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ABSTRACT

Using qualitative research methods, this dissertation closely examines discourses and representations of disability from the cinematic images of disabled characters and their families in two South Korean films, *Oasis* (C. Lee, 2002) and *Malaton* (Y. Jung, 2005) as well as from the responses of nineteen Korean graduate students at a US research university to disability imagery of the films. The findings on the representation of disability in the films indicate that disability is used as a visual reminder to restore previously marginalized identities, such as gender and sexuality. Situated in the Korean male crisis brought on by the 1997 economic turmoil, the films disclose Neo-Confucian patriarchy’s attempt at maintaining its privileged status and its complicity with the neo-liberal logic. The successful alliance between the two relies heavily on the depoliticization of disability. In the process, disabled characters are reduced to visual metaphors to signify the perceived marginalization of nondisabled people and a living means of proving able-bodied supremacy. In the films, the dominant ideologies, patriarchy, ableism, and neoliberalism, are materialized through normatively feminizing and sexualizing a disabled woman in *Oasis* and blaming a mother of an autistic son and remasculinizing the son with the familiar trope of “supercrip” in *Malaton*.

Even though the films are saturated with disability imagery, the focus of the participants, none of whom are disabled themselves, shift away from disabled characters toward themselves. Consequently, disability becomes an emblem of these nondisabled participants’ own concerns and desires to approximate “normal,” especially gender-based obstacles, expression of gender identity, sexuality, and repression. A sense of marginalization and aspiration is strongly felt by female participants who symbolically use disability to critique male-oriented Korean society. Their male counterparts tend to deploy disability as a tool to express their perceived marginalization and nostalgia for a patriarchal social order.
However, identification with disabled characters is short-lived, and the participants of both genders ultimately disassociate themselves from disability and disabled people due in large part to their hegemonic understanding of disability. In other words, narratives of tragedy, disease, and dependency appear to override their partial attachments to the plight of disabled characters and their family members. Constrained by the cinematic treatments of disability and participants’ assumed fear and guilt of disability, the participants fail to fully engage with disability and to understand it as an important part of human diversity.

The findings imply that a Disability Studies perspective, one that shifts from medical to social framing, is very useful when it interrogates the connections between disability and other social identities. A perspective can politicize disability, while also helping alleviate sensitivity and fear through discussion, and can, at its best, provide a safe space in which people can critically engage with disability.

By

CHUNG WAN WOO, B.A., M.A.

DISSERTATION

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Film is considered “the twentieth century storyteller, the model through which we articulate the world” (Turner, 1993, p. 8). However, this storyteller is by no means a transparent window onto the world. Rather, with the help of its conventions and codes, film creates and circulates knowledge by “presenting and promoting ideas about what constitutes the human experience” (Connor & Bejoian, 2006, p. 52). Such a filmic fabrication has implications for the ways in which minority groups, including disabled people, are understood and experienced in the real world. This is because cultural representations of disability affect our perspectives of disability, related public policy, the allocations of social resources, and the meaning of “civil rights” (Bérubé, 1997).

Statement of the problem

Since society tends to marginalize disabled people, shut them from public view, and relegate them to their private spheres, the media, including film, serve as major information sources on the very nature of disability/disabled people (Byrd, 1989; Garland-Thompson, 2001). Given that disabled people are one of the historically disenfranchised minorities, their participation in culture-producing institutions is rare; therefore, their voice in the construction of their images is negligible at best (Mitchell & Snyder, 1997, 2001). Very often, cultural representations of disability are concerned about nondisabled people’s feelings and responses to disability, rather than about disabled people’s (Ellis, 2008; Garland-Thompson, 1997; Longmore, 1985, 1995; Morris, 1991; Norden, 1994; Mitchell & Snyder, 1997, 2001).

Media can also reinforce generally agreed ideas and avoid matters which challenge accepted values (Goggin & Newell, 2005). Among them, popular films often represent disability in ways that have more to do with understandings of normality and nondisabled people than those of difference and disabled people (Feldbaum & Rossetti, 2005). By
locating disability within problem bodies and minds, the films are valuing strength and perfect bodies and minds. They often feature mainstream perspectives on disability and difference, while using disability as compressed information about characters and plot devices (Ellis, 2008; Garland-Thomson, 1997; Mitchell & Snyder, 1997, 2001). Disability as a metaphor can be “the safest way” for nondisabled audiences to explore these issues because “they can separate themselves quite easily from disabled character, who is quite clearly different from the normal man” (Morris, 1991, p. 24) and “relieve them of their own anxieties about experiencing similar fates” (Lerner & Straus, 2006, p. 2). For this reason, filmic representations become important sites of inquiry to understand how representations reinforce normality and shape reality for disabled people. The representations not only reveal the ways in which disabled people are portrayed in film, but more importantly, provide conduits through which nondisabled audiences perceive and respond to disability/disabled people and shape the reality for disabled people.

Representations of disability have flooded the worldwide popular media. Norden (1994) argues that bodily differences, through disability, impairment, and illness, lie at the heart of our media heritage. Different bodies appear in some of the most popular films of early cinema, in the rhetoric of wartime propaganda, and in contemporary narratives about the capitalistic culture’s most closely held values: individualism, self-determination, and community membership. Mitchell and Snyder (2001) contend that disability operates in Western literature as an opportunistic representational device to re-frame, disrupt, and critique society. Disability, “serves as a metaphorical signifier of social and individual collapse” (p. 47). They also note that the frequent use of disability as a predictable, patterned mode of characterization is oddly invisible and unstable, and representations of disabled characters do a kind of disappearing act, as well. Because of this, readers tend to screen out
disability, even when it is present (p. 196). Disability is “constructed as the embodiment of corporeal insufficiency and deviance […] becom[ing] a repository for social anxieties about such troubling concerns as vulnerability, control and identity” (Garland-Thompson, 1997, p. 6).

Since its development in the mid 1980s, Disability Studies has understood disability as an artificially constructed category used to reinscribe the legitimacy of the “normal” body and mind as representative of true humanness and human functioning, and interrogated the means and locations of its construction. Early scholarship on disability and film remained focused on exposing and challenging stereotypical portrayals of disability in film (Darke, 1998; Longmore, 1985; Norden, 1994), television (Klobas, 1988), and photography (Hervey, 1992). These scholars relied on their “activist agenda” (Smit & Enns, 2001, ii) to liberate disabled people from oppressive media practices and attempted to rehabilitate public beliefs and attitudes towards disabled people. However, their analytical tools—relatively simple character and plot analyses— are not appropriate to engage with complex media texts, which are aesthetic as well as political (Smit & Enns, 2001). Responding to such needs, recent scholarship has incorporated an aesthetic methodology into its critical lens and has begun to examine the ways in which films not only transmit a single ideology but also present audiences with contradictory or ambiguous ideologies. More specifically, this scholarship questions the idea of the passive spectator that early scholarship assumed and reconsiders what it means to be spectators of films. The recent scholarship has found that cinematic conventions and narrative strategies contribute to the discursive construction of disability (Church, 2006; Ellis, 2008; Hoeksema & Smit, 2001; E. Kim & Jarman, 2008; Olney, 2006; Smit & Enns, 2001; Snyder & Mitchell, 2006).
However, in relying substantially on textual determinism (defining the audiences solely in terms of their viewing positions)\(^1\), many overlook the meaning-making carried out as a collaborative process at the intersection of audiences and film texts. That is to say, this contemporary scholarship rarely takes into account the actual audiences and their filmic readings. As several scholars in Cultural Studies have contended, any claims about meaning and media seem somewhat conjectural without audience interpretations (Schiappa, 2008; Schiappa & Wessels, 2007; Stromer-Gailey & Schiappa, 1998). All texts are, to some extent, “open,” and audiences fill up the empty space, so the meaning of media cannot simply be established by one critic’s decoding of the text (Dines & Humez, 2003, p. 2). Williamson (1978) points out “all signs depend for their signifying process on the existence of specific, concrete receivers, people for whom and whose systems of belief, they have a meaning” (p. 40). In addition, audiences bring different “salience”—religions, gender, social capital, education, ethnicity, nationality, etc.—to their viewing experience, which influences their mediated text reading (Morley, 1986, p. 10). In other words, audiences may be active viewers who bring to their watching different sets of experiences and beliefs (Gamson, 1998).

Cultural Studies and Film Studies scholars have paid scant attention to disability as the focal points of their critical inquiry. As Hladki (2005) points out, “this [the negligence of disability within the concerned scholarships] is surprising given that questions about subjectivity, identity, and difference are key to theoretical concerns” (p. 265). Disability is not a focus of contemporary research in South Korean (hereafter Korea or Korean) Cultural Studies and Film Studies, either. Except for few studies (G. Choi, 2001; E. Kim, 2007; Yoon, 2003), disability is conceptualized as “lack,” “loss,” “deviancy,” and “abnormality” within

\(^{\text{1}}\) According to Stacy (1994), Film Studies and Cultural Studies conceptualize the viewer differently. Spectators are placed in text in Film Studies, while audiences are located outside text in cultural studies (p. 24).
the scholarship, which has played a key role in not only dismissing disability as unworthy of academic concerns, but justifying disabled people's lower statuses in the private and public arena. Even the scholarship tends to distance itself from disability as an academic dead-end by considering it as a mere medical condition or by construing disability as post/colonial tropes in literature and film, while failing to extend to disabled embodiments. The predominance of such traditionally-oriented thinking of disability not only reinforces medical model of disability, but also ignore the fact that subjectivity, identity, and difference are compounded by disability.

Disability is by no means new to Korean films. Numerous characters with all forms of disabilities, especially in early films, were often used as a trope of the nation’s traumatic history imposed on the body/mind. The representation of disability during wartime is perceived to show the subjugation of the Korean identity to the foreign powers (Yoon, 2003). Also, disability in Korean classic films is heavily gendered. One of the commonalities in these films is the appearance of impaired or disabled male characters. What is noticeable is that most of them deny their impairment or disability and seek to reclaim their masculinity by way of hypermasculinized acts: bank robbery, self-mutilation, and the abuse of women in *Obaltan* (1960), *The Deaf Samryong* (1964), and *Manjong* (1968) respectively.

Recent disability films are no longer limited to tropes for the damaged self/nation. In the new century, now that Korean democracy has been stabilized throughout consecutive civilian governments, disability as the national experience appears less frequently. However, starting with the artistic and commercial success of *Oasis* (C. Lee, 2002), numerous films involving main characters with all forms of disabilities, such as *Oh, Brother* (2002), *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002), *Who Are You?* (2002), *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2003), *A Smile* (2003), *The President’s Barber* (2004), *Bye! UFO* (2004), *Witch Board* (2004),
Malaton (2005), My Brother (2005), Barefoot Kibong (2006), Apartment (2006), Bunt (2006), Love Me Not (2006), My Teacher (2006), I'm a Cyborg, But That's OK (2006), Herb (2007), Mr. Daehan, Mr. Mingook (2007), The Elephant on the Bike (2007), With a Girl of Black Soil (2007), The Fool (2008), Iri (2008), I am Happy (2009), Mother (2009), Heaven and Sea (2009), My Love, By My Side (2009), Sex Volunteer: Open Secret 1st Story (2009), My Mother is a Whore (2010), Elbowroom (2010), Glove (2011), Themselves (2011), Blind (2011), Champ (2011), The Crucible (2011), and Only You (2011), have recently emerged. Considering the fact that past Korean films rarely framed disability as their important concerns, such integration of disability subjects into mainstream Korean cinema can be a welcoming sign which indicates more flexible cultural attitudes and political and cultural progression toward a more fully integrated society. However, an uncritical celebration of the visibility of disability fails to grasp the cultural phenomenon in its complexity. Because the discourses of disability in these films are often contradictory and ambiguous, they invite a critical response and a critical intervention.

Why is the Korean film industry more fascinated with the subject of disability? The possible answers for this phenomenon can be found in the rise of Korean film industry, the heightened public awareness of disability and disability rights, and/or millennial preoccupations with seismic change, with the “idiot” figure often representing “a throwback to a previous era or a simpler way of life” (Halliwell, 2004, p. 215). While this dissertation acknowledges these heterogeneous factors behind the recent surge in disability films, they fall beyond the scope of this dissertation which aims to critically read two film texts, Oasis and Malaton and use them to solicit students’ perspectives on disability representations. In

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2 I spelled the way the autistic main character, Chowon, in Malaton, pronounces the word “Marathon.”
short, the dissertation focuses more on how the film texts construct disability, disabled people, and their family members and how disability is being watched and talked about by nondisabled Korean graduate students.

**Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the construction of disability through the depictions of disabled characters and their family members in Korean films, *Oasis* and *Malaton* as well as the responses of Korean audiences to these representations. The dissertation seeks to bring together audiences and film texts for a more comprehensive understanding of cultural representations of disability. In this dissertation, I contend that disability as a political identity and embodied experience is suppressed by a traditional understanding of disability, metaphorical appropriation of disability, and normalization of disability. Well-meant criticism made by the film directors and the participants are assimilated into dominant able-bodied ideologies and, as a result, oppression against disabled people continue unchecked and justified.

This dissertation analyzes the two Korean popular films featuring disabled characters and their family members, *Oasis* (C. Lee, 2002) and *Malaton* (Y. Jung, 2005). A critical examination of the films is also accompanied by the perspectives of nineteen Korean nondisabled graduate students on these filmic imageries, both of which contribute to a nuanced analysis of the politics of disability representation. A combination of textual and audience research is applied to these filmic representations of disability. This dissertation locates the analyses at the theoretical crossroads of Disability Studies, Film Studies, and Cultural Studies. Disability Studies serves as the main critical lens through which to bring together film and audience discourses and to reread disability construction through such discourses. The discipline of Disability Studies is largely concerned with interrogating the
dominance of the “medical model” in literature and culture, dislodging its naturalness and making explicit the distributions of power it conceals (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 9). Disability Studies informed by Cultural Studies/Film Studies provides tools for analyzing filmic representations of disability and audience readings of such representations and guides and refines the analysis with the methodological tools to interact with participants.

**Operational definition**

This dissertation places the subject of disability as the focal point of critical inquiry and analysis. Such a Disability Studies-informed perspective significantly departs from a medical perspective which understands disability as problems in need of medical and rehabilitative interventions. Rather, disability is read as an experience, embodiment, and identity, frequently connecting with and occasionally contradicting other social markers like gender and sexuality. In addition, I conceptualize disabled people as witness survivors whose oppression have been historically inscribed on their own bodies and minds as well as social change agents who fight against social injustice which marginalize themselves as well as their fellow minority groups. In this dissertation, I use the terms, disabled people and people with disabilities, interchangeably, with a tendency to the former, as it is not only shorter than the latter, but facilitates the politicization of disability by placing “disability” at the forefront.

The participants in this study tend to use cognitive, developmental, and psychiatric disabilities interchangeably and also describe these three different yet overlapping disabilities as a “mental” disability. However, regardless of whether they use correct terms, I accommodated any of the terms they chose in this study. This is partly because any intervention might have disrupted a flow of conversations and their use of the terms may indirectly tell about the arbitrary nature of those naming and labeling practices.
Research questions

Research questions for this dissertation are; 1) How do these films construct disability, disabled characters, and their family members and how do nondisabled participants interpret disability, disabled characters, and their family members in the films?; 2) To what extent do these participants think disabled characters in the films consider and reflect the lives and experiences of disabled people in Korea?; 3) In what ways do participants’ readings of disability reveal what it means to be nondisabled/disabled at the intersection of gender, class, and sexuality? These research questions guided the interviews and the analyses of the film texts and the interviews by discovering the meanings drawn from the films, the participants’ perspectives, and their interactions with others.

Organization

This dissertation consists of seven chapters. In introduction, I problematize disability representations in cultural products with the following three questions; 1) What is at stake in disability representation?; 2) Why bring together filmic depictions and audiences’ interpretations of disability?; and 3) In what ways does this dissertation help fill in the gaps in the relevant fields of studies, Disability Studies, Cultural Studies, and Film Studies? In Chapter 2, I review theoretical and methodological concepts for disability, film, and audience analysis in the concerned scholarships. In this chapter, I also look at key issues and approaches in each discipline and contemplate how this dissertation fills in a gap in the existing literature and research. In chapter 3, I describe the research methods and procedures, including selecting participants, data collection, data analysis, ethical concerns, and limitations of this study. In Chapter 4, I provide an overview of disability in Korea by situating the perceptions of disability, mothers and disabled children, and disabled women within Korean culture. This chapter is used as a foundation for understanding the following
data chapters. In chapter 5, I examine the two Korean films, *Oasis* and *Malaton*, with an emphasis on narrative structures, genres, characters, and styles. To produce more nuanced textual analyses, I apply relevant theoretical concepts to analyzing the films and also situate them in a “male in crisis” caused by the 1997 Korean economic breakdown. In chapter 6, I investigate how 19 Korean participants, none of whom are disabled, make sense of disability/disabled people in the films and social world. The findings (emergent themes) from the interview data are presented and discussed. In the concluding chapter, I summarize the main arguments and findings, discuss several implications of this dissertation within and beyond academia, and gives future directions to research on disability representation.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I review key issues and approaches in the relevant disciplines, Disability Studies, Cultural Studies, and Film Studies. I also illustrate and examine the relevant studies regarding disability, film, and audience in each discipline. Lastly, the chapter considers how this dissertation fills in the gap in existing literature and research.

Disability Studies

Prior to the emergence of the disability rights movement in the early 1970s and Disability Studies in the mid 1970s, disability was framed through a religious or medical understanding. Within these frameworks, disability was understood as a punishment from God for sins (Blanks & Smith, 2009) or as an isolated, deviant, or abnormal illness, disease, or condition that happens to individuals and/or affects their physical/mental abilities (Clark, 2005). These understandings have had a negative impact on the lives of disabled people. Throughout history, disabled people have faced different forms of discrimination, such as stereotyping, stigmatization, abuse, violence, social exclusion, and denial of citizenship.

Informed by the enfranchisement and inclusion of minorities prompted by the civil rights movement in the 1960s, disability rights activists began to recognize that the limitations on their lives were not principally bodily but rather stemmed from prejudice, discrimination, a lack of access, and a failure on the part of society to accommodate physical (and mental) difference. In the hopes of dissolving these restrictions, activists and allies began to pursue inclusion and equal opportunities through both the legal and political arenas (Longmore, 1995). Due to these efforts, disability today is seen as a civil rights issue.

As the academic branch of the disability rights movement, Disability Studies locates disability in particular contexts and understands it as a “social, political, and cultural phenomenon” (Taylor, 2003). This academic discipline has put forth alternative frameworks
that critically view the construction of disability and has challenged traditional perspectives of disability. More importantly, it has sought to remove discriminatory practices against disabled people and to deconstruct the assumptions behind such practices.

**Disability as a social construct.**

Disability shares commonality and difference with race, gender, and class. On the one hand, disability is a socially constructed phenomenon, similar in that respect to race, gender, or class. Disability is not biological characteristics within individual bodies or minds, but is a set of negative social reactions (e.g., structural, physical, and attitudinal barriers) to individuals’ bodies or minds. Of course, there are differences between and among disabled and nondisabled people, as between and among people of different sexes, races, and classes. But the values of these differences are culturally determined and serve to decide who is normal or abnormal in society. Thus disability is not so much about differences themselves but is more about how we interpret and value differences at a particular time and place. As a consequence, like racism, sexism, and classism, ableism (a systemic discrimination based on ability), denigrates, devalues, and oppresses disabled people.

One the other hand, disability differs from other social markers. For one thing, ableism is so pervasive as to be almost invisible, unlike the other forms of oppression above. Because of its prevalence, there is little consensus among the general public and even among scholars as to what practices and behaviors constitute ableism (Linton, 1998, p.9). Using Hall’s “floating signifier” concept, Beljoian and Reid (2005) note that disability is more elusive, mutable, and complex than many other categories. They explain that disabled people may not identify as disabled, as they are externally labeled (as mentally retarded, visually impaired, etc.) by terms chosen by others of which are often associated with stigmas. Another difference lies in the fact that regardless of gender, class, and race, all people can become
disabled due to aging, incidents, and genetic issues. Because of this fate, people currently living without disabilities are sometimes referred to as being “temporarily able-bodied” (TAB). Zola (1993) comments that porosity of disability breaks down the boundary between “us” and “them” and incorporates disability into a continuum of experience of having a body (p.171).

### Medical and social model frameworks

The predominant disability frameworks are the medical and social models. A focus on normality and abnormality is central to the medical model. This model is structured around medical terms and does not distinguish between disability and impairment. Disability is understood as something anatomically, neurologically, psychologically, genetically, or chemically “off the mark.” The model locates the problems of disability within individuals’ bodies or minds and conceptualizes these problems as deriving from the functional limitations or psychological loss assumed to arise out of disability (Oliver, 1990). Therefore, disabled people are framed as deficient, abnormal, and sick, and their abnormal bodies/minds seen as faulty mechanisms to be repaired or eliminated through medical procedures (Couser, 2005, p. 112). Several consequences flow from this model. First, the model disempowers disabled people with its “blame the victim” stance. According to this model, the problems of disability are inside disabled people bodies/minds rather than in the social forces stigmatizing and marginalizing them. Therefore, disabled people are responsible for any disadvantages resulting from their impairments. Second, this model has brought about segregation, institutionalization, surveillance, and questionable medical intervention. It has established many rehabilitation and welfare facilities to exclude disabled people from society.

One of the early discourses employed by disabled people was the social model of disability introduced by UPIAS (Union of Physically Impaired against Segregation 1975) in
the U.K. (Finkelstein, 1980). Adopting a concept of disability as a social construct, this model reads disability as an experience of oppressive social relations based on the exclusionary barriers in society (Siminski, 2003). Disability stems from society’s inability to meet the diverse needs of citizens. Also, this model separates disability from impairment. Disability is external (social oppression), while impairment is internal (attributes within individuals). Moreover, disability is subjective identity which is socially constructed as undesirable and marginalized by political and social systems in need of change. This model has made several contributions to how disability is understood. First, it defines disability as the form of social oppression, not the form of impairment (Shakespeare & Watson, 2001, p.10). Second, it provides disabled people with political collectivity and advocacy tools for claiming identity as a social minority (Corker & Shakespeare, 2002, p.3). Third, a social model construct offers Disability Studies a primary theoretical framework because it problematizes and interrogates the social process of disability within our collective societies (Oliver, 1996; Vernon, 1999). Although this model has helped loosen medicine’s grip on disability, it has caused some other problems. Its heavy reliance on historical materialism and its analysis of disabling environments have neglected the experiences of impairment and bodies (Thomas, 1999; Hughes & Paterson, 1997). Linton (1998) states that impairment, often accompanied by pain, anxiety, and suffering, must be theorized since social change will not take those things away. Morris (1991), in working to theorize pain, comments that “traditional Western medicine has consistently led us to misinterpret pain as no more than a sensation, symptom, and a problem in biochemistry” (p. 5). Another limitation of this model lies in its negligence with regard to exploring the intersections between disability and other social relations (gender, race, class, sexuality, etc) (Asch, 2004; Garland-Thomson, 1997;
Morris, 1991; Thomas, 2001; Wendell, 1996) because this model centers too much on disability.

**A Disability Studies perspective**

Disability Studies scholarship has been parallel to, informed by the social model of disability. Disability Studies scholars have also theorized, analyzed, and critiqued the social model. Disability Studies originally arose in sociology but has gained ground recently in the humanities and other disciplines. Disability Studies, as a field of inquiry, is porous. It involves a wide range of disciplinary concerns, theoretical frameworks, and political projects. Linton (1998) maps out the large projects facing Disability Studies as “an interdisciplinary field” (p.2). She adds that “scholarly explorations and the initiatives undertaken by the disability rights movement have resulted in new paradigms used to understand disability as a social, political, cultural phenomena” (p. 2). Disability Studies projects are undertaken to expose ways in which individualized and medicalized notions of disability have culturally and historically been constructed and reinforced. Disability Studies starts with the premise that “disability is a culturally fabricated narrative of the body, a system that produces subjects by differentiating and marking bodies” (Garland-Thompson, 2001, p. 1). In other words, disability is a collection of ideological categories as varied as “sick, deformed, ugly, old, abnormal, or debilitated” while ability is saturated with such terms as “beautiful,” “healthy,” “normal,” “fit,” “competent,” and “intelligent” (pp. 1-2). Such a comparison of bodies (e.g. disabled/able-bodied) legitimizes the unequal distribution of resources, status, and power in society.

A Disability Studies perspective is defined as counter-hegemonic and inclusive. First, Disability Studies reveals the hegemonic meta-narratives found within medical/clinical discourses on disability by investigating the ways in which disability refers not to a human
being’s capacity to perform certain tasks or adopt certain behaviors, but rather to an individual’s location within a social system. To begin with, Disability Studies scholarship seeks to destabilize the simple binaries between disability and ability and abnormality and normality. As Linton (1998) explains Disability Studies as a “counterpoint to the medicalized perspectives on disability” (p. 2). Disability Studies centers its main concerns around the social construction of disability, the processes giving particular meaning to disability, and the consequences that these constructs and processes have on the treatment and positioning of disabled people (Bejolian & Reid, 2005, p.2). Disability Studies scholars question the idea of normalcy as truth by asking who determines who is normal/abnormal, and what the consequences their determinations have on disabled people.

In his essay, “Constructing normalcy,” Davis (1997) questions the norm by analyzing the historical invention of normalcy in the 19th century. He argues that the processes of modernization established a link between the body and industry and this new knowledge that bodies could be standardized resulted in negative consequences for certain groups of people, including disabled people, whose bodies are assumed to be deviant from the norm (pp. 11-17). Also, scholarship problematizes the standard identity distinction between disabled and able-bodied people by disclosing how disability is constructed by way of legal, medical, political, cultural, and literary narratives that constitute exclusionary discourses. In her book, Extraordinary Bodies, Garland-Thompson (1997) investigates the cultural representations of the cripple, the invalid, and the freak in the U.S. culture and literature in order to see how representation affords meaning to different bodies and helps to shape identity production. She asserts that representation structures reality, so the metaphysical and symbolic uses of disability must be contended with within the political movement (p. 288).
A number of Disability Studies-oriented works expose the destructive consequences of the medicalized view of disability on disabled people in society. In *Stigma* and *Asylum*, Goffman (1961, 1963) exposes how disabled people are framed as outsiders, some of whom are systematically controlled and dehumanized in institutionalized psychiatric facilities. In *Christmas Purgatory*, Blatt and Kaplan (1966) provide poignant evidence of the inhumanity experienced by cognitively and psychiatrically disabled people in large state hospitals. In educational settings, many scholars have pointed out that ability-based educational practices have negatively affected disabled students (Brantlinger, 2001; Danforth & Navarro, 1998; Erevelles, 2000). Other scholars reveal that popular media are saturated with misrepresentations of disabled people, which are likely to affect the experiences of real disabled people (Longmore, 1985; Norden, 1994; Pointon & Davis, 1997).

The second key aspect of a Disability Studies perspective is its inclusiveness. Disability Studies challenges the exclusiveness of medical/clinical perspectives on disability by taking into account alternative, critical, and insider perspectives of disabled people. It opens a door for multi-perspectives—disciplines and theoretical approaches. Not only does Disability Studies embrace various academic disciplines and theoretical underpinnings, but also puts the standpoint of disabled people at the center. Taylor (2003) makes it clear that Disability Studies does not rely on a single academic discipline. Instead, the field is influenced by different disciplines (history, sociology, literature, law, cultural studies, anthropology, geography, communications and media studies, the arts, etc.) and by the various post-positivist lenses (interpretivist, feminist, critical/ Marxist, literary, postmodern, etc.).

A Disability Studies perspective also values the voices and the experiences of disabled people. Disability Studies scholarship looks at history, law, culture, politics, art,
science, and medicine through the lenses of disabled people’s lives. According to Davison and Sieber (2005), Disability Studies views disabled people as knowledge producers whose common history has generated a wide variety of art, music, literature, and science (p. 499). Therefore, the experiences of disabled people become a means by which social, political, and legal discourses on disability are analyzed and critiqued. Hahn (1998) writes that unlike other minorities, disabled people have not yet been able to refute the implicit or direct accusations of biological inferiority used to justify the oppression imposed on them. Linton (2005) describes Disability Studies as a project to “weave disabled people back into the fabric of society, thread by thread, theory by theory” (p. 518) to make their voices heard and to give them full citizenship status in society. In addition, Disability Studies perspective does not overlook the diversity within disabled people. Taylor (2003) points out that society lumps different humans into a simple group, ‘disabled people,’ and this too-simple classification affects the ways disabled people are viewed and treated. By contrast, the Disability Studies perspective considers all kinds of disability on the premise that each individual has different experiences and perspectives, all of them are valuable.

Finally, a Disability Studies perspective values the contributions made by disabled people, re-imagines disability as a web of cultural meanings, and reveals how disability invents and reinvents things around us. Caught in the simple disability/ability binary, the traditional discourses of disability produced in the medical and clinical fields cannot generate this form of new knowledge about disability. A Disability Studies perspective treats disabled people as valuable contributors to society and also pays special attention to the ways disability redefines our understanding of the world. To begin with, a Disability Studies perspective views disabled people as potential political actors who can critique oppressive social and physical environments for social change. Within this perspective, disabled people
are neither victims of personal misfortune nor simply victims of an oppressive medical model. Instead, they are people who have agency and are resistant to the structure, which denies their participation in public sphere. Snyder and Mitchell (2006) theorize disability as “a site of resistance and a source of cultural agency previously repressed” (p.10). They note that medically embedded cultural representations are one of the cultural locations of disability, which continue to contribute to the oppression of disabled people (p.3). In order to integrate disabled people into society, distorted disability representations in art, literature, film, theater, and other forms of artistic expression need to be fully questioned and analyzed (Linton 2005; Garland-Thompson, 2005).

Historically, the cultural representation of disability has functioned at the expense of disabled people, in part because they have not controlled their own images. Their images are manufactured by nondisabled people who very often produce misrepresentations and play a critical role in relegating disabled people to the margins of society. However, there has been a significant change in recent decades, and disabled people have started to speak up for themselves. Couser (2005) writes that through life writing, many disabled people have initiated and controlled their own narratives, and their works constitute an important part of life writing in North America over the last three decades. Such “disability autobiography” offers accounts of living with disability, including such experiences as discrimination, frustration, pain, anxiety, and so on from both first and third person points of view.

As an alternative counterpoint to misrepresentations in popular media, a disability culture has emerged. According to Longmore (1995), disability movement entered a second phase, centering on the quest for collective identity whose primary task is the exploration and creation of a disability culture. Art and imagery are imperative in culture and cannot be controlled by those outside of the disability rights movement. For this reason, disability
culture recognizes the necessity to reclaim and control the ways in which disability images are constructed and delivered. Disabled artists and performers are empowered to challenge cultural misrepresentation and reshape the disability narrative.

A Disability Studies perspective focuses on how disability redefines our worldviews. It calls for re-imagining disability and reveals how the storied quality of disability invents and reinvents the world we share (Garland-Thompson, 2005, p. 523). Re-imagining disability helps integrate disability and disabled people into our knowledge of human experience and our society. According to Garland-Thompson, the artist Claude Monet and the photographer Chuck Close moved away from representational and realistic to impressionistic painting and cubist photography, respectively, as they developed significant disabilities later in their careers. Their disabilities (visual impairments) became a critical factor in refining and redefining their artistry. She says “they (Monet and Close) were great artists not in spite of disability, but because of disability” (p. 524).

**Disability and film**

Davis (2002) identifies Disability Studies' move into cultural analysis as having the following three-phases: 1) the identification of negative stereotypes and inaccuracies; 2) the unearthing of positive or subversive representations in historic texts; 3) a theoretical phase, which mobilized the newly charged identity in order to question the wider society. The phase model is not linearly progressive. Rather, the three stages coexist with one another. Thus, the model is still useful in seeing what approaches to cultural products have been available in the Disability Studies scholarly community.

