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Redefining Strength of the Female Athletes in Contemporary Philippine Cinema

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ABSTRACT

The study examines how the strength of women as athletes is portrayed in modern-day Filipino film through the mediums of *Thelma* (2011), *Sunshine* (2024), and *Friendly Fire* (2024). In particular, it focuses on the types of pressures faced by the female protagonists as well as their coping mechanisms, the physical, emotional, familial, institutional and digital pressures they encounter and how the films redefine strength through other means besides winning and performance. The study adopted a qualitative content analysis approach with selected scenes, dialogues, character actions, conflicts and visual representation based on the concepts of Pierre Bourdieu (capital, habitus and field), Michel Foucault (discipline and biopower), and Gayle Tuchman (symbolic annihilation). Results show that the athletes' athletic identities are produced through different access to resources, familial responsibilities, institutional control, bodily control and media visibilities. They cope by enduring, regulating emotions, disciplining them, negotiating and resisting in an adaptive way. In each of the three films, strength is defined not so much in terms of dominance or recognition but as the ability to act, to endure and to redefine oneself in the face of unequal systems of power. The study proposes that the Philippine sports cinema is a critical space through which the interplay of gender, body, class, and control of institutions can be explored in relation to the construction of female athletic identity.

INTRODUCTION

The image of women in sport in the media reflects society's understanding of sport, gender, achievement and body identity. Women's role in sports have grown, but still women sportsmen are represented in the sport with gendered expectations, recognition and stereotypical notions of femininity. Despite various initiatives to promote gender-equality, recent research has revealed that elite sport and sport media remain strongly dominated by men, with women's bodies still being assessed in a way that does not fully consider their gender identity while the presence of gender bias in the sport media remains (Fraser & Kochanek, 2023; Herrera *et al.*, 2024; Liu *et al.*, 2024). Such depictions constrain the recognition of women as capable athletes, controlling and competitive sporting subjects, and complex subjects.

This is particularly pertinent to Philippine cinema as film is a place of culture, a place where meanings about the female body, female labour, female agency and female strength are created. Athletic strength is not just physical; it is also emotional, endurable, self-disciplined, and systemic, this means it is the ability to manage the body and to achieve legitimacy within systems. Vaquero-Cristobal *et al.* (2024) highlight the fact that lack of media presence of women in sport contributes to the lack of gender equity as it affects the perception of the importance of women's participation. As such, Philippine cinema can either allude to the stereotypical image of the female body as weak, beautiful, or relational, or it

can go against this grain by depicting female athletes as embodied, resilient and socially-positioned subjects.

Previous research on women in cinema tends to investigate and debate the themes of femininity, beauty, motherhood, sacrifice and relational identity. But not so much attention has been paid to female athletes as a subject of the movies, especially in the Philippines. Specifically, there have been very few studies that have explored the processes of female athletic strength being built in class-based competition, institutional control, bodily control, family responsibility, reproductive exposure, and virtual presence. The lack of representation is important, though, because athletic women are not just portrayed as successful people going for it—they are also placed in a social context that shape the types of strength that are acknowledged, rewarded, or rejected. The aim of this study is to analyze how *Thelma* (2011), *Sunshine* (2024) and *Friendly Fire* (2024) portray female athletes as objects of concurrent systems of power.

Research Questions

1. In the films selected, what kind of pressures and struggles do the female heroes face as athletes?
2. What are the ways that female characters respond to the physical, emotional, familial, institutional and digital pressures of their sports experiences?
3. In what ways do the chosen films repurpose the traditional definition of female athletic strength in terms of winning, performing and being recognized?

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Purpose Statement

This paper investigates the portrayals of female athletes in the context of gendered pressure, institutionally expected, body controlled, family bound and media scrutinized in this paper, Thelma (2011); Sunshine (2024) and Friendly Fire (2024). It examines various types of struggle that female protagonists face in their athletic environment and the impact it has on their athletic and personal identities. This study also examines the coping mechanisms of the characters, such as resilience, emotional control, self-control, negotiation and rejection. Lastly, it explores the redefinition of female athletic power, in relation to performance, vulnerability, gender, and power, in the films.

Theoretical Lens

The main ideas that guide this study are those of Pierre Bourdieu's regarding capital, habitus and field. Bourdieu's model can be applied to the analysis of the inequalities of women in sport, the family, media and digital environments. Economic capital, social capital, cultural capital, and symbolic capital all address the impact of material resources, relationships, and skill/discipline/disembodied knowledge on athletic opportunity, and the impact of recognition and legitimacy upon these. Habitus describes their internalization of the need to sacrifice, discipline oneself, be feminine, and take responsibility; field describes how sport is a structured space that is rife with competition for athletes to seek visibility and legitimacy.

