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Resilience in Silence and Shadows: Adversity and Triumph Narratives of Pwd Characters in Contemporary Philippine Cinema

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the portrayal of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) in selected contemporary Philippine films that focus on stories of systemic exclusion, psychological resilience and social agency. The study is qualitative and employs content analysis to elucidate key moments in the films that foreground disability as a social and cultural experience, with a focus on *Love Child* (2024), *The Trial* (2014), and *The Delivery Rider* (2025). The approach to the analysis is based on Social Model of Disability, Psychological Resilience Theory, and Crip Theory. Results indicate that films create disability as a product of barriers of attitude, institution, environment, and communication. *Love Child* focuses on family, medical and educational systems that make inclusion optional; *The Trial* showcases a dysfunctional legal system that is a disabling environment for neurodivergent communication; and *The Delivery Rider* analyzes workplaces and urban environments designed for neurotypical productivity. In parallel, the films depict resilience as an interpersonal and situational phenomenon, one that is sustained through family bonds and ethical commitment, caring and connection to the community, and future-oriented hope. By using the films in Crip Theory, the authors and creators of those films challenge the representation based on pity and consider the PWD characters as agents who can resist normalization and demand recognition, accommodation, and dignity. The study can help cinema in the Philippines and disability studies in general to demonstrate that contemporary films can serve as cultural critiques of ableism and can be calls for a more inclusive social imagination.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a notable shift in the Philippines towards the portrayal of marginalized groups in cinema, such as Persons with Disabilities (PWDs). This is important as film is not only a reflection of social attitudes, but also influences the way the audience thinks about disability, difference, dependence, care and social participation. In the past, marginal characters were introduced into films through showmanship, pity, or comic relief, but recent films have started to highlight disability as a social condition experienced by a person, with a focus on the social factors that impact their lives, such as family, institutions, labour systems, urban environments, and cultural discourses (Magsalin & Roquel, 2023; Lei, 2024). The following films, *Love Child* (2024), *The Trial* (2014) and *The Delivery Rider* (2025) offer fruitful contexts in which to explore this transition. Each movie centers on a character who is a PWD or has neural differences. Instead of disability being conceived as a personal medical problem, these films portray disability as a social problem, a problem created when social systems are organized around the assumption of the norm of speech, behavior, movement, cognition, and productivity. Cinematic conflict thus is not just about impairment, but also by the failure or refusal of institutions and communities to allow difference.

But, as is common with much existing debate about disability in film, there are a number of medicalised

interpretations of disability, generalizations about inclusion or character based accounts of suffering and inspiration. Less has been paid attention, however, to the ways in which Philippine films are building up disability as an all-inclusive phenomenon of structural marginalization, psychological adjustment and social resistance. This study seeks to fill that void by exploring the convergence of the Social Model of Disability, Psychological Resilience Theory and Crip Theory in film productions that are taking place in the Philippines these days and how they represent agency, accommodation and dignity in relation to disability.

In particular, the research questions that are guiding the study are:

1. What systemic barriers do the characters with PWD face?
2. How do PWD characters respond psychologically to adversity and show themselves to be resilient?
3. How do the films disrupt the norms of pity and able-bodiedness in terms of stories of agency, accommodation, and social acceptance?

Theoretical Framework

Three complementary frameworks are used for the study. The Social Model of Disability provides a theory of disability that sees disability not just as a consequence of a bodily or cognitive difference, but also as a product of

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social, institutional and environmental barriers (Oliver, 1983; Oliver, 2013; Bunbury, 2019). It is this framework that will be adapted to look at attitudinal stigma, inaccessible institutions, spaces to sensory hostility, and rigid procedural norms in the selected films.

Secondly, Psychological Resilience Theory considers resilience to be a process of positive adaptation in the face of risk, which involves intrinsic (intellectual, emotional, moral, and future) and extrinsic (family, community, and social resources) protective factors (Masten, 2018; Ungar & Theron, 2019; Feldman, 2021). This would prevent the study from diminishing the concept of resilience and its ability to be seen as individual heroism.

Third, Crip Theory is applied to the way that the films question compulsory able-bodiedness, which is the idea that able-bodied and neurotypical forms of speech, movement, thought, learning and work are the norm for social participation (McRuer, 2006; Levy & Young, 2020). Crippling is moments of characters revealing, resisting or challenging the social imperative to be fixed, normal, acceptable only through conformity in this study.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

Qualitative content analysis was used to systematically interpret the textual, narrative and cinematic aspects of selected contemporary Philippine films with PWD protagonists. This design was well suited as it allowed the researchers to explore the meaning of disability, resilience and social acceptance as communicated through dialogue, character action, institutional interaction and spatial arrangements (Brylla, 2018). The study added more than just a summary of the plots by examining how an individual's internal psychological resources and external ableist structures interact in each story.