**Early scholarship.**

Barnes, Mercer, and Shakespeare (1999) state that cultural stereotyping as a form of oppression is used as a rationalization for treating disabled people as deficient. Negative
media portrayals of disabled people confirm what it means to be disabled in society. Thus, detecting and challenging the elements of stereotypical depictions of disabled people in popular media became an important task for Disability Studies scholars. Several scholars identified a wide range of stereotypes assigned to physically disabled people in the media and classified them according to different stigmatizing characteristics of the physically disabled (Biklen & Bogdan, 1977; Longmore, 1985; Norden, 1994). The earliest scholarly interpretations of disability in film followed the assumption that the negative images of disabled people on the screen create negative situations for disabled people. This approach frequently attacked films presenting derogatory and discriminating images of disabled people and provided some of the categories of disability tropes, such as the Supercrip, the Tragic Innocent, Beggarly Imposter, Limping Villain, Better-Off-Dead, etc (Norden, 1994).

Clogston (1994) critiques these derogatory films for their medical point of view on disabled people. These films cast disability as a disease that requires treatment. They center on efforts to return disabled people to proper functioning, so that they can be embraced by normal society. Images derived from the viewpoint of the medical model often portray disabled people from the perspective of able-bodied people. Disabled people are only objects of the gaze, whose stories are often narratives of overcoming and curing their defects. Impairments are always constructed as residing within individuals, and never as problems created by society, such as interpersonal alienation, inaccessibility, job and housing discrimination, stigmatization, etc. (Couser, 2005; Oliver, 1990).

In his seminal essay, “Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disability,” Longmore (1985) regards film and television as influential reinforcers of cultural prejudice toward disabled people. This essay set the theoretical tone of Cinema Studies within Disability Studies, which remained primarily focused on exposing and reversing the discriminatory ideology
underlying most depictions of disability. Three main stereotypes associated with the physically disabled are identified in Longmore’s work: criminality, maladjustment, and asexuality. These tropes generally associate disabled people body with criminality or monstrosity (e.g., a host of James Bond villains or Peter Seller’s comically evil Dr. Strangelove). Alternately, disabled character may also be part of compensation dramas or “super-crip” narratives of remarkable overcoming, including My Left Foot (1989).

In his book, The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disabilities in the Movies, Norden (1994) offers the first complete analysis of negative images of physical disabilities in U.S. films. He followed the approach outlined in Longmore’s work, but added a much-needed historical element, citing examples ranging from early silent films to contemporary films. He argues that Hollywood films are essentially ableist in their portrayals of disability/disabled people. He pinpoints a substantial number of stereotypes attached to disabled people: the civilian superstar, comic misadventurer, elderly dupe, high-tech guru, noble warrior, obsessive avenger, saintly sage, and sweet innocent. According to Wolfson and Norden (2000), one of the aspects of Hollywood’s disability depictions is the strong sense of isolation that all but envelops characters with disabilities. They claim that “Hollywood moviemakers have gone out of their way to separate disabled figures from their able-bodied peers (as well as from each other) and otherize them” (p. 290).

Meanwhile, representations of developmental/cognitive/psychiatric disabled people have been under-studied in Disability Studies (Murray, 2006). Rather, these representations have been investigated in other disciplines, mostly Psychology and Media Studies. Several scholars have detected a medical point of view in numerous films that create or reinforce stereotypes for developmental/cognitive/psychiatric disabled people. Gabbard and Gabbard (1999) note that many of the preconceptions and misconceptions people result from the
images of mentally ill characters portrayed in the popular media. Among disabled people, those with mental illnesses are the most stigmatized group (Smart, 2001, pp. 118-119); they are stereotypically portrayed as dangerous and hostile. Hyler, Gabbard, and Schneider (1991) point out those films such as *Nightmare on Elm Street the Friday the 13th* sequels, and most slasher films link mental illness with homicidal maniacs. Wahl (1995) comments on the biased presentation of mental illness in film, noting that the actual data support five basic facts; 1) some people with mental illness are dangerous; however, 2) the vast majority are neither violent nor dangerous; 3) violence, when it occurs, is seldom directed at strangers; 4) the insanity defense has not resulted in the release of large numbers of dangerous individuals into the community; and 5) the portrayals of mental illness in the media are highly inaccurate.

In a similar vein, Smith (1999) points out the roles of the developmentally disabled in contemporary US films as miraculous healers. In *Forrest Gump* (1995), Gump functions as a healer and uniter; he brings back into the world and into marriage the thoroughly shattered Lieutenant Dan and even creates life inside the spiritually dead Jenny. Investigating savant characters with autism in film, Murray (2006) notes that the fascination with the savant figure must be understood as a fundamental misapprehension of the actual nature of autism. Rather than a realistic character, the figure of the savant is a “peculiarly narrative-driven phenomenon,” an excellent opportunity to modify plot or character relations that invites the production of exceptionalness (p. 31).

Early scholarship on disability and film helps to support the idea that disability is socially manufactured, identifying common characterizations that reinforce audiences’ sense of alienation and distance from disability. These early works lay a cornerstone for later scholarly attempts to rehabilitate public beliefs. However, this scholarship is also limited in several respects. First, a positive/negative image analysis is both too simple and too
subjective. Pointon and Davies (1997) point out that talking about negative and positive images is ineffective because it unrealistically simplify the subject matter. Moreover, although disabled people might have a clear idea about what constitutes a negative image, the identification of positive images is more difficult and harder to achieve consensus on (p. 1).

Too, this scholarship fails to contextualize disability; the reasons behind misrepresentations about disability remain unexamined. Namely, it is limited in that text and context are inseparable (Storey, 1999). Moreover, this approach often falls short of looking at the sites of contradiction in film texts where conflicting ideologies overlap (Smit & Enns, 2001, p. x). More importantly, because it relies on an excess of textual determinism, this scholarship fails to recognize the agency of audiences, presenting them instead merely as groups of passive viewers.

Recent scholarship.

The relationship between film and culture has been further complicated by recent scholarship on film and disability, which has begun to examine the ways in which films present spectators with contradictory or ambiguous ideologies. In their edited volume, *Screening Disability: Essays on Cinema and Disability*, Smit and Enns (2001) announce themselves and their colleagues as part of this "new wave" of disability film scholarship, challenging the idea of the passive spectator, revisiting what it means to be spectators of films, and calling for greater emphasis on reception and greater recognition of the complexity of texts (pp. ix-xi). In the volume, Hoeksema and Smit (2001) critique the assumptions made by earlier film and Disability Studies scholarship, with its activist agenda, which claim that negative images of disabled people in film bring about negative living conditions for disabled people outside of film. As an alternative to relying on these assumptions, they suggest combining the perspectives of Film Studies and Disability Studies to find out what
correlations actually exist. They point out that early scholarship has weaknesses, in that it heavily relies on simple image analysis without appreciating film texts as a whole. Instead, these scholars pay critical consideration to the idea of film as art, by applying an aesthetic methodology to the study of the films dealing with disabilities, thus offering the potential for a new wave of film and disability scholarship. Hoeksema and Smit believe that their integrating model enables a comprehensive analysis of disability films that is impossible from only one or the other perspective (p. 34). They contend that when the images in films are analyzed, the cinematic languages which constitute the images should be taken into account. They note that “[w]ithout the aesthetic contributions of Film Studies … without an understanding of high and low angle, shots, panning, close-ups, tracking, the use of sound in film, etc., images in films are interpreted in a bland and one-dimensional fashion, thus causing the image to lose that which defines it as an artistic expression” (p. 35).

As Disability Studies enters into dialogue with Film Studies, recent scholarship turns to film genre analysis, revealing ambiguous, conflicting ideologies within film texts, and their subversive potentials. In particular, physical anomalies in horror films are critical concerns for several scholars in recent scholarship. While analyzing film adaptations of Renard's *Les Mains d'Orlac* and their portrayals of physical disabilities, Olney (2006) argues that the horror genre works to subvert the "ableist" ideology that sustains the prevailing hegemony of normalcy (p. 294). He critiques the earlier Disability Studies scholarship’s simple analytical tools and assumptions about passive spectators, stating that “the relationship between horror and physical disability would focus not only on the ideological gaps, contradictions, and ambiguities inherent in horror novels and films, but also on the ability of readers and viewers to resist or recast the ‘dominant’ or intended meaning of these texts” (p. 295). His main point is that body of work in the horror genre destabilizes long-accepted corporeal norms, because
the problem body in such genre exists "in between" established ontological categories like "alive" and "dead," "self" and "other," "human" and "nonhuman," "able-bodied" and "disabled" (p. 295).

In a similar vein, Church (2006) locates fantastic films, such as *Freaks* (1932), *Edward Scissors Hands* (1989), and *Videodrome* (1982) at the intersection of Disability Studies and Film Studies. He critiques Disability Studies’ inclination towards social realism films and its presupposition of stable spectator positioning. He complicates ambiguous ideologies residing in film texts with the spectator positions these films demand. He argues that fantastic films open up a more political space for disability representations and spectatorship. In other words, these films destabilize normative realism, lead nondisabled spectators into unfamiliar imaginative worlds, and thus enable them to identify with disabled characters.

In their book, *Cultural Locations of Disability*, Snyder and Mitchell (2006) take a different turn from scholars who found the horror genre subversive. Reassessing Linda Williams’ body genres (melodrama, horror and pornography)³, they argue that “disability is as crucial as gender in the primal structuring fantasies of [melodrama, horror and comedy]” (p. 162), disabled bodies serve as a “form of visual shorthand” (p. 164) and are “constructed cinematically and socially to function as delivery vehicles in the transfer of extreme sensations to audiences” (p. 162). While Williams suggest that the excesses of these three genres are political and resistant, thereby offering privileged sites to challenge traditional gender roles, the two authors do not find in these genres potentials of this kind regarding disability. Instead, they privilege “new disability documentary cinema,” such as *When Billy*

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³ Mitchell and Snyder substitute comedy for pornography, placing disability in the center of their analysis, instead of gender.
Broke His Head (1995) and Vital Signs: Crip Culture Talks Back (1995), as offering a true “site of resistance and political revision.”

In addition to a greater dialogue with Film Studies, trends in the more recent analysis of representations of disability include critical intersections with other theoretical frameworks. In his book, Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability, McRuer (2006) uses queer theory and Disability Studies to examine As Good As It Gets (1997). He considers the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality intersects with compulsory able-bodiedness. According to him, people attempt to define their own status of personal able-bodiedness by comparing themselves to a seemingly flawless identity that, although largely unrealistic, becomes the generally accepted norm. He argued that this film uses ableist and heteronormative epiphanies—means by which the norm slightly tolerates the queer disabled subjects to invite them into the narrative, to offer a sense of wholeness, however illusionary (p. 12). An able-bodied status is achieved through heterosexual romance. In this process, a queer disabled character, Simon, loses his queer/disability subversiveness by helping the two heterosexual main characters, Melvin and Carol, to accomplish their heterosexual coupling.

Hixon (2008) also examines a film, The Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975), from a Disability Studies perspective informed by queer theory. He contends that, in spite of its normative ending, which kills queering bodies and reinforces social norms, this film still subverts both heteronormative expectations and conventional attitudes towards corporeal differences by means of the representations of disabled/queer characters with normative authority. In other words, this film sexualizes or queers Dr. Scott/Frank-N-Furter and reduces the medical gaze, which is “a major regulatory power acting upon bodies to partition them into normal and disabled” (p. 180). In addition, he suggests that the normative narrative resolution may function to parody “normative happy-endings” (p. 186), as well as to exhibit
Frank’s determination not to assimilate into social norms. As a result, this film succeeds in offering a potentially liberating and transformative experience for the spectator.

In summary, using textual analyses, recent scholarship on disability and film found that cinematic conventions and narrative strategies contribute to a discursive construction of disability and ambiguous ideologies within texts which may be interpreted as subversive. It is still flawed, however. As recent scholarship, too, relies substantially on textual determinism, it overlooks the meaning-making process between audiences and film texts. As such, much of the investigation of representations of disability in film could be enriched by more critical dialogue with qualitative audience research influenced by Cultural Studies.

**Cultural Studies and Film Studies**

Cultural Studies was loosely formalized in postwar UK as an anti-elitist, radically contextual, and multi-methodological project concerned with emancipating the working class. Cultural Studies scholars sought to legitimate working class cultural practices and to mobilize their authenticity as a resource for social revolution. Cultural Studies has always been an unfolding discourse, responding to changing historical and political conditions, and always marked by debates, disagreement, and interventions. Over time, Cultural Studies scholars expanded this focus to incorporate questions about race and ethnicity, and gender and sexuality, and Cultural Studies eventually expanded to include globalization, post-colonialism, pedagogy, youth subcultures, aesthetics, history, and many others. While the UK tradition of Cultural Studies emphasized class struggle, the US counterpart developed somewhat differently. Carey (1989) points out that US Cultural Studies was grounded in a pragmatic, liberal-pluralist tradition. It opposed the dominant positivism of media effects research and deemphasized class to focus more broadly on the social practices by which
diverse groups achieve relative stability and consensus (as cited in Lindlof & B. Taylor, p. 60).

Culture in Cultural Studies is regarded as a terrain of conflict and contestation in which social relations in everyday life are produced and reproduced. That is to say, within a given culture, a continual struggle over meaning takes place in which subordinate groups attempt to resist the imposition of meanings which bear the interests of dominant groups. So culture is defined politically rather than aesthetically. Within a Cultural Studies framework, it is not the object of aesthetics, but the texts and practices of everyday life that are studied (Storey, 1996, p. 2). In a sense, Hall (1980) argues that cultural texts and practices are not inscribed with meaning, guaranteed once and for all by the intentions of production; rather, meaning is always the result of an act of “articulation” (p. 328). This process is called articulation because meaning has to be expressed, but always in a specific context, a specific historical moment within a specific discourse.

Informed by Marxism, Cultural Studies places culture under ideological scrutiny in two ways (Storey, 1999). First, the meaning of cultural texts and practices must be understood in terms of their social and historical contexts. However, Cultural Studies insists that the importance of culture derives from the fact that it helps constitute structure and shape history. Therefore, cultural texts must be examined for the ideological work that they do, rather than for the ideological work that they reflect. Second, culture is the site of profound struggle between members of dominant and marginalized groups, along ethnic, gender, generational, and class lines. Therefore, the analyses of cultural texts and practices must take into account such power relations, focusing on which perspectives are politically and socially prominent, or marginalized and silenced, and why.
Qualitative audience research

An important contribution of Cultural Studies is that it examines the audiences and media influence directly. Critical theorists tend to investigate texts and social systems and have generally moved away from the study of individual audience members and how individuals are affected by dominant messages and systems in media. Cultural theorists note that it is necessary to return to the audiences because ideologies are rarely stated directly (Lull, 2003), providing opportunities for audience members to read different meanings into the media texts (Hall, 1993).

Barker (2003) states that qualitative research methods have been used predominantly in Cultural Studies (p. 25). Cultural Studies recognizes how political, economic, and cultural aspects are fundamentally entwined rather than discrete. Alassutari (1995) asserts that Cultural Studies and qualitative research methods should be understood as a bridge between the humanities and the social sciences. By being consciously and self-reflexively eclectic in its theories, and pragmatic and strategic in its choice of methods, Cultural Studies has been important in promoting qualitative research methods (Barker, p. 25).

Work in Cultural Studies has centered on three kinds of approach: ethnography, textual analysis, and qualitative audience research. Many scholars define qualitative audience research against humanistic textual and quantitative based analyses (Hall 1980; Hermes 1995; Radway, 1984; Stacy, 1993). Other scholars argue that these two approaches share two basic tenets: 1) all mass-mediated messages have universal deterministic effects on the audience; and 2) popular media texts have one unequivocal meaning (Schiappa, 2008, Schiappa & Wessels 2007; Stromer-Galley & Schiappa, 1998). In other words, media texts and audiences are often placed in linear cause-and-effect relationships, so textually ascribed meanings get reproduced fairly directly in audience’s heads. However, Schiappa (2008) and other argue
that texts need audiences in order to yield the fullest possible analysis of meaning. A text does not have a single meaning but rather a range of possibilities defined by both the text and by its audiences. Responding to such needs, qualitative audience researchers seek to conceptualize meaning-making and claim that meaning is not an attribute of the media text, but is formed in interplays between media and the audience.

Most of the Cultural Studies-informed qualitative audience studies focus on TV or other popular media forms, such as novels, magazines, and so forth. Until very recently, audience research on film was quite scarce in Cultural Studies and Film Studies because the film medium was conceived as an art form only, and film scholars tended to take for granted that they could read the minds of the implied spectators. Likewise, the conceptualization of audience in mainstream Film Studies is based on spectatorship positioning, textual analysis, meaning as production-led, passive viewing, and unconscious meaning (Stacey, 1994, p. 24). In her ground-breaking essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Mulvey (1975) demonstrates the tendency toward a conceptualization of the audience in mainstream Film Studies, based on her textual analysis of several Hollywood classic films. She identifies the essentially patriarchal structure of classic Hollywood films, claiming that the cinematic apparatus positions men and women differently by putting the spectator in a masculine subject position. As a consequence, men on screen drive narrative forward, while the figures of women are reduced to objects of desire.

On the contrary, Cultural Studies has paved the way for a serious consideration of individual audiences’ actual readings. The history of film and the ways in which audiences are studied have been written mainly from the perspective of textual analysis or the canonical method of literary studies (Stacey, p. 260). Complementary to textual analysis, qualitative audience research has been in use in Cultural Studies and illuminated a meaning-making
process between texts and audiences. A wealth of scholarly research indicates that audiences’ interpretations add a new dimension to a study of meaning-making.

Stacey’s (1994) work on women’s memories of female Hollywood stars in *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*, counters the mainstream Film Studies perspectives on audiences. She conducted qualitative research on two hundred and thirty-eight UK working class white women over age sixty, who were asked to send her letters and to complete questionnaires. She found that three themes emerged from the data: escapism, identification, and consumerism. Even though escapism is treated as trivial and unworthy of academic engagement, and applied to popular culture enjoyed by women, she problematizes this dismissal, claiming that her participants not only escape into the luxury of Hollywood films, but also escape from the hardships, dangers, and restrictions of wartime in the UK. As opposed to female spectators positioning themselves in the interest of patriarchy, as suggested by text-centered analysis, her findings indicated that her participants responded to the ways in which stars can generate fantasies of power, control, and self-confidence (p. 158). While critiquing Film Studies work on consumption for perpetuating a very production-led approach to the subject, she reveals that her participants remembers Hollywood idols and their fashions as transgressing restrictive British femininity and employed them as strategies of resistance (p. 198). She concluded that her participants’ accounts of Hollywood stars pointed to the possibility of “uses of American femininity to rebel against what they perceive as restrictive British norms” (p. 238). Moreover, she adds that “the production of feminine self in relation to 'Americanness' signified autonomy, individuality, and independence to many spectators in the Britain at this time” (p. 238).

In focus group research of viewers of *the Cosby Show* (1984-1992), Jhally and Lewis (1992) found that their study participants make different meaning out of the show, depending
on their social locations, especially race. On the one hand, the White participants read the professional success of the Huxtables, the family on the show, as evidence that affluence is available to everyone regardless of race, in spite of being aware of racism and classism faced by the African American community. To reconcile this contradiction, the white participants attribute traits, laziness and stupidity, not systemic oppression, to the reason for such social inequalities. The African American participants, on the other hand, recognize the lack of reality on the show but are generally willing to suspend critiques because it is generally viewed as necessary to break stereotypes and to represent positive aspects of their community.

In *Black Women as Cultural Readers*, Bobo (1995) examines the unique positions that black women in the US occupy as consumers of literature and film about Black women’s experiences. She conceptualizes black women as an interpretive community (p. 2) and looks at the history of these women’s engagement with, and resistance to, cultural products. She notes that Black women have historically assumed the roles of “cultural producers, critics, and members of an audience” and that these roles have positioned them to “intervene strategically in the imaginative construction, critical interpretation, and social condition of black women” (p. 27). She focuses on Black women’s perspectives on three works portraying Black women: *Waiting to Exhale, The Color Purple,* and *Daughters of the Dust.* Based on extensive focus group interviews, she found that her Black female participants’ interpretations of the texts were different from those of professional film critics. In other words, her participants analyze the films through the lens of their “background, histories, and social and cultural experience” (p. 99). She adds that their interpretations are as varied, insightful, and well informed as those of professional critics. Bobo’s work on the reading practices of black women suggests that audiences who are accustomed to being denied access
to “positive” representations develop their own unique strategies to negotiate meaning in films.

Using focus group interviews, Stromer-Gailey and Schiappa (1998) compares audiences’ readings of *The Firm* (1993) and *Jurassic Park* (1993) with popular culture critics’ claims that these two films promote postmodern skepticism towards the institutions of law and science among Generation X. However, their findings indicate that Generation Xers interpret the texts differently than the critics. Their participants feel that these films illustrate the temporary corruption of science and law owing to the greed of specific individuals, while exhibiting their consistently positive faith in such institutions.

Analyzing the role of “killer women” in the films such as *Thelma and Louise* (1991), *Terminator 2* (1991), *The Quick and Dead* (1995), and *Tank Girl* (1995), Vares (2002) contends that “it is not possible to theorize how audiences respond to representations of violent women from textual analysis or anecdotal accounts alone” (p. 213). Employing focus group interviews with women in New Zealand, she found that female viewers make sense of such roles largely in terms of the genre with which the film is identified. Thus, those that enjoy *The Quick and Dead*, for example, do so, in part, because it disrupts the genre’s traditional representations of women, while those who dislike the film found the genre itself boring. She concludes that audiences’ sense of taste in movies is more often explained by genre preference than by explicit reference to gender politics: “Both genre and generic forms are shown to structure viewer expectation and thus influence the perception, selection, and interpretation of films” (p. 225).

In a reception analysis (text/audience) of *Rush Hour 2* (2001), J. Park, Gabbadon, and Churmin (2006) found that their Black and Asian focus group participants are just as resistant to finding race-based humor offensive, though the reasons these participants do not
find the humor offensive are different from those of the White participants (pp. 173-174). In comparison with the White participants, who interpret minority characters strictly within the confines of stereotypes, their Asian and Black counterparts found a positive source of pleasure in the negative portrayals of their own race and do not produce oppositional discourse. The scholars conclude that the generic convention and textual devices of comedy encourage audiences to naturalize racial differences as essential and natural, not culturally constructed, so audiences fail to challenge racial stereotypes.

**Disability and audience research**

Cultural Studies and Film Studies scholars have paid scant attention to disability and audience research. Only a few qualitative researchers (Kama, 2004; Ross, 1997, 2001; Velez, 2008; Wilde, 2004), informed by Disability Studies, Film Studies and/or Cultural Studies, have begun to question the textually-centered disability representation analyses. Their foci are on different kinds of media—TV, radio, and film—involving disability and disabled people’s perspectives of the media. UK-based scholar Ross (1997, 2001) examines disabled participants’ perspectives on TV and radio programming respectively. Using focus groups and a postal questionnaire, her first study (1997) found that disabled participants call for “removing the insulting label of disabled and making it ordinary” (p.76), criticizing unrealistic portrayals of disabled people in fiction and non-fiction TV programs. Foregrounding their desire to be represented as ordinary, the participants rarely identifies with disabled characters in dramas and soaps on the grounds that the characters are one-dimensional and do not accurately reflect the participants’ life experiences. The participants also feel negative about non-fictional TV programs (e.g. news reports) featuring disability. They also recognize the programs are not only replete with stereotypical and sensational images of disabled people, but give nondisabled people “expert” roles in discussing disability.
Ross’ second study (2001) is geared towards disabled participants’ reception of radio. Drawing on data gathered from focus group interviews, she found that 1) participants feel uneasy about stereotypical portrayals of disabled people in radio and the potential effects of the stereotypical images on disabled people; 2) participants are concerned about the uses of offensive language in radio, such as wheelchair-bound, crippled, handicapped, etc as well as the limitations of an auditorial medium to accurately describe disabled people (pp. 425-429).

Israeli-based scholar Kama (2004) discusses the ways in which mass-mediated images interact with psychological and sociological processes and help to construct audience members’ modes of self-perception. He interviewed 30 Israeli disabled people and asked them to describe their most remarkable memory of a disabled person in the media. In his findings, two prominent stereotypes, the Supercrip and the Pitiful Disabled, emerge from the data. He found that his participants wish to see more disabled people who “have done it” (overcome disability) presented as role models; he also founded that the Pitiful Disabled trigger the participants’ antipathy. He concludes that challenging situations confronting disabled people, such as social inferiority, exclusion, and stereotypical representation, prompts them to identify with the seemingly better stereotype (supercrip images rather than the pitiful images).

UK-based scholar Wilde (2004) scrutinizes disabled/nondisabled males’ engagement with portrayals of disability and impairment in UK soap operas, contextualizing their interpretations within wider material and discursive resources. With the help of focus group interviews, she found that most of disabled people/nondisabled participants remain silent on the topics of impairment or disability, or refuse to identify with such representations, reporting a much greater attachments to nondisabled characters. A considerable number, both nondisabled and those with acquired disabilities, interpret portrayals of impairment and
disability as natural justice (e.g., punishment for their wrongdoings), while those with lifelong disability take comparatively “rejective” positions. Wilde concludes that the disproportionately low levels of engagement with disabled characters are constrained by textual forms, disabling representations, and viewers' gendered identities than by preconceived preferences for nondisabled characters.

In his doctoral dissertation, *Audience Responses and Disability Representation in Four Films and TV Dramas: A Qualitative Audience Study*, Velez (2008) attempts to link the representations of disability in four films, *Prelude to Happiness* (1975), *Passion Fish* (1992), *The Sea Inside* (2004), and *Brooke Ellison Story* (2004), to the perspectives of audience members who had acquired mobility disability on these representations. Velez’s findings from five focus group interviews sometimes coincide with and at other times depart from those of textually oriented analyses made by several Disability Studies Scholars. In other words, several scholars in the community (Longmore, Klobas, Norden, etc.) demand more realistic depictions of disabled people in the media, cautioning that negative images of disabled people may have harmful effects on audiences, including disabled people. In accordance with these scholars, all of Velez’s participants reject the stereotypical images and call for more realistic images which would more accurately reflect their lived experiences. Their rejection is based on the comparison the negative images to their personal experiences and their prior knowledge of similar cases.

What is more interesting about Velez’s findings is that most of the participants do not place a particular importance on such problematic images and/or films about disability. They have difficulty remembering the relevant film titles and/or images and some even avoid watching disability-specific films which possibly remind them of their traumatic life experiences. Contrary to some of the literature on disability representations and the disability
movement’s criticism, which take a unilateral stance towards such films, the participants do not unanimously agree with all of the films’ representations of disability. For instance, their reactions to *The Sea Inside* dealing with the topic of euthanasia for a disabled person, is worthy of attention. In terms of euthanasia, most of the participants have a different perspective from what Disability Studies scholars and disability rights activists do; the Disability Studies and disability rights activist community vehemently oppose euthanasia. The participants interpret euthanasia in the film as an individual choice, rather than a systemic oppression to erase disabled people. While not finding euthanasia offensive in *The Sea Inside*, the participants often critique another similarly-themed film, *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), for its superficial treatment of a disabled person who commits suicide. Due to the artistic quality, real-life story, and multiple points of view involving the main character’s decision to kill himself ascribed to *The Sea Inside*, the participants retain a critical distance from the scholars and the activists.

According to Davison and Sieber (2005), disabled people are generally excluded from knowledge-production, even though their common history has generated a wide variety of art, music, literature, and science (p. 499). By interviewing disabled people, all of the above-mentioned research incorporates the perspectives of disabled people into knowledge-production. The research has contributed to Cultural Studies and Film Studies, with placing the perspectives of disabled people at the forefront. However, each research has its limitations. For example, Ross’s two studies (1997, 2001) do not adequately explains why stereotypical images are pervasive in TV and Radio and what impacts the images have on the lived experience of her disabled participants. In addition, Kama (2004) fails to problematize the audiences’ identification with characters with supercrip images. He does not account for why his participants prefer the supercrip images which are controversial in the Disability
community. The supercrip images have been under particular scrutiny in Disability Studies scholarship because “they [supercrip images] do not reflect the day-to-day reality of most disabled people” (Shapiro, 1993, p. 17). Not thoroughly engaging with the media texts their participants reference, both Ross and Kama fail to bring complexity to their research findings.

To the contrary, Wilde and Velez succeed in capturing the complexity of their study participants’ media engagements by combining textual and reception analyses. Through a critical examination of dynamics of meaning-making, they found that the participants’ readings of disability are compounded by textual forms and features, such as genre, style, narrative, etc. However, both of the scholars tend to under-analyze the social locations of the participants, including disability, when they engage with the media. Textual forms and features alone do not sufficiently account for the participants’ dis-identification with disability and disabled characters or their disinterest in disabling imagery. Methodologically, such under-analyses may be partly due to the fact that most of the primary participants are disabled and thus have different understandings of disability, in comparison with nondisabled people’s, or partly due to a lack of individual interviews in both studies which could bring out richer data for an in-depth analysis. This dissertation not only combines textual and reception interviews nondisabled participants, but include individual interviews as part of its research methods. This strategic combination and inclusion can be complementary to and extending the findings of these two studies. In the following chapter, I describe the research methods and procedures, including selecting participants, data collection, data analysis, ethical concerns, and limitations of this dissertation.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Chapter 3 mainly deals with the research methods and procedures. To begin with, I provide an overview of qualitative methodology and audience research. Then, I describe how I selected films and participants, collected data, analyzed the two films and the interviews and memos, and investigated ethical concerns, in addition to describing the limitations this study may have.

Qualitative research

Qualitative research relies on the following beliefs: 1) there is no single truth; 2) reality based on perceptions is different for each person and changes over time; and 3) what we know has meaning only within a given situation or context (Burns & Grove, 1993). Simply put, all knowledge claims are “situated,” in that they arise out of particular social/historical contexts and therefore represent particular rather than universally applicable claims. Without a doubt, defining qualitative research is elusive because of the broad and varied range of studies within this genre. Brantlinger, Klingner, and Richardson (2005a) explain that the confusion about qualitative work is partly due to the fact that “qualitative approaches developed somewhat simultaneously [in] separate disciplines” (p. 93), including ethnography in anthropology, symbolic interaction in psychology, phenomenology in philosophy, discourse analysis, and interpretive work in cultural studies, etc. However, what these studies share are similar epistemology (a theory of knowledge), methodology (a system of methods used in a particular area of study), and methods (specific tools for research), which we call qualitative research. Qualitative research is referred to as “a systemic approach to understanding qualities or the essential nature of phenomena within a particular context” (Brantlinger, et. al., 2005b, p.195), and it involves empiricism, knowledge production,
particular research skills and tools, production of scientific evidence, and coherent articulation of results (pp. 195-196).

Qualitative researchers aim at making sense of, or interpreting, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 3). Cresswell (1998) adds that “the researcher builds a complex and holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (p.15). Qualitative methods enable researchers to know people personally and to see them as they are developing their own definition of the world. They look for what people experience in their daily struggles within their own societies. In doing so, qualitative researchers employ an array of methods to collect data, including interviews with individuals and groups, observational notes, participant journals, focus groups, life history interviews, and textual analysis. Qualitative research methods enable the study of the process of making meaning or the formation of people’s perspectives (Bikeln & Moseley, 1988, p.155). These methods can document patterns within research subjects’ lives, revealing how they construct meaning around these patterns.