The concepts of discipline and biopower by Michel Foucault contribute to the analysis by explaining how the female athlete's body is disciplined via training, surveillance, evaluation, institutional authority and self-monitoring. In the selected films, coaching systems, academic demands, family obligations, pregnancy talk, and digital viewing are all mechanisms of control which affect the movement, behaviour and self-understanding of female athletes. Foucault's model can therefore be used as a tool to uncover the processes of building up strength through regulation and management of the body.

The theory of symbolic annihilation as developed by Gaye Tuchman further guides the analysis of gendered representation in this study. The analysis of gendered representation in this study is also guided by Gaye Tuchman's theory of symbolic annihilation. Tuchman's idea is to address issues of women's underrepresentation, trivialization and misrecognition in the media. Coaches might symbolically annihilate female athletes when their athletic qualities are eclipsed by family obligations, emotional obligations, appearance, sexuality, pregnancy, or controversy. When combined, Bourdieu, Foucault and Tuchman give the study the ability to look at female athletic strength is a product of a social construction where it is recognised, controlled and represented.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The method used in this study is the method of Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA). Identifies themes of pressure,

coping and strength through purposive selection of texts. Data is collected by repeated viewing and thematically analysed using systematic coding.

Research Design

The study used a qualitative content analysis method to analyse the portrayal of women's athletic strength in Thelma (2011), Sunshine (2024) and Friendly Fire (2024). Qualitative content analysis can be used in this study, as it is suitable for interpreting the manifest and latent meanings of cultural texts, such as the scenes, conversations, actions, clashes, and visuals. Qualitative enquiry, as espoused by Creswell and Poth (2023), may be used to grasp how meaning is created in social and cultural contexts. This study applied the method to the study of recurring patterns of pressures, coping and strength manifested in the Philippine contemporary sports movie.

Research Corpora

Purposive sampling method was used on the selection of the three films for study. The corpus were Thelma (2011), Sunshine (2024), and Friendly Fire (2024). Struggle, pressure, coping and redefining strength are all key themes in these films, and each focuses on a female protagonist whose athletic identity is affected by some of these aspects. Thelma (2011) is a case of running and surviving to become an athlete in poverty and family responsibility. Elite Gymnastics & the Regulation of the Female Athletic Body: Sunshine 2024. Friendly Fire (2024) extends the conversation to e-sports, representing digital competition, online visibility and legitimacy of female gamers.

Data Collection

The data were gathered by re-watching the films selected. The researchers were able to determine some of the scenes, dialogues, character actions, conflicts, and visual aspects that were directly related to the research questions. Athletic experiences of the protagonists, such as pressures they faced, coping responses, and how strength was portrayed were noted. Special focus was paid to family relationships, to the role of the coach, to the rules of institutions, to bodily control, to being questioned by the media, to digital spectatorship and to instances of resistance or self-definition.

Data Analysis

The unit of analysis was selected scenes, dialogues, character actions, conflicts and visual representations. To get acquainted with the storyline and character development of each movie, the researchers watched it a number of times. They then created descriptive codes that included family pressure, economic hardships, institutional discipline, bodily regulation, emotional distress, coping, resistance and athletic recognition. The codes were classified into the larger themes of the three research questions: forms of pressure and struggle, coping strategies, and redefining female athletic strength.

The three cinematic contexts were compared to each other by using cross-film analysis.

Trustworthiness Of The Study

The researchers adopted repeated viewing, shared inspection of selected scenes, comparison of interpretations, and direct textual evidence from the films in order to enhance trustworthiness. The researchers employed repeated viewing, collaborative checking of selected scenes, comparison of interpretations and direct textual evidence from the films for the enhancement of trustworthiness. Excerpts were used to illustrate each theme and discussed within the context of the theoretic lenses used. Three films also enabled a comparison of films from different cases, thereby avoiding the tendency to use one film as a representation of female athletic strength. All procedures were designed to ensure that the results were based on the films and consistent to the research questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the results as they are related to the three Research Questions. *Thelma* (2011), *Sunshine* (2024) and *Friendly Fire* (2024) are film texts that depict female athletes in the fields of family, institution and digital. The analysis reveals that female athletic strength is not an inherent personal ability but a social construct that is a result of unequal access to resources, systems of discipline, control of the body, and gendered visibility.

Forms of Pressure and Struggle Experienced by Female Athletes

The three movies portray female athletes as objects in various yet interrelated systems of stress. The main pressure factors in *Thelma* are poverty, caring and eligibility for schooling. In *Sunshine*, pressure is created through the pressures of the top sport in the sport itself, the pressure of the scrutiny of reproduction and the pressure of the institutionalized pressure. Pressure in *Friendly Fire* is influenced by family duty, money insecurity, Internet exposure and public criticism. In all of the films, struggle is not just seen as a personal failing of the subjects; instead, it comes from the social fields in which people are asked to play, are seen as playing, or are judged as playing.

Parental obligations, poverty and eligibility to institutions

Thelma (2011) focuses on the inhibitions of family responsibility and lack of economic capital on athletic development. The gift of running doesn't necessarily mean the opportunity to run, however, as her family needs to survive, they have to decide on the training, schooling and competition. The movie demonstrates that a person is not a good athlete if he or she does not have the necessary material resources and institutional support for staying in sports.