Research Corpora

The three films that were used to create the corpus were *Love Child* (2024), *The Trial* (2014), and *The Delivery Rider* (2025), which were all set in the Philippines. This selection is purposive and based on four criteria: (1) disability or neurodivergence is central to the story of the protagonist or most important character in a film; (2) there are explicit scenes in a film of social, institutional and environmental barriers; (3) there are different representations of developmental, intellectual, neurodivergent and physical experiences in the films and (4) the films can be accessed via an official or verified distribution platform which will allow for repeated viewing and accurate transcription of selected scenes.

Data Collection

The data was collected by repeatedly watching the selected films. A scene log was used to record dialogues, character actions, spatial descriptions, and important moments in the story. The researchers looked at situations where the topic of disability was addressed, when characters faced obstacles, when coping or support mechanisms were

depicted, and when characters took action to defy stigma, pity, or exclusion. When needed, culturally-specific expressions were noted in the original text and included in the English translation of the Filipino and multilingual dialogues.

Data Analysis

Twenty-five scenes were purposively chosen as the main units of analysis due to the high concentration of the social interaction, institutional encounters and internal development of the protagonists. Open coding of dialogues, actions, and settings were done first. For the second cycle the codes were organized into theoretical categories that were related to the research questions: systemic ableism, psychological resilience and disruptive agency. The researchers then contrasted the patterns in the three films in the final cycle, to determine how each film finds disability in different social contexts: family/school, courtroom, and workplace/city.

Trustworthiness of the Study

The researchers employed repeated viewing, researcher triangulation, intercoder discussion, and audit trail to enhance trustworthiness. The researcher's initial coding of the selected scenes were compared and any discrepancies were discussed and resolved. Descriptions of the scenes, initial codes, theoretical categories, analytic memos, and selected excerpts of the dialogues were included in the audit trail. To provide a strong contextual base for interpreting the film, direct quotations from the films were inserted and reflexive notes were kept to minimize the possibility of deficit-based assumptions being made of characters.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents and analyzes the findings of the literary research on the selected Philippine films, focusing on the adversity and triumph narratives of PWD protagonists. Rather than treating the films as isolated texts, the discussion compares how each film locates disability within different social arrangements and how the characters negotiate exclusion, resilience, and agency.

Systemic Barriers and Institutional Obstacles Facing PWD Characters

Across the three films, disability is represented as socially produced rather than merely biologically located in the individual. The characters' difficulties are intensified by environments that demand neurotypical speech, behavior, memory, productivity, and emotional control. This pattern is consistent with the Social Model of Disability, which argues that disability becomes disabling when social structures fail to accommodate difference (Oliver, 2013; Bunbury, 2019). Table 1 presents the comparative pattern of systemic barriers across the three films.

In *Love Child*, Kali's autism is frequently interpreted through deficit-oriented institutional language. The diagnostic scene, in which Kali is compared to a much

Table 1: Systemic Barriers Across the Three Films

Film	Primary Ableist Space	Dominant Barrier	Interpretive Significance
Love Child	Family, clinic, and school	Deficit-based diagnosis; conditional inclusion; financial burden	Disability is framed through developmental norms and institutional readiness rather than unconditional accommodation.
The Trial	Courtroom and legal procedure	Derogatory labeling; hostile questioning; memory and communication demands	Legal procedure becomes disabling when it ignores neurodivergent communication needs.
The Delivery Rider	Workplace and urban environment	Mockery, standardized labor scripts, sensory-hostile spaces	Labor and city spaces privilege neurotypical productivity and sensory tolerance.

younger developmental stage, positions him primarily through delay and lack. Although clinical assessment is necessary, the film shows how professional discourse can reduce the child to a developmental measurement rather than a whole person.

Doctor: "Kali is already 4 years old, but his mental capacity is at 9 months old. Ngayon pa lang niya narerecognize sarili niya at kayo rin bilang magulang niya."

This scene illustrates how medical and educational systems may intensify family anxiety when disability is communicated mainly through deficiency. The problem is not simply the diagnosis but the absence of language that recognizes accommodation, developmental variability, and the child's dignity. Later school scenes extend this institutional barrier when inclusion is presented as conditional and dependent on Kali's ability to approximate normative expectations of progress.