Qualitative research differs from quantitative research, which centers on numbers and counting (e.g. statistics and surveys). Bogdan and Biklen (2003) define four characteristics of qualitative research (pp. 4-7). First, qualitative research is naturalistic; it uses actual settings as the direct source of data, and researchers are the key instrument of data collection. All the research methods associated with qualitative research are heavily dependent on the researcher as interviewer, observer, facilitator, communicator, and interpreter of data. In other words, all data is filtered through the researcher. In this respect, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) emphasize the creative, intuitive, and improvisational role of the researcher by likening qualitative researchers to bricoleurs, jazz musicians, and quilt-makers. Second, qualitative research is
descriptive. Data collection takes the form of words or pictures rather than numbers. Lofland (1971) indicates that qualitative research involves the task of delineating forms, kinds, and types of social phenomena and documenting them in loving detail (p.13). Third, qualitative research is concerned with the process, not the result, through which researchers examine phenomena. Fourth, qualitative research is inductive in that researchers build abstractions, concepts, hypotheses, and theories from details. By contrast, quantitative research is based primarily on deductive forms of logic and theories and hypotheses are tested in a cause-effect order.

Qualitative research methodology can follow five traditions of research strategies: ethnography; grounded theory; case study; phenomenological research; and biography (Creswell, 1998, pp. 27-37). In ethnography, the researcher studies an intact cultural group in a natural setting over a prolonged period by collecting primarily observational data. In grounded theory, the researcher strives to develop a general and abstract theory grounded in the views of the participants. The research process involves collecting interview data and analyzing the data, using several methods of coding to develop the theoretical model of the process, action, or interaction under investigation. Case studies aim to develop an in-depth analysis of a program, event, process, or individual. Multiple sources of data are used, including documents, archival records, interviews and observations, to illustrate the case in depth. Understanding the essence of human experience about a phenomenon, as described by the participants, is the objective of phenomenological research. It usually involves long interviews with a limited number of participants designed to develop patterns and relationships of meanings, as experienced and described by the participants of the study. Narrative research is a form of inquiry in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals through the collection of life stories, usually by interviews. It provides a detailed picture of
individual lives. The choice of particular research strategy depends on the objective of the study and the phenomenon under investigation. For example, researchers might study an individual’s experience (phenomenology), or individual’s life (narrative research), explore the process, activity, events, and outcome (case study and grounded theory), or explore behaviors and rituals of a culturally defined group (ethnography).

**Qualitative audience research**

Qualitative audience research is often used as a generic term indicating several methodological approaches that theoretically and empirically studying the role of mass media in the production and circulation of meaning in society. In other words, this type of research seeks for empirical evidence, through historical or ethnographic research, that documents the production and circulation of meaning. More importantly, a specific form of qualitative audience research, reception analysis, combines textual analysis and empirical research by focusing on the complex signifying process of the interaction between media text and audience in a specific cultural context. Jensen (1993) defines reception analysis as “a qualitative form of audience-cum-content analysis, comparing the discourses of media content and the discourses of the audience – as recovered through interviewing, observation, and textual analysis – in order to interpret and explain the process of their interaction in specific social contexts at a particular historical juncture” (p.21). In a similar way, Staiger (1992) distinguishes between reception and textual study, noting that reception study “tries to explain an event (the interpretation of film), while textual study is working toward elucidating an object (the film)” (p. 9). Reception analysis researches “the history of the interactions between real readers and texts, actual spectators and films” (p. 8). Reception analysis offers insights into the interpretive processes and everyday contexts of media use, where audiences rearticulate and enact the meanings of mass communication (Jensen, p.26).
Following in the footsteps of qualitative audience research tradition, this dissertation attempts to keep theory and methods balanced by combining interviewing of nondisabled subjects and textual analyses of the films under consideration. Such combined research methodological tools provide this study with empirical rigor and theoretical imagination; data collected from interviews strengthens the reliability of findings, while textual interpretation adds theoretical underpinnings to those findings. Likewise, this dissertation connects visual discourse and everyday life, “[w]here representation and reality are mutually constituted” (Natter & Jones, 1993, p. 155). For fostering nuanced analysis of discourses from the participants and the films, the dissertation needs two different, yet intertwined methods, textual and reception analysis

**Textual analysis**

Textually, this dissertation looks at how these film texts, *Oasis* and *Malaton*, visualize disability/disabled people and how they demand spectator positions (implied spectators located in a text). In doing so, the grammar of film, the narrative structure, characterization, setting, camera, editing, and sound were carefully analyzed. As regards to the grammar of film, this dissertation pays special attention to character and narrative structure. Fiske (1987) put an emphasis on character and narrative as crucial categories of textual analysis. According to him, characters are discursive constructs embodying ideological positions and values; they are not individuals existing independently of textual and broader social relations. Narrative functions as another important element of textual analysis, in that it orients the viewer’s understanding of stories and naturalizes meanings and events that are ideological.

Another primary concern of this textual analysis is the social, economic, and historical factors operating within the two films under consideration. As Jameson (1981)
states that all films, whatever their historical settings, always speak to the moment of their production in some way, so all the cultural products are political (p. 20). Likewise, many of the disability-themed films, including *Oasis* and *Malaton*, are set and were produced and consumed at a time of social upheavals caused by the financial crisis in Korea (1997-2001), making political statements to post crisis socio-cultural landscape marked by an alleged crisis of masculinity. Therefore, in addition to the image analyses, this dissertation pays attention to discourses outside of the film texts as well. Put simply, the dissertation zeroes in on the ways in which the two films articulate, dramatize, or play out the workings of dominant discourses of their time.

To do so, the dissertation seeks to read the cinematic responses at the level of "political unconscious," where the two films address, resolve, or complicate social contradictions and tensions operating within the dominant ideologies of the economic/masculinity crisis (Jameson, 1981). In line with this, the dissertation also puts the disability films in parallel with other popular texts of a crisis in masculinity during and after the economic turmoil, such as domineering female, terminally ill, middle class males, and successful global sport star narratives.

However, the two techniques of textual analysis, image and discourse alone, cannot generate the nuanced understandings of these two films because it is actual audiences who make sense of images, situated in a specific historical time. This is why this dissertation also brings in the method of qualitative audience research.

**Film selection.**

*Oasis* and *Malaton* feature leading disabled characters: Gongju, a woman with cerebral palsy in *Oasis*, and Chowon, an autistic man in *Malaton*. *Oasis* revolves around Gongju’s romantic relationship with Jongdu, a male assumed to be mentally retarded.
Malaton tells about Chowon, who completes a full marathon race with the support from his mother and his coach. The films have been chosen for their artistic/commercial achievements, disability-centered narratives, and descriptions of disability in relation to other categories of difference, gender, family, sexuality and/or class, all of which are open to multiple interpretations.

Safran (1998) writes that popular films influence the perceptions and opinions of audiences. These two films received artistic and commercial successes: five million admission tickets sold for Malaton and one million for Oasis. They also garnered critical acclaim, both internationally and domestically. In addition, these films place disability at the center of the story. In other words, disability functions thematically, not just metaphorically in both films. Disability is often a means for setting the narrative in motion and it is used in the films as a catalyst for the dramatic tensions and conflicts among characters (Poore, 2007). At the same time, these films investigate the social stigmas attached to disability. Moreover, these films describe supposedly different disabilities (physical and non-physical) and genders (male and female), constructing disability “through negotiations within the ideologies of the normative nuclear family and patriarchy” (E. Kim, 2007). Considering that disability intersects with gender, sexuality, and other social constructs that inform our conception of "normal" bodies and minds (Meeuf, 2009), the two films provide the critical site for understanding the complexities of these intersections.

Reception analysis

Through focus groups and individual interviews, this dissertation contemplates the ways in which Korean graduate students make sense of disability/disability representations. Meaning lies not in the text alone, but in how audiences interpret texts. This type of empirical analysis not only complements or modifies textual analysis, but explores the various aspects
of the film-viewing experience. In this dissertation, focus groups were used as the primary research method and follow-up individual interviews as secondary.

Simply put, the ways in which these participants respond and relate to these disabled characters and their family members in the films (and disabled people in social world) signify the complexities of the participants’ subject positions in relation to ideal bodies and minds, which the dominant ideologies of the time attempts to construct. The integration of textual and audience research acts as an internal and interpretive validity check to “dispel doubts … [about] the reality of a finding … [avoiding] validating a claim on the basis of source-method-researcher agreement” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002. pp. 241-242). In addition, it increases “the researcher’s credibility as an analyst of the scene” (Cantrell, 2008, p. 9).

**Participant selection.**

A group of nondisabled Korean graduate students from a Northeastern US private research university participated in this study. Snowball sampling was employed in this study, wherein participants suggested other participants as potential informants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). This snowball sampling occurred by means of two distinct methods. The first was by word of mouth as participants made recommendations of other participants. The second method in recruiting participants was through the internet. I posted the description of the study at the university’s Korean Student Association online website. Nineteen Korean students (10 females and 9 males) out of 25 were selected for this study through on-line ads at the website and personal connections and the participants’ recommendations in June-March 2010. The other six were excluded because of the following reasons: scheduling conflicts, non-attendance, and/or unwillingness to participate in focus group interviews.
Participants.

In this dissertation, I am interested in nondisabled participants’ understandings of disability, disabled people, and their families in the films under investigation and in how their interactions with such disability imagery inform their interpretations and constructions of disability, disabled people, and families of disabled people in the social world. In addition, I wanted to know how gender and socio-economic status influenced the participants’ meaning making of disability. Due to this research interest, absence of disability, gender, class, and nationality were initially considered in my selection of the participants. Age, sexual orientation, religions, years of living in the US, and fields of study were not considered the selection criteria. However, findings in this study indicate that gender and socio-economic status are not a significant factor to affect the participants’ conceptualization of disability, disabled people, and their family members.

The participants all range in ages from 25 to 36 at the time of the interviews. Seventeen participants self-identified middle or upper class, in addition to two who self-identified as lower class. All were Korean citizens and enrolled or expected to enroll as a full-time student at the university. All of the participants had no disabilities or immediate family members with disabilities, except for one whose brother had polio. In addition, all of the participants, except for one (different participant who worked with disabled people for years), had limited contact with disabled people in their life. I did not have absolute standards or criteria in defining limited or extensive contact. Rather, I defined it in a relative sense, based on my data. Except for the one person who worked with various disabled people for years, the rest of the participants, 18 participants, had something in common; they had personally interacted with one to three disabled people, including researcher, in their entire life. Most of
the information they have about disability and disabled people is from media. The names of all participants in this study are pseudonyms.

**Research methods.**

The focus groups and follow-up interviews I conducted were composed entirely of Korean men and women identified as nondisabled. In order to explore their perspectives on disability, focus group interviews and follow-up individual interviews were used. Focus group discussions are an ideal way to study how people feel about things and to delve into the complexities of their opinions and attitudes (Stokes, 2003), and it is, therefore, the predominant method in audience research (Bobo, 1995; Katz & Liebe, 1990; Morley, 1980; Park et al., 2006; Stromer-Gailey & Schiappa, 1998; Vares, 2002). Focus groups “place particular importance on interaction between participants” (Freeman, 2006, p. 492). Focus groups are particularly “appropriate for the generation of new ideas formed within a social context” (Breen, 2006, p. 466).

Focus groups are not, however, a method free of limitations (Breen, 2006; Freeman, 2006). Although all the participants share the experience of interacting with disability imagery in the films and disabled people in their social world, they differ from each other in many ways: age, the extent of exposure to disabled people, knowledge of disability and media, assertiveness in expressing their opinions, etc. Therefore, power dynamics inevitably operate within the group, potentially silencing less privileged participants. Additionally, some of them may not feel comfortable sharing personal information or opinions about a “politically correct” subject in a group setting, or, may not be able to think of pertinent information at the time of the focus group (Freeman, p. 493). To help mediate these potentially unproductive concerns, I used in-depth follow-up interviews as a supplement to the focus groups. By way of this strategic combination of qualitative methods, focus groups
and individual interviews, this dissertation has the advantage of first identifying a range of experiences and perspectives, and then of layering more depth and nuance where needed (Duncan & Morgan, 1994).

Focus groups stimulate talk from multiple perspectives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 101) by providing a more natural setting than an one-to-one interview (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 115) and in-depth interviews, which involve extensive probing and open-ended questions, allow the researchers to understand, in considerable detail, how people think and how they came to develop the perspectives they hold (Bogdan & Biklen, p. 3). In other words, focus groups give participants a greater range of responses in a shorter time period, while individual interviews provide greater depth from individual participants. Likewise, in this dissertation, the combined design allowed the participants to share their experiences and perspectives in the group setting and then provided time for these individuals to elaborate on their personal experiences, attitudes, and beliefs. I benefited from this combination, which enhanced the richness of data, thereby enabling me to better respond to my research questions.

**Data collection.**

Before I began to interview the participants, I drafted a plan and received approval from the Institutional Research Board (IRB) in June 2009. When I met with the participants in initial meetings, I introduced myself as a Ph.D. student who is interested in the representations of disability in Korean media, who was eager to learn about their thoughts on the representations. After I briefly explained research interest, interview process, and confidentiality, the participants were asked to read the form and bring the signed form to the scheduled interview. In order to make them feel more comfortable about this “weighty” subject, I revealed my disability (visual impairment) in the initial meeting and tried to help them to understand my disability as a motivational force for the study, to promote their
participation by explaining the potential benefit of the study: increased disability awareness. Also, I assured the participants that the researcher’s identity would not influence whatever they would talk about. The majority of the interviews, all but four, were conducted either in the homes of the participants’ or various campus sites. At the request of some of the participants, four (2 focus groups and 2 individual interviews) were conducted at my home.

19 participants were divided into four groups along gender lines: 2 female and 2 male groups. The rationale for this division was to compare how males and females read film texts that involve disabled characters and their family members. When dividing the groups, I also considered the closeness among the participants, availability at the time of discussion, and site preferences. They did not receive any monetary compensation, but snacks and refreshments were provided in return for their participation. Participants in each group were asked to watch the films in their entirety and then select the scenes they felt were important with regard to disability; afterwards members participated in two group discussions over the course of nine months between June of 2009 and March of 2010. However, due to a certain amount of time commitment for film viewing (about 2 hours for each film), a small number of the participants chose to attend group discussion(s) only on the grounds that they watched the films at their homes prior to group discussion(s). In these cases, the participants were handed a copy of the DVD(s) at least three days prior to the designated meeting(s). Time spent on each focus group range from one and half hours to three hours. Thirteen participants attended the two group discussions required for this study, while six participants only attended one discussion due to their unexpected scheduling conflicts.

At the beginning of each interview, I reviewed the consent form with the participants, explaining that the focus groups would be audio-taped but that their names and other identifying information would be removed from the transcript to protect their confidentiality.
The participants were instructed not to share any information acquired during the discussions outside of the group. Participants were also told that they could refuse to answer any questions and that they could leave the study at any time. After reviewing the participant’s consent forms, I collected a signature from each member. In case that they did not bring the form, I arranged a new form for their convenience.

Previous to any focus group meeting, I drafted a small number of questions (about 4-5) related to the depiction of disability in the films and the real lives of disabled people. The questions included storylines and important scenes from the films, portrayals of disability/disabled people/their family members in the films and other media, the participants’ experiences interacting with disabled people, and the subjects’ thoughts on portrayals and living conditions of disabled people. I would ask the group the questions as needed and then I would strive to not interrupt their responses. In the focus groups, I would play a facilitator role. However, if necessary, I probed for stories the participants would bring to the discussion and added my own thoughts, too. This strategy would leave the participants with an impression that they are not observed and the researcher is “one of the participants.”

During the interview sessions (both in focus groups and individual interviews), I tried to conceptualize myself as more like a facilitator or participant, not a subject expert or interviewer with authority. Adding my own thoughts to some parts of the discussions was unavoidable because I was often asked my feelings and opinions about some issues. However, I tried to keep my perspectives at a minimum level and to make the discussion go smoothly. For example, when some female participants asked me about how I thought about a rape scene in *Oasis*, I replied “I was upset, too, but there may be a different interpretation of it. Is there any different idea or thought?” Therefore, I don’t think adding my thoughts significantly affected either the flow of the discussions or the patterns and themes emerging
There were six participants who had previously watched one or both of the films. Some of them stated that disability did not catch their attention when they first watched the films. At that time, they just considered the films, artistic (*Oasis*) and entertaining or inspirational (*Malaton*). Because I talked about my research interest at the beginning of every interview, to some extent, it could have led participants to focus more on disability during the interviews. To counteract its possible influence, I encouraged them to freely talk about anything and made them sure that it did not have to be solely disability-related issues.

Nineteen follow-up individual interviews were conducted at the participants’ convenience (between July of 2009 and February of 2010). The average of each interview was one and half hours. Between the focus groups and individual interviews, I thoroughly reexamined the transcripts of each focus group and identified relevant narratives to follow up on the individual interviews. After transcribing the interviews and reading and reading them, I looked for emerging themes and areas to explore. I conducted follow-up interviews to clarify some themes gradually constructed while collecting the data. The follow-up interview usually started with the following open-ended statements: “Tell me about your experience of the previous group discussion(s),” and “Tell me about your thoughts on the films.” Most participants often appeared disoriented with the broad openness and their lack of memory, asking what to do and where to begin. Whenever their confusion occurred, I rephrased the questions, “Was there anything that impressed you during the discussion(s)?” or “Any scenes that you were drawn to?” I also brought several questions related to the emerging themes from the previous discussions and/or questions concerning comments in need of clarification. I encouraged them to share whatever they remembered and asked clarifying questions such as...
“What do you mean by…?” or “Could you tell me more about…?” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

In all, the total amount of data collection for this study included eight focus groups and 19 individual interviews, totaling 43 hours and 23 minutes and yielding approximately 400 pages of transcripts and memos. All of the interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and analyzed between June 2009 and February of 2010. The interviews were conducted in Korean and later translated into English. Transcriptions and memos were coded and analyzed throughout the data collection process so as to identify emerging themes.

**Data analysis.**

This dissertation made use of analysis found in grounded theory research, which involves an inductive process of drawing themes from data gathered in the form of transcripts and memos. In discussing ground theory, Strauss and Cordin (1998) state that:

> [t]heory derived from data is more likely to resemble the ‘reality’ than is theory derived by putting together a series of concepts based on experience or solely through speculation (how one thinks things ought to work). Grounded theories, because they are drawn from data, are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action (p.12).

Likewise, when collecting the data and conducting interviews, I did have theories with me, but was not trying to prove or disprove them. I started with a theoretical framework based on Disability Studies, Film Studies, and Cultural Studies. Everyone always has a theoretical framework and assumptions. However, I was not looking for anything specifically and was open to any findings that came out of my data. My dissertation advisor was also helpful in the data analysis process. He read all the transcripts and assisted me to better
articulate and refine the themes that came out of the data. My recursive readings of transcripts and memos and the analysis of data enabled me to identify and articulate the patterns and themes that emerged from interviews with the nondisabled Korean graduate students. The advisor’s comments made the data analysis richer and more complex and helped me think beyond my perspectives.

Auerbach and Silverstein’s *Qualitative Data: An Introduction to Coding and Analysis* (2003) provided guidance for data analysis. According to the authors, the data analysis process goes through four types of stages: identifying repeating ideas, articulating themes, comparing theoretical constructs, and developing theoretical narratives (pp. 35-40). To begin with, a number of relevant passages captured my attention after transcribing the raw data and reading them. The relevant passages were marked in several colors. Then, I proceeded to extract the “repeating ideas” or “text-based categories” included in the selected relevant text. I used this procedure by means of the electronic underlining function of Microsoft Word software in which the focus groups and in-depth interviews were transcribed. No computerized analytical tool was employed. The repeating ideas identified are “disability is a medical/functional problem,” “disabled people are abnormal,” “disability is a complex process,” “I am (symbolically) disabled, too,” “we (nondisabled people) are discriminated against, too” “we are fearful of becoming disabled or having a disabled child,” “they (disabled people) are (want to be) like us,” “they can do anything,” and so forth.

Second, after finding the “repeating ideas” or “text based categories” in the transcripts, I grouped them into larger units that Auerbach and Silverstein term “theme” (p. 38). These themes were implicit topics shared by a group of repeating ideas. Three themes emerged from the repeating ideas: 1) a hegemonic understanding of disability, 2)
metaphorical use of disability and its impacts, and 3) normalization of disability and disabled people.

Third, upon completing repeating ideas and themes, I moved on to the next step in the process, the creation of higher level interpretations, “theoretical constructs.” A theoretical construct is a larger idea that encompasses several themes and connects the themes with the existing literature in the field in which I engaged (Disability Studies, Cultural Studies, and Film Studies). The repeating ideas and the themes were refined and supplemented with the relevant literature in the three concerned scholarships.

Finally, a “theoretical narrative” is a summary of the conclusions that links the theoretical constructs found through the process of coding, and specifying “what we have learned about our research concerns” (p.40). Based on the findings of this study, I discuss several implications within and beyond academia, concluding with future directions for disability research method and theory.

**Ethical concerns**

A researcher's personal beliefs and values are reflected not only in the choice of methodology and interpretation of findings, but also in the choice of a research topic. As Devault (1999) states, "[L]ike every researcher, then, I wrote about others through the lens of self – but a self that developed and changed as I met with those others" (p. 190). Interview researchers have long been concerned with identity and its effects on the interviewing process (DeVault & Gross, 2006). Learning to be a good qualitative researcher means that one should examine how one’s subjectivity and perceptions are changed during the research process (Villenas, 1996). For this reason, this study allowed me to explore my subjectivity as an individual with an invisible disability who is middle class and male and has a high education.
In addition, I came to realize how my subjectivity informs and is formed by the whole research process.

As this research progressed, I became aware that the nature and style of the interviews shifts with researcher and participants’ "emerging and changing identity" (Villenas, 1996, p. 722), and the "border between insiders and outsiders is not always clear" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 87). At a theoretical level, I was worried if my supposedly different perspectives on disability (me as an outsider) would result in some barriers that inhibit open communication. On the other hand, I was also wondering if my privileges (being middle class, highly educated, and male) would be ideologically agreeing with some of the participants who are similarly situated in terms of social locations. I was an insider along with my participants because of my invisible disability, which would place me in an able-bodied position and secure privileges of the nondisabled. All participants, including myself, had grown up in an ableist Korean culture, unlikely knowing that the able-bodied are privileged over disabled people. In addition, I found my insider/outsider status shifted as I engaged with female participants. Alcoff (1995) states that “location and positionality should not be conceived as one-dimensional or static but as multiple and with varying degrees of mobility” (p. 106). When researchers position themselves as "insiders" or "outsiders," they attempt to stabilize and make coherent that which is tenuous and discursively constituted. I experienced such status shifts, especially while interacting with female participants. However, I see such changing identities during the research process as strength, complicating the whole research process as well as reflecting my subjectivity.

At a practical level, I had concerns about how I would handle situations in which my subjectivity could affect interactions with participants, research design, and analysis. Also, I was concerned about how to establish a good rapport with nondisabled Korean participants.
First off, in order to help address the power dynamics between the participants and myself, I disclosed my research interest and purpose in the project at the beginning of initial meetings and each interviewing. I also added my personal history that I was mainstreamed into regular schools, like them, due to my invisible disability and my parents’ concern over stigmas attached to disability. I also revealed that I had had literally no idea and interest on disability until I encountered discriminatory experiences (at the age of thirty) and began to study on disability.

Consequently, it became clear to all the participants that though the idea for the study was personal, I was more like “one of them” as an insider. I also added my own stories during the focus group conversations even though I tried not to be as obtrusive as I could. I believe these strategies made participants more comfortable with me. I was the “researcher,” but I was also a facilitator and group member; therefore the potential alienating power dynamic between researcher and subjects was, to a point, mitigated.

Second, in order to disrupt the binary between dis/ability, I tried to avoid “me as disabled researcher,” or a “spokesperson” for the entire disabled population, at the same time, I discouraged the nondisabled participants from trying to speak for all of the nondisabled people, because it is indispensible for this study to see how different subjects navigate the fluidity of their relations to dis/ability. I tried to blur a rigid binary system between disability and ability and researcher and researched in order to excavate the layered power dynamics operating within supposedly fixed identities.

Third, I made a great effort to develop rapport and make the participants feel comfortable enough to talk about what they thought and felt. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) state “[a] good part of the work involves building a relationship, getting to know each other, and putting the subject at ease” (p. 94). Right before each interview, I started with small talk, such
as talking about myself and my experiences as international students, asking about the participants’ classes or families, to create comfortable mood. I also tried to engage with participants on a semi-regular basis, hanging out and getting together socially.

Whenever issues of subjectivity and its impacts on the research process came up, I made journal entries, did peer debriefing and consult with my dissertation advisor, who provided critical feedback on descriptions, analyses, and interpretations. These considerations and strategies enabled me to get closer to the complexity situated between these supposedly fixed identities and improve the overall design of the study.

**The limitations of the dissertation**

Since this dissertation is qualitative audience research of the two Korean films, it has certain limitations. First, I used a small sample (eight focus groups and 19 individual interviews involving 19 Korean students at the US university). I chose them due to their availability. Yet, the selection and organization of a small number of interviews was not intended to claim about representative sampling or generalizability. These 19 participants should not be said to be representative of their nationality, age, or social group.

Moreover, this dissertation is concerned about the perceptions of the two films, rather than their effects on the perspectives of these participants. Focus groups are not intended to elicit generalizable results (Morgan, 1994). The results, then, should be viewed as descriptive and interpretive. Relying primarily on qualitative data gathered from a reception analysis, this dissertation incorporates these participants’ perspectives within my own analysis, in an effort to provide a more empirically-grounded study. Second, this dissertation does not integrate disabled people who have been marginalized and silenced into the research. However, this dissertation pays more attention to the perspectives of nondisabled persons on disability,
people who are said to construct hegemonic understandings of disability with which Disability Studies scholars must contend.

Lastly, this study does not include the participants in the process of data analysis. Ideally, I would have given each participant a transcript and asked for their feedback. Also, I would have asked them to interpret the findings with me. However, I chose not to do so for two reasons: time and financial limitations and the possibility of compromising integrity of data. I was concerned that working with participants on interpretation would delay the completion of the project. In addition, I could not afford to offer a monetary return for their feedback. Moreover, in line with several scholars, including Acker, Barry, and Essesveld (1991) and Naples (2003), I am not fully convinced that interpretative collaboration always leads to better analysis; it is incorrect to assume that participant’s edits to the transcript will lead to more valid data.

In the next chapter, I give an overview of disability in Korea. More specifically, I explore the ways in which Neo-Confucianism and its alliance with patriarchy inform Korean perspectives on gender and disability. I also look at how such perspectives affect the lives of mothers of disabled children and those of disabled women in Korea. An examination of these two subjects is necessary to understanding the two films, since both films deal with marginalized females, (a profoundly disabled woman in Oasis and a mother of an autistic son in Malaton).
CHAPTER 4: DISABILITY IN KOREA

In this chapter, I describe how the meaning of disability in Korea is constructed at the intersection of gender, family, and religion. To begin with, I examine how religious ideas (mainly Neo-Confucianism) and its alliance with patriarchy affect the ways in which Koreans think about gender and disability and how gender and disability are performed within multiple institutions, including family. Then, I zero in on mothers with disabled children and disabled women as unique subjects of research in which gender and disability compound each other. An exploration of these two subjects not only provides a deeper understanding of the intersection of disability and gender dynamics in Korea and gives a good foundation for understanding the films in the following chapter.

In 2010, the Korea Ministry of Health and Welfare (KMHW) reported that the number of registered disabled people in Korea was about 2.5 million, 5% of the nation’s population, which has increased by an average of 11.2% a year since 2000. However, a higher numeric figure, ranging from five to seven million, was unofficially estimated (J. Lee et al., 2012). J. Park (2002) explains the disparity that the disappearance of disabled people from official records is caused by several factors: parents’ unwillingness to register their children as disabled at an early age, insufficient benefits for being registered as disabled, limited definitions of disability category, and a lack of awareness about the registration process. In addition, this numerical difference can be accounted for by the country’s strong collectivist and paternalistic orientation. More concretely, in a society where sameness is highly valued over difference which is negatively connoting “unnatural” or “unwanted” (Grinker, 2007, p. 239), people are unlikely willing to put themselves under a disability category. In such a highly homogenized culture, disability is constructed as something undesirable or even considered to disrupt the idea of harmonious interdependence.
(cooperation, solidarity, and oneness). I try to locate disability in the Neo-Confucian culture of conformity where the unity of the whole is more important than the individuality of the one, producing healthy body as a requirement of people,

In Korea, disabled people have been dehumanized with words such as byungshin or deungshin, roughly translated as crippled or retarded. Today, because of work done by disability rights activists, terms such as jangaein or an individual with a disability and jangaewoo a “disabled friend,” are used. The word “jangae,” however, carries the meaning of “obstacle,” “difficulty,” and “dysfunction,” in addition to the meaning of “disability.” Even though these newer terms attempt to highlight the personhood of an individual with a disability rather than his disability, disability is still considered a shameful experience for individuals and their families in Korea (Kim & Kang, 2003). Uncritically emphasizing personhood over disability may provide a rationale for preserving disability as a secondary condition and for disregarding the special and diverse needs of disabled people. It also seems to condescendingly overcompensate for dehumanizing language; this is another example of flawed liberal humanism which leads us to the hegemonic production of knowledge.

**Neo-Confucianism and gender relations**

Disability is not simply an objective condition, but also a social characteristic of a person, influenced by culture, religion, gender, class, and other factors (Y. Lee & Bursztyn, 2010). These culturally informed perspectives mediate how people make sense of disability and respond to disabled people. To better understand the Korean culture, one must first be familiar with the Neo-Confucian tradition and its effects on the lives of Koreans. Neo-Confucianism is a religion that originated in China but it became a prescribed way of life, rather than a religion, in many Asian countries including Korea (Chan, 1998). Although Neo-Confucianism lost its position as state ideology long ago, contemporary Neo-Confucianism
persists as a cultural force, still affecting Korean people’s life in every aspect. The main concerns of Neo-Confucianism are correct actions to build harmony across society. In order to build up harmony, including strong family ties, the greater importance of community over individuals and social cohesiveness, a hierarchical relation is emphasized based on age, sex, and social status. Such hierarchical relation extends to family dynamics and social interactions. The Korean culture is vertically stratified where recognition of higher or lower status is extremely crucial in communication. Group harmony is stressed as well as homogeneity. One is taught not to call extreme attention to oneself, especially if it will lead to shame or embarrassment.

The Korean culture also places strong importance on family loyalty. Harmonious relationships among the family members are expected and strongly reinforced. Traditional values support the patriarchal system of roles and relationships in Korean families. The relation of husband and wife was represented by the idea of sincere wife (Kuo, 1998). Hierarchical gender relations were created based on the supposed “natural order” of things. Neo-Confucianism considers the male as a positive being (yang) and the female as a negative counterpart (ying), whose interactions kept the world in balance. Yin was associated with the feminine, the passive, the negative, and the weak while yang was associated with the opposite qualities and forces (e.g., the masculine, the active, the positive, the strong). While men’s body and mind was cultivated as a superior gender, those of women was constructed as an inferior other, functioning to maintain and reproduce the family line through their corporeal bodies. T. Kim (2003) argues that Neo-Confucianism ethics continue to influence rigid gender scripts positioning men as subjects and women as “subjectless bodies” in need of control and protection (p. 105). According to her, men were expected to transcend their bodies (learning, philosophy) to become “superior men,” while women’s success, bound to
the imminent and the domestic, was rooted in their ability to mimic a concealed and deferential ideal, defined by virginity or maternity (pp. 105-106).