Excerpt 1 (1:18:18-1:17:48)

[Floring: "Oh my, *Thelma*. You're so stubborn. Especially you. Let's just thank God that your sibling is alive. But what are we going to do now? We can't afford to have her an operation, so your sibling can walk. We can't even afford to buy a wheelchair"]

This scene illustrates this scarcity of the economy which shapes *Thelma's* athletic trajectory. The inability of the family to provide medical care, through Bourdieu's notion of 'economic capital', places *Thelma* in an 'underadvantageous' sporting field. Emotional and material labor are needed to address the family's immediate requirements, putting sport in a low priority. The Foucauldian lens also highlights the concept of language of sacrifice and gratitude that also "disciplines" *Thelma* to accept responsibility for the family. This role of her as an athlete, is complicated by the role of daughter, sister and caregiver.

Excerpt 2 (1:33:55-1:33:34)

[Floring: "Being the eldest is not easy, but you have to fulfill it. Your grandmother passed away due to complications from childbirth with your Aunt Marie, and I was the one who took care of your Aunt Marie—fooling around is not allowed, you need to work immediately"]

The scene shows the gendered habitus which influences *Thelma's* sense of duty. Family responsibility is not spoken about as a short-term responsibility, but as a conditioning that is handed down from generation to generation of women. This expectation puts *Thelma* under the constraint of little options and the need to sacrifice is natural. As a symbol, *Thelma* is frequently portrayed as an athlete, and also as a caregiver who's strong based on her endurance and responsibility. A similar finding is noted by Abalos et al (2018) that the caregiving in the Filipino family is often gendered, with daughters expected to take up families' care duties.

Excerpt 3 (20:05-18:59)

[Coach: "You are now under probation. You failed your history grades, so you can't train for now. If it were up to me, pass your exam first, *Thelma*, and I'll allow you to join the qualifying race for the Philippine team."]

[*Thelma*: "It seemed so easy at first. But it's actually hard."]

The coach's warning is an indicator that *Thelma's* involvement in sport is also institutionalized. The sporting arena meets the school arena - academic compliance is needed for access to sport. The probation system is a representation of Foucault's principle of discipline, as it keeps the control and restricts *Thelma's* body from participating in the world according to the norm of the institutions. That there is an athletic struggle, and that it is not just the physical struggle, but the bureaucratic, academic and disciplinary struggle.

Elite Sport, Reproductive Scrutiny, and Institutional Exclusion

In Sunshine (2024), the main character is a player in a very controlled sports arena in which her sporting performance, her physical control and her institutional recognition play a part to define her. Pregnancy adds to her tribulations as it turns into a point of judgment and exclusion. The movie demonstrates the assessment not just of their performance, but also of their compatibility, as defined by their bodies, with institutional expectations, by women athletes.

Excerpt 1 (01:58-02:33)

[Coach: "Maybe you lost focus... This is your last chance at the Olympics. Did you forget that?"]

[Sunshine: "No, Coach. I'm ready. Even for National Championship next year"]

Coach: "Just because you have a place on the national team doesn't mean you can slack off"]

Sunshine's elite sport career is fragile, as the coach warns. Being a part of the national team does not ensure her security, she must continuously demonstrate discipline, readiness and productivity. The field of Bourdieu seems to suggest that elite sport is a competition in which recognition needs to be continually gained. The scene illustrates, via Foucault how discipline gets internalized: Sunshine doesn't resist the pressure, she responds to it by affirming her readiness. The authors Willson *et al.* (2022) describe the pressure elite sport environments place on athletes, the monitoring and evaluation they undergo, and the legitimacy and self-regulation imposed by the institutional context.

Excerpt 2 (08:10-08:25)

[Miggy: "Yeah, yeah, I heard you... How sure are you that it's mine? Hub?"]

[Sunshine: "Fuck, are you seriously asking me that?"]

[Miggy: "What are you going to do?"]

[Sunshine: "What am I going to do? Us... asshole, you got me pregnant"]

[Miggy: "Okay, calm down, calm down"]

[Sunshine: "You calm down!"]

[Miggy: "You know what to do, just don't get me involved"]

This conflict takes Sunshine from the sport to the issue of childbearing. The exchange puts her under the spotlight, as Miggy tries to get away from responsibility. The scene is a symbolic representation of gendered symbolic power: pregnancy is a problem that threatens Sunshine's athletic legitimacy, emotional security and institutional future. Brömdal *et al.* (2020) describe how reproductive and gender-related issues might combine with the context of elite sport, causing additional scrutiny for women athletes.