In *The Trial*, the disabling structure is the courtroom. Ronald's intellectual disability is used to undermine his credibility, emotional intelligence, and capacity for self-representation. The legal process demands precise memory, quick verbal response, and emotional composure under pressure, yet it provides little evidence of disability-sensitive communication support.

Julian: "Ronald, ang mga tao na katulad mo marunong bang magmabal?" / "Kaya nga ang tawag sa inyo kulang-kulang, abnormal..."

The derogatory labels "kulang-kulang" and "abnormal" demonstrate attitudinal ableism, but the scene also reveals institutional ableism because these attitudes operate inside a formal legal setting. Ronald is not merely insulted; he is forced to prove his humanity and reliability within a system already structured to doubt him. Thus, the courtroom becomes a disabling space where procedural uniformity overrides equitable participation (Cordero, 2024).

In *The Delivery Rider*, ableism emerges in both workplace and urban environments. Santo's neurodivergence is mocked by co-workers and pressured by corporate routines that require standardized scripts, speed, proof-of-delivery procedures, and emotional compliance. The urban environment further intensifies this exclusion

through noise, heat, traffic, and sensory overload.

Colleague: "Di mo ba nakikita yan, tirik-tirik na yung araw ob. Santo napakalakas ng amats mo!"

This moment reduces Santo's difference to irrationality. The insult pathologizes neurodivergent perception and reinforces the idea that only conventional forms of cognition are valid. When combined with the film's cramped delivery hubs, noisy streets, and rigid platform protocols, Santo's experience shows how labor systems and urban spaces are built around neurotypical productivity rather than sensory and communicative diversity (Botha & Frost, 2018; Flemmer & McIntosh, 2025).

Taken together, the three films locate ableism in distinct but connected spaces: *Love Child* foregrounds medical, family, and educational ableism; *The Trial* exposes legal ableism; and *The Delivery Rider* critiques workplace and urban ableism. The pattern suggests that disability is not simply represented as a personal condition but as a relationship between bodies, minds, institutions, and environments.

Collective narrative examples from *The Delivery Rider*, *Love Child*, and *The Trial* show that disability is not biological but socially constructed. In all three movies, attitudinal barriers see characters with disabilities stripped of their humanity and portrayed as medical deficits, whereas institutional barriers, such as rigid corporation guidelines and stringent judicial processes, force people to conform neurotypically. Additionally, environmental barriers are exemplified by sensory-unfriendly environments that become physical obstacles. All these narratives show that disability results from the refusal of the world to adjust to differences. Through portraying disability as deficits, society constructs barriers that turn individuality into marginalization in a world built around a neurotypical norm.

Manifestation of Psychological Resilience in Response to Adversity

The movies also depict resilience, not only as personal but as I said, more than a personal toughness as well. On the contrary, resilience is seen as a process that has to do with inner resources and support systems. There is some

consistency with the theory of resilience, which is one that focuses on adaptation via multisystemic resources, rather than on individual heroic actions (Masten, 2018; Ungar & Theron, 2019).

The *Delivery Rider* is a testament to Santo's resilience: his dedication to his child and his capacity to take vulnerable action to protect himself. Repeatedly, he tells them to "fight back," which is not only a rhetorical ploy, but a script for survival learnt in response to a threatening world.

Santo: "Pag nasa America ka, wag kang magpapabully don ha... Pag sinaktan ka, laban!" / Miro: "Laban!"

The exchange is resilient and intergenerational/relational. Santo is not preparing his child to face danger, it's preparing him to resist it. Father-child relationship becomes a protective resource and fear into agency. Likewise, everyday expressions of recognition and reciprocity (Feldman, 2021; Shirleyana *et al.*, 2023) are ways to sustain resilience, as exemplified by Aling Maring's concern for Santo.

Love Child is about the family's ability to share financial, emotional and caregiving stresses. This includes planning, emotional regulation and joint decision making as it is evident in the ways in which Ayla and Paolo discuss tuition, therapy, work and household duties as a way of demonstrating resilience. In addition to being exhausted at work, Ayla's tiredness is evidence of resilience not being the lack of suffering, but rather the constant management of stresses that are exacerbated by unsupportive institutions.

Ayla: "I wake up at 4 am to help him every day, and I stay up late until 12 midnight every day."

This line sheds light on gender and economic aspects of care. Don't romanticize what Ayla did, it wasn't all about sacrificing herself as a mother. Instead, the movie challenges the absence of institutional support which puts the burden of being included on families' private budgets. Her determination is thus her power and her condemnation of systems that make disability care so heavily reliant on family labor.

