks

Liz & Alex
Designers in Residence

Everything that we have learnt from this process has begun with you. You have challenged our thoughts like no one else. Your feedback has been our north star. Thank you for teaching us, moulding us, sharing your resources and time so generously with us.

Eshaan Sood
Our Catalyst

Thank you for being you – honest, strong, thoughtful, vulnerable, loving. In all ways, you have kickstarted our project and our initial conversations with you about your experiences set the foundation for The Crossover. Thank you, dear dear friend.

Indian disabled people
Our community

Thank you so much for putting your trust in us and spending hours at end to engage in our interviews, workshops and co-creation sessions. You helped us check our own assumptions and showed us new possibilities.

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