Excerpt 3 (38:50-38:29)

[Coach: "I know that you know, Shine. Are you pregnant? If you are, I am so sorry but I have to remove you from my roster. You

won't be able to compete in the qualifiers...What a waste of all your effort, only two months left"]

The coach's decision is indicative of how institutional authority is imposed on participation through body standards. The theme of the pregnancy of Sunshine is the basis for exclusion, demonstrating the male rule of the body of the athlete by means of the availability, control and uninterrupted performance. This means that she has lost some symbolic capital in the sporting sphere, which is no longer seen as legitimate. Likewise, Davenport *et al.* (2022) state that there are often few supportive policies in place at elite sport organizations, which leaves uncertainty and vulnerability for female athletes.

Digital Precarity, Household Duty, and Public Scrutiny

In Friendly Fire (2024), the study continues to discuss not just traditional sport, but the e-sports as well. Economic insecurity, family obligations, watching sports online, and gendered legitimacy in the world of gaming all form part of Hazel's athletic identity. Hazel is different from Thelma and Sunshine as she has to compete in a digital universe where visibility is instant, volatile and subject to public evaluation.

Excerpt 1 (1:31:57-1:30:22)

[Mother: "She's not even doing anything. All she does is keep playing that Xandata thing. Livestreaming nonstop."]

[Mother: "The 30th is coming up, Zel. Keep that day free, okay? You'll pick up Aero."]

[Hazel: "Yes"]

[Mother: "Have you saved up already? He surely won't have money. You'll cover it for now."]

The talk reveals that Hazel's game playing is not regarded as a real work or sport in the household. The skills she puts into her e-sports activities are undermined, and her role as a caregiver and financier is emphasized. However, Hazel can't win the symbolic recognition required to make playing games a legitimate way of making a living, due to Bourdieu's notion of capital. A Foucaultian perspective of the household authorises her time and her behaviour. Morgenroth, *et al.* (2020) point out that there are gender stereotypes and role conflict that impact women's participation and legitimacy in gaming.

Excerpt 2 (1:20:01-1:19:31)

[Mother: "Stop using your phone so much. Eat now. What are you even doing at your job? What will you gain from that? Find a side job. We don't have money to buy food anymore. Your older brother is coming home, we need to prepare for his arrival. Stop using your phone so much. That Xandata stuff will get you nowhere. Zel, I'm telling you; we have no savings left, we don't have any money anymore."]

This exchange also gives the audience a glimpse into the price Hazel pays for her decisions as an economy

becomes unstable. Her gaming is seen as unproductive, as it doesn't right the house's scarcity immediately. The image illustrates that people's athletic identity must be acknowledged in online and offline contexts. Hazel's role as an athlete is tenuous when the family doesn't take gaming seriously as a form of work. Similarly, Brenner-Levoy (2025) reads that the male and female expectations of domestic and household labor, when it clashes with women's involvement in games, can undervalue women's gaming.

Excerpt 3 (40:47-40:29)

[Host: "Actually, Hazel, many people have been asking me. Are the rumors true that your brother is an ex-convict and your mother is an alcoholic? How did this affect you and your training"]

[Hazel: "What does that have to do with us entering the Grand Prix?"]

The interview scene is a symbolic violence, read through the media. Rather than paying attention to Hazel's performance, the host gets the viewers' attention on family stigma. There is an attempt to define Hazel's athletic identity through personal controversy, but one that is stymied by her response. This is a symbolic annihilation by Tuchman and the sensationalized story of the competent female athlete is set aside. Nevertheless, as mentioned by Crothers *et al.* (2024), women in e-sports might be subject to more heightened surveillance and identity-related scrutiny which result in a loss of legitimacy.

The three films demonstrate how the pressure acts in the different fields of power on the athletes. Thelma's struggle is a struggle of poverty and family survival, while Sunshine's struggle is a struggle of elite sport's regulation and reproductive scrutiny, and Hazel's struggle is a struggle of digital visibility and economic precarity. In all three movies, unequal structures that shape opportunity, legitimacy and recognition cause a problem in female athletic struggles.

Regulated Coping Strategies in Female Athletic Environments

The female protagonists in Thelma (2011), Sunshine (2024), and Friendly Fire (2024) show coping strategies in response to pressures in their athletic environments. Coping is expressed through emotional regulation, persistence, reframing, and continued engagement despite family, institutional, financial, and social demands. Instead of withdrawing, they adapt by managing distress and maintaining focus on their athletic roles. These responses show resilience as the ability to continue participating despite challenges. Overall, coping is presented as an adaptive process for navigating the combined pressures of sport, family, and society.

In Thelma (2011), the protagonist copes by continuing athletic training despite caregiving duties and financial constraints. She negotiates between family survival needs and her athletic goals through sustained effort

and emotional endurance. Even with competing responsibilities, she maintains commitment to sport. This shows coping as quiet resilience shaped by family and institutional pressures.

Thelma and Hannah share an emotional exchange before Thelma leaves for Manila, showing resignation, guilt, and responsibility centered on separation and strain.