The strength of Ronald is the consistency of his ethics during tough times, in *The Trial*. He is not afraid of daring questions and still maintains his truth. His saying "Lying is wrong" is based on a belief system that he has within himself, that in turn allows him to retain agency in a space that is created to have him lose it.

Ronald: "Hindi ko po siya sinaktan... sinabi ko lang po ang totoo." / "Opo, kasi mali po ang magsinungaling."

Resilience is thus not depicted as an emotional invulnerability of Ronald. He gets lost, and upset, but he maintains his sense of right and wrong. This makes stereotyping with intellectually disabled characters as helpless or unreliable characters difficult. Resilience, such as persistence, telling the truth, and working to be intelligible in an institution that mistakenly sees difference

as deficiency, are all demonstrated in the film.

Throughout the different films, resilience is expressed in terms of relational and contextual. Santo's sense of family purpose and community recognition; Ayla's sense of shared care and emotional reframing; Paolo's sense of ethical conviction and limited, but important, sense of caring relationships; Ronald's sense of ethical conviction and limited, but important, sense of caring relationships. The movies thus contradict inspirational portrayals which only feature PWD characters when they manage to overcome the disability. Rather, they demonstrate that the relationship with others when they provide recognition, protection, and agency is the basis for sustaining resilience.

The Pursuit of Inclusion: Reasonable Accommodation and Social Acceptance in the Philippines

The third pattern relates to the movement from the idea of "pity" to "agency. As Crip Theory has illustrated, the chosen films can be interpreted as critiques of compulsory able-bodiedness, the idealization of the norm of disabled and neuro-divergent people looking and acting like able-bodied people (Levy & Young, 2020). The main characters aren't just disabled, but also reveal the ableist imperative that they must be cured to belong. But this criticism is most prominent in *Love Child* when Kali's existence is a subject of regrets or prenatal testing, when he is aborted or when they wish to make him "normal." The scenes make it clear how ableism is manifested, not only in institutions but also in close family fears. Paolo's decision not to consider Kali a "cancelled order" defies the logic that disabled lives are not 'wanted' or worth as much.

Paolo: "Oh, tapos? Terminate the pregnancy? Cancel order? Ganun ba 'yun?"

This answer refutes the notion of the failure being preventable because of disability. It offers a way to reconceptualize Kali's life and make it acceptable and not apologetic. The film thus transcends pity by revealing the cultural scripts that lead parents to feel guilty, shamed or regretted when a child doesn't "fit the developmental script. The film thus goes beyond pity by uncovering the cultural scripts that may cause parents to feel guilt, shame, or regret for a child who does not "fit the developmental script.

The *Delivery Rider* is a work that challenges notions of competence with the body and the rhythm that is neurodivergent. The boxing scene, which goes from doubt to recognition for the crowd, acts as the inverse of ableist spectator. Santo's not empowered because he is "neurotypical" and he is recognized because his own embodied style, his own timing and focus work within a space that mistreats and underestimates him.

Crowd: "Sige, Santo! Laban, Santo!" / Coach: "Panalo si Santo!"

The image of this space is "crippled" in the sense that it exposes that competency doesn't have to be the same

type of aggressive, quick, or rhythmic movement, but can also be a slow, uncoordinated, or awkward one. The transformation from ridicule to respect won't eliminate ableism, but it will show the extent to which ableism is a judgment based on a very limited conception of what it means to perform.

But the agency is more morally ambiguous in *The Trial*. There are questions of consent, vulnerability, social learning and legal responsibility regarding Ronald's testimony. The analysis is not to be used to "cover up" bad behavior. Instead, the movie exposes how social and educational marginalization can result in a lack of direction or education in matters of intimacy, consent and communication among neurodivergent individuals. This means that Ronald's vulnerability is socially constructed and the lack of accountability is due to the lack of disability sensitive procedures in the justice system.

Ronald: "Hindi po ganoon ang nangyari!"

This denial is important because Ronald's defiant opposition to interpreting his action and identity as a whole. Not only is he an object to be talked about; he tries to talk from his own point of view. The film highlights the need and the challenge of acknowledging agency in people who don't communicate in a way that is accepted in the dominant legal paradigm.