Korean family life is generally based on Neo-Confucian philosophy and ethics that strongly inform the traditional values and roles of family members. The husband is expected to be the breadwinner, major decision maker, head of the family, and enforcer of rules. The wife’s role is to provide emotional nurturance to her husband and children and to assume full responsibility for the household tasks. She is expected to be passive and submissive to her husband and his family. When family members fail to perform the role behaviors demanded by tradition, disharmony and shame may be brought to the family, and women may be reprimanded by actual or threatened abandonment by the family (Ho, 1995). Historically, women of Korea have been treated as second class citizens, without regard to their social and familial positions. The constitutional acknowledgement of gender equality facilitated by democratic ideology and economic growth in Korea has improved the socio-economic status of women. Under Neo-Confucianism, men were expected to transcend their bodies (learning, philosophy) to become “superior,” while women’s success, bound to the intimate and the domestic, was rooted in their ability to mimic a concealed and deferential ideal, defined by virginity or maternity (T. Kim, 2003). Nonetheless, Korea's history of strong patriarchal social traditions and the Neo-Confucian ideology of male superiority act against gender inequality and play a critical role in the continuing control of women’s bodies. The emphasis on disciplining and controlling women’s bodies was central to Neo-Confucianism since these bodies were so valuable due to their potential capacity to bear children (especially boys).

Women of Korea as a group continue to face systemic patterns of discrimination that they encounter in multiple settings. The Neo-Confucian influence helps to keep Korean
women subordinate socially and economically. Although the female economic participation rate has increased, they still face structural inequalities and discrimination. Sung (1998) notes that Korean traditions, especially in families, remain strong, despite many social and economic changes. Patriarchal gender relations have been used to secure the wife’s subordinate position. Women’s domestic work is treated as inferior, for men to do it has been regarded as shameful, defaming masculinity (Yang & Rosenblatt, 2001). In spite of increased awareness of gender inequality at home, there has been no fundamental change (W. Chung, 2007). Even in dual income families, most of the wives do household tasks and rear the children by working harder themselves even though some women may cope with this challenge by negotiating with their husbands for assistance (Soh, 1993). At work, female workers are discriminated against. For instance, female workers are more likely to work in non-permanent jobs than their male peers (in 2010, 63.5% versus 39.7%) (Y. Kim, 2010). Compared with men, women in Korea also have lower socioeconomic status. For example, married women particularly, if they have children, tend to be channeled into unskilled, temporary labor mainly due to the cultural belief that they lack marketable skills (M. Kim & H. Kim, 2007).

In summary, the Neo-Confucian notion of the female body (with its emphasis on the corporeal) continues to hold true in contemporary Korean society. In opposition to men’s body, women’s body should be preserved physically pure for the sake of her potential for child bearing because she may be progressing towards the roles of wife and mother. This kind of gender hierarchy still persists and has a negative effect on the lives of women as a subordinate group. Korean women as a group have a lower social status, fewer opportunities for higher education, work, and poorer financial resources than their male counterparts. In a
society such as Korea with a high level of gender discrimination, cultural norms and values exacerbate the phenomenon.

**Perceptions of disability**

Disabled people have been viewed as inferior human beings in Korean society and received little to no assistance from feudal kingdoms to contemporary government. The Neo-Confucian tradition deeply rooted in Korea culture led to belief that disability makes one inferior in a hierarchical society. In traditional Asian culture, a disability was attributed to moral, spiritual, or supernatural causes (Matsuda, 1989) and was interpreted as a punishment from God, a visible reminder of God’s wrath for their ancestors’ sins, or parents’ neglect for the upbringing of the child from pregnancy (Cho et al., 2000). However, as Kim-Rupnow (2001) points out, such a traditional concept coexists with a medical point of view in contemporary Korea. According to her, for those with a medical viewpoint, disability is believed to be caused by genetic defects or diseases. They believe disability must be treated and even eliminated by medical interventions because it reduces the individual's quality of life and causes clear disadvantages (pp. 119-121). More importantly, the “pride and shame” principle surrounding the family (Morrow, 1987; Yang & Rosenblatt, 2001) adds another burden to the parents who have disabled children, for the entire family is looked at as inferior and is shamed if there is a disabled child in the family.

Neo-Confucian family ideology and hierarchism result in two opposite attitudes towards disabled people such as aversion and compassion. Both of the attitudes have greatly affected the lives of disabled people. Strong family ties provide a safety net for disabled people (Y. Lee, 2010). Within the context of traditional Korean values and family structure, disabled people may receive important family support and their concerns may be solved.
within the boundary of the family. However, strong familism often serves to marginalize disabled people from a public sphere because disability is perceived as family shame.

Korean people greatly highlights saving face and the emphasis of the family’s name is embodied in Neo-Confucian value system which evaluates a person by the excellence of his or her body, speech, writings, and face (K. Jung, 2001). In other words, each family member is responsible for upholding the family’s good reputation with his social success. If each member does not succeed or attain a desirable social standing, this is considered to bring shame to the family. Disabled family members are more likely devalued because they are believed to bring shame to their families by not measuring up to societal ideals of success and by threatening the homogeneity of society (Kim & Kang, 2003; Yang & Rosenblatt, 2001).

Neo-Confucianism begins with family relationships and ascribes different roles and responsibilities to various family members. Korean society also values obligations and care for other family members, the oldest son is expected to take responsibility for the aged parents. In that cultural context, a person with disability is likely thought of as a burden and responsibility to other members. Put simply, disability serves to inhibit reciprocal family ties. In this regard, You and McGraw (2011) point out that disabled people are shunned in Korea partly because they are seen to interfere with the ability to perform one’s role in the family, such as providing care for parents in the old age and to observe ancestor worship rites in gravesite ceremonies (p. 581). Within a family-centered society, disability becomes familial matters rather than social ones. Responsibility for the care of disabled children remains firmly within the family, and the institutionalization of a family member continues to be perceived as shameful (Cho & Kim, 2006).
Mothering disabled children

In almost all societies, mothers of disabled children are likely to have unique experiences. In raising their children, they must navigate powerful societal structures that not only devalue their children and themselves, but put primary caregiver roles on their shoulders. In the same way, mothering disabled children in Korea is challenging and complicating. Mothers with disabled children in Korea must negotiate socio-cultural systems anchored in the patriarchal family context that limits both agency and autonomy of their children and themselves. The mothers are easily at odds with social norms which stigmatize their disabled children and downplay the validity of parenting disabled children. Mothers with disabled children in Korea are subject to be given the burden of care where care-giving is considered to be a woman’s work, not as a skilled professional. It is one of the occupations that are still undervalued and neglected. The mothers are expected to align themselves with norms of ideal motherhood; mothers are positioned as ever available, ever nurturing providers who raise children, assist husbands, and manage a household. In addition, their mothering is often complicated by negative perceptions of disability, mother-blaming culture, and a lack of familial and social support.

Negative perceptions of disability are still pervasive in Korea and lead to the emotional stress and hardship of these mothers. Many Korean mothers report that they rarely found helpful people on the bus or the subway (Cho et al., 2003). In this ableist and misogynistic tradition, the major blame is often placed upon the mothers. The widely practiced patriarchal and ableist traditions are identified as the source of the shame and guilt associated with having a disabled child (H. Kim, 2012; You & McGraw, 2011). Several mothers express their strong distress about the blame that continues to be placed on themselves about having disabled children within and beyond their own family settings.
Families of disabled children likely undergo the stigmas attached to disability (Yang & Rosenblatt, 2001). S. Cho, Singer, and Brenner (2000) reveal that mothers of disabled children internalize such socially imposed blames and have feelings of shame, self-blame, denial, and anger for having disabled children. Their finding also indicates that the mothers had previously planned to commit suicide with their disabled child when they found out the child’s disability.

Less involvement in caring for disabled children by other family members, especially male spouses is identified (Cho, Singer, & Brenner, 2003; Grinkler, 2007; H. Kim, 2012; You & McGraw, 2011). Many mothers in these studies put an emphasis on the importance of other family members’ involvement in care-giving their disabled family members. In addition, lack of adequate social support helps worsen the situations for mothers. According to Oh and Lee (2009), Korean mothers of children with developmental disabilities express a high level of overall burden, particularly in financial domains, mainly caused by lack of social support. More specifically, several factors are identified as caregiver burden, including increased disability-related cost and less social support. Korean mothers of disabled children are situated within socio-cultural contexts that undervalue disability, naturalize their primary caregiver roles, and therefore delimit agency of their disabled children and themselves.

The situations of disabled women in Korea

Disabled women across culture are very often situated at the intersections of multiple identities, consequently occupying the lower rungs of society. Korean disabled women are one of the most marginalized groups in the country, facing multiple forms of discrimination. Disabled women in Korea are economically vulnerable as a result of low employment rates and low incomes. To be specific, in education, employment, social welfare, and marriage, disabled women experience significantly more discrimination than disabled men, nondisabled
women, or general population. To begin with, disabled women of Korea have a far lower level of education than their comparable groups. 63% of disabled women are elementary school graduates or below, despite the fact that the educational system purports to welcome disabled persons, while the rate for disabled men is 41.6% and the rate for nondisabled women is 29.4% (Byun et. al., 2002; H. Oh, 2006). The biggest difference lies within higher education. Only 4.2% of disabled women fall into the college graduate or above category: among disabled men, the rate is 11.2% and among nondisabled women, the rate is 20.6% (Byun, et al., 2002). K. Kim (2010) explains such low level of disabled women in education with two reasons premised on the patriarchal alliance between disability, gender, and class: the family does not have enough money to support education for disabled female members and/or the family does not want their disabled female members to be seen in the public areas, including school.

Needless to say, in Korea where education remains the single most important factor affecting social mobility, disabled woman with insufficient education are likely placed at a lower socio-economic status. In comparison with similarly oppressed groups, they show the lowest status in employment (Byun, et al., 2002, p. 64-65). The monthly income of disabled women who were employed was 55.8% of the income of employed, disabled men. Only 19.5% of disabled women are employed, while 43.2% of disabled men are employed. Average monthly income for employed disabled women is $450, only 52.8% of salary of disabled men. Employed disabled women very often report discrimination against promotion, treatment, and benefits. Some 84.3% of disabled women do not have any kind of pension, leaving them in a precarious situation when they become older. Disabled women in Korea also have a high unemployment rate than both disabled men and the non-disabled population. In 2005, the unemployment rate was over seven times higher than that of the total population.
The 2005 employment rate of disabled women was 20.2%, while 44% of disabled men were employed (J. Park, 2007). The unemployment rate of disabled women was 29% in 2005, compared with 4% for the total population. Due to lack of information and low level of social participation resulting from patriarchal oppression, disabled women make use of fewer social welfare benefits than their disabled male counterpart (K. Kim, 2010).

Disabled women face discrimination in other areas, too. The marriage rates of disabled women are lower than that of those without (Byun et al, 2002, pp. 67-69). The rates of unmarried disabled women in their 20s, early 30s, and late 30s stand at 65.0, 37.7, and 15.9 % respectively whereas the rates of those without disabilities are 40.1, 10.7, and 4.3 % respectively. Their divorce rate is historically higher than those without. This may indicate that they are not very often able to maintain happy marriage. Oh (1998) investigates causes of divorce which range from excessive demands for dowry, to infertility, to physical and verbal abuse.

Sexual abuse and domestic violence are also crucial issues for disabled women. According to a 2005 survey carried out by the Research Institute of the Differently Abled Person’s Right in Korea (RIDRIK), 49.5 % of disabled women have experienced several kinds of violence. More specifically, they have experienced verbal abuse (42.8%), beating (9.5%), rape (2.5%), confinement (0.8%) and others (pp. 31-34). Disabled women experience verbal or physical violence such as harassment, beating and rape even at home and at the group facilities. Disabled women who become victims of such violence are pressured from telling anyone, and because they often live in isolation from society, they do not know who to ask and where to go for help.

Disabled women are very often excluded from education, employment, social welfare, and many forms of participation in activities that give meaning and value to life. The
low employment rates and wages and high unemployment rates not only suggest inequalities on the basis of gender, disability, and class, but make it difficult for disabled women to make a living. In addition, in the society where their fundamental sense of security is denied, it becomes harder for disabled women to live as independent individuals.

Disabled people, especially disabled women, have been perceived as asexual and unsuitable as romantic partners, too. Milligan and Neufeldt (2001), describing these perceptions as myth, note that the negative perceptions are mainly shaped by the stigmatizing effects of disability. In line with this, discrimination and oppression that disabled women of Korea often confront are deeply rooted in the Neo-Confucian cultural system, designed to subordinate gender, disability, are in contraposition to ideal womanhood whose bodies and minds are expected to conform to the Neo-Confucian norms. Korean society has certain expectations of one’s productivity based on a gender role. In a rigid hierarchical system, Koreans are expected to fit themselves into what society imposed on them. How about Korean disabled women? Do they measure up to such cultural expectations?

To begin with, the perceived image of non-feminine or less feminine often contributes to making an assumption that disabled women are incapable of having sex or going through pregnancy (Lloyd, 2001). In a similar vein, disabled women in Korea are positioned as a threat to the unity of patrilineal families because of their perceived inability to procreate or risk of producing disabled children. Within the Neo-Confucian context, a woman was thought of as instrument to bear a child, especially a son, who would continue the patrilineal family system. The absence of a child, especially son, or the presence of a disabled child would mean the termination of the family. In a nutshell, they very often fail to meet the expectations placed upon Korean women.
Korean disabled women are not necessarily cut out for their culturally defined supporter roles, either. Morris (1995) points out that ability-oriented society rarely assigns disabled women care-giver roles because they are very often seen as dependent and helpless. Traditional Neo-Confucianism defined an ideal woman in terms of filial daughter, faithful wife, and dedicated mother, who was expected to sacrifice her life to make her three men—father, husband, and son—recognized in the public sphere. This culturally defined gender role expectation has changed little over time. Given that these women rarely meet such requirements, they become opposites of ideal women: undesirable. This is because society and family hardly provides these women with accommodations or resources either to be that healthy, supportive figure.

The culturally dominant scripts of femininity tend to reject disabled women's impaired bodies. Therefore, disabled women often experience internal and/or external devaluation (Wendell, 1996). Disabled women’s non-normative bodies rarely conform to hegemonic standards of beauty and sexual fitness. Their bodies not only violate hegemonic regime of attractiveness, but may well connote sexual inability to perform in normative sexual activities. Such aesthetic and functional expectations are designed to fulfill the heterosexual male desire. Whether constructed as sexually active or not, disabled women are likely placed outside the criteria of heterosexual male pleasure-givers, have little opportunity to have voices as sexual subjects. In a society where male sexual desire and pleasure are sanctioned, while female’s is suffocated and even punished, it is taken for granted that sexuality of disabled women is even more suppressed and denied. In chapter 5, by analyzing two films, Oasis (2002) and Malaton (2005), I illustrate the ways in which disability and gender, under the Neo-Confucian patriarchal gaze, are more suppressed with the advent of neoliberalism.

In this chapter, I investigate the construction of disability in two highly acclaimed Korean films, Oasis (C. Lee, 2002) and Malaton (Y. Jung, 2005). More specifically, I examine the process by which disability, as a political identity and embodied experience, is co-opted by patriarchy and neoliberalism. In doing so, I first situate the films within the context of the “male in crisis” caused by the 1997 Korean economic breakdown. Then, I introduce three theoretical concepts to examine the films. Lastly, I textually analyze each film for their narrative structures, character development, genre, and styles.

The findings indicate that, in spite of the possible good intentions of the directors, both films are deceptively hegemonic due to their reliance on ableist and sexist assumptions about disability. Throughout the films, the dominant ideologies of patriarchy and neoliberalism are rearticulated through sexualizing a disabled woman in Oasis and through blaming the mother of an autistic son and remasculinizing the son with the familiar trope of “supercrip” in Malaton.

Context

One of the most important abilities films have is to imaginatively address, resolve, or complicate social contradictions and tensions that are irreconcilable in the social realm from which they emerge (Jameson, 1981). Likewise, many of the disability-themed films, including Oasis and Malaton, respond to the historical moment of their production in unique ways. More specifically, Oasis and Malaton reveal how, complicit with the neoliberal reforms engendered by the financial crisis in Korea, hegemonic masculinity not only legitimized its position even in a time of male crisis, but relegated women, lower class, and disabled people to the margins. In other words, hegemonic masculinity remained intact by adopting new neoliberal values: efficiency, free competition, self-help, and survival of the
fittest, while the statuses of non-conforming identities were downgraded. Thus, in order to effectively understand the oppressive marginalization of disabled people, situating the films in the context of neoliberalism is necessary. In the context section, I argue that during the economic crisis period, forces of neoliberalism and patriarchy together privileged elites and further marginalized unprivileged groups.

Neoliberalism is a set of economic and social policies and processes originated in the 1970s that serve to maximize the free market and minimize government expansion of social programs. Premised on the principle that the markets can and should advance human well-being as well as social good, neoliberalism values competitive markets and the freedom of individual choice and devalues governmental attempts to provide social resources (Cooper & Randall, 2008; Harvey, 2005; Kumashiro, 2008; Sewell, 2009). Neoliberalism holds negative perspectives on the welfare state, due to its assumed bureaucratic inefficiencies. According to M. Friedman and R. Friedman (1990), welfare spending in a neoliberal sense is regarded as either “spending someone else’s money on yourself” without considering keeping “down the cost” or “spending someone else’s money on still another person” with little concern for the economy (p. 117). Neoliberalism often leads to policies that reduce governmental regulation of trade and expand the privatization of public services (e.g., health care, prisons, education, etc.). Consequently, these processes result in the diminishment of public and democratically governed spaces, while often widening social inequality.

Over a short time span of four decades in the latter half of the twentieth century, Korea transformed its economy from an underdeveloped agricultural economy to an industrialized economy. K. S. Chang (1999) refers to it as “Compressed modernity,” noting that the “South Koreans have experienced Westerners’ historical development of two or three centuries over merely three or four decades” (p. 30). Such rapid economic growth in Korea
was possible due in large part to a state-led, chaebol-centered (family-owned conglomerate), labor-exclusive and export-oriented development strategy driven by three consecutive authoritarian regimes (1961-1987). However, economic success was gained in exchange for the deferral of political freedom, the violations of human rights, the collapse of small and medium business, and the exploitation of lower class workers and women (H. Kim, 1998; S. K. Kim, 1997). The collusion between the state and the chaebol, coupled with its attendant aftereffects, were challenged in the late 1980s by democratization movements. Facing the tension between democracy and market economy, the Kim Yong Sam administration (1993-1998), the first civilian government since the early 1960s, took neo-liberalism as its basic ideology and pushed a faulty globalization policy, which opened financial markets but did not introduce the market principles of responsibility and punishment, and failed to have the chaebols restructure in response to the changing conditions of the global economy (Ha & Lee, 2001; Hundt, 2005; Lim & Jang, 2006; Yun, 2010).

The financial crisis (1997-2001) in Korea was due in large part to the sudden withdrawal of money by foreign investors and signaled the end of the government-driven economy and the advent of the globalized neoliberal economy. Throughout the crisis, Koreans did see the powerlessness of their government and the collapse of eleven chaebols, both of which were perceived to be the main engine for the nation’s rapid economic success over the previous decades. The rise of Korean economic development, once praised by world economists and the IMF (International Monetary Fund), came to be discredited as crony capitalism—a distorted market system with the overly close “state-banks-chaebols” connection (Ha & Lee, 2001; Lim & Jang, 2006; Yun, 2010).

In the face of accumulated foreign debts, the Kim Yong Sam administration was left with no choice but to turn to the IMF for a bailout. The IMF agreed to lend $56.5 billion to
Korea on the condition that the nation must follow even stricter neoliberal reforms by restructuring its own financial and governmental systems. In response, the next civilian government—the Kim Dae Jung administration (1998-2003)—opened up financial markets for foreign investment, increased the flexibility of the labor market, decentralized and restructured the financial sectors of the "chaebols", and cut its public budget (Ha & Lee, 2001; Shin, 2010).

Koreans themselves were not only shamed by such foreign intrusion, but also suffered enormously from its social consequences, including: mass unemployment, unparalleled rises in poverty, diminished social services, rising school dropout rates, increasing suicide rates, and divorce and domestic violence (A. Kim, 2004; World Bank, 1998). Along with these consequences, the crisis caused Koreans to witness the collapse of the preexisting values and institutions that had upheld male patriarchy and family systems. Countless families were disintegrated; their male breadwinners, now jobless, were even displaced from their families, and some parents sent their children to orphanages or, worse, just abandoned them on the street due to severe economic hardships.

Poverty and inequality have a collusive relationship alongside class and gender lines. To begin with, those who fall into the category of the lower class are hit the hardest. Several studies (Ha & Lee, 2001; S. K. Kim & Finch, 2002; Song 2006) reveal that the lower classes are most vulnerable to unemployment because they have fewer resources and skills to be transferred for employment during and after the crisis, in comparison with the middle/upper classes who benefited from the pre-crisis boom periods and have enough resources and translatable skills. In addition, the changes brought about by the financial crisis have a harsher impact on another disadvantaged group, women. In particular, during the corporate restructuring process after the crisis, married women and pregnant women were first to be
fired, thus forcing the women entering labor market to delay marriage (S. K. Kim & Finch, 2002; Song, 2006). Many policies aimed at helping women's causes were also scrapped in the wake of the crisis.

The neoliberal-oriented social welfare policies in the post-crisis era, in addition to the nation’s inadequate welfare system, have exacerbated the woes of historically unprivileged groups as well (Crotty & Lee, 2005). Taking the health care area as an example, C. Kim (2005) points out that the government’s social welfare policies followed the neoliberal, rather than the pro-welfare, trend by promoting the privatization of public hospitals, reducing the number of health personnel in the public sector, and deregulating occupational safety and health (pp. 569-573). However, the neoliberal health reforms have hindered access: people have to pay more in both private and public hospitals (p. 574). Also, the market-friendly social health insurance policies in support of the welfare of workers excluded non-regular workers who are mostly women and lower class people, ineligible for social health insurance (Song, 2006).

Korea’s neoliberal shift reveals that, from its beginning, neoliberalism advanced the interests of economic elites, concentrating wealth and capital in the upper strata of society (Ha & Lee, 2001; Lim & Jang, 2006; A. Kim, 2004). It was the capitalist elites, chaebols, and foreign investors who benefited the most from the nation’s neoliberal transformation, which was accelerated by the IMF’s structural reforms, while underprivileged groups have been forced to bear the burdens of the economic restructuring with stagnant or dwindling incomes.

While, in a crisis like this, male privilege might have been subject to criticism, Modellski (1991) claims that “male power is actually consolidated through cycles of crisis and resolution, whereby men ultimately deal with the threat of female power by incorporating it” (p. 7). In other words, masculinity is armed with a self-defense mechanism that can
constantly overcome and incorporate its own perceived crisis. In a Korean context, the strong tradition of patriarchy constructs the nation in androcentric terms. K. Jeong (2006) notes that “a threat to the nationhood of Korea can also, by extension, be interpreted as a threat to the Korean masculine subject” (p. 16). In a similar vein, Joo (2007) comments that the family is an important site where male subjectivity is cultivated and reinforced. Thus, male struggles within family are dramatically manifested and allegorize the nation’s crisis in power and authority. Joo further argues that in turbulent social upheaval situations, many Korean films emphasize the importance of family values and patriarchy by presenting remasculinized male heroes (pp. 213-219).

However, the traditional concepts of masculinity are recreated and rebuilt in accordance with shifts from government-controlled economy to a global market-driven economy. Both masculinity and neoliberalism are compatible with each other in that their coalition can effectively control and exploit marginalized groups for their mutual benefits. Neoliberalism promotes self-reliance, rugged individualism, untrammeled self-interest, and privatization, equating a lack of state interference and labor market efficiency with human freedom (Sewell, 2009). In short, by ridding the concept of the public good and the community and replacing it with individual and familial responsibility, neoliberalism calls upon individuals to sever from their group identities.

The collusive alliance between neoliberalism and patriarchal masculinity is critical in covering up the real victims of the crisis, minority groups, and suffocating their voices. In addition, in order for neoliberalism and patriarchy to be absolved of their social responsibility and thus to secure their interest, “the social safety net is reduced to bare minimum in favor of a system that emphasizes personal responsibility” (Harvey, 2005, p.76). The alliance has a significant implication for historically disenfranchised groups, including disabled people.
Since, within the neoliberal framework, individuals should be in charge of finding their own solutions to their lack of health care, education, and social security, disadvantaged groups who hardly receive social support often fail, only to find themselves blamed and marginalized in the illusive neoliberal logic. Even if some of the disadvantaged group members successfully manage such requirements, they are unlikely able to avoid carrying the burden of engaging in endless self-assessment and self-development to stay relevant to the fast-changing free market. In the mean time, male and capitalist dominant positions are redefined and bolstered and disadvantaged groups are stigmatized as social drains, relegated to the periphery. More importantly, the agency and voices of the groups, especially disabled people, are suppressed and usurped, only to find themselves as an imaginary signifier of perceived (able-bodied) male suffering caused by the economic crisis. The circumstances of less-privileged are problematically read as evidence of the privileged male suffering. In other words, disabled characters in films are appropriated for remasculinization purposes.

In a similar vein, during and after the crisis, popular media texts exhibited symptoms of remasculinization and neoliberal collusion. Media narratives included the collapse of the nuclear family and anxiety over the breakdown of patriarchal gender relations. At the same time, individual success stories about overcoming the crisis and participating in global competition prevailed as well (Y. Cho, 2008; Chung & Diffrient, 2007; J. Lee, 2002; Song, 2006). The narratives worked to neutralize the discomfort resulting from both internal and external threats. I draw a parallel between the disability texts and other symptomatic texts of “anxious masculinity,” “remasculinization,” and “neoliberal fantasy” during and after the economic crisis, such as family disintegration narratives featuring “bad” females and physically/mentally weak males, and global success narratives, such as those of sport stars.
First, in relevant media in this era, tragic middle class husband characters were often employed as signifiers of the crisis, while irresponsible, immoral, and over-consuming female figures were represented as conduits of Western cultural and capitalist penetration, bringing irredeemable shame and destruction to the male characters and their families. J. Lee (2002) reveals that in the 1990s media texts, ailing, middle-aged salary men in middle class families were canonized as altruistic and patriotic victims of the Korean modernization project. They were considered to be the driving force of the phenomenal economic growth, and the subsequent economic failure was symbolically linked with problems of health and body.

The popular media also supported the symbolically castrated husbands by blaming wives for their overzealous consumption habits and lack of loyalty to their husbands (Chung & Diffrient, 2007). Song (2006) found family breakdown discourse was popular in the crisis period. According to Song, the breakdown in the family results from fathers not being able to fulfill their leadership role as economic providers and decision makers within the family due to the social crises, and thus their lack of patriarchal control leads to a dysfunctional family. Paradoxically, neoliberalism and patriarchy are framed as not responsible for the family collapse. Rather, the discourse identifies the causes of the family breakdown as wives and mothers who do not conform to the traditional caregiver roles.

Other interesting popular media texts featured individual success stories on a global scale in spite of the national crisis. Chanho Park, a Major League baseball player, and Seri Park, a Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) golfer, came to national prominence during the crisis period and their great success drew huge public attention. Their great performances represented the nation’s capability for overcoming the crisis, as well as a symbol of Korean supremacy. Analyzing the media coverage of the two national celebrities, Y. Cho (2008) found that Korean professional athletes’ worldwide success highlights
individual responsibility over social responsibility and independence over interdependence which strongly reflects neoliberal tendencies and covers up the sources of the crisis.

How is the emergence of disability-themed films in the post-crisis period understood and do they fit into the male/national crisis narratives? I argue that disability narratives are situated in between family breakdown and individual success narratives as disability successfully travels across anxieties and desires expressed by both narratives. Disability becomes more visible and useful as an explanatory metaphor for “masculinity in crisis,” and the family/nation plagued by globalization, while disability (e.g. in inspiring stories) also dramatically embodies neoliberal subjects who “aspire to and accept the burden of managing their personal formation for a changing world with no governmental and communal support” (Abelmann, Park, & Kim, 2009, p. 229). Therefore, in these disability narratives, suffering male protagonists often seek to restore their undermined masculinity by disciplining female bodies and, at the same time, by re-engineering disabled bodies, including their own, to fit a neoliberal subjectivity wherein time and effort are voluntarily put into overcoming their own perceived deficiencies.

In *Oasis* and *Malaton*, disability is a representational strategy that serves as an important link between remasculinization and neoliberalization. More importantly, disabled males in the films are a vehicle for disseminating neoliberal masculinity. Disability becomes a visual signifier for (able-bodied) male suffering caused by the economic crisis and an object that needs to be overcome for a new masculinized subjectivity. More importantly, overcoming disability is a rationale for subjugating other fellow marginalized groups, especially women.

One who overcomes disability is recognized as a better person, someone who is respected and appreciated as well-rooted and competitive in the wake of the crisis. Ability is
considered to be a tool for social inclusion in a broad sense: a conduit for economic and social advancement. In reality, to disabled people, proving ability is not a ticket to the full inclusion into the neoliberal/remasculinized terrain because disability as an individual and group identity must be contained or removed to achieve the goals demanded by remasculinized and neoliberal projects. I suggest that the neoliberal turn caused by the economic turmoil aggravates an already present ableist and misogynistic tendency in Korean culture. Furthermore, it delegitimizes disability as a political identity and embodied experience, and prevents alliance-building between traditionally marginalized groups, including disabled people and women.

**Theoretical background**

In this chapter, I apply three theoretical concepts, McRuer’s (2002, 2006) “compulsory able-bodiedness,” Cornell’s (1995) “hegemonic masculinity,” and Mitchell and Snyder’s (1997, 2001) “narrative prosthesis” to critically analyze the two films. Using these theories, I seek to demonstrate how female subjectivities—specifically, sexuality and motherhood—are used to normalize otherwise deviant identities, including disabled people and especially disabled males. I also examine how disabled male subjectivities are used to ultimately affirm male/able-bodied identities as superior. In other words, the study of the three concepts helps unearth the structure where patriarchy, deeply rooted in sexism and ableism, can thrive by rejecting all that is “unmanly” and “non-able-bodied.” By employing these concepts, I highlight the process by which male disabled characters are humanized, normalized, and remasculinized at the expense of female characters, (both disabled and nondisabled) in order to pacify patriarchy made anxious by the 1997 economic crisis in Korea. In addition, I illustrate how pacification is in cooperation with Neo-Confucianism (rigid gender roles, women’s subordination within the family, and family as a core of social well-
being), and neoliberal values (independence, self-development, individual responsibility, and competition).

McRuer’s concept of compulsory able-bodiedness helps illuminate the ways in which the disabled subject is pressurized and absorbed into the normalized subject through linking with another compulsory identity, “compulsory heterosexuality.” McRuer (2002) defines compulsory able-bodiedness as the “destructive, normalizing requirement placed on disabled bodies by society” (p. 300). The systems of compulsory able-bodiedness necessitate sameness and passing as the unmarked essential way of nature (2006, p.8); McRuer (2002) states that the compulsory able-bodiedness “casts some identities as alternatives,” and ironically “buttresses the ideological notion that dominant identities are not really alternatives, but rather the natural order of things” (p. 301). Kafer (2003, pp. 79-81) aptly shows how compulsory able-bodiedness plays out for disabled people in two ways: first through the use of physical forces, such as forced sterilization, screening for disability, and hate crimes against disabled people; and second, through the cultural presumption of able-bodiedness, or denial of disability for visually unmarked disabled persons and a constant dialogue on questions of cure, loss, and disavowal for those with apparent disabilities. Kafer notes, “This assumption serves to isolate people with disabilities by masking the pervasiveness of disability throughout society” (p. 80).