Excerpt 1 (44:36-42:45)

[Thelma: "It's our dream, both of ours. I'm doing this for you. If only... I wish... I had been the one in the accident. I hope you can forgive me, Hannah. I'm sorry, little sister. I promise... I won't stop running until you can walk again. I won't stop, little sister. I won't stop."]

Unequal physical capacity reflects Bourdieu's capital, producing unequal opportunity and mobility in sport. Emotional strain becomes self-regulation in Foucauldian terms, as guilt is redirected into continued effort. Gendered representation frames female athletes as expected to embody sacrifice and responsibility, shaping coping as endurance. Similarly, Didymus and Fletcher (2017) note that coping in elite sport is a transactional and meaning-making process involving appraisal and self-regulation that enables athletes to sustain performance under stress

The conversation shows Thelma prioritizing family financial needs over joining the track team and focusing on earning prize money for her household.

Excerpt 2 (1:06:19-1:05:38)

[Coach Danny: "It's a waste. Why didn't you join the school's track team?"]

[Thelma: "I don't know, sir. My parents need someone to help at home. And I'm not used to running in front of many people watching. I just need money for my younger sibling. So where is it? The prize money, sir?"]

Limited financial resources restrict access to participation within Bourdieu capital, showing how opportunity in sport is shaped by material inequality. Family responsibility becomes an internal guiding force under Foucault discipline that regulates decision-making and limits athletic involvement. Female athletes are positioned through representation and gender framing within caregiving expectations, where domestic roles influence visibility and participation in sport. This is supported by Kuss *et al.* (2022) note that women's participation in gaming is shaped by intersecting social, familial, and structural pressures, including gender norms and resource limitations that affect engagement and legitimacy.

A phone call between Thelma and Florine shows pride, longing, and encouragement for her to continue running, ending in mutual commitment.

Excerpt 3 (13:26-11:16)

[Thelma: "Yes, mother... Mother, I won't stop running."]

[Florine: "I'm happy with what you've become. Please remember..."]

I love you very much, Thelma.”
[Thelma: “I love you, Mom.”]

Endurance reflects Bourdieu’s habitus, where persistence is shaped by lived experience despite emotional difficulty. Family support functions as capital that sustains continued athletic engagement. From a Foucauldian view, responsibility becomes self-discipline that maintains commitment despite distance. Female athletes are framed through gendered representation as embodying sacrifice and emotional restraint. Similarly, Lopez-Fernandez *et al.* (2019) note that women’s participation in gaming is shaped by overlapping social, economic, and domestic pressures, including time constraints and gendered expectations that influence their access and legitimacy in gaming culture.

In Sunshine (2024), coping is shaped by self-discipline within a highly regulated sport environment. The protagonist manages training demands and personal crisis by maintaining routines and focusing on performance. Instead of expressing distress, she channels pressure into preparation and continued training. Her coping reflects disciplined endurance and internal regulation under institutional control.

The protagonist uses self-talk to manage a high-pressure situation, affirming focus and confidence before performance. The moment shows coping through emotional and cognitive regulation.

Excerpt 1 (01:58-02:33)

[Sunshine: “Just have faith. Sunshine. Just focus... just have faith... trust yourself.”]

This stabilization is anchored in capital, where confidence functions as a resource for sustaining athletic legitimacy within competition. Control is produced through Foucault’s discipline, as repetition becomes a self-regulating mechanism that replaces external enforcement. Gender framing shapes representation by positioning emotional restraint as an expectation for female athletes in high-performance contexts. Similarly, Latinjak *et al.* (2017) explain that self-talk operates as a self-regulation strategy that helps athletes manage attention, emotion, and performance under competitive stress.

She denies the pregnancy rumor to protect her athletic identity under reputational pressure. The exchange shows her credibility becoming unstable within the sporting environment.

Excerpt 2 (38:29-38:24)

[Sunshine: “Coach, I’m not pregnant. What are you hearing, Coach?”]

Her response functions as cognitive defensive regulation, rejecting external claims to preserve psychological and professional coherence. Rumor circulation disrupts Bourdieu’s field by undermining symbolic capital such as reputation and legitimacy. From a Foucauldian view,

institutional questioning acts as disciplinary control requiring immediate self-justification within authority structures. Gendered representation frames female athletes’ bodies as sites of speculation where reproductive assumptions affect sporting legitimacy. Similarly, Fraser and Kochanek (2023) note that women athletes frequently experience gendered scrutiny and bodily evaluation that shape adaptive and protective responses in order to maintain legitimacy within elite sport environments.

The coach redirects Sunshine toward self-directed motivation, which she affirms through a brief focus statement. The interaction shows a shift toward internal alignment before performance.

Excerpt 3 (07:05-07:10)

[Coach: “Do this for yourself. Not for the judges, not for the audience.”]

[Sunshine: “For myself... just trust.”]