Through the lens of Crip Theory, the three films move beyond the narrative of overcoming disability to actively challenging compulsory able-bodiedness in Philippine society. The protagonists disrupt the status quo not by fixing themselves, but by crippling normative spaces whether it is Santo reclaiming the boxing ring through a neurodivergent fighting style, or Paolo resisting the ableist logic that treats a disabled child as a cancelled order. These films expose how systemic pressure forces PWDs to mimic neurotypical standards to be deemed productive or valued, while simultaneously critiquing the folk remedies, medical deficit-thinking, and legal interrogations that pathologize their existence. Ultimately, these films show that inclusion is an act of resistance. By refusing to hide or apologize, the characters demand that society moves past mere pity toward true acceptance of their right to exist as they are.

In *Love Child*, it represents institutional and family-based disability by depicting how inclusion is often treated as a conditional privilege rather than a right. The film highlights the heavy financial and emotional burden placed on the family unit, where the lack of affordable, inclusive schooling forces parents to navigate a deficit-based educational system. In this context, disability is portrayed as an institutional hurdle where the child's progress is constantly measured against neurotypical standards, often leaving families to provide the ordinary magic of support without sufficient state or systemic aid. In *The Trial*, it serves as a stark representation of legal ableism, exposing how the judicial system remains a hostile environment for those with developmental differences. The courtroom acts as a site of interrogation where the protagonist's mental capacity is used to

discredit his testimony, and aggressive questioning techniques fail to provide reasonable accommodations for his communication style. This portrayal suggests that the law often prioritizes rigid procedural uniformity over true equity, effectively silencing neurodivergent voices through attitudinal barriers and derogatory labelling. Meanwhile, the *Delivery Rider* focuses on workplace and urban ableism, illustrating how the physical and corporate world is architecturally designed for neurotypical processing. The protagonist must contend with one-size-fits-all corporate scripts that ignore his cognitive needs and a sensory-hostile urban environment characterized by overwhelming noise, heat, and chaos. By placing a neurodivergent worker in these spatial traps, the film critiques a labor market and city infrastructure that treat sensory differences as a burden to be managed rather than a valid form of human diversity.

Overall, the larger pattern emerging across all three films is the shift from viewing disability as an individual medical deficit to a socially constructed barrier. In each narrative, the primary conflict arises not from the characters' conditions, but from a social architecture that prioritizes standardization and productivity over accessibility and dignity. Despite these varying obstacles whether in the classroom, the courtroom, or the city streets the protagonists consistently demonstrate relational resilience. Their ability to persist is not just a matter of personal grit but a dynamic process supported by family cohesion and community care. Social support, particularly from family and significant others, is a primary predictor of the quality of life for PWDs, as these networks provide the essential mechanism to navigate threatening life events (Nyame *et al.*, 2025). Ultimately, these films show that fitting in is not the goal. Instead, the characters stand their ground and demand that society stop trying to fix them and start accepting them exactly as they are.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the film industry not only depicts disability as a social and institutional problem, but also as a condition of a Philippine society that fosters ableism. In *Love Child*, *The Trial*, and *The Delivery Rider*, PWD characters are represented as engaging in education, law, job, and urban environments, which do not always allow for sensory, cognitive and communicative differences. Concurrently, the films depict resilience as a relational process, using family support, ethics, caring from the community and the need for recognition. The films are analyzed using Crip Theory, which questions the way pity is used in the films to show the characters as PWD agents who are resisting normalization and asserting their right to dignity, accommodation, and inclusion. The study also makes a contribution to the study of Philippine cinema as it demonstrates the potential of disability narratives to be cultural criticisms of ableism and calls for a more inclusive social imagination.

The findings suggest that not just character development,

but space and institutions are important to consider when examining disability representation for film scholarship. Neutral sites are not really neutral, they are cinematic spaces where ableism is made visible – the clinic, the class, the courtroom, the workplace, the city. This indicates that disability should be looked at more carefully in future analyses of Philippine cinema, where the spatial and institutional production of disability is taken into consideration. The findings call for a deeper understanding of disability and inclusion in disability advocacy, as it can't be “just at the level of compassion” or awareness. Based on the films, the dignity of a PWD needs concrete supports to be given their dignity: accessible education, disability-friendly legal processes, flexible work rules, sensory-friendly public transport, and family supports. These films can contribute to the broadening of public discourse about the rights of disabled people from sympathy to justice by dramatizing the emotional and social burden of being excluded.

Limitations

This study is not comprehensive enough to claim to represent all of disability representation in contemporary Philippine films and only three films are used in this study. The results of the analysis presented in this research are qualitative, so the results are influenced by the researchers' theoretical lenses and scenes selected. The film collection could be extended to films of other decades, films from other areas, films of other genres and films from various disabilities. Audience reception studies are also possible to test the interpretations of Filipino audience and to see if the films' presentations affect the perception on the inclusion of PWD in society.

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