Heterosexuality and able-bodiedness, as institutionalized techniques of normalization, are often combined in a mutual effort to conflate and regulate disability and homosexuality. Despite the fact that the two films do not explicitly address homosexuality, such heteronormative requirements are everywhere and most conspicuously manifested through sexualizing a disabled woman in Oasis and vilifying a domineering mother in Malaton, both of whom transgress against “normal” heteronormative culture anchored in heterosexual
families. Therefore, the compulsory able-bodiedness concept in addition to compulsory heterosexuality, reveals how disability as an embodied experience and political identity is contained and destroyed under the project of difference-erasing “sameness.”

Connell’s (1995) hegemonic masculinity is also very useful in that it not only investigates the relationship between masculinity and disability, but also reveals previously oppressed people’s participation in the oppression of others (for example, disabled males’ subjugation of females in the films) (Razack, 1998, p. 13-14). Connell (1995) defines hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (p. 77). In other words, hegemonic masculinity is society’s normative ideal, and its practices of masculinity are designed to institutionalize men's dominance by suppressing female subjects. However, hegemonic masculinity extends to other subordinate individuals and groups. Hegemonic masculinity is "constructed in relation to women and to subordinate masculinities" (p. 185-86). The notion of hegemonic masculinity is important for understanding inter- and intra-gender power relationships. Masculine hegemony exists over women (external hegemony) and over subordinate masculinities (internal hegemony). Hegemony is accomplished, therefore, through the differentiation between "normative" and "non-normative" masculinities (Kimmel 1990).

However, hegemonic masculinity is never a complete project, since it requires the absolute suppression of non-conforming men (disabled, homosexual, unmanly, lower class, non-white, etc.) and non-conforming women (disabled, homosexual, unfeminine, etc). At the center of hegemonic masculinity is an understanding of power relations that sustain control, whether in relation to women or to other men. Like compulsory able-bodiedness, hierarchical
power structures of hegemonic masculinity are most often found buried behind an “assumed normativity” (Gagen, 2007, p. 526).

Hegemonic masculinity is very fluid. Because of its fluidity, it sustains its dominance over subordinate groups. These days, hegemonic masculinity takes multiple forms, very often assimilating characteristics of other non-hegemonic identities through its own hybridization (Demetriou, 2001). In spite of its fluid boundaries and hybridization, the essential virtues of hegemonic masculinity remain intact. In an examination of US media coverage of legendary baseball player Nolan Ryan, media studies scholar Trujillo (1991) describes hegemonic masculinity as a cultural or idealized masculinity that filters itself into the common sense of a society. He argues that “the media repeatedly cast Ryan as a hegemonic masculine hero, reproducing archetypical notions of manhood” (p. 1). By examining media representations of Ryan, Trujillo further illustrates five distinguishing features of hegemonic masculinity: 1) physical force and control; 2) occupational achievement; 3) familial patriarchy; 4) frontiersmanship; and 5) heterosexuality.

Following in the footsteps of deconstructing hegemonic masculinity, Atkinson and Calafell (2009) add one more important trait of hegemonic masculinity to the list, what they term “a gray area,” that protects a male from responsibility for his “immoral and often violent actions” (pp.1-2). In order to support their provocative thesis, they analyze representations of Anakin Skywalker/Darth Vader in the Star Wars prequel trilogy. They contend that the Anakin Skywalker/Darth Vader character can escape responsibility from his own atrocious actions and emerge as a heroic figure because the narratives emphasizes his selfless past, external threats, and the deceptions that limit his agency. The dark guise can thus be blamed for his most egregious actions (p. 15). In other words, the Anakin Skywalker/Darth Vader character redeems himself from what he did wrong under aegis of the narrative protection.
Similarly, the two male characters with cognitive/developmental disabilities, Jongdu and Chowon’s (non)physical violence against females can be justified mainly due to their assumed innocence, which is often associated with mental impairments, their non-hegemonic masculinities as disabled males, and finally their irrational behaviors against female characters (understood medically rather than socially). Importantly, Atkinson and Calafell make it clear that the gray area is not entirely limited only to film texts. Rather, they suggest that the gray area, evasion of responsibility, is a predominant example of male defense, which “creates spaces of permissiveness for physical violence, sexual violence, harassment, and various forms of discrimination” (p. 17).

Therefore, one question remains: what factors make it possible for disempowered figures, such as disabled males, to be eligible for a proxy to hegemonic masculine culture? While Anakin Skywalker/Darth Vader as able-bodied male is a privileged figure who can move up the social ladder, in reality, the chance for mentally disabled men to be socially mobile is tenuous. However, unlike the Anakin Skywalker/Darth Vader figure, these disabled male characters possess two contrasting, yet interrelated attributes, hypermasculinities and vulnerabilities. Such perceived attributes enable hegemonic masculinity to conceal its sharp teeth and hide its hostility towards women, justifying domination over those considered non-hegemonic. In a time of male crisis, disadvantaged males, including disabled males, serve as metaphorical signifiers to reflect individual, social, or cultural breakdown.

Here Mitchell and Snyder's (1997, 2001) ideas about "narrative prosthesis" can help to provide a useful framework for investigating representational strategies and practices surrounding disabled male characters. Mitchell and Snyder (2001) contend that disability operates in Western literature as a stock feature of characterization and as an opportunistic metaphorical device to reframe, disrupt, and critique society. Narrative prosthesis is meant to
indicate that disability/disabled characters function as a “crutch upon which literary narratives (and authors) lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight” (p. 49). Disability is “constructed as the embodiment of corporeal insufficiency and deviance […] becoming a repository for social anxieties about such troubling concerns as vulnerability, control and identity” (Garland-Thompson, 1997, p. 6). In other words, disability is the stand-in for what is collectively feared and denied in society, aiding in completing what is considered able-bodied, normal, and desirable. Disability in literature betrays personal and collective desire to be/approximate normal, while symbolizing deviant and non-idealized otherness. Therefore, disability becomes a powerful metaphor to examine the “gap between the real and the ideal” (Yoon, 2003, p. 5).

In the words of Siebers (2008), “disability has provided the public imagination with one of its most powerful symbols…but it always symbolizes something other than itself” (p. 48). To some extent, the exclusive use of disability as metaphor is an empowering and even radical approach to social issues. However, disability as metaphor, when facilitated by a patterned mode of characterization and a mere plot-forwarding device, fails to create complex character development within literary and filmic texts and to echo the materiality of disabled people in society (Mitchell & Snyder, 2001, pp. 2-3). Moreover, it widens the distance between disabled people and other minorities by enabling other minorities to downplay the oppression of disabled people because disability is seen as the “other other that helps make otherness imaginable” (Siebers, 2008, p. 48).

Narrative prosthesis offers a good vantage point for discussing the ways hierarchical power dynamics are at play, in light of disability representations in/outside Oasis and Malaton. Narrative prosthesis plays out in two ways: between (non) hegemonic groups and within non hegemonic groups. Within the films, the disabled male characters are rehabilitated
and remasculinized through objectifying their narrative prostheses, (non) disabled females. The female characters conversely aid their male opposites in developing insights in their own lives. Similarly, outside the films, appropriating the perceived vulnerabilities and hypermasculinities of disabled male characters, their narrative prostheses, able-bodied people, including filmmakers and possibly audience members, successfully normalize their presumed marginalization and reconfirm their hegemonic masculinity and able-bodiedness. The disabled male bodies/minds in the films are sites where filmmakers and audiences articulate both their insecurity and desire in order to feel more masculine and able-bodied themselves. As a consequence, not having its own place, disability is made lifeless and plays the sidekick to prosthезize other identities in the films.

**Oasis (2002)**

*Oasis* tackles the underlying logic of modern capitalism and globalization in Korea that exploits socially weak people for profit by exploring the hopeless life of the urban lower class in the post economic crisis era. The film vividly illustrates how those living at a lower stratum of society are marginalized by globalization and are susceptible to unemployment, family collapse, isolation, and violence. It engages with such weighty subject matter by featuring the voices of two disabled characters. On some levels, the film succeeds; it reveals the sexuality of and the family abuse experienced by disabled people, and confronts social prejudices against disability and the lack of social support.

However, this seemingly rebellious text is in many ways aligned with hegemonic masculinity. In other words, its social critique relies heavily on sexist, classist, and ableist assumptions about disability. In the film, the hegemonic masculine order is made less visible because the characters are not typical “oppressors.” The film accomplishes this by sexualizing a disabled woman deemed as asexual, ugly, and sterile, and by appropriating and
transforming supposed aspects of a lower class disabled man as ruggedly masculine, violent, innocent, and sexual. Able-bodiedness completes and covers up the project of hegemonic masculinity by eliminating the difference considered to be non-conforming (female, low class, and disabled) and generating the sameness considered conforming (fit body and mind). Ironically, the able-bodiedness is performed by the female lead’s fantasy in which she imagines herself as a restored, beautiful, and sought-after body. I argue that a Disability Studies perspective reveals the ways in which the deep-rooted ideal of able-bodiedness operates as a mask for the neo-liberal agenda of the narratives of “remasculinization”—the process by which men aspire to regain patriarchal power and heterosexual privilege—that were common after the Korean financial crisis.

**Plot Summary**

*Oasis* depicts the unlikely love story between two disabled characters, Gongju (Sori Moon), a woman in her mid 20s who has severe cerebral palsy, and Jongdu (Kyunggoo Sol), a man in his late 20s who is assumed to be mentally retarded. Both of the characters are living in poverty, lacking in familial and social support, which allegorizes the lives of lower class Koreans in the middle of a devastating economic crisis. The film opens on the day that Jongdu is paroled after serving a three-year term for his elder brother’s crime, manslaughter in the hit-and-run death of Gongju’s father. Jongdu was sent to jail instead because his able-bodied brother is favored in the family. Jongdu pays an unwelcome visit to the victim’s family and sees the dead man’s severely disabled daughter, Gongju, a lonely shut-in, abandoned by her older brother who neglects and takes advantage of her. Meanwhile, Jongdu is fascinated by Gongju at first sight and decides to woo her. Later, Jongdu returns to visit her. The visit ultimately ends with him sexually assaulting her, but she rejects him and falls unconscious in terror.
What starts off as a forced sexual relationship between the two ends up developing into a tender friendship based on their otherness, which deepens into true love. However, both families’ prejudice and narrow-minded social norms challenge the development of their romantic relationship. Nevertheless, their love continues to grow. Gongju invites Jongdu back to her apartment where they make love for the first time. Although at this time, their sexual encounter is consensual, Gongju’s family, discovering their intercourse, accuses Jongdu of raping her. Jongdu is arrested and imprisoned.

*Oasis* vividly illustrates how marginalized groups, including disabled people, are assimilated under the framework of remasculinization and neoliberalization in this post-crisis cinematic representation. The framework is rendered more legitimate through the subordinate group’s mimicking and accepting of dominant positions and values. In the film, the framework is unmarked and invisible as a result of Jongdu’s patriarchal violence on Gongju and Gongju’s subsequent neoliberal move towards individual perfection through her able-bodied fantasy. I suggest the framework could permeate the hearts and minds of both disabled and nondisabled audiences, and make them voluntarily distant from disability as a political identity and embodied experience.

**Disability, appropriation, and gendered violence**

*Oasis* appropriates the presumed and paradoxical qualities of the protagonist’s cognitive disability, including hyperfemininity (innocent and vulnerable) and hypermasculinity (sexual and violent). Such appropriation serves to hide his complicity in maintaining and enjoying a gender-based privilege. Jongdu’s physical violence against Gongju can be justified mainly due to his assumed innocence often associated with cognitive impairments, and his sexually aggressive behaviors are understood medically rather than socially.
It is the “gray area” of hegemonic masculinity that enables Jongdu to successfully avoid responsibility for his sexual crime. Jongdu’s evasion is executed by the film’s narrative strategy and style along with its limited understanding of mental retardation. In the film, his aggressive behavior is constructed not as a result of learned masculinity, but of a mere medical symptom. His violent behavior is also alleviated with the sheer innocence stereotypically associated with cognitively disabled people. Furthermore, the film’s uncritical engagement with his disability helps accentuate Gongju’s vulnerability and deviancy, and allows him to be transformed into a rescuer, rather than an offender.

The neutralization of the gendered violence is made plain in the sequence in which Jongdu imposes himself on Gongju. Being aware that Gongju is severely disabled and oftentimes alone, he breaks into her apartment room. Failing to reassure and pacify the startled Gongju, he begins to sexually molest her, stopping only when she passes out. Immediately, he seeks to solve this unplanned situation in unsophisticated and even comical ways, putting her under running water, hitting his head with regret and so on. A shaking camera adds a sense of innocence and confusion to the rape sequence and stays with the vantage point of Jongdu in the close-up shot, while Gongju moves back and forth out of frame. The technique creates a feeling that a childlike Jongdu is playing with a toy, not a human subject. After Jongdu returns home, the camera also cuts to the medium shot of a playful Jongdu who plays rock-paper-scissors with his mother, which is juxtaposed with the full shot of a crying Gongju taken from behind her. Subsequent scenes viscerally narrativize the familial exploitation of Gongju (spending her disability pension for their interest) and her neighbors’ rudeness (having sex in front of Gongju). All of this contributes to the watering down Jongdu’s criminal act, and leads to Gongju calling him and becoming romantically involved with him later.
In addition, the film’s medical and stereotypical interpretation of Jongdu’s mental retardation aims to avoid an excessively simplified identification of him as “good or bad” and to shift the audiences’ immediate focus to Gongju’s profound physical disability. To be specific, the interpretation complicates his character and affords room for Jongdu to be transformed as a responsible man who looks after Gongju with his whole heart. The shift in focus from his disability to her own’s further supports his transformation to a melodramatic victim/hero with his crime absolved.

Melodramatic victims/heroes?: Come closer to masculine values

*Oasis* capitalizes on a melodramatic trajectory to highlight Jongdu’s good deed of helping the female disabled Gongju. The trajectory functions to cover up his sexual violence and the gender hierarchy between the two characters and to make his cognitive disability seemingly not an issue. More importantly, through the means of the melodramatic encounter, hegemonic masculine values are instilled in audiences’ minds. The film follows in the steps of several melodramatic traditions, such as dysfunctional families, suffering women, broken and disoriented men, and intense and expressive forms of realism and affect, even though it heavily relies on a greater realism that mitigates the emotional excess.

The typical melodrama plot is a simple trajectory centering on three distinct characters: victim, villain, and hero. A victim character suffers persecution by a villain character and/or forces and a heroic savior redeems the victim’s virtue through an act of retribution and rescues her from evil—victim and hero characters can be inhabited in the same person: the virtuous victim/hero (Anker. 2005, p. 24). The film attempts to avoid the overly polarized character description of good and evil, but to some extent, it loosely follows the melodramatic character treatment. In the film, Gongju is constructed as a suffering victim persecuted by rigid social norms. Her initial innocence has been shattered but can be restored
through Jongdu’s redemptive heroic action. The families of each protagonist and rigid social norms—hegemonic masculinity, sexism, classism, ableism, and more—play the villain role in marginalizing and exploiting disabled characters. Jongdu’s sexual assault on Gongju in the beginning leaves his virtuous victim/hero status problematic, but he undergoes a complete change to a virtuous protagonist later in the film when he redeems himself by means of his symbolic action, cutting the tree branches. According to Anker, the heroic deed is symbolic rather than material reparation: “a shift of affect from the vulnerability of victimization to the powerful confidence of valiant accomplishment” (p. 25).

As the narrative proceeds, Jongdu shifts from a villain who tries to rape Gongju to a melodramatic victim/hero. In the film, Jongdu is problematically constructed as a victim/hero with a childlike aura and vulnerability that legitimizes his transgressions. He is redeemed through accepting “conventionally masculine values, such as [the ability to] remain strong, caring, responsible, virtuous, and in control of self and others” (Kusz, 2008, p. 225). In the mean time, Gongju functions merely as a catalyst as Jongdu discovers his new remasculinized self. His character’s association with class and disability is inadequate to disseminate and popularize the hegemonic masculine values. Thus, his character must be redefined to meet such needs by eliminating the threatening elements of hypermasculinity epitomized in his sexual violence. His complete make-over is heavily indebted to the melodramatic convention the film adopts. After his sexual violence is forgiven by Gongju, Jongdu is born again a melodramatic victim/hero figure. He abruptly changes to a charming and chivalrous romantic hero, wooing, amusing, saving, and protecting Gongju from the indifference, cruelty, and hypocrisy of the institutions of family and society. Eventually, he seems to be exonerated and achieve virtue, according to the flawed logic of the film. Oasis
makes a subtle ideological manipulation by allowing its male protagonist to atone for his sexism through the ostensibly “charitable” assistance he gives to his disabled girlfriend.

**Sexual objectification**

Sexually objectifying a woman is a means through which hegemonic masculinity is maintained and reproduced (Bird, 1996). In a similar vein, the film forcefully sexualizes a disabled woman deemed asexual and non-productive in order to normalize her femininity and sexuality considered to be overshadowed by her damaged body. Her normalized femininity and sexuality, under the influence of the hegemonic masculinity, reveals the gendered hierarchy of that sexuality. More importantly, recognizing the damaged body as part of diversity and resistant to heterosexual normativity seems out of the question. Such framing leads audiences to refocus their gaze on the normalized Gongju rather than the deformed Gongju celebrating difference. In other words, her impaired body and disability is rendered dismissive and docile by repressive gender discourses. She is understood only through sameness, not through difference, in relation to supposedly normal people. The film participates in a system where disabled people are pressurized into becoming normal.

After being sexually victimized by Jongdu, Gongju is problematically awakened to her sex and sexuality. The scene in which the neighboring couple rudely have sex in her apartment is critical because it is the moment that she is forcefully made to feel herself as a normal/sexual woman and Jongdu’s rape attempt is wrongly turned into a “benevolent” act of acknowledging her female side. In the scene, watching the neighboring couple from her room, Gongju appears sexually aroused by moving her lipstick up and down as if she was conducting the intercourse. Under the banner of upgrading her to an “ordinary woman,” her sexual agency is severely wounded by the normative heterosexual values. She is reduced to being an object of male desire. Her grotesque body in the Bakhtinian sense loses its political
and liberating dimensions—"a revolutionary tool, one by which social hierarchies can be destabilized, inverted, mocked and satirized" (Fraser & Greco, 2005, p. 69). Her agency as a sexual being becomes questionable as the film clearly shows that Gongju as a sexual being is profoundly affected by Jongdu’s sexual attack on her body and soul. However, the film doesn’t pose any questions about her newly formed subjectivity as a sexual and feminine woman, even though it profoundly affects a change of her perspective on Jongdu and the violence he inflicts on her. Instead, this film egregiously celebrates its success in rescuing the femininity and sexuality of a disabled woman publicly deemed asexual and unproductive by situating her in a traditionally feminine role.

**Gongju as a neo-liberal subject**

In the several fantasy sequences, Gongju, the only character who fantasizes, uses her imagination to escape from adversity, including her impaired body and dire circumstances. She imagines herself as a nondisabled, healthy, and beautiful woman who can gracefully walk, talk, and sing. Interpreting her fantasy is a challenging task; on the one hand, the fantasy seems to allow her to be positioned as a human, a woman, and a wife, which may prove her inclusion and empowerment. On the other hand, her supposed desire and voice seems only to be heard in the fantasy, which attest to her total isolation and powerlessness. Considering her dire situation and impaired body, her own fantasizing may be understandable or even taken for granted for some people. However, at the same time, her desire may be too political to be the mere act of wanting to be someone else. Therefore, how should her fantasy be understood? I argue that the fantasy not only disempowers her subjectivity as a disabled woman, but reveals able-bodiedness at work in the heteronormative practices of the film and the film’s reality complicit with neo-liberal mentality.
The fantasy sequences clearly show that the film’s social critique is based on the highly gendered discourses complicit with able-bodiedness. The collusive alliance between the two is also reshaped by the neo-liberal logic of the film. In other words, Gongju’s fantasy operates as a site in which hegemonic masculinity, able-bodiedness, and neo-liberal orientation conflate with one another. Lemke (2002) attends to a key aspect of the neoliberal rationality as “the congruence it endeavors to achieve between a responsible and moral individual and an economic-rational individual” (p. 61), further explaining that in its neo-liberal framework, individual-subjective factors, not social-structural ones, decide social problems, including disability, unemployment, alcoholism, etc. In this neo-liberal context, the healthy body becomes the moral body, while those who are disabled, obese, poor, or unfit are stigmatized as negligent, irresponsible, and even immoral. Therefore, equated with a problem body, Gongju takes full responsibility for fixing her own body. She does not have a material access to fixing it, so she has to rely on her imagination as a symbolic act of rehabilitation.

In her fantasy, Gongju internalizes gender, body norms, and personalizes the systems of oppression that set her apart from the rest of society. Her impaired body and its attendant effects could be regarded as a potential disruption to dominant masculinity and neo-liberal regime, so they are framed as negligent, irresponsible, and immoral. In order to contain and rehabilitate her, the film adopts a creative strategy, her own fantasizing about being an able-bodied woman. More importantly, her fantasizing is manufactured as her individual choice. She performs compulsory able-bodiedness because of neo-liberal rationality and heterosexual gender norms imposed by society, which function “by covering over, with the appearance of choice, a system in which there actually is no choice” (McRuer, 2006, p.8).

Women are often subjected to discourses which encourage engagement in a culture of self-surveillance and self-control. Within the discourses, women are constantly reminded
that their bodies need improvement, while their bodies are often constructed as deviant. Women are led to internalize these discourses and regard themselves as deviant and feel shame (Bartky, 1990). In particular, those who are "rejected bodies" are strongly encouraged to alter them within a patriarchal, capitalist, and consumerist society where women’s physical appearance is highly valued (Bordo, 1995, 1998; Wendell, 1996). Gongju’s complete makeover as an able-bodied woman is consistent with women’s continued subjection to such culture. Thus, Gongju's willing submission to the patriarchal system is poignantly expressed in the form of the fantasy; she incessantly stares at her reflection in the fantasy, internalizes inequality, and accepts it. Gongju’s fantasizing reveals that she internalizes her guilt of being a disabled woman and seeks to alleviate her guilt through her mimicry as nondisabled. It implies a hierarchical order based on gender, sexuality, and ability in a rigid heteronormative and neoliberal structure. More importantly, such order displaced onto a disabled body covers up its destructive nature and legitimizes itself, by having the female other, herself, correct her own problem body.

**Passing and disability**

What strategy will allow a disabled woman to best navigate such hostile reality? On the one hand, Gongju’s bodily transformation should be understood in the framework of “passing.” Her passing as an able-bodied woman is an important site to look at the manipulative nature of hegemonic masculinity as well as fantasy itself. In the film, the fantasy is constructed as the only medium through which Gongju can pass because of her highly visible disability. She attempts to pass as a nondisabled woman through her imagination. From a Disability Studies angle, the act of her bodily transformation has a political implication. Goffman (1963) defines passing as a strategy for managing the stigma of "spoiled identities"—those discredited by law, opinion, or social convention. Like other
disadvantaged minority groups, some disabled people pass as nondisabled because passing enables them “to avoid social stigmatization and to gain the safety and advantages offered by dominant social roles” (Siebers, 2004, p.5). Passing is possible not only because of people’s ability to disguise their identity but also because of the social tendency to repress the embodiment of difference (p. 5). Passing reproduces social hierarchies, placing the dominant social position as simultaneously normative and desirable, while placing the subordinate social position as “other” (p. 3).

On the other hand, her act of passing as nondisabled with no substantial environment change is reminiscent of disabled people negotiating strict surveillance of the medical model of disability. In the medical framework, disability is constructed as problems residing within individuals, rather than those created by society. Without significant social change or accommodation, disabled people are forced to correct their bodies and minds (including hiding their identities) to meet society’s expectation. Images produced by the model often force disabled people to conform to what able-bodied people want. Disabled people are only objects of the able-bodied gaze, whose stories are often narratives of overcoming and curing their defects.

Likewise, Gongju’s body considerably changes to nondisabled with no substantial environmental modification. At the introduction of Gongju, she is indulged in her fantasy, mentally alleviating her pain from her unsupportive environments. The audience is invited to glimpse into her first fantasy in which she plays with her hand mirror and reflects sunlight onto the ceiling of her dim apartment room and the light transforms into a white dove. In this scene, a white dove flutters in her barren room while female humming (Gongju in fantasy) is heard in the background. The moment we hear someone enter, a groaning sound (Gongju in
reality) overtakes the soft humming. The camera tilts down from the ceiling to Gongju’s twisted body.

However, Gongju’s fantasizing takes a different form after the dove scene. Experiencing Jongdu’s sexual attack and the neighbors’ sexual intercourse before her, Gongju seeks to transform her own body, rather than to ease the harsh mental effects of her unfavorable environment. More importantly, she imagines only when Jongdu is present. It shows that her fantasy is a highly gendered practice as well. The structure that forces her to change, but allows him to be as he is, makes her problem seem more urgent. In later fantasy sequences, the film reveals its more ability-oriented nature of her fantasy by highlighting her free body movement. She appears miraculously restored and can move and sing with grace and speak with eloquence. However, Jongdu, who always appears in her imagination, remains the same. He is still awkward and unsophisticated, not knowing what happens around him or being able to understand how the fantasy has impacted her. This suggests she sees her disability as more urgent or troubling unacceptable than his disability, that suggests fantasy is gendered. For example, in one scene, when Jongdu and Gongju miss the subway back home, she mentally transforms herself into a beautiful, healthy woman, embracing Jongdu who is sitting on her wheelchair while Gongju pushes the chair here and there, softly singing into his ear, “If I were.” She becomes a feminine girl, as if taking care of Jongdu on a wheelchair in her fantasy. She performs the duties imposed on women by society by displaying her “ability to care for others and her sexual attractiveness” (Smith, 2009, p. 40).

**Fantasy and normalization**

After the dove scene, Gongju fantasies start to more emphasize normalization through Gongju’s admiration of what supposedly ordinary people do. To begin with, rather than continuing to use force, such as the rape scene, the film familiarizes her fantasies by
making things mundane to ordinary people become the object of her fantasies. Her fantasies become part of audiences’ mundane lives while the audiences’ mundane lives are part of her imagination. In several fantasy scenes, she reveals her desire to be an ordinary woman who is able to do mundane things, playing with Jongdu in a public space, a trivial argument with him, and making a big fuss over nothing. The subway scene in which Gongju and Jongdu go sightseeing emphasizes her humble desire to be “one of the ordinary women.”

In the scene, when she sees a couple sitting across from them, playing with each other, drinking from a water bottle on the subway, the camera tilts up from Gongju’s face, which seems to envy the couple, to Jongdu’s empty face. Suddenly Gongju comes into the screen, miraculously jumping up from the wheelchair. She is standing beside him, hitting him hard in the head with the water bottle.

Even though the subway scene aims to normalize Gongju by means of two tools, heterosexuality and able-bodiedness, audiences are meant to respond positively. The distance between her and audiences becomes narrower due to familiarization while the fantasy’s stark contrast with her reality questions the validity of the fantasy. This could have been a space for audiences to reflect on their own privileges in relation to Gongju. Instead, heterosexuality and able-bodiedness are reinscribed for the audience. Gongju’s fantasy world, resonant with such familiarity in the audience, ironically occurs in contrast to her brutal reality. At this point, the film tends to accentuate her brutal reality rather than the familiarity of fantasy.

The scene in which Jongdu invites Gongju to lunch at his older brother’s auto repair shop demonstrates that Gongju’s fantasy coexists with and is disrupted by her cruel reality. Her desire to appear normal competes against her real, supposedly ugly body and dingy home and the contrast between fantasy and reality articulates the meaning of her life experience as a disabled woman. After Jongdu and Gongju are denied access to a restaurant because of the
owner’s prejudice against Gongju’s disability, Jongdu invites her to his older brother’s filthy and stuffy auto repair shop. While Jongdu talks to his sister-in-law on the phone, Gongju is restored again. Gongju, sitting in the wheelchair, moves back and forth, stands upright, and tags along with him. The pleasant situation she wants to happen is generated by her imagination. She engages in playing with, quarrelling with, and reconciling with Jongdu who has no sense of what happens in her fantasy.

Even though Gongju changes herself into an able-bodied woman, she is unable to cast spell on the dim and untidy environment. Simply put, her fantasy is created against the backdrop of brutal reality. She talks, walks, and dances in the cluttered repair shop, not a fancy place. She is served cheap take-out Chinese food. Along with the familiarity of the fantasy, the coexistence of reality and fantasy could have caused audiences to deconstruct the emptiness of her fantasy. Gongju’s fantasy as a nondisabled woman is performed against the backdrop of her brutal reality. Audiences may be aware that the fantasy is unreliable and fragmented and doesn’t help alleviate her suffering. However, the film fails to develop the ambiguity of the fantasy further, instead relying on the spectacle of her fantasy.

In spite of familiarity and reality elements in Gongju’s fantasy, the film fails to encourage audiences to deconstruct Gongju’s suffering as a disabled female subject. The elephant scene epitomizes this failure. In the elephant scene, a tapestry entitled “Oasis” hanging on the wall of Gongju’s apartment room becomes part of her fantasy. The images in the tapestry, an Asian Indian woman, an Asian Indian boy, and a baby elephant are animated in her cramped apartment room. Jongdu and Gongju are dancing with these images, and Gongju appears as if she were “normal.” They kiss for the first time. The visual excess of the scene, exotic spectacles, burning heterosexual love, and Asian Indian music and dance movement overtake the film’s realistic conventions, tightly framed shots and low key lighting.
which creates a sense of claustrophobia. I argue that the film’s shift toward magical realism and its visual and aural intensity results in the failure of the connection between Gongju and audiences.

**Non-liberating magical realism**

After the subway and the auto shop scenes, the film is more inclined to a narrative technique of magical realism without questioning its sexist and ableist assumptions. Magical realism is defined as a narrative strategy that incorporates fantastic or mythical elements into seemingly realistic fiction. Its common features include self-reflexiveness, multiplicity, parody, dissolution of character or erasure of boundaries that creates an alternative world to correct reality (Sellery, 2001). The form is often used by the disenfranchised groups as a vehicle to address socio-political issues since the real is breaking down, there is a "metamorphosis in perception and in things perceived a kind of narrative raw material that draws in sophisticated ways on the world of [the] village" (Jameson, 1981, pp. 128-129).

Likewise, the elephant scene in *Oasis* emphasizes the defamiliarized reality with the help of magical realism. Rather than “metamorphosis,” I contend that the film’s penchant for magical realism keeps audiences from denaturalizing their perspectives on gender and disability. The elephant scene well illustrates this: heterosexuality and able-bodiedness are left untouched supported by exotic visual spectacles. That is to say, Jongdu and Gongju still stand in an alternative world with the same logic of gender and disability. How would audiences consider Gongju’s fantasy? In analyzing the elephant scene, Y. Kim (2007) claims that the audiences still have to embrace the painful reminiscence of the memories of Gongju’s real life even in the middle of her fantasy as the film seeks to de-dramatize the situations, refusing the normal excesses of emotion typically on display (p.48). I partly agree with him, but he tends to ignore the fact that the visual excess created by the scene is so strong that it
occludes Gongju’s brutal reality. In other words, she lives in a society in which her disabled body is considered malfunctioning and unproductive, her different speech skills are considered incommunicable and unintelligent, her unconventional look is considered unfeminine and threatening, and her social class is believed to make her as inferior.

In addition, Kim (2007) overlooks the fact that the scene relies heavily on sexist and ableist assumptions about disability. In other words, due to the visual excess, or possibly the incompatibility between fantasy and reality that Kim asserts, the audiences may veer towards heterosexual romance and ableist adventure colored by the “Orientalist” spectacles instead. Gongju’s transformation happens off-screen. Gongji is simply internalizing master narratives such as sexism, ableism, and classism and is powerless to challenge dominant social ideologies. Kim (2007) further argues that in the long run, the audience comes to realize that “the fantasy doesn’t provide comfort or consolation rather it is more like an uncomfortable mirage… It’s a fantasy for fantasy’s sake” because of its coexistence and contradiction with reality (pp. 47-48). I partly agree with his argument, but he doesn’t consider that the fantasy may work to reiterate and reinforce heteronormative practices. Rather than dealing with “uncomfortable mirages,” the audience attempt to identify heterosexual romance within her fantasy as able-bodied as a source of their comfort, while her broken body and unsupportive circumstance as that of their discomfort.