Internalized focus functions as coping by turning pressure into self-motivation, helping stabilize attention and performance. Within Bourdieu’s field, legitimacy is shaped through regulated self-presentation under constant evaluation. From a Foucauldian view, coaching authority becomes internalized as self-regulation and cognitive control. Gendered representation frames composure and self-trust as expected traits of female athletes. Similarly, McCardle *et al.* (2017) highlight that self-regulation in sport involves goal-directed attention, emotional control, and cognitive strategies that help athletes sustain performance under pressure.

In Friendly Fire (2024), coping involves emotional adjustment, avoidance, and reliance on creative and social engagement. The protagonist navigates family, financial, identity, and digital pressures while continuing in e-sports. She manages emotional strain across personal and online spaces shaped by constant judgment and comparison. Overall, coping is shown as flexible negotiation within interconnected and evolving pressures.

Hazel is confronted about her gaming and livestreaming, framing her digital activity as a source of family tension.

Excerpt 1 (1:31:57-1:31:36)

[Mother: “You’re really going to lie to me. She’s not even doing anything. All she does is keep playing that Xandata or whatever it is. Livestreaming and livestreaming.”]

Sustained e-sports engagement places Hazel within Bourdieu’s field, where legitimacy is shaped by unequal valuation of digital participation. From a Foucauldian view, parental surveillance acts as disciplinary control that regulates her behavior. Gender framing positions her gaming as a deviation from domestic responsibility, increasing scrutiny. Similarly, Kivijärvi and Katila (2022) note that women gamers must continuously negotiate legitimacy within gaming culture, where identity is shaped by gendered expectations and ongoing social regulation in digital spaces.

A private exchange between Sonya and Hazel reveals withheld information about Hazel's family background, shaping their understanding of her situation.

Excerpt 2 (53:10-52:54)

[Sonya: *Why didn't you tell me this?*]

[Hazel: *"My family isn't okay, Sonya. And they're just one of the many things I don't want you to know about me."*]

Disclosure control places Hazel within Bourdieu's capital, where withholding personal history helps maintain social legitimacy. From a Foucauldian perspective, emotional boundaries act as self-discipline to limit exposure and external judgment. Gender framing constructs female identity as expected to be open and emotionally available, making silence a form of resistance. Similarly, Wilhelm (2021) notes that digital self-presentation is shaped by gendered pressures on visibility and identity disclosure, where online environments regulate how individuals manage authenticity and personal information.

Hazel withdraws as she reflects underwater on her family situation, especially her brother's release from prison and the emotional burden it brings. The moment highlights personal isolation and unresolved family tension.

Excerpt 3 (1:03:47-1:01:00)

[Ryan: *"Released? To go home? Dude."*]

[Hazel: *"No, idiot. From prison. He knows I'll be the one picking him up. But I'm scared. I'm sure he'll be angry at me when he finds out I left Mom. I don't even know how to face him."*]

Hazel's family ties function as Bourdieu's capital, where relational obligations shape both emotional burden and social position. From a Foucauldian view, discipline becomes internalized as self-accountability even in isolation. Gender framing positions emotional responsibility within feminine expectations of caregiving and moral attachment. Similarly, Barigozzi *et al.* (2025) note that women disproportionately experience an invisible mental and emotional burden within family systems, where caregiving responsibilities shape self-perception, emotional strain, and everyday decision-making.

Across the films, coping is a structurally shaped response to unequal power, resources, and legitimacy rather than an individual trait. *Thelma* situates it in domestic scarcity, *Sunshine* in institutional discipline, and *Friendly Fire* in digital precarity. Control shifts from constrained endurance to internalized discipline to negotiated agency across the three contexts. Overall, coping remains shaped and limited by domestic, institutional, and digital power relations.

Redefining Strength Among Female Athletes

The three films redefine female athletic strength beyond physical performance, victory, or public recognition. Strength is portrayed not only as bodily ability, but as the capacity to endure pressure, assert agency, and negotiate identity within unequal social structures. In *Thelma*

(2011), strength is rooted in persistence amid poverty and family sacrifice. In *Sunshine* (2024), it emerges through bodily autonomy and decision-making under institutional and reproductive pressure. In *Friendly Fire* (2024), strength is expressed through negotiated agency in digital competition despite family burdens and public scrutiny. Across the films, strength is framed not as an individual trait alone, but as a response to structural limitations, gender expectations, and unequal power relations.

Strength as Embodied Persistence

In *Thelma* (2011), strength is first presented as embodied persistence. Athletic strength is not limited to physical endurance or competitive skill, but is shaped by the protagonist's ability to continue despite poverty, family obligations, and emotional sacrifice. The film shows that bodily strength is tied to discipline, endurance, and perseverance under unequal material conditions. Rather than portraying strength as effortless talent, *Thelma* presents it as persistence developed through hardship and sustained commitment.

Excerpt 1 (56:55-55:23)

[Florig: *"Remember, Thelma, training is important to condition your body. Go straight. Look at where you're going, far ahead. Run faster. Through training, you'll become tougher, stronger, and your endurance and stamina will increase. Do you understand? You need to be fast; you need to be strong; you need to be more flexible. Focus, concentration, and your heart are also needed. Don't give up. Run faster, Thelma! Faster! And don't pay attention to the people watching you. Clear? And it's important, if the race is short, give all your strength. But if the race is long, pace yourself. Don't go all out so you won't run out of energy."*]

This training exercise is an association of strength, discipline and body control, endurance. But the movie also upends this perspective by setting *Thelma's* training in the context of the vulnerability of her family and economic scarcity. Her strength isn't just from the physical conditioning, it's from the need to move on, even when it's tough, both physically and emotionally. In sport, Naidu-Young *et al.* (2024) point out, women have to constantly struggle for recognition, legitimacy and capital in a gendered relationship.

Excerpt 2 (13:26-11:16)

[Aldo: *"Child, you know, I want to tell you something... It's not your fault. You are a gift from God to me. Run. Because that is your gift. Just look straight ahead, run straight ahead."*]

[Thelma: *"Okay, father. Father, I love you both, okay? You are my inspiration. I'm doing this for you. For Hannah."*]

Thelma's talent as an athlete is empowered by the inspiration from her family. This also uncovers a conflict—the power is acknowledged when it is in the service of family duty. The film thus undermines the notion of strength as being measured only by an individual's drive. *Thelma's* symbolic capital can be obtained via Bourdieu,

in her athletic ability, and via Tuchman, in her familial sacrifice, but her representation could alternatively be based more on devotion than on her ability to represent herself independently through sport.

Excerpt 3 (09:37-07:52)

[Thelma: *"Sometimes, we need to sacrifice the people we love and even the things that are important to us in order to achieve our dreams. Never give up. Learn how to run and get used to imagining victory even before you reach it."*]

This is Thelma's restatement of the definition of strength—sacrifice and mental preparation. Strength is envisioned before it's realized, indicating that the first step in strength begins within. The film also reveals that this discipline is not necessarily a preferred option; it is an option that is determined by poverty, family expectation and need and gender. Zuo & Bai (2025) propose that athletes maintain their performance by using emotion regulation and coping mechanisms that involve psychological control and coping with stress.

Strength as Bodily Autonomy

In *Sunshine* (2024), strength is redefined through bodily autonomy. The film initially presents strength through discipline, competitive endurance, and performance readiness within elite sport. However, as the story develops, strength becomes associated not only with athletic training but with the protagonist's ability to make decisions about her own body despite institutional pressure, reproductive scrutiny, and gendered expectations. *Sunshine* shows that female athletic strength includes the power to assert bodily agency under systems that seek women's bodies.

Excerpt 1 (02:33-02:40)

[Coach: *"Go on, just keep going. You can still do it."*]

[Sunshine: *"I can do it, Coach. I won't give in. For the Olympics... I can do this."*]

In the beginning, it's competitive endurance that's *Sunshine*'s strength. She trains and lines up her body to Olympic dreams. The Foucauldian perspective of the scene is one of the internalizing of the demands of the performance. According to the Boat *et al.* (2021), sporting performance is maintained by the practices of self-control and embodied regulation. The movie later delves into this model and demonstrates that *Sunshine*'s body is not just an athletic body.

Excerpt 2 (16:06-15:49)

[Sunshine: *"I won't give birth to this because I'm not ready to be a mother..."*]

[Sunshine: *"I don't want to be a mother, what is it to you!"*]

This moment is a new definition of strength – refusal, autonomy of the body. Despite the stereotype that femininity has to automatically equal motherhood, and that pregnancy ought to wash away her athletic selfhood, *Sunshine* stands firm. *Sunshine* defies the notions that

femininity is synonymous with motherhood, and that pregnancy should strip her of her athletic selfhood. Her strength is in recognizing her own inadequacy and making a choice over this which other people try to make for her. Pullen *et al.* (2022) provide a gendered social and institutional framework for understanding reproductive choices in elite sports, which are defined by norms that constrain or liberate certain autonomy, identity, and perceived suitability of women as mothers and athletes.

Excerpt 3 (14:06-13:38)

[Sister: *"Sunshine? Your older sister loves you very much..."*]

[Sister: *"Whatever your decision will be, whatever happens..."*]

[Sister: *"I am on your side, Sunshine..."*]

Caring is shown by the sister's support and strength is sustained. The strength that comes through sunshine is not because of being alone but through relational affirmation where she can make a decision under pressure. According to Cho *et al.* (2020), significant others' perceived support is one of the aspects that leads to the emotional well-being and resilience of athletes. The movie thus negates the notion of pure individual strength and demonstrates that it is possible for athletes to need supportive relationships in order to be autonomous.

Strength as Negotiated Agency

In *Friendly Fire* (2024), strength is portrayed as negotiated agency in digital sport. Hazel's athletic identity is shaped by gaming skill, teamwork, emotional regulation, family obligations, and public scrutiny. The film presents strength not as dominance, but as the ability to navigate pressures while maintaining legitimacy, responsibility, and competitive identity in a male-dominated digital environment.

Excerpt 1 (1:05:23-1:04:56)

[Sonya: *"Just focus on your training. Work hard, play harder. And don't forget the three rules of being an eSports team. Number one, trust your teammates. Number two, never get too tilted. And three, play to win."*]

[Hazel: *"I'll remember that."*]

Friendly Fire requires strength built by discipline, teamwork and emotional control. Hazel realizes that e-sports isn't entirely a game of technicality, but one that calls for communication, composure and a strategic trust. Bourdieu's e-sports field bestows symbolic capital on players who are able to show their proficiency and team-work. Hazel's training illustrates the production of disciplined bodies and regulated emotions through Foucault as well, in the case of the digital sport.

Excerpt 2 (1:02:46-1:02:21)

[Von: *"Are you close with your brother?"*]

[Hazel: *"He was the one who taught me how to play Project Xandata. And Mickey, my first mouse, came from him. I owe him a lot. That's why I don't know if he'll forgive me when he finds out*

I left Mom.”]

Relational inheritance and emotional debt are the strengths of Hazel. Her gaming ability is linked to her family history, and suggests that playing games is not a purely separate activity from family life. Piggott and Tjønndal (2023) believe that in the e-sports context, women’s identity formation occurs in gendered institutional frameworks requiring women to constantly negotiate legitimacy through their competence, their expectations, and their social positioning. Hazel’s power is in negotiating her competitive identity, and her family responsibility.

Excerpt 3 (1:37:52-1:32:29)

[Hazel: “Message him, Thirdy. Ask for a rematch.”]

[Hazel: “Just trust, guys. We can do it!”]

[Hazel: “Sorry, boys!”]

[VO: “Victory, well done.”]

Hazel’s ability to communicate with confidence in competition is a redefinition of strength as seen agency, in the digital sphere of a male-dominated landscape. This shot contrasts with previous ones where she is playing and it’s brushed aside, as it demonstrates her taking charge, working as a team and confidence. As Ruvalcaba *et al.* (2018) point out, feedback and social recognition are important to the creation of identity in e-sports. Hazel’s win isn’t just about the game; it’s a statement against the notion that women aren’t welcome in competitive gaming environments.

The three movies offer a unique and intertwined depiction of female athleticism. Thelma’s portrayal of strength is as a “sacrificial endurance” that is formed by poverty and family obligation. For Sunshine, strength is more of a form of discipline in action than of bodily autonomy and refusal. This is a subject that Friendly Fire views as a negotiation of strength in a digital sport and under public surveillance. As a group, the films reveal how socially constructed is the athletic strength of women, through systems of recognition, control, and representation that are unequal. Strength is not just about winning; it’s about persevering, making a choice, resisting and sticking around when the rules aren’t giving women the legitimacy to play.

CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that Thelma 2011, Sunshine 2024 and Friendly Fire 2024 break the norm of female athletic strength which is based on winning, physical prowess, and public attention. In each of the movies, female athletes are depicted as objects of family responsibility, economic precarity, institutional control, physical control, scrutiny of their reproductive capacity, and digital exposure. The strength of Thelma comes from enduring poverty and caring for others. In Sunshine it is seen through self-regulation, bodily autonomy, and refusal in a highly-regulated sport system. In Friendly Fire, it is manifested in a digital and gendered competitive arena involving

negotiated agency.

The study demonstrates how female athletic identity is developed when access to capital is unequal and when the fight for recognition takes place in different fields through Bourdieu. The films expose the discipline of the female body through the process of training, watching, rules and self-watching as illuminate by Foucault. The study explores how this can happen to female athletes through Tuchman, who was not recognised as an athlete due to her family responsibilities, sexualisation, personal controversies, or being assumed as a feminine athlete. The study highlights how Tuchman was not recognised as an athlete because of her family responsibilities, sexualisation, personal controversies, or gender assumptions. In general, the films do not offer only the strength of women athletics as a personal attribute, but as a culturally produced reaction to the unequal power systems.

Implications

The results suggest that gendered imagery of women athletes on the big screen in the Philippines is a product of cultural constructions that are influenced by gender, class, body politics, and institutional power. The movies imply that athleticism is inextricably linked with social circumstances which make it difficult for women to be athletes. In the context of film and media studies, the study demonstrates the potential of examining sports films as a space in which articulations of discipline, sacrifice, autonomy, and recognition are negotiated. The results highlight for gender and sport studies pressure not only in the arena but in family, institutional and digital environments that shape bodies and identities of women athletes.

The research also suggests that narratives of sports in the Philippines offer ways of rethinking the narrow notion of strength, by allowing female athletes to be treated as complex beings, not only as inspirational models. Through their stories, the protagonists illustrate the possibilities of the endurance, resistance, emotional control, body, and negotiated visibility as aspects of female athletic identity. These depictions have the potential to foster more critical reflection on the role of recognition and restriction of women in sports-related roles in media, sport institutions, families and digital communities.

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