

Framing the Gendered Crip:

Intersectional Representations of Gendered Disability in South Korean Commercial Films

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This study examines the intersectional inequalities of disability and gender, particularly how they are masked by the illusion of visibility in South Korean commercial films. While the representation of disabled characters has increased in recent years, it is crucial to assess whether these portrayals are fair and unbiased, especially through the lenses of ableism and gender discrimination. This study addresses the following questions: Are there differences in the representation of disabled characters by gender? If so, how are female disabled characters portrayed compared to male disabled characters, particularly in terms of the degree of exposure and framing of characteristics? By answering these questions, this study analyzes disparities in representation and framing, revealing how able-bodied perspectives construct preferred disabled traits in a gendered manner, ultimately reinforcing societal norms that cater to the expectations of the abled.

Despite the recent shift in the drama industry toward centering narratives around disabled women, South Korean commercial films continue to portray disability in a biased manner. The findings show that the majority of disabled protagonists in these films are male, often depicted with intellectual disabilities but possessing extraordinary talents that compensate for their impairments. In contrast, female disabled characters are typically relegated to peripheral roles as partners or family members, primarily characterized by kindness. These findings serve as critical evidence in uncovering power dynamics, exposing embedded stereotypes, and examining the gender norms reflected in South Korean cinema.

The theoretical framework draws from Campbell's concept of ableism, McRuer's crip theory, and West and Zimmerman's theory of "doing gender." Each of these theoretical perspectives

provides a distinct yet interrelated lens for analyzing how disability and gender intersect within media portrayals. In detail, ableism operates as an ideological framework that constructs disability as an inferior state, reinforcing the assumption that the able-bodied experience is the norm. Within media representations, ableism is reflected in narratives that depict disabled individuals through stereotypical tropes, such as the tragic but inspirational figure or the burden on beloved able-bodied people around them.

In the context of Korean films, disabled characters are portrayed particularly in the compensatory framing of male disabled characters as possessing extraordinary abilities. Meanwhile, female disabled characters are frequently sidelined, existing to support able-bodied protagonists rather than having narratives of their own. The analysis through crip theory and “doing gender” helps unpack these gendered discrepancies, revealing how disability is framed differently depending on gender and how it is used to reinforce dominant social hierarchies and the broader structures of gendered ableism. Taken together, these perspectives allow for a nuanced critique of the intersectional inequalities present in the depiction of disabled characters, showing that visibility alone does not equate to fair representation.

Methodologically, the research employs critical discourse analysis and narrative analysis to examine the multidimensional inequalities embedded in these portrayals. Twenty commercial films produced in the 21st century in South Korea are analyzed using the following coding categories: “Level of Exposure,” “Importance of Characters,” “Representation of Disability,” and “Gendered Discrepancy.” Each code serves as an analytical tool to assess the visibility of disabled characters by gender and to determine whether disparities exist in the roles they assume and the traits they exhibit.

This research is significant for its effort to unveil the deception of visibility, especially with South Korea serving as a compelling field to explore this issue. As the level of visibility on screen far exceeds the level of societal acceptance in this country, it is essential to examine whether the rising media representation of disabled characters and narratives reflects genuine progress or whether it is a well-crafted strategy to cater to the preferences of the abled majority. As questioned, the findings uncover that disabled characters, especially females, are often framed to fit into the existing societal norms, serving to entertain the mainstream audience. In this regard, this study calls for deeper critical insight to inspect the intersectional power relations in their manifestation and urges a more nuanced analysis of their broader

social implications.

This research can be the starting point as well as the basis for further comparative studies over a variety of media productions. It adds to the hope to provide the current Korean media industry with guidance on how to deal with media in the direction of fairly representing, and ultimately, going along with all forms of disabled communities.