Owing to the film’s inconsistent uses of fantasy sequences, familiarity, reality, and especially magical realism, the audiences find the sequences unreliable. Their distrust of the sequences leads them back to their preconceptions of disability and gender. In the elephant scene, Jongdu and Gongju’s heterosexual love (e.g., kiss) is enabled by her bodily transformation as nondisabled, audiences may draw the juxtaposition between ability and heterosexuality. Accustomed to such gender and body norms, they valorize the
heterosexuality and ability that Jongdu and Gongju perform in the scene. However, it’s important to contemplate how the audience would manage the painful memories of Gongju’s real life. Audiences are more likely to make an analogy between her impaired body and her unsupportive reality. In this analogy, there is no room left for considering the symbiotic relationship between her impaired body and her environment from a different angle or for deconstructing the unnaturalness of her mimicry of an able-bodied woman. However, even though the audience is suspicious of her fantasy, they tend to fixate on Gongju’s restored body because they want to free themselves from Gongju’s brutal reality and the discrepancy between fantasy and reality. They may favor magical realism over brutal reality. As a result, they avoid engaging with her assumedly ugly, twisted body and with her cruel reality. Instead, they seek to reconfirm that her desires could be fulfilled with a nondisabled body, a particularly feminized and sexualized body. Her physical transformation works to alleviate the audiences’ discomfort with her supposedly ugly, unhealthy body and unfavorable environment.

What effects does the audiences’ fixation on Gongju’s rehabilitated body have on themselves? It does not allow audiences to question and challenge their own privileges over her in relation to power differentials. Instead, audiences identify Gongju as part of themselves, not understanding her specificity and difference as a disabled woman. Gongju’s specificity as a disabled woman is erased by the discourse of the sameness audiences may invoke, “she is like us,” “she is a human,” “she is a woman” or “she is a wife.” All women are disabled in need of men’s assistance shadow gender role. Gongju can be seen as representing the crisis in Korean culture due to globalization and neo-liberal politics.

Jongdu represents the masculinist viewpoint of every man in Korean society. Even though Jongdu appears mentally disabled, he still embodies the power of hegemonic
masculinity: his disability is not visible within the film. Jongdu can be wrongly read as the heroic figure that represents the rehabilitation of Korean culture. His heroic acts of physical love, emotional support, and the symbolic act of cutting the tree branches that overshadow her room and scare her. Belief that no one can be sexually interested in Gongju leads to Jongdu’s conviction for rape because of the other characters’ inability to see Gongju an able woman. Jongdu is capable of removing the male anxiety others force on Gongju’s disabled body.

In summary, Oasis absolves Jongdu’s responsibility and guilt for his sexual violence by constructing him as an attractively vulnerable and rebellious victim-hero who paradoxically supports a patriarchal order and remasculinizes himself at the expense of his fellow minority. Gongju is also reduced to be an embodiment of neo-liberal logic. Internalizing her severe physical and emotional suffering caused by a structural social inequality, she takes care of her body, soul, and mind all by herself and assumes all the responsibility for herself. She becomes a most successful self-entrepreneur who faithfully champions the illusive neoliberal promise by abandoning her disability as an individual and collective identity, relegated to passivity and obedience. Losing their specificity as disabled, the sufferings of both Gongju and Jongdu are depoliticized, and are only seen as representations of the crisis in Korean culture due to globalization and neo-liberal politics.

Malaton (2005)

Malaton succeeds in revealing societal attitudes towards disability and the dearth of social and familial support for disabled people. However, its critique is watered down by a hegemonic understanding of disability and gender. In the film, such hegemony is made invisible by the film’s two tactics: pathologizing the motherhood of Kyungsook (a mother of a cognitively disabled son) and structuring the plot around the son’s surfeit of ability, thereby
normalizing him with the familiar trope of “supercrip” that I will explain later. More importantly, the able-bodiedness completes the project of remasculinization by effectively eliminating the difference perceived as non-conformist (female and disability) and generating the sameness perceived as conformist (male, fit body, mind, and society). As in *Oasis*, the film uses fantasy sequences replete with able-bodiedness in order to complete the project and give birth to a neo-liberal mode of subject. I argue that a Disability Studies perspective reveals the ways in which able-bodiedness operates in this ambitious project complicit with neoliberalism because Disability Studies questions the privileging of ability and penetrates the complex dynamics of such alliance.

**Plot summary**

Based loosely on the true story of Hyungjin Bae, a well-known autistic swimmer and runner in Korea, *Malaton* tells about an autistic male in his early 20s, Chowon (Seungwoo Cho), who completes a full marathon race with the help of a mother, Kyungsook (Misook Kim), and a coach, Jungwook (Kiyoung Lee). As a young mother, Kyungsook and Chowon went missing at a family outing. When the young Chowon was found at a zebra pen, a guilt-ridden Kyungsook vowed to herself that she would stay by his side until he died.

Since the event at the zebra pen, Kyungsook has become overprotective of Chowon, hoping that Chowon will forget his abandonment. A few years later, Kyungsook, finding that Chowon has a special talent to run great distances, believes running can alleviate his autism and decides to prepare him for a marathon. She hires a gruff former marathon champion, Jungwook, who trains Chowon to race in the marathon.

Meanwhile, the mother’s preoccupation with Chowon causes trouble with all the male characters in the film: her husband, second son, and Chowon’s coach. Followed by these conflicts, another significant incident takes place when she loses Chowon in a subway
station. This event leads Chowon to confess that he remembers his past abandonment, and that the abandonment was the reason for his obedience to his mother’s instructions and wishes. Shocked and withdrawn, she gives up her ambition for Chowon to be a marathon runner and decides to pull him out of the competition. In spite of her disagreement, Chowon secretly leaves the house and successfully finish the race.

*Malaton* allegorizes post-crisis Korea and the life of Korean people through a dysfunctional middle class family. Similar to the film’s pathological construction of autism, Chowon’s family is so “impaired” that it must be remediated with individual success. The film identifies Chowon’s disability and Kyungsook’s non-traditional femininity as the main causes of the family’s dysfunction. Such dysfunction is corrected only when Kyungsook returns to a submissive gender role, and Chowon overcomes his disability on his own. Hegemonic masculinity represses Kyungsook’s unique social location as a mother of a disabled son, while it reshapes and reconstitutes Chowon’s disabled subjectivity through neoliberal-oriented mentality, such as self-government, self-determination, autonomy, and progress.

**Melodramatic victim?**

Generically, *Malaton* is a sport film which has melodramatic elements. Baker (1998) states that “in sport film, sport per se is not the most important aspect of the film with the emphasis being placed upon the individualized melodramatic element contained within the story” (p.130). Very often sport films portray sport as the means through which individuals attempt to overcome their social situation or problem. However, in *Malaton*, Kyungsook plays a melodramatic figure who fights against values and prejudices that denigrate her disabled son to a second class citizen. Kyungsook is a suffering melodramatic heroine. She
has to struggle with those in and outside family about the way that she chooses to raise Chowon. How should her suffering be understood?

In her discussion of Victorian melodramas, Rossman (2003) writes that pain is gendered due to the distinctive demands that ideology places on men and women. She points out that “suffering conceals the strategic use of masochism as a form of agency” (p. 25). Accordingly, “masochism is a performance staged by the sufferer, designed to convince an audience that the sufferer deserves sympathy” (p. 24). So, under Rossman’s premise, is Kyungsook’s emotional distress subversive? Do audiences sympathize with her suffering? What does she gain from her suffering? To answer these questions, I have to explore the ways in which the film constructs her emotional pain as a mother of a disabled son.

Like most female heroines in melodramas, Kyungsook, the only female main character in the film, is suffering. It is not because she is a helpless victim, but because she does not conform to a typical mother role which caters to all of the family’s need as a caretaker. In studying Korean nondisabled mothers who raise children with developmental disabilities, Oh and Lee (2009) reveal that these mothers experience a high level of caregiver burden due to increased disability-related costs, maternal factors, and less social/familial support (p.149). Despite the fact that Kyungsook’s suffering derives from inherent problems in the system of patriarchal family and society (e.g. women having the burden of responsibility for child care), this film doesn’t provide much space for audiences to critically engage with or deconstruct her suffering. As she transforms, she begins to function more as a villain, and audiences are invited to ignore the social roots of her suffering.

Up to the midway point in the film, Kyungsook is portrayed as a woman who witnesses and fights against social prejudices and discrimination against disabled people or at least negotiates Korea's compulsory able-bodied system anchored in the patriarchal family
and society. Whenever Chowon is discriminated against, her suffering is validated: she acts out and critiques social intolerance towards disabled people. But after the midpoint of the film, with her subversive agency and voice suppressed and usurped by several male characters, including Chowon, Kyungsook degenerates into a monstrous mother who prevents Chowon from crossing over into the manhood. In the narrative, she is not given agency or a certain amount of authority with respect to her suffering. I argue that Rossman’s premise does not apply to Kyungsook’s suffering: hers is not politically subversive and does not elicit approvals from audiences, either. All she gains from the suffering is a pathological obsession with her own son. The depoliticized suffering is mainly due to the male bonding that Jungwook and Chowon build up as the narrative proceeds. Representations of male bonds rationalize their emotional torturing of Kyungsook.

**Homosociality and gray area**

Homosociality refers to non-sexual attraction for members of one’s own sex, (Lipman-Blumen, 1976). Bird (1996) adds that homosociality encourages clear distinctions between hegemonic masculinities and non-hegemonic masculinities by means of the segregation of social groups (p. 121). In the film, all the male characters, including Chowon, participate in the misogynistic acts directed at Kyungsook or other women. Though the acts do not involve explicit physical violence, they are serious enough to transforms Kyungsook into a domineering woman in the narrative and, thus, to delegitimize her social injuries. As in *Oasis*, the gray area of hegemonic masculinity works to shield these males from punishments and allows them to safely hide their misogynistic attitudes and practices. The gray area is in support of the film’s narrative strategy and stylization. It is designed to underscore her maternal guilt at the abandonment and her pathological obsession with her disabled son,
while it maximizes Chowon’s innocence and vulnerability to conceal his hostility towards women.

In the film’s initial abandonment sequence, Kyungsook is constructed as selfish and cold, instead of a young mother of a disabled child, struggling without any familial or social support. In the sequence, we see Kyungsook vacantly sitting, barely holding Chowon’s hands in a long shot with passers-by foregrounded on the screen. The camera cuts to the close-up shot of the hands of Chowon and Kyungsook which are almost separated, and we see Kyungsook shout out, through crowds in a high angle, “Chowon is missing!” Though passers-by block off what happen between the two, the above-mentioned techniques would leave audiences a feeling that she deliberately abandoned him. At this point, Kyungsook does not know that Chowon has been aware of his abandonment.

With Chowon’s real father, Heekeun, marginalized in the narrative, Jungwook, a bitter and washed-up former marathon champion, assumes, or is made to assume, the role of surrogate father and mentor, guiding Chowon into manhood. He is obligated to teach a physical education class at Chowon’s special school as community service. Nothing more than a lazy drunk, he eventually gives in to the mother’s continual pleading and becomes Chowon’s private coach. Expectedly, he begins to ignore and takes advantage of Chowon during the initial part of the whole training. As part of the special training, Jungwook takes Chowon to highly masculinized places—horse-race track, bar, and public spa—so that Chowon may get a glimpse of the rugged manhood. Using feminist film criticism, H. Lee (2006) writes that the spa scene is very important in that a fictive father/son relationship between Jungwook and Chowon is forged as soon as they confirm their phallus in the spa (p. 301). In order to strengthen their homosocial bonding, the film, employing Chowon’s innocence and genuine purity (very often associated with cognitive disability) attempts to
humanize Jungwook to fit in with the surrogate father role. In one scene, Chowon's preoccupation with running is so strong that he accidentally runs 100 laps around a soccer field when Jungwook tells him to do that without literally meaning it.

Feeling guilty that Chowon is tired and grabbing his heart, Jungwook asks him if his heart is hurting. Chowon suddenly takes Jungwook’s hand to his heart and lets him feel the heart pounding. In a reverse angle shot exchange, each shares meaningful stares. In another scene in which Jungwook trains Chowon for the race, they respond to each other by running side by side in a slow motion as if ritualizing and solemnizing their male bonding. They become inseparable with their faces overlapping on the screen. Finally, being tired, they lie on the grass together, Chowon says, “my heart is pounding and I like it” and passes a water bottle to Jungwook.

This film also capitalizes on a buddy film genre where the central plot involves two adult men engaging in an exploration of friendship. It has been argued that the emergence of this film genre is a response to deny the destabilizing effects that 1970’s feminist activism brought about and to shore up the institution of homosociality itself (Gates, 2004). The resulting effect of adopting the formula in this film is to expand hegemonic masculinity to marginalize female characters and to collapse “intermasculine differences (between disabled boy and nondisabled adult) by effecting an uncomfortable sameness, a transgression of boundaries between self and other, inside and outside, and legitimate and illicit” (Fuchs, 1993, p. 194). The film attempts at avoiding homosexual anxieties evoked by representation of the homosocial bond between Chowon and Jungwook. More concretely, two male characters not only exchange the meaningful looks, but also homoerotic physical contacts.

However, the film minimizes the anxieties associated with homosexuality, channeling that energy into symbiotic “growth” of both characters. This displaced the energy
drives their intimacy and friendship, especially Chowon’s ability to cure a “disabled”
Jungwook character and Jungwook’s ability to initiate Chowon’s latent masculinity. Moved
by Chowon’s innocence and enthusiasm, Jungwook eventually sees promise in Chowon, not
just as an athlete, but as a human being. Not to mention, Jungwook himself is humanized. In
return, he gives Chowon the skills he needs to win the race. By showing men who are able to
express their emotions without being feminized, the buddy films often "valorize a model of
masculinity that... celebrates both strength and intimacy," and it shows relationships where
"male bonding can suggest an erotic charge without the associated anxiety such relationships
often trigger within the Hollywood action genre" (Sandellman, 1999, p. 24).

**Obsessive mother**

Later on, Chowon and Jungwook, the coach, cement their homo-social bonding,
which undermines Chowon’s affinity with Kyungsook. As hegemonic masculinity achieves
its boundaries through the articulation of out-groups (Whitehead & Barrett 2001), there is no
room left for Kyungsook in the male bonding. Two scenes highlight Kyungsook’s
marginalization in the male bonding. In one scene, Kyungsook, with her back to the camera,
uneasily observes Chowon and Jungwook warm up in a field in the distance and then the
camera cuts to the full shot of Kyungsook taken from behind as she walks away, lonely.

Feeling uncomfortable with Jungwook’s close relationship with Chowon, Kyungsook
dismisses him after all. In another scene where she announces his dismissal, Jungwook tells
her that the marathon ambition is not for her son’s benefit but her own. His critique not only
exacerbates her inner struggle about her raising Chowon, but ensures audiences that she is
obsessed with her own son. While Kyungsook and Jungwook argue, Chowon’s father,
Heekeun, observes them in the distance and doesn’t intervene in the dispute. It signifies that
he is unable to help guide Chowon into the manhood.
Heekeun’s inability and Jungwook’s disappearance to support Chowon make Chowon’s status vulnerable because he is in Kyungsook’s hands. At this point, she is transformed into a domineering woman. Kyungsook’s transformation into such a woman is supported by the camerawork. Without Jungwook, Kyungsook pushes Chowon too much hard and have him compete for the full marathon race. However, he has to quit in the middle of the race since he doesn’t know how to pace himself. Despite the fact that Chowon earns a medal for participating, when he clamors for the medal, she lies to him that the medal is reserved for winners only. On screen, a hostile foreground Kyungsook, comes between Chowon and audiences and then the camera cuts to the close-up shot of Kyungsook’s hands hiding the medal behind her back. Such photographic arrangement works to make audiences feel insecure or isolated because domineering Kyungsook blocks off the audiences’ view of Chowon (the character that audiences identify with), and audiences naturalize her as an obsessive mother. Kyungsook’s suffering as a political/cultural embodiment is severely damaged by the film’s treatment of her guilt at having abandoned Chowon as well as overlooked other family members.

**Chowon strikes back!**

Since Chowon’s abandonment and recovery in a zebra pen, he has been preoccupied with anything relating to zebras. The zebra foretells his soon-to-be revived masculinity as well as Kyungsook’s secret. His fixation on a zebra creates conflicts with others, mostly women. For example, Chowon touches a woman’s zebra-striped handbag and another woman’s mini-skirt with a zebra pattern, but the narrative highlights his vulnerability and innocence, the presumed medical and stereotypical traits often associated with autistic people. These examples represent his hostility towards women. A handbag and a mini-skirt, typical
female possessions, are perceived as fetishized objects of male gaze. He develops the skills to be a man even while his masculinity is restrained by his overbearing mother.

The accidents caused by such preoccupation also serve to step up the tension between Chowon and Kyungsook. In a subway station, while Kyungsook is not attending to him, Chowon goes down to the platform. He spots a woman wearing a skirt with a zebra pattern and touches it. Kyungsook, desperately searching for him, finds him just in time to see him beaten up by the woman’s boyfriend. She holds Chowon in her arms for protection. Unexpectedly, Chowon shakes off her arms, bloodied and in pain, and shouts out, “This boy [himself] is a defective [disabled] child,” which is Kyungsook’s routine language for explaining her son’s abnormal behaviors to other people. In addition, Chowon reveals directly to his mother that he remembers his childhood abandonment. Subsequently, a flashback leads to the past incident in which audiences see Kyungsook vacantly let go of Chowon’s hand in a long shot. The flashback reconfirms her abandonment of Chowon and underscores her intentionality. His revelation leaves her physically and emotionally vulnerable and hospitalized. By practically removing his “domineering mother” in the narrative, Chowon finally occupies space in the whole frame and acts like a person with agency. He becomes a patriarchal successor.

Mythic Narrative

Malaton follows a typical mythic narrative of a hero cast out by family and/or society and later redeemed and reconstituted as masculine (Frank, 1993) and clearly relies on the trope of the "supercrip," the term popularized by Shapiro (1993) to describe the over-representation of high-achieving disabled people whose achievements are almost impossible for others to live up to. The film’s dependence on supercrip along with mythic trajectory
works to makes anxious masculinity invisible since Chowon’s embodied disability is sutured into normative discourses of physical prowess, courage, hard work, and perseverance.

The prevalence of the "supercrip" trope in the media, is critiqued by the disability community because it fosters “unrealistic expectations about what people with disabilities can achieve, what they should be able to achieve, if only they tried hard enough” (Berger, 2008, p. 648). This trope ignores “the material realities and discrimination faced by disabled people” (Meeuf, 2009, p. 89). The supercrip mystique may have some negative impacts on the non disability and disability community alike. Internally, unintended social fissures develop between disabled people and undermine their collective voice and solidarity. Externally, it encourages the public to adopt “self-made man” and “blaming-the-victim” ideologies (Ryan 1971) that work against progressive social change and implementation of the social model (Smart 2001). In a word, the supercrip trope erases the disability and its interaction with society, “banishing it to the realm of the invisible, replacing it with raw power and heroic acts of derring-do in a hyper masculine frame” (Alaniz, 2004, p. 307).

How is the supercrip trope treated in popular narratives? In analyzing two male disabled athlete narratives, Jason McElwain’s story and the film Murderball (2005), Jodlowski (2007) states that these two storylines bear a resemblance to a mythic narrative structure in which a male protagonist departs from a community, experiences many hardships, and then returns home with knowledge, growth, and empowerment acquired from his journey. In the two narratives, disabled people male characters overcome their impairments or disabilities in the face of adversity and then come off as knowledgeable, fully-grown, and empowered. In addition, she attributes the mass appeal of the storylines to two representations of mythic male protagonists as wounded storyteller and cyborg. According to her, the wounded storytellers garner the power of their wounds in order to tell their stories,
while either physical or metaphoric mechanical body parts that feature the cyborg characters
function as tools to overcome their struggles. In *Murderball*, she reveals the strong overtone
of masculinity embedded in the supercrip narratives in which male disabled protagonists
“abandon previous weakness and inscribe masculinity into their bodies” (p. 5).

Similarly, *Malaton* follows the mythic narrative that a male hero passing the oedipal
trajectory of growing to maturity and achieving personal and social identity with a help of his
surrogate father, Jungwook (coach). Chowon’s journey begins when his autism creates chaos
and disorder, and he has to overcome formidable obstacles and moral dilemmas that come
with his disability and finally accomplish “morality” (Jones, 2005) affirmed by his family and
society. In this sense, Chowon is a wounded storyteller because of his symbolic and material
wound, autism. Autism is a source of his power as well as a drive to tell his story, although
his authorship is questioned. In terms of the cyborg characteristic Jodlowski explains,
Chowon doesn’t have any kind of mechanical aid to enhance his body functions. Instead, he
relies on symbolic and natural aids attached to his body and mind.

To begin with, a zebra serves as a signifier of his masculinity once traumatized by his
mother’s transgression (abandonment) and plays a magical role in empowering and
remasculizing Chowon. From its beginning, the film highlights his fascination with a zebra.
He recites a text from TV show, *Animal Kingdom* about how a mother zebra raise her
children, “A mother zebra discipline her children in order to survive in a wild forest in which
their natural enemies are crowded.” His act of recitation instills masculinity in his mind and
foretells his soon-to-be revived masculinity. Also, Chowon’s unmediated legs and gorgeous
body shape, signifiers of efficiency and super human ability, are used as a tool to overcome
his cognitive disability. In other words, his super-powered legs and body shape are
compensatory gifts or powers assumedly resulting from his mental impairment. Because the
film constructs him as natural and innocent, Chowon does not use any mechanical parts in the film. However, his supposed naturalness and innocence are depicted as machine-like and his body, especially legs, is a medium which excludes his machineness. Chowon’s unmediated yet machine-like body parts are sanctified by his mother, coach, and even himself who often say, “Chowon’s legs are worth a million dollars and Chowon’s body is outrageous.” In addition, his formidable concentration is always embodied by his unmediated legs. In summary, taking a full advantage of his unmediated leg power and zebra amulet he succeeds in instilling masculinity into his mind/body. However, anesthetized and fetishized, his suffering as disabled is absorbed into a mythic nature.

**Able-bodied and neo-liberal fantasy**

Chowon successfully completes a marathon, in spite of struggling with adverse circumstances during the race. The race is a battlefield on which he abandons his disability (signifying femininity or weakness fostered by his mother) and “inscribes masculinity into his body and mind” (Jodlowski, p. 5). The film’s dependence on supercrip works to makes anxious masculinity invisible, since Chowon’s social suffering as disabled is deeply sutured into normative discourses of physical prowess, courage, hard work, and perseverance.

The completion of the race proves that Chowon falls into the categories of “fit” body (able, young, and male) and mind (positive, individualistic, determined and goal-oriented), which are considered standards of normality. With his individualistic goals, masculinity, and ability, affirmed, Chowon seems to be a liberated figure. However, Garland-Thomson (1997) warns that the “visual rhetoric” of images of disabled people simultaneously makes disability “visually conspicuous while politically and socially erased” (p. 56). In this film, there remains no space for disability as an identity and embodied experience to breathe, as it is suffocated by a socially constructed healthy body and mind enforced upon Chowon. I argue
that Chowon’s newly formed subjectivity (healthy, determined, and masculine) is an illusion, made possible only through his individualized imagination, in addition to his denial of disability.

The race sequences that constitute the climax of the film demonstrate how bodies and minds of disabled people are exploited to fabricate the supremacy of able-bodiedness. In this respect, two fantasy sequences that occur during the race are significant in that they reveal the patriarchal tactics in collaboration with the neoliberal logic. The first fantasy reaffirms that the Chowon’s newly achieved subjectivity constantly requires the oppression of others, especially Kyugsook. During the race, Chowon reaches his physical limitation and falls on the ground. At the moment, a seemingly female hand holding a chocolate cookie comes into the frame. We don’t know who she is as her body is outside the frame and she disappears immediately. The audiences are unexpectedly invited into his imagination, hearing Kyungsook’s voice and seeing her face covered in haze. The camera cuts to a close-up on his hands holding the cookie. Recuperated by his mother’s audio-visual image, Chowon resumes running with the cookie in his hand. However, upon gaining momentum, he throws it down on the ground. The cookie was used as the mother’s reward to discipline the young Chowon; it also signifies her time and effort put into caring for Chowon. By implication, he not only separates himself from two paralleled weaknesses, disability and femininity, but removes the potential of alliance-building between disabled people and women.

However, Chowon’s first fantasy inadvertently lays bare the susceptibility of his remasculinized subjectivity. Although his subjectivity may be validated within a family setting, it does not guarantee that the subjectivity is endorsed by the mainstream society filled with prejudices and discrimination against disabled people. In this vein, the second fantasy effectively eliminates such discomfort by reimagining an “ableism” free society in a highly
depoliticized way. In the fantasy, Chowon abruptly imagines himself running to the cheers of the crowd, including the woman’s boyfriend who beat him up. Amid cheers from the crowd, he is running around a swimming pool, baseball stadium, subway station, and store—the public places where he experienced attitudinal and social barriers. Finally, he is running with his favorite animal, a zebra, in the Serengeti, in Africa. These imagined places and people prompt him to run faster and cross the finish line, in under three hours. Unlike Gongju in *Oasis* who passes as able-bodied in her imagination, Chowon attempts to make an inaccessible society pass as free of any social defects. Siding with the neo-liberal logic, which separates individuals from their historical and social contexts, Chowon denies the brutal social realities faced by disabled people. In this illusive society, disability is an individual or familial problem, not a social one.

Chowon’s social suffering as disabled is overshadowed by the neo-liberal ideas of meritocracy that a person will succeed if he or she works hard. As if to prove the validity of this myth, he becomes the most successful neo-liberal subject who faithfully accepts the neoliberal logic, subjugating himself to the patriarchal system without his own critiques and his own forms of subjection. Through disciplining himself, Chowon takes care of his body, soul, and mind alone and assumes the responsibility for his care, thus largely relieving the nation from its obligation to take care of post-crisis social issues like disability, poverty, and the welfare of the people.

The fantasy sequences reassure the superiority of able-bodiedness. Prior to the sequences, audiences are uncomfortable with a series of disability hate and misogynistic incidents (zebra related incidents and suffering mother). Audiences may even feel their own complicit with a rigid patriarchal system. However, the fantasy sequences imbued with ability and neoliberal oriented tones do not allow audiences to challenge social injustices imposed
on disabled people. For them, Chowon is a mere conformist spectacle which facilities the story of pleasurable escapade and more importantly reassures their statuses as able-bodied and, thereby, relieves them from the burden of forming emotional attachments with Chowon and his mother. Deflected from the social roots of Chowon and Kyungsook’s pains and injuries, audiences take cautionary messages from the film. First, Chowon must overcome his disability for his personal growth, a manly man. Second, Kyungsook must not stray from her traditional gender role in the family.

Progressive elements in *Oasis* and *Malaton* are turned over to the dominant ideology owing to their limited lens on disability. Under the pretext of normalization and humanization, the films sexualize a disabled woman, blame a mother of a disabled son, make him a supercrip, and cover up male violence against females. Above all, situated in the Korean male crisis brought on by the economic turmoil, the films also disclose Neo-Confucian patriarchy’s attempt at maintaining its privileged status and its complicity with the neo-liberal logic. The successful alliance between the two relies heavily on the depoliticization of disability. In the process, disabled people are reduced to a visual metaphor to signify the perceived marginalization of able-bodied people and a living means of proving able-bodied supremacy.

In the next chapter, I examine audiences’ responses to disability and disabled people in the films and social world. More specifically, I describe how nineteen participants in this study understand disability and disabled people. In addition, I consider how their readings of disability are related with other social markers, gender, class, and sexuality.
CHAPTER 6: RECEPTION ANALYSES OF NONDISABLED AUDIENCES

In this chapter, I demonstrate the three interwoven themes that have emerged from the interview data. To begin with, the chapter articulates the first theme, hegemonic understanding of disability, which is narrated around three subthemes: 1) disability as a medical problem; 2) visible abnormal vs. invisible normal; 3) intersectionality. The second theme, metaphorical use of disability and its impacts, is shown through with three subthemes: 1) disability appropriation; 2) trivializing the experiences of disabled people; and 3) fear and guilt. Lastly, the third theme, normalization of disability, manifests itself through three subthemes: 1) normalizing/humanizing disabled people; 2) normatively feminizing and sexualizing disabled people; 3) super-cripping disabled people.

Weaving all three themes together, I contend that the “medically- or norm-informed” understanding of disability, in combination with disability metaphors, serves to reinforce and reproduce oppressive social systems, which may accommodate the participants’ privileges as normal/nondisabled at the expense of disabled others. I suggest that the nondisabled participants may not benefit from the systems in the sense that the normative conception of disability and other social markers requires harsh regulation, which denies the complexity of identities.

Theme 1: Hegemonic understanding of disability

Most of the participants conceptualize disability alongside a traditional model of disability, where disability becomes an individual problem in need of medical or rehabilitative correction. In addition, these participants reveal that disability is a relational, yet fixed concept that is constantly compared with and judged against able-bodied social norms. Moreover, traditional and relational comprehension of disability is interwoven with other social markers, gender, class, and sexuality. Though the participants recognize that
disability is a complex interaction between biological and social forces, they do not move beyond the common understandings of disability and other social markers. Thus, the participants’ beliefs about disability, one firmly located in the medical model of disability and beliefs in absolute normalcy are based on bodily and cognitive essentialism and binary thinking.

**Disability as a medical/functional problem**

The participants imagine disability within a traditional model of disability. For most of the participants, disability is a physical or mental condition, as the result of an illness, injury, or accident of birth, that causes significant limitations to a person’s quality of life and is therefore understood as a misfortune deserving of medical and social care. In other words, disability becomes an individual problem in need of medical and rehabilitative intervention. First, participants equate disability with impairment, such as the loss of a body part, mental impairment or the loss of bodily functions that impairs a person from functioning properly. In defining disability, the majority of the participants cite limitations in activities rather than singular physical or mental impairments. When Chris is asked to share his understanding of disability, he identifies disability as a physical or mental impairment, which results in inconvenience (for physical disability) and low levels of functioning (for mental disability):

> I kinda conjure up the images surrounding physical disability. You know, impaired bodies or dysfunctional bodies. Physical disability is about body and its dysfunctions. The dysfunctions give rise to inconvenience. Mental disability…I have to say that those with mental impairments have different levels of mental capacity.

In a similar vein, Fiona understands a physical disability in terms of functionality. She likens disability to broken machine parts that cannot be returned to their original
conditions. In her analogy, a disability becomes synonymous with impairment, a state of being broken and irreparable. That is to say, disability makes it harder or even impossible for the possessor to perform a task or accomplish a goal as he used to be able to. Fiona states:

Hmm, Body. I mean their (disabled people) body parts are out of order, so they can’t function properly. They are like broken machine. Disability is like malfunctioning and these broken body parts cannot be restored to the original status.

Ian also defines mental disability in functional terms. For him, mental disability is perceived as something irrational or not in control. Because of such mental malfunctioning, the affected person talks and behaves in strange or unacceptable ways. Because of his assumed lack of understanding and inability to control himself, a mentally disabled person cannot communicate with others or follow agreed-upon social rules:

When something weird and irrational is caught to my mind, I would say the person is “mentally disabled.”

R (researcher): Can you explain more about “something weird and irrational” part?

Ian: I meant strange behaviors, strange ways of talking, and communication failure. Those who ask for socially unacceptable things, or when I tell them not to do something (because it’s socially unacceptable), but they don’t follow or understand what I am saying. I would say they have (mental) disabilities. They have a lack of understanding as well as inability to control.

In alignment with medical viewpoints of disability, many of the participants assign certain meanings to disabled bodies and minds. These meanings are mostly characterized by
vulnerability and tragedy, calling for emotional responses, such as pity and terror. For example, when she begins talking about what it means to be disabled, Hannah focuses on the vulnerability often associated with disability/disabled people. She understands disability as “total dependence, in need of help,” and connects it to family misfortune. She shares her experience of seeing a severely disabled child when home staying with a Korean family in Singapore. She first vividly describes the child’s characteristics from a medical point of view:

She (the child) was 5-6 years of age. She has the same disability that Moon So Ri (Gongju/cerebral palsy) has. You know, kiddos of her age are supposed to walk and run. She can’t. The level of her intelligence, I mean her ability to talk, understand, stuff like that seemed quite low.

Hannah then focuses on the child’s dependence on her family, especially her mother. She explains that “the child needs intensive care, because she is very weak, so her mother takes care of her 24/7. She is a very devoted mother.” Hannah continues to provide some background information about the mother and the child:

While she (the mother) was bearing her child, taking a prenatal test, a doctor encouraged her to abort the baby. Anyway, she gave birth to disabled child and had a hard time in raising the child in Korea. So, she moved to Singapore where her mother lives.

Hannah speaks more about the impact of the child’s disability on family:

I heard that she had argued with her husband about childbirth. He didn’t like it. I had never seen her husband, nor seen her talk with him over the phone. I don’t know if they divorced or not…It seemed like the child’s disability affects their relationship. It’s very
unfortunate to see a family broken. I feel very sorry for both of the
girls.

Hannah explains further, when asked why she feels sorry for them:

Would the child grow up as normal kids? The child wouldn’t be able
to perform as normal ones at school, either... She (the mother) is
highly educated, a masters’ degree holder, and tri-linguis. This child
changes her mothers’ life, probably the other members, too…. If I
were her, could I give up on everything for her disabled child?

Could I give up what I have learned so far and career?

Hannah’s response unwittingly betrays power differentials in terms of gender and
disability. Within the imbalances, a disabled person is devalued, while childcare labor is
unevenly distributed to a woman. However, what I am more interested here is the way
Hannah constructs a disability/disabled person within a social institutional setting. The
medical view of disability assigns certain negative meanings (e.g. “weak,” “dependent,” or
“in need of help”) to the concerned person (the child), and the meanings attached to the
person not only call for emotionally charged reactions (pity) materialized within a family. In
other words, Hannah’s dominant conception of the child’s disability enables her to identify
the child as vulnerable. The vulnerability attached to the child requires an emotional reaction,
pity, embodied within the family. The child’s disability negatively affects other family
members. Therefore, the child and her disability are constructed as an object of pity, a burden
to the rest of the family, and even a cause of a dysfunctional family scenario.

In summary, the participants tend to define disability within a medical
framework. Within the framework, disability is described as a defect, deficiency,
dysfunction, abnormality, or medical problem residing in an individual. The
model also attaches vulnerability and tragedy to disability/disabled people on the grounds that disability reduces the individual's quality of life and puts them at a disadvantage. Because of the model’s individualized construction of disability, disability and its attendant issues are very often approached individually, not socially, while at the same time, medical and rehabilitative interventions, such as cures, are to be justified.

**We (nondisabled) are normal, they (disabled) are abnormal**

The participants’ engagement with disability relies heavily on an able-bodied standard of normality. Some of the participants tend to understand disability/disabled people from a progressive model of disability. However, these people still rely heavily on an ability/disability binary. In such a framework, ability takes center stage, while those outside the ability category are marginalized. Though the social model emphasizes accommodations and social solutions and potential for success, the participants still understand disability in relation to normalcy. As a result, the idea that disabled people can achieve anything naively prevails and ultimately reproduces able-bodiedness as ideal. This is a pseudo-progressive position that reinforces sameness and denies the validity of the disability experience and requires disabled people to disavow their disability as identity. Within this framework, disability represents a deviation from a state of normality. As a consequence, it becomes something to be avoided, prevented, and/or removed.

Several participants actively separate disability/disabled people by employing an “us” and “them” analogy. When they think of disability, it is very often juxtaposed with the concepts of normality. Aaron, for instance, sees the limited functionality of body parts and the lack of thinking capacity as defining features of disability. Interestingly, his comment reveals that disability is a very relational concept, which I will explain in detail later.
Capacity and the function go hand in hand with the normality concept. In other words, who is capable and whether body parts are functional are dependent on what normal people do:

Aaron explains:

If you can’t do things that normal people do because of problems, I refer to problems as disability. For example, old ladies are disabled, too. More specifically, when you can’t go up or down the stairs as quickly as normal people, when you do not walk as fast as normal people or think as reasonable as normal people. Strictly, you are disabled.

By referring to the scene in which Chowon, an autistic character in *Malaton*, is dancing in a public space, the participants differentiate him from themselves by using “us” (normal) and “them” (abnormal):

Fiona: I found Chowon significantly different from us. In the movie, *(Malaton)*, the scene in which this guy (Chowon) is dancing in the mart. I guess he is poor at controlling himself. Of course, they (the mentally disabled) have ways of expression. But they are not good at restraining themselves. So, Chowon expresses whatever he wanna say or do

Julie: Right, we are always conscious of *Sisun*, (the ways you are judged and perceived by others). I guess Chowon does not have this kind of mind system. So, the freedom he feels and we do is totally different…

In accordance with Fiona and Julie, Ethan makes it clear that disabled people belong to an abnormal category and that that idea is socially accepted. By describing the
characteristics of being atypical as abnormal, he puts disabled people into the abnormal category. Being normal acts as the standard against which its counterpart is constantly compared and judged:

In society, there are two categories, normal and abnormal. When it comes to abnormal people, they are different from us. I mean they have many different characteristics than normal people.

R: What characteristics?

Ethan: The ways they talk, move, think, even appearance. You know, disabled people are definitely abnormal groups. I believe that the idea disabled as abnormal people is a socially accepted one.

Smart (2001) describes two definitions of normality: normal as the absence of deviance and as the standard of evaluation (p. 5). She also adds that the determination of normality relies on the combinations of three components: characteristics to be judged, the environment in which the characteristics appear, and the individuals who are making judgment (p. 2). When several participants are asked to define what is normal, they similarly express their opinions about normality. Gaby and Julie attempt to define it in line with an original sense of the term normality, such as typical, routine, commonplace, and to be expected.

Gaby: What I meant by “normal” is no difference with me. The things I am familiar with, or at least I am used to. You know, something usual and I would say typical… I mean, what average people are expected to do.

Julie: I think… If I make a conversation with a mentally disabled, it will not be a typical one. For example, he is a slow speaker or… His
level of understanding is quite low. Anyway, it will not be a routine conversation normal friend’s do.

R: What do you mean by “normal friends”?

Julie: People who have a similar level of understanding with me. Or people who share common topics with me. They should be similar to me in terms of everything.

Disability constitutes the reverse side of normality, one of the forms of deviance, while able-bodiedness, signaled by “us,” is a standard against which disability/disabled people are compared and judged. Brit suggests that she is the one who makes a judgment on who is normal or not; though aware of subjectivity of any norm, she still feels she is qualified to be objective in deciding and labeling those norms:

First and foremost, they (disabled people) are different from me. I mean… I identify difference from what I observe and what I see.

Based on my observation, I am judging who are different and who are not and who is normal and who isn’t.

In a similar way, Deanna centers herself in defining who is normal and who is not, while marginalizing disabled people. She states, “I can detect abnormal behaviors or physical traits the moment I see them, you know, people of this kind (disabled people).” When Deanna is asked to explain how she is qualified for the judging role, she qualifies her ability to judge with her possessing normal characteristics:

I think and act rationally as opposed to disabled people. Sound mind, sound body. Of course, I have a normal mind system. I am feeling okay with my body. It functions very well. Do you see any problems in my overall appearance?
Interestingly, Ian, Chris, and Ben show that defining normal and abnormal is quite subjective. However, their fresh interpretations do not go further, partly because of their heavy reliance on ableist concepts, objectivity, relativism, and humanitarianism when they apply subjectivism to disability. After all, they end up reproducing the binary. Ian explains that “it (defining who is normal, who is not) is different place to place,” by comparing people with obesity in Korea and their US counterparts, and tells about how these people are perceived differently in each country. Ian states:

I came here (US) a few years ago. Since then, I have seen lots of overweight people everywhere. If I saw these fat people in Korea, I would consider them as abnormal or even deviant. I do not know exactly how Americans view fat people. But, I do not think they treat fat people like disabled people…

However, unlike his initial questioning about the normal/abnormal binary, Ian accepts disability as abnormal because he believes it is a scientifically-based objective concept. He says, “[medical] doctors and possibly psychiatrists diagnose disability with accurate and objective standards.” In his above statement, the “objective” standards are used as a foundation upon which the binary between disabled and nondisabled people is solidified. Therefore, facilitated by scientific standards and binary thinking, Ian validates his scientifically informed perspectives and upholds nondisabled bodies as the norm and at the same time marginalizes his counterparts. He concludes that “the more different from me disabled people are, the more severely disabled they are. So, people with mental problems are the most severe ones. If they understand what I am saying not too bad, I don’t think of them as severely disabled. They may be my friends.”
Ben also raises a question about the exclusiveness of the normal/abnormal binary. His inquiry comes with his newly formed curiosity about why he takes something for granted. He reveals that: “I’ve never seriously thought about disability;” “I’ve never critically engaged with why some people are called disabled, while others not;” and “I have never communicated with disabled people at all.” He says he accepts “disability definitions society imposes on certain people without criticism.” His new inquiry leads him to continually ask himself, “who are normal and who are not.” However, instead of more critically engaging with the binary, he tends to rely on relativism, infused with different levels of abilities. Relativism plays itself out within the limit of ability and difference and inadvertently veils the unequal power distributions between disabled and nondisabled. Ben explains:

Compared to myself, Chowon is superior in terms of an athletic ability. Chowon will be nondisabled and I am disabled if the athletic ability is a deciding factor about who is normal. It’s very subjective.

But, we are just different. It’s not about who is right or wrong.

Chris, originally from the countryside in Korea, has a different idea of normality/abnormality and dis/ability from the other participants, all of whom are from urban cities. According to Chris, there were two mentally retarded bachelors in their 40s in Chris’s village. He recalls that “all the people in my village did not treat them as disabled even though they knew that these two guys’ behaviors were abnormal and deviant.” He articulates that their behaviors were considered no problem because his village people got used to their behaviors and these bachelors worked well at a farm. Chris says:

My village is a small community. It’s like everybody knows everybody. The elders probably saw them (two old bachelors) from their childhood. They were pretty much accustomed to their
behaviors. These two old bachelors helped a farm work a lot. They worked really hard, so my village people always welcomed and liked them. In particular, the talkative one did say extravagant things… They danced kinda funny way. They did cute things like kids.

However, Chris’s insightful observation and interpretation is overshadowed by his romantic and paternalistic attitudes towards disability and humanitarianism. After all, he ends up supporting the normal/abnormal binary and rationalizing the power differentials between the two. He emphasizes humanity by saying, “people must be placed over disability. The old folks knew and practiced it.” Chris further explains:

It’s all about respect and care. Those (disabled) people may be inferior, but they are all humans and good people, like us. Yes, they are weak, but we are not. They just need help. All we need to do is just help them. In the long run, there will be no need to divide normal and abnormal.

The boundary between normality and abnormality is also consolidated by some of the participants’ hierarchical preferences towards physical over mental disabilities. Yuker (1988) found that mild/physical disabilities are perceived to be at the top of this hierarchy, while mentally/severely/multiply disabled and disfigured people are placed at the bottom rung. Harasymiw et al. (1976) explains that those impairments (e.g. mild/physical) that conform most closely to the norms set by society are ranked as the more acceptable. In the same way, several participants differentiate mental and physical disabilities and mild and severe disabilities. In other words, physical/mild disabilities are more acceptable to the participants, while they distance themselves from mental/severe disabilities. Candy separates
physically disabled people from those with mental disabilities by saying that “they (the physically disabled) are closer to me in terms of mental capacity, so more potentially normal.” In addition, Hannah differentiates mentally/severely disabled children from those with physical/mild disabilities in terms of dependence:

People with physical impairments are able to live. But I doubt if people with mental impairments can survive without caregivers. The physically disabled just experience inconvenience. Even though they are a bit different, I mean physically, they are like me. They just experience inconvenience. But for those with mental problems more it’s way more than inconvenience.

Julie, who has a brother with polio, separates her physically disabled brother from those with mental/severe disabilities. She is even upset about the fact that other nondisabled people often would treat him like those with mental/severe disabilities. She divides the whole of disabled people into two, based on the degrees of similarity between her and them. Grouping others into those who are like her and those who are not, her status as normal functions as a standard against which others are compared and judged. Consequently, her normality is never questioned and naturalized:

In a way, I have to think of him (her brother with polio) as a disabled person. But I don’t think his disability is serious enough. He is a tier 4 disabled.\(^4\) He is like a normal person. He can speak and think as good as, or possibly better than, us. He is just limping a little bit. There are many disabled who belongs to higher tiers (those

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\(^4\) In Korea, there is a 6 tier system which categorizes disabled people into six groups. Tier 1 represents the most severe disability condition and the largest amount of benefits belong to this tier 1 groups. Tiers 1-3 are regarded as severely disabled, while tiers 4-6 are mildly disabled (J. Park, 2002).
with mental/severe disabilities). They are not like him. I mean tier 1 people are really, really disabled. These people cannot perform social functions like us. They are totally different from us.

In a word, the participants’ medical understanding of disability inadvertently lays bare that disability is a relational concept, continuously constructed against able-bodied norms. By placing “us” (nondisabled) at the center, while marginalizing “them” (disabled people), the norm stays unchecked.

**Intersectionality**

It is through disabled characters in the films under consideration that many participants display their more nuanced understandings of what it means to be disabled. From their accounts of disability, regardless of the participants’ recognition, disability is not only a far more complex interaction between biological and social forces, but also a complex site where disability interacts with gender, class, and sexuality. Clare (1999) writes that "gender reaches into disability; disability wraps around class; class strains against abuse; abuse snarls into sexuality; sexuality folds on top of race...everything falls piling onto a single human body" (p. 123). In other words, disabled bodies are sites over which biological and social forces exert their authorities.

Fitz adds a new dimension to defining disability. In his understanding, disability is visual as well as functional in relation to normality. While addressing Gongju's disability in *Oasis* (cerebral palsy), he makes an important comment on how one’s rationality is judged. Even though he acknowledges that Gongju is a physically disabled woman with no mental defect, he emphasizes that visual images and communication skills can decide one’s state of mind as well:
Miss Moon So Ri’s character (actress playing Gongju in *Oasis*) thinks like us, but she is unable to express herself. The ways she thinks are probably the same as people in general, but the ways she presents herself are totally different from us. So, we consider her irrational and not judicious.

Similarly, in carefully observing Gongju’s impaired body and visual traits, Aaron is suspicious of Gongju’s mental capacity. He identifies her perceived lack of communication as evidence that she would be (considered) mentally disabled, too. With her different ways of communication invalidated, Gongju’s mental capacity is severely questioned by Aaron:

I am not quite sure of her mental capacity, though. I think the problem lies in her presentation skills. I know her listening and understanding level is as high as normal people. But she is unable to present herself. You know, she listens well, but is incapable of reacting to anything because of her severe disability.

R: What makes you think that Gongju cannot react to anything?

Aaron: It is more like an animal. Normal people wouldn’t do that. However perfect she may be able to understand, she doesn’t have any means to show that she understands.

Hannah explains Gongju’s disability along with its social aspect. Her complicated understanding of disability is made plain when she addresses Gongju’s disability. Hannah points out that Gongju may be mentally disabled too, even though she knows that Gongju’s mental side is intact. Hannah supports the assertion with two pieces of evidence: Gongju’s different communication skills and the perceived impact of her profound physical disability on her mental side:
I define physical disability as impairment which causes inconvenience to the possessor and/or visual offense to others. Even though Gongju appears very bright, the ways she expresses herself is not understandable. I think there are many who regard her as mentally disabled, too. Her communication skills are so different that most of us wouldn’t comprehend. Her communication is not normal at all, so she has to be excluded from others…

When Hannah is asked to explain why she thinks Gongju is mentally disabled, she states:

Well, I mostly see her as physically disabled. But I guess there must be a mental trauma resulting from her serious physical disability. She is unable to move or coordinate herself. She has a very broken body, which causes others to avoid her. She experiences isolation and thus feels lonely. You know what I mean? In a situation like that, she must be mentally impaired, too.

In the above statement, Hannah aptly evidences that disability is a complex phenomenon in which biological and social forces play out together. In her above dialogue, Hannah makes it clear that Gongju’s significantly impaired body-as-visual-excess and its embodied experience all serve to cast doubt on her mental status. Eventually, the boundary between physical and mental disability becomes blurry.

Gongju’s impaired body becomes worthy of sympathy and desexualized. Fitz comments that, “I feel more sympathetic with her (Gongju), especially when I see her abnormal body. Her body calls for my help, not my (sexual) drive like Sol Kyung Koo (the actor playing Jongdu in Oasis). I don’t find her body sensual at all.” Gongju’s significantly
impaired body is very often contrasted with normal women’s bodies among male participants. When Gary, Hans, and Ian talk about Gongju’s disability, Gongju’s body is constructed as opposed to normal women’s. In addition, they draw a parallel between normal and ideal women. In the process, being normal loses its statistical meaning, ending up as being ideal. However, in their dialogues, Gary questions the normal concept Hans and Ian uses it to evaluate Gongju’s body:

Hans: She (Gongju) is different from women in general. More specifically, beautiful and healthy women. It’s hard to place her in that category.

R: What are the characteristics of beautiful and healthy women, then?

Hans: She should be physically magnificent. Chiseled faced, curvy, and slim body. She should be intelligent, too.

Ian: Visually great, nice personality.

Gary: You two already said what was on my mind. But in reality, does a girl who meets all such criteria exist? It’s a bit wrong. Normal women aren’t always beautiful or sexy. They are just average in that category.

Gongju’s disabled body juxtaposed against normal/ideal women’s is often contextualized by a culture that puts more value on one’s appearance, especially females’. Fiona puts Gongju’s disability in a Korean social context, saying that, “As far as I know, Korean society highly values one’s visibility. I mean the society emphasizes the look of people, appearance. The way a person looks and is seen has to be important.” In conjunction with Fiona, Hans suggests that such a visually-oriented culture is a gendered experience, which privileges women’s physical appearance:
We (men) are inclined to visual aspects of women. Women are so into materials. It probably depends on people. I don’t know. I am not a woman myself. But women seem likely to look for ability and money in comparison with men who are inclined to physical attributes.

In contrast with Gongju’s profound physical disability, most of the participants do not notice Jongdu’s disability (mild mental retardation). Ethan thinks Jongdu is just a bit slow rather than (mentally) disabled. Aaron also finds it hard to identify Jongdu as mentally disabled because of his absence of visual traits associated with physical disabilities. Aaron adds that “Sol Kyung Koo (Jongdu) doesn’t look mentally disabled in comparison with Gongju. No doubt, she definitely looks (both mentally and physically) disabled.”

However, many female participants, including Deanna and Candy, share different views on the absence of his disability. In particular, Deanna identifies Jongdu’s mental disability from the very beginning of the film due to his irrational behaviors. She expects that the audience will not be able to notice his mental disability because “he doesn’t have any signs of physical disability.” She further states that Jongdu’s mental problem should have been diagnosed earlier. She also points to a classed aspect of mental disability by commenting that “Jongdu didn’t have economic support or family care. He never had a chance to be medically tested and treated.” Meanwhile, Candy interprets the decreased visibility of Jongdu’s disability in a different way. She raises an interesting question, “What if he (Jongdu) were female? Wouldn’t we more easily identify her (Jongdu) as disabled? I mean wouldn’t we see her as a bit slower than normal people?” Candy’s question seems to suggest gender plays an important role in identifying one’s disability. In other words, disability is a
gendered experience in which the disabilities of women are more identifiable and unacceptable, while those of men are harder to identify and more acceptable.

Deanna and Amy disagree with Candy on the grounds that, as they believe, female disability is more accepted by society as a whole. Deanna asserts that the female disabled would receive more advantages than the male disabled. She contextualizes such assertions in relation to Korean society, which “tends to be very generous to women.” She further explains that “If men make a mistake, there will be huge price-paying and responsibility imposed upon them. But if women do, they will not pay the price as hard as men will. Of course, except for women’s sexuality.” In conjunction with Deanna, Amy complicates such supposed privileges, explaining that “they (privileges) are bound up with one’s gender and severity of disability. She comments that less severe disability and female gender identity would enable a mildly disabled woman to “survive anyway, even if she was battered or anything,” because she would “likely meet a man who could protect her.”

Ironically, Candy’s argument is supported by two male participants, Aaron and Ben, who don’t recognize Jongdu’s disability in *Oasis*. Basically, Aaron supports that women’s bodies and minds are more easily pathologized. In other words, female disabilities are more identifiable. In particular, the assumed attributes of mental disability are more closely associated with women. His remarks show that female attributes are more scrutinized and regulated. To begin with, comparing men and women, in terms of madness, Aaron shows how each gender is differently perceived and judged:

We’ve seen lots of “Crazy bitches” (Korean slang, equivalent of a “bag lady,” perhaps) in a number of public places, streets, etc. At least one girl of this kind comes to exist in every neighborhood. Probably, there are many “Crazy sons of bitches,” too. But, they are
off my radar. Even if these male “bitches” acted strangely, we just would think and say, “Crazy” and easily let the feeling (of pathologized disability) go.

Aaron continues to explain how women’s disability/madness is visually, conceptually, and linguistically accentuated. His comment below displays how disability is converging with gender, especially female gender. At the same time, he shows how disability is contradicting with gender, especially male gender:

By contrast, the strange behaviors of female “bitches” are visually and conceptually more noticeable. We have an old saying, “A crazy bitch riding on a seesaw board” or “A crazy bitch with disheveled hair.” What about male counterparts (an old saying using men as a metaphor of being crazy)? None! If a woman had her hair completely loose and aimlessly walked like crazy, I would feel so creeped out and repulsed. If a man did the same thing, I wouldn’t have such a feeling. I think the craziness of a woman is more exaggerated and widespread.

Another male participant, Ben, sides with the idea that identifying one’s disability is a gendered process. He emphasizes that he finds himself more generous to Jongdu’s disability, but more critical of Gongju’s. He states, “If he (Jongdu) were a woman, female-turned Jongdu would be perceived as more than slow. She becomes definitely crazy and pathological.” When Ben is asked to explain why Gongju’s disability stands out more, he responds that “She (Gongju) is doubtlessly disabled because she deviates from our expectations of normal girls.”
Class and sexuality also play out in addressing disability dynamics for participants. To begin with, many of the participants talk about the importance of class dynamics while engaging with disabled filmic characters and their nondisabled family members. In particular, families of disabled characters as caregivers and their lower class statuses are at the center of the participants’ conversations. Several participants believe that Kyungsook’s middle class status (Chowon’s mother in *Malaton*) enables her to effectively deal with her son’s disability (autism). While Fiona talks about the importance of familial support to disabled people, she mentions Kyungsook’s middle class identity as a resource for supporting her disabled son.

Fiona states:

> She (Kyungsook/Chowon’s mother) looks very middle class to me.
> She has time, money, and information to educate her own son. Most of disabled people are from a low socio-economic family. I don’t think they (low socio-economic family) could afford to it, but she could.

Similarly, Hannah shows that disability is an embodied experience imbued with classism. She vividly describes difficulties Gongju and Jongdu face due to their lower class statuses and lack of their familial support. In particular, Hannah highlights Jongdu’s mother’s inability to act maternally because she lacks economic power:

> The families of Moon So Ri (Gongju) and Sol Kyung Koo (Jongdu) look very poor and uneducated. In case of Sol Kyung Koo’s mother, she is economically dependent, living off her eldest son’s house. She doesn’t have her own voice in family…. She (Sol Kyung Koo’s mother) doesn’t economically support her disabled son at all.
Most of the female participants actively address female sexuality issues in the discussions while talking about a rape attempt scene in which Jongdu attacks Gongju in their almost first encounter. Before engaging with the violent scene, Hannah foregrounds public perception of disability alongside a gender line. She thinks that male disabled people are perceived as “useless,” while female disabled are perceived as “useless plus vulnerable.” She recognizes that this gendered perception likely makes disabled women subjects to physical and mental assaults.

Eva feels upset about Gongju’s vulnerable situation in Oasis, emphasizing that “in a situation like that, any women could be targets of violence.” When asked to explain the Gongju’s situation, she summarizes that “a low SES girl abandoned by her own family and left alone, more importantly, she is profoundly impaired in need of intensive personal care.” In other words, Eva’s comments illustrate Gongju’s body as a site where disability, gender, and class speak to one another, helping to marginalize her. Also, Eva cautions against a “rape developing into love” plot and is concerned about Gongju’s limited choice to select a partner. Eva says:

If Gongju had many options like #1, #2, and #3, she would be able to compare and contrast men, according to her tastes. She would be able to pick one of the three, not ending up choosing the wrong partner. She is not in a privileged position. She has to pick Jongdu, her only available choice.

Amy and Deanna attempt to explain the limited choice within Gongju’s body and/or class status as well. Both females identify Gongju’s mobility and communication issues as a source of the unavailability of male partners. Amy regards Gongju’s disability and poverty as contributing factors, stating, “how can Gongju be appealing as a romantic partner? Very sorry
to say that. But she is bedridden and in poverty. No one even attempts to take her as a friend.”

Gongju’s social disadvantage is justified by her impediments; Deanna details more about Gongju’s situation along with her impediments:

A woman generally has to find her romantic interests around her.

Unfortunately, there happens to be the only one guy, Jongdu.

Gongju has mobility and accessibility issues, while Sol Kyung Koo (Jongdu) does not. At least, Jongdu could understand her, while normal males never.

In a word, the participants’ perspectives on disability reveal that disability is a complex interaction between biological and social forces and a site where disability is often converging and contrasting with other social markers, gender, class, and sexuality. However, most of the participants do not critically engage with such intersections even though they recognize them. This may be partly because their understanding of social markers, including disability, is based on binary thinking and bodily essentialism.

**Theme II: Disability as metaphor and its impacts**

A number of Disability Studies scholars and disability rights activists point out that disability has been used as a universal metaphor for abnormality by nondisabled people who often employ disability to define themselves as normal (Couser, 2005; Ellis, 2008; Garland-Thompson, 1997; Mitchell & Snyder, 1997, 2001; Stoddard-Holmes, 2002; Yoon, 2003). Such metaphors may create hostile social cultures for disabled people. In this section, I explore the metaphors that the participants use to describe the conditions of disability and experiences of disabled people. In addition, I examine the process and impact that their metaphorical uses have on disability as a political identity and embodied experience. The participants employ disability metaphors in mostly terms that limit disability experiences to...
“disadvantage,” “hardship,” “freedom/rebellion,” and “mental healthiness,” and employ such metaphors to articulate their supposedly marginalized statuses, rather than to imagine the experiences of disabled people.

The participants’ metaphorical uses reveal their tendencies to overlook social discrimination faced by disabled people. Such negligence takes the form of short-lived identification with disabled people, reverse discrimination, and depoliticizing disability as identity—all of which are based on metaphoric appropriations of disability. However, fear and guilt still linger among some participants. They also address fear and guilt of being disabled, having a disabled child, and conspiring with oppressors and oppressive systems in the midst of their metaphorical deployment of disability and de-emphasis on the experiences of disabled people. I argue that unquestioned metaphorical uses of disability serve only to consolidate ideas of normality and inhibit political engagement with disability.

**Disability appropriation**

Disability is seen as a metaphor that rehabilitates previously marginalized identities based on gender and sexuality. Upon their temporary identification with the filmic disabled characters, the participants’ interpretations veer towards themselves, with disability becoming an emblem of their own perceived marginalization, especially in relation to gender-based obstacles, expression of gender identity, sexuality, and repression. Female participants, for example, perceive articulations of disability in the films as reinforcing existing critiques of Korean male patriarchy. Male participants perceive them as enabling the rehabilitation of their wounded masculinities. Therefore, the participants’ disability narrative is not a story about disabled people, but an ableist metaphor that appropriates disability as its signifier (Ben-Moshe, 2006; D. Biklen, 2009).
Many of the participants attempt to identify with the characters in the films. In their accounts, Chowon and Jongdu’s innocence and free-spiritedness is assumed to derive from their mental disability (cognitive and developmental disability). When Ivy talks about Chowon’s mental disability, she finds herself thinking of his (mental) disability as a source of “innocence” and “sympathy.” Referring to the scene in which Chowon is abruptly dancing in front of many people, Ivy says, “Mentally disabled people are crystal clean and they are like angelic figures.” Then she links Chowon’s innocence to her nephew. She states: “He (Chowon’s dancing) reminds me of my young nephew. When my nephew was a baby, he was dancing whenever the music was turned on. My family couldn’t take their eyes off his dance moves. He was so adorable.” She adds that, “My nephew was a joy of my family. We had a hard time back then.” When she is asked how mentally disabled people are similar to children, she elucidates that “[l]ike him (nephew), Chowon must be very happy, at least in a state of mind…Maybe mentally purer than us.” Even though she admits that “I may not know exactly about who disabled people are—I hardly see them—I always watch few of them in the media,” she comes to conclude that “Like myself, the audiences may find characters with mental disabilities innocent and eventually sympathize with them.” When she is asked how she thinks the audiences sympathize with Chowon, she responds, “They (mentally disabled people) are like happy children, and people don’t wanna see their tragedies at all.”

The metaphoric use of disability as innocence or purity is predominant in Ethan’s narrative of disability. Similar to Ivy, Ethan uses innocence as a disability metaphor and extends it to mental healthiness. In addition, he employs such a metaphor to highlight the “harsh reality” faced by normal people, including himself. Ethan also mentions the same scene Ivy referred to in addressing differences with his favorite character, Chowon. Ethan expresses ambivalent attitudes towards Chowon’s perceived different behaviors. Put simply,
Ethan admires Chowon’s supposed innocence, while he does not accept Chowon’s “deviant” behaviors. Ethan describes Chowon’s behavior as “deviant” from what normal people do and the whole situation in the mart as “embarrassing,” and he states that “We just don’t understand what these (mentally disabled) guys do… They are totally different from us, so are called mentally disabled.” However, the gap between Ethan (normal) and the mentally disabled (abnormal) is paradoxically reversed by his perceived notion of mentally disabled as purer and mentally healthier. Ethan explains:

Ethan: Sometimes I feel they (mentally disabled people) are mentally healthier than us. They would lead a happier life, not knowing their (mental) disabilities and accompanied hardships. But, we (normal people) are always aware of and frustrated by reality.

R: How would you know that they lead a happy life?
Ethan: I am sorry to say that. But, they do not have reason.

In the above-mentioned narrative, Ethan attempts to reverse the positions of disabled people and nondisabled people. In such reversal, (mentally) disabled people are placed in an ideal position, while their counterparts (normal) are placed in a non-ideal position. He identifies putative healthiness of disabled people as their absence of thinking. He appropriates mental disability as a symbol for happier and healthier life in order to show the hardships of normal people, including himself. Ethan’s ambivalence is indicative of how nondisabled people negotiate the gap between the real and the ideal by appropriating disability as a symbol with little awareness of hardships that disabled people experience.

Metaphorical uses of disability seem to help both Ivy and Ethan to overlook social discrimination against disabled people and to shift their foci towards nondisabled families of disabled people and their assumed caregiver burdens. When Ethan comments about the
dancing scene, he says, “If I have not known Chowon for a long time, he may be adorable and the spectacle he makes may be pleasurable to watch… However, if I were his parents or brothers, it would be very embarrassing and heart-aching.” Ivy also tends to be inclined toward Chowon’s parents and their burdens of care-giving

Having a child with a profound disability like Chowon… of course, he seriously suffers from frustration, too. But, I am more concerned about his parents, I mean their frustration levels. His parents should become a saint.

Chris and Gary also use disability as a metaphor in interesting ways. They describe their life situations as “in control” but “repressed.” In opposition to such a life, they find mentally disabled male characters very non-conforming and liberated. In their disability narratives, disability is signified as rebellion against conformist society. In other words, Jongdu and Chowon’s putatively deviant behaviors are means by which these two male participants can imagine their remasculinized selves. However, their seemingly liberating disability usages are limiting, in that they are so preoccupied with their concerns and desires to return to maleness that they overlook the social experiences of disabled people.

Picking Chowon as his favorite character, Chris expresses his fascination with Chowon’s deviant behaviors. He states that “Chowon’s different, yet innocent behaviors, dancing in a public place, passing gas at the most inopportune times, walking around nude around a swimming pool or what else? Sing a tampon advertisement song before a girl, ha ha ha. They are so mesmerizing.” When asked to describe how he deems Chowon’s behaviors fascinating, Chris explains: “People wouldn’t dare do these things unless they were crazy like Chowon…. You know what? I felt great watching his (Chowon) manly stuff.” He untangles the relationships between deviance, disability, and manliness, by stating that “all Chowon did
was against social norms, who would have thought singing the tampon song in front of a woman? He is a rebel.”

Chris further explains:

These days, men are so tamed. They are not allowed to do anything…I don’t think I am an exception. I have been always a good eldest son, a bit embarrassing to say, but a good student, too. My mom always teaches us (his brother and him) that we should behave ourselves and do good things only. I really admire her disciplines. But, sometimes, I wanna do what my mom would never expect. You know, something totally manly. At least, Chowon’s daredevil acts gave me vicarious satisfaction.

The appropriation of (mental) disability as rebellion is more complicated in Gary’s disability narrative. He picks two characters as his favorites Chowon’s coach in Malaton and Jongdu in Oasis. Gary reveals his fascination with the coach, saying, “I feel as if I looked at myself in the mirror when I see the coach,” because “he has no pretense,” “[s]leeps or eats whenever he feels like,” is “[l]aid-back,” and “[d]oesn’t try to read other people’s minds.” Gary concludes his admiration of the coach character, expressing that “the coach is ruggedly masculine figure I always wanna have around.”

Gary also admires Jongdu’s laid-back lifestyle, but, for some reason, he shows unwillingness to identify with Jongdu. Gary says, “I sort of admire his (Jongdu) lifestyle. But, he is too much different from me. He is a social misfit, I mean he seems mentally disabled, while I am not.” Even though Gary does not identify with Jongdu, he can’t help liking this “socially deviant” character:
From different angles, Jongdu is an admirable character, at least for me as a person who pursues escape from reality.

R: You are pursing the escape?

Gary: Yes, indeed.

Gary contextualizes his escape from reality with his family background in his individual interview. Because he is from a conservative and well-to-do family, and an eldest grandson by the eldest son, he had certain rules and behaviors imposed on him. Gary finds Jongdu’s non-conforming character appealing when he contrasts his feminized masculinity with Jongdu’s rugged masculinity:

I had been taught to act one way only. My childhood had been full of responsibilities and duties. When I entered a high school, I saw my friends having fun and came to envy them. I was thinking about hanging out with these guys. I quit hanging out with them. You know the way I had been taught kind of kept me from doing that.

For whatever reasons, I couldn’t be rebellious…. Jongdu does what he wants and what he thinks right. He does whenever he feels like. He doesn’t do anything when he doesn’t. I don’t know why I think of him this way. But he is very masculine.

Gary’s fascination with Jongdu’s rugged masculinity not only reflects his own longing to be normal but also his status as able-bodied. When Gary is asked what parts of the Sol Kyung Koo character (Jongdu) he is drawn to, he states that “Jongdu has his own way of doing…he is damn fearless.” Gary identifies as a source of fearlessness Jongdu’s inability to negotiate between the real and the ideal resulting from his mental disability:
Gary: Whatever escapes we may pursue, we wouldn’t be able to transfer to reality….It’s just fantasy.

R: Why not?

Gary: Because we have a clear idea of what we can do and what we cannot do, or what we should do and what we shouldn’t do, while Jongdu has no clear idea.

R: What made you think so?

Gary: You know, he is (mentally) disabled. A social misfit just does strange things. He doesn’t belong to a majority. He is minority.

Several female participants use disability as metaphor for individual and social disadvantages. Their metaphoric uses of disability as a social disadvantage reveal their social locations and their yearning for unattainable wholeness. Such metaphoric understanding of disability allows the participants to make identification with disability in order to express their own concern over their marginalized status, but the participants do not leave much room for speaking for disabled people.

Candy uses disability as a metaphor for “barriers” or “difficulty” to describe communication failures, and even identifies herself as “disabled in some sense” when she is in a difficult situation of speaking with others or vice versa. She states: “I have some barriers or difficulties like any other people. For example, if the two people had a communication problem, I would say it’s a disability.” However, when Candy is asked whether she is discriminated against due to such communication failure, she replies:

I would say no…but in movies or reality, people experience certain transformations in their minds and bodies and act differently, I mean,
violently; it would be like a disability, too. You know…everyone may have a disability.

Candy also understands disability as a disadvantage. She does not identify with any of the disabled people in the films, saying that “these films are too formulaic. I know the codes and conventions of films of this kind.” However, she sympathizes with the disadvantages disabled people experience, stating: “I sort of understand their discrimination (filmic characters) because I sort of feel the same way.” Her sympathy does not go to the material experience of disabled people. Rather, she employs disability as a starting point to address her own perceived disadvantages, regarding gender discrimination in a Korean film industry:

I sort of understand their discrimination (filmic characters) because I strongly feel the same way. I know I have a middle/upper class background. I am also highly educated. Nevertheless, I feel very disadvantaged most of the time. I will work in a Korean film industry. The industry is known for its male-oriented and conservative tendency. I expect to have some discrimination. Being a female filmmaker is like you are disabled in the first place.

When Candy is asked to explore her status of being disabled in film industry, she articulates a limited job opportunity. According to her, female filmmakers are subject to discrimination both in academia and industry. Her discrimination stands in stark contrast with her male counterparts’ perceived privileges in employment, social/familial support systems, and types of films. With the help of her symbolic identification with disability, she succeeds in laying bare male privileges prevailing in the film industry. However, the symbolic use of disability does not provide any space for articulation of social discrimination experienced by
disabled people, a reflection on her own privileges, or an attempt to build rapport with them as co-minorities. In her narrative, disability only functions as a symbolic shortcut to articulate her disadvantaged status as female in the film industry and as a catalyst to reflect her desire to be normal:

Getting a job in Film Studies scholarship (in Korea) is fiercely competitive. … I have a senior (Korean male) student who just graduated from the program. I think that he will easily get a job in Korea…. He was graduated in a strong Film Studies program at a university. Also, I may have a disadvantage because I am a single woman. He is a married man with a wife and a son. Society is very supportive of a male breadwinner. Moreover, he is doing a feature film and I am doing experimental film. Feature filmmakers are more easily recognized. I never think I am less capable than he. It’s not fair.

Similarly, Ivy identifies with the situations disabled characters face, rather than the characters themselves. She clarifies that “to me, disability is like a social barrier.” In a way, her concept of disability bears a resemblance to a perspective of the social model of disability. However, in some of her disability narratives, Ivy’s disability as a social barrier concept is used to articulate her own perceived sense of marginalization, rather than that of disabled people, even though she seems to have more progressive thinking. In addition, her metaphoric use of disability as disadvantage enables her to compare herself with her US disabled friend. She emphasizes her marginalized identities, gender and race, and then places herself in a less privileged position than her friend. Ivy seems to figure that the disability identities of her friend give her some advantages in pursuing her own degree Ivy’s
identification with social disadvantages is used to express her own anxiety about “being put at a disadvantage” and desire about “normalcy” based on her sense of “equality.” When asked to explore both her marginalization and privilege, Ivy responds:

I ask myself where I am belonging to. Am I a privileged group? I have to say, “No.” You know…I am a nondisabled Asian woman who studies in the US. In comparison with my (disabled) friend, I don’t think I am better positioned.

R: Very interesting. In what ways you are less positioned?

Ivy: At the professional level, the clearly defined standards exist. It’s not about whether you have a disability or not. However, scholarships and academic procedures seem conducive to advancing disabled students. One of my friends, she is American…she has a less severe disability, but enjoys such entitlements. Her academic work is not that good, but highly recognized because of her disability. She always gets accommodations…

Ivy continues to elaborate on the accommodations she thinks her disabled friend receives:

I don’t know exactly. But she seemed like having extended deadlines for her papers. English is not my mother tongue. I need the accommodation, too. But almost all professors wouldn’t recognize my special need, because I have no disability. I have kept thinking it’s unfair. I hope that I will be treated on the equal basis.

Appropriations of disability as a metaphor make it possible for the participants to identify with disability/disabled people. However, their identification is short-lived.
Metaphorically understanding disability as difficulty or disadvantage, the participants actively apply the metaphor to their sense of marginalization. When the participants are asked to identify similarities and differences with film characters, most of them are inclined to point out differences, but are unwilling to explore the similarities. For example, Aaron expresses his uneasiness about attempting to find the similarities. When he is asked whether he has found himself or his friends similar to disabled characters in the films, he responds, “Your question sounds like we are mentally disabled.”

Most of the participants also feel uneasiness about finding the similarities, signaled by keeping silent, or asking “Do I have to” or “Can we move to another question?” In particular, Julie, who has a disabled brother in her family, expresses her discomfort when asked to find the similarities between herself or significant others and disabled characters in the films. She describes her mother’s denial of her brother’s disability:

To some extent, she (Julie’s mother) denies her son’s disability.

That’s because he is bright and doesn’t have any problems except for the leg. Only difference is his limping. He doesn’t have a lower level of intelligence, either. He’s just limping. Instead, he has a higher IQ than all of us. But she would distance him from other disabled people, like Chowon and Gongju. I think my mom never liked my brother lumped into the same group with these kinds (severely disabled).

According to Julie, stigmas attached to disability/disabled people lead her mother to separate her polio brother from being labeled as disabled or to dissociate him from other disabled people. When Julie is asked to explore what made her mother try to dissociate him from other disabled people, she replies,
“all kinds of bad things accored to disability. I fully understand why she (mother) refused it.” Likewise, I suggest that the stigmas attached to disability and power differentials between (non) disabled people may play a significant role in the participants’ difficulty in identifying with disabled characters in the films, in spite of their active uses of disability as metaphor.

**Trivializing the experiences of disabled people**

The participants display a strong notion of an absolute and irreconcilable split in society between those perceived as “nondisabled” and those labeled “disabled.” This perceived split, facilitated by the metaphors, leads the participants to uncritically engage with the lived experiences of disabled people. More concretely, they tend to downplay discrimination and oppression disabled people face by means of the following ableist reverse discrimination rhetorics: burden/freeloader narratives, hardships of nondisabled family members, and the notion of disabled people as potential oppressors.

Amy talks about the underserved privileges some disabled people may enjoy at the expenses of nondisabled people. While describing Chowon’s mother as a public enemy in *Malaton*, she extends the common enemy rhetoric to disabled people. Through a third person perspective, she cautiously expresses her concerns over disability benefits/entitlements. In her narrative of disability, Amy constructs disabled people and their disability benefits as a free ride or unnecessary rights. Her strong rejection of disability benefits is made plain when she brings in unknown and unidentified groups who would, in her hypothetical view, strongly resist the idea of benefits for disabled people:

There must be some people who feel this way. If one paid a bus fare, but they saw disabled people paying none, they as nondisabled would likely feel they are at a disadvantage. I don’t know if we have
strong benefits for disabled people (in Korea). If we had the strong
benefits (for disabled people), there would be some groups who
would strongly object the benefits. They would make every possible
effort for disabled people not to have such benefits.

When asked to describe how disability benefits are rejected by certain nondisabled
people, Amy invokes reverse discrimination rhetoric. In this reverse discrimination,
nondisabled people are at a substantial disadvantage, while disabled people are at an
advantage. Put simply, non disabled people play sacrificial roles in supporting their
counterparts as burdens. Amy believes that the reverse discrimination is not fair, and against
equality. In this regard, Reynolds (2008) asserts that in a democratic society where self-
sufficiency and reason are constructed as part of the definition of equality, “equality often
ends up meaning like the majority” (p. 80). As a consequence, false accusations from the
majority against disabled people are made. For disabled persons, equality too often means
“pressure to pass as able-bodied, to become like the majority and a ‘productive’ member of
society” (p. 82). Amy continues to explain:

Amy: Well…I don’t know exactly. It would be similar to… What’s
that? White people complaining about black people?
Eva: Maybe, affirmative action or reverse discrimination in the US?
Amy: Thanks, it’s a reversed discrimination… certain groups
(nondisabled) would seek to keep their rights and benefits intact.
R: Do you happen to know the groups?
Amy: Hmmm…I don’t know which specific groups would do that,
though. But there must be…
R: Why there must be?
Amy: It’s equality. We live in a society based on equality. It’s not fair.

Aaron shows how the reductive meaning of equality affects disability as an identity and disabled people as subjects. He understands disability issues in terms of a majority vs. minority. For him, disabled people constructed as minority must fit into the “standards of nondisabled people” (the majority) and contribute to society by “working hard” like the “nondisabled.” Aaron also attempts to explain the total assimilation of disabled people into the mainstream for the interests of a large majority.

In one way or another, they (disabled) have to follow the majority. It’s inevitable. They are a minority. I think it’s so wrong that they have benefit without any contributions to society. At least, they have to work hard to fit into the mainstream in order to secure their benefits.

R: In terms of your understanding, minority groups must follow the majority?

Aaron: Minority issues are sort of important. But the majority can’t sacrifice for only a few people. 9,999 people cannot afford to and shouldn’t follow and consider just one person. This is against the interests of a majority. This is how the system goes. I don’t think society could operate, if considering disabled people only. If I had been wrong, wouldn’t have the system worked in the interests of disabled people?

The participants’ sense of disability benefits reveal self-sufficiency, independence, and autonomy are significant constituents of what they constructed as equality. Paradoxically,
equality becomes synonymous with the majority. Accordingly, for disabled people, the result is “either assimilation through processes of normalization or exclusion through processes of marginalization or confinement” (Reynolds, 2008, p. 82).

In a similar vein, Ian explains the necessity of the social standards imposed on disabled people for the public good. To begin with, he asserts that society shouldn’t accept “their deviant behaviors (mentally disabled) for the public good” because “It’s almost impossible to meet the needs of everyone,” thereby there should be “some rules which require all the people to follow to maintain social stability.” When Ian is asked to define the “public good,” he expresses the difficulty to define it in the beginning because “the public good would be different from society to society.” Instead, he gives an interesting example of why supposedly deviant behaviors would be necessarily controlled for the public good. He seems to conflate mental disability with sexual deviation. Ian attempts to justify the confinement of mentally disabled people for the sake of the public good:

Ian: If sexual perverts abuse female passers-by by showing their sex organs and trying to attack them in an abandoned alley, the women are likely abused or even vulnerable to crime. But if these sex perverts are regulated and excluded by laws or whatever, I mean… if some bad people are controlled, it will be beneficial to everyone. I mean something good for a large majority.

R: So, mentally disabled persons should be excluded?

Ian: Not all of them, but some of the mentally disabled people must be.

The participants’ perspectives on disability benefits also suggest that they construct disabled people as dependent and value the important roles of nondisabled people. In accordance with this, disability benefits become compensations for time and effort made by
nondisabled family members to care for their disabled counterparts. Most of the participants’ foci are invariably shifted to nondisabled caregivers in the films. All of them are concerned about the caregiver burdens of Kyungsook, Chowon’s mother, in Malaton or even the abusive brother of Gongju in Oasis. Consequently, disabled people as a historically disadvantaged group are subsumed by discourses of dependency and care. While commenting on nondisabled family members in each film, Hannah insists that disability benefits should be understood as compensatory for what nondisabled people have done for their disabled family members. Hannah, especially, accentuates dependency of significantly disabled characters, stating that “In cases of Chowon (in Malaton) and Gongju (in Oasis), they can’t live independently without care…. Both of the characters require intensive care and someone’s sacrifice. Caretakers would be likely their parents, brothers or sisters, spouses or whatever.” Then, Hannah puts disabled people in dependent roles and their counterparts in caretaking roles and draws out a rationale for disability benefits. She understands the relationship between disabled as care-receivers and nondisabled as caregivers as “the flip side of the same coin,” and then construes disability benefits as compensation to alleviate negative effects arising out of their disabilities. Hannah further explains:

Hannah: Wherever disabled people are, there have to be their caregivers. It’s like the flip side of the same coin. To coexist, I think care receivers should do something for caregivers.

R: How?

Hannah: For example, when Chowon’s mother buys a car or parks it in a lot, she has disability entitlements, such as tax cuts or handicapped lots due to Chowon’s disability. But, living with Chowon takes his mother’s and other family members’ sacrifices…
the benefits may keep caregivers and care receivers on balance because they are in symbiotic relationships…. I guess the benefits may alleviate problems arising out of disability.

In Hannah’s dialogue above, disability entitlements are at odds with their original purpose: to promote self-autonomy and independence of disabled people. Rather, their benefits are constructed as compensation for nondisabled caregivers’ sacrifices, especially families of disabled people. Within the framework, because disabled people are dependent on and burdens to nondisabled people, the mutual pleasure, respect, and cooperation between the two cannot be discussed. In addition, the framework has no space to discuss systemic oppression and discrimination, which have marginalized disabled people. Rather, the framework highlights hardships and sacrifices made by caregivers and rationalizes power differentials between nondisabled and disabled people.

The oppression and discrimination disabled people often encounter are eclipsed in some of the participants’ notion that a disabled person can be a socially powerful actor or an oppressor. Despite the fact that the participants acknowledge unfavorable social realities faced by a majority of disabled people, they still focus on difference within the group by highlighting that “there are socially powerful disabled people, too.” For example, Eva acknowledges that “disabled people would likely fall into bottom rungs of society” because of “lack of social and familial support.” However, she instantly highlights the possibility that some disabled people can achieve social power that “if disabled people had middle/upper class background, or their parents were determined to enroll their children at college, it would be possible to avoid marginalization.” Therefore, there is little space to discuss the oppression and discrimination against disabled people. Eva continues to explain:
I know there are very few disabled people who go to colleges and get college degrees. Among them, some would have professional jobs. For example, being a professor means you become those with vested rights. In spite of their disabilities, I guess, their statuses move up. Of course, they may be disadvantaged and even discriminated against because of their disabilities. These disabled people can acquire and exercise invested rights. These people are incorporated into mainstream and get successful.

When most of the participants, including Amy, Brit, Candy, and Eva, have an opportunity to talk about their own privilege in relation to disabled people, Candy tends to circumvent the opportunity by emphasizing the unearned privileges and power some of the “successful” disabled people may enjoy. In the beginning, she acknowledges the social marginalization of disabled people by stating that: “I know that most of disabled people are placed in way below average in terms of social power.” But, she instantly shifts away from the marginalization to the opposite case that “we know 1% of disabled people have and exercise some invested rights and powers.” Candy’s narrative is based on the assumptions that social upward mobility for disabled people is possible. However, in reality, the likelihood that disabled people move up the social ladder is very slim because of discrimination in employment, education, housing, etc. Therefore, actual experiences of disabled people are again overshadowed by the slim possibility of upward mobility of disabled people. Candy continues to develop the slim possibility into an interesting case that disabled people would exercise power in negative ways by referencing her professor:

Candy: I happened to know a disabled professor. I thought that she would have understood me better because her disability and my
international student/female status would share something in common. Actually, she doesn’t. She discriminated against me. I don’t see her as part of the minority groups at all.

Candy also sees her disabled professor as an example that some disabled people have potential to be oppressors. Her interpretation of her disabled people professor as a possible oppressor is narrated around disability entitlements. Once again, disability related entitlements are misunderstood as if they were abused by one’s authority position:

Even though she is disabled, the professor enjoys her unearned privilege, too. She knows how to use her disability and its attached entitlements. She was offered transportation, meals, and an exclusive assistant for her, though she is a very incompetent professor and filmmaker. I think she acquired a new identity which enables her to be placed in the invested rights groups.

In addition, Candy’s suspicion over disability entitlements reconfirms her professor’s alleged incompetency as a filmmaker. She critiques the professor’s incompetency in particular and the paternalistic social mood in which disabled people’s work are overly evaluated. In her critique, she relies heavily on the absolute power of ability, which, by extension, serves to negate the social marginalization of disabled people as a whole and the necessity of disability entitlements:

Candy: She is a very incompetent professor and filmmaker. But she has several advantages because of her disability identity. Whenever she submits her work for film festivals, her work likely draws attention, regardless of its quality. This is because she has a disability. She could be considered a good filmmaker within
disability community only. But, no way outside it. I strongly believe she exercises and enjoys the political power in an inappropriate way.

With regard to this, Brit also critiques the prevalent paternalistic attitudes towards disabled people. She is also critical of the ways nondisabled people engage with disabled people. According to her, the paternalistic attitude and manner does not help both parties, especially disabled people. As an alternative solution, she suggests a holistic approach that all aspects of a person should be counted. In other words, disability should not be the main focus when people are considered. However, her naïve observation on the hierarchical relationship between disabled and nondisabled people is problematic. And her humanistic approach is made possible only through the depoliticization of disability. Brit comments:

We as nondisabled people tend to be too cautious when we interact with disabled people. You know, we are too concerned about the possibility of offending them. As a consequence, we do too nice to them, most of the time ending up spoiling them. Judging a person takes a lot of work. I mean, many elements of the person should be carefully considered. Sometimes, we are too conscious of disability only, we easily forget many aspects surrounding them.

The participants’ overall critique about disability may summarize nondisabled people’s typically automatic responses to this kind of dialogue. Even though their critique succeeds in revealing the fact that disabled people can be placed in authority positions, misusing power, the critique is unable to distinguish disabled people in a position from, say, a heterosexual, middle/upper class, nondisabled male in the same position. More importantly, this kind of critique serves to play down social discrimination experienced by disabled people and to conceal nondisabled people’s own privileges in relation to disability/disabled people.
Redirecting anxieties: Fear and guilt

Disability Studies scholars argue that nondisabled people tend to project their own anxieties onto disabled people (Garland-Thomson, 1997; Davis, 1997; Norden, 1994; Wilton, 2003). In other words, by redirecting their own fear of dependency to substitute targets, especially disabled people, they can split off from parts of themselves that they do not want to recognize and safely preserve their egos. Considering that most nondisabled people will develop disabilities at some point in their lives due to aging, accident, or disease, or have the possibility of having a disabled family member or significant other, the scholars’ psychoanalysis-informed argument works well with the fears and guilt some of the participants display in this dissertation. In spite of the participants’ attempts to distance from disabled characters/people and their issues, a sense of fear and guilt is still lingering among them. They are fearful of becoming disabled, having a disabled child, and being guilty for conspiring with oppressors or oppressive systems.

Amy vividly recalls her fear-loaded childhood experiences in encountering with disabled people in a traditional market. Whenever she went to the market with her mother, she saw disabled people, especially disabled beggars. Amy describes the moment as follows:

There used to be many beggars in a traditional market place. As far as I remember, most of them were impaired and males. Honestly, I had never thought that they were disabled until the meeting with you. I just thought that they have no arms or legs. They wore strange things. They were really dirty and hairy. They were not like us. I was so scared to see them, often hiding myself behind my mom.

Amy’s additional description suggests that the sources of fear not only come from the scary images of impaired beggars, but her own anxiety related to becoming like them. She
shares her childhood nightmares by stating: “I dreamt very horrible nightmares whenever I saw them there,” and describes the dreams as “so awful to even think of… having the same amputated bodies they have.” She concludes with a very interesting comment: “Ever since, I have tried not to see them.” When she is asked to elaborate, she responds, “I don’t know exactly, but I don’t wanna be like them.” Amy briefly adds: “I just don’t wanna be one of them. I am so scared to be like them. That’s all.” Her narrative inadvertently betrays the blurry boundaries between disabled and nondisabled. Because of nondisabled people’s susceptibility to disability resulting from aging, accident, etc., anyone can experience disability at some point in their lives. In addition, her narrative reveals that disability is constructed as dependence, tragedy, and pity, plastered with visually excessive images. Even if Amy may not be aware of her own vulnerability, her interpretation of disabled beggars and her intent on distancing from them reveals her own anxiety as temporarily able-bodied and independent-bodied.

The fears of having a disabled child are pervasive among married participants. Ian remembers having argued about prenatal testing with his wife, who was six month pregnant at that time. When his wife was advised to have a prenatal test in a hospital, she refused it because of any possibility that a fetus would be found defective and eliminated. Ian describes the difficult moment as follows:

I asked her (Ian’s wife) to take the test. She didn’t listen to me at all.

She was like I am not gonna abort a baby, even if something goes wrong. I had never thought about it (having a defective baby). But, this could happen to anyone. Back then, I had a desperate hope that I would not have this kind of baby. When I tried to talk about any possibility with her, she walked out of the room. It was like “don’t
even say any single bad word out of your mouth.” I am very thankful to having a healthy son.

When Ian is asked to say more about his “desperate” hope not to have a defective child, he responds, “if I could avoid the situation (having a defective baby), I would be willing to do anything. But if it could happen to me, I would have to accept him.” He also reveals that the main factors behind his unwillingness are caregiver burdens and costs of raising a disabled child, by saying that “Bringing up a disabled child likely takes a great deal of time and effort, let alone money. Honestly, I don’t wanna do that.”

Hans also expresses his deep concern in interesting ways over his four-months-pregnant wife possibly bearing a defective fetus. Such an anxiety is appeased or contained by highlighting an individual choice to abort the fetus and unexpectedly critiquing disability rights activists for intruding into disabled people’s privacy. Hans defends an individual choice for aborting a defective fetus, saying, “It’s so private, nobody should intervene in decision-making, other than parents.” Hans’s uneasiness about invasion of privacy shifts to particular disabled people—disability rights activists. Hans is concerned about the overgeneralization presumably made by disability rights activists that all disabled people would want to be different or treated differently than nondisabled people. Hans says, “They (disability rights activists) would like to think of disabled people as different from the rest of us. But I am not quite sure that their argument fits all disabled people.” However, in the next dialogue, Hans reveals his contradictory stance towards an “individual choice” by overgeneralizing disabled people, especially their perspectives on normality. Hans says: “disabled people wanna be the same as the rest of us. They don’t wanna look different. It’s by instinct.”
Feeling a sense of guilt for conspiring with oppressors or oppressive systems which favor themselves over disabled people is dominant in Gaby’s narrative. Gaby is concerned about her possible complicity with normalcy, which marginalizes disabled people, and she feels guilty about such collusion. To begin with, Gaby attempts to articulate the ways she feels about a male-dominated society and links it to disability:

When I got back home from the (group) discussion, I had to ask myself. My critical thinking about disability opens the door for another concept. I applied this disability stuff to women. Men always dominate the world. So, women are placed in a minority position. Just think about business settings. Men take most of the important positions. Women are placed at the bottom. Men always say that women, because of their typical personalities and bodies, are not fit for business environments or higher positions. But who defines appropriate personalities and bodies in such fields? Men do that because it gives them a lot of advantages. It is the same thing. Similarly, disabled people are placed in abnormal groups because a large majority feels comfortable without them.

When asked to elaborate on the majority’s discomfort with disabled people, Gaby states:

I could not help thinking this way. But, I kinda follow what the majority do…I guess I like the state of being normal. It’s because I am selfish. I do not like any changes at all. I see many disabled people in my life… They are everywhere. But, I find myself
avoiding them… I am selfish. I am a mean person. I am scared

and… I guess I feel too much different from them.

Gaby seems in dilemma. She feels uncomfortable about being complicit with the majority and the systems of oppression, which overlook the concerns of disabled people. At the same time, she is accustomed to what the majority performs as normality/able-bodiedness. Her dilemma is materialized through her commonsensical, yet contradictory, act: attempting to distance herself from disability/disabled people who are paradoxically present “everywhere.” The narrative of her sense of fear and guilt may suggest that even a potential liberator possibly participates in the oppressive system that accommodates her privilege as normal/able-bodied to the disadvantage of other fellow minorities. However, Gaby’s privilege is premised on her partial surrender to the masculinist regime of power aided by an ability-centered ideology. Within the regime based on the hierarchical power relations, she is not entitled to have a solid ground from which to articulate her own discrimination and oppression as female, since she is indirectly in cooperation with the oppressive system by glossing over the social injustices committed against disabled people.

Gaby’s commonsensical, yet ambivalent act, avoiding disabled people present in countless places, is more specifically and strategically manifested through other participants’ narratives in theme 3, normalization of disability and disabled people. In spite of their initial attempts at distancing themselves from disability and disabled people, the participants seek for a quick remedy this time, finding sameness between disabled people and themselves in the name of “humanness.”

In summary, with the otherness of disability accentuated, disability is metaphorically used to signify individual and social disadvantages in the participants’ disability narratives. The disability metaphors are designed to address the participants’ perceived sense of social
marginalization, rather than to reflect actual experiences of disabled people. Therefore, they only serve the interest of these nondisabled participants, not that of disabled people. Their anxiety and yearning for wholeness or the idealized, unimpaired bodies/minds take center stage at the expense of the social inequalities experienced by disabled people. In other words, the participants use disability as a means through which to normalize their presumed marginalization and to confirm their normalcy after all. The metaphorical use of disability helps the participants overlook the material experience of disabled people, using reverse discrimination rhetoric. However, in the midst of the metaphors and downplaying, they still express their own perceived fear and anxiety in relation to disability and the oppressive system.

**Theme 3: Normalization of disability and disabled people**

In spite of their persistent dissociation from disabled people, explained in previous sections, the participants often switch gears to express the perceived sameness, rather than difference, between disabled people and themselves. Under the pretext of “they (disabled people) are like us” or “they want to be normal,” and “we are all humans,” the participants convert disabled people in the films and social world into those who they think are “normal” and similar to themselves. The conversion takes the form of feminizing, sexualizing, and “supercrippling” disabled people.

However, paradoxically, despite their transformation, disabled people are not accepted into the normal regime. I argue that emphasis on sameness not only serves to contain disabled people as political subjects and disability issues, but to reinforce the privilege of these participants as able-bodied. That is, when the participants conflate their experiences with those of disabled characters, they consolidate the rhetoric of sameness,
which evidences the able-bodied identity as superior and functions as an invisible norm against which non-normative bodies and minds are judged.

**Normalizing and humanizing disabled people.**

The participants arbitrarily judge disabled people and their experiences by their own standards and end up assuming that disabled people aspire to be like themselves. Such strategy is to deny their own privilege and defend their own identities as able-bodied and to cover up their own instability as temporarily able-bodied.

In a discussion of an autistic male character, Chowon in *Malaton*, Aaron is suspicious about a claim that he perceives is held by disability rights activists and scholars, namely that all disabled people should be regarded as normal. To begin with, Aaron highlights the distinct boundary between the normal/abnormal categories and disabled and nondisabled, and mentions, “It is taken for granted that there should be normal and abnormal categories within society. Even though he (Chowon) participated in and completed the (marathon) race, he cannot be considered normal.” Aaron’s strong belief about the division between disabled and nondisabled people, regarding normality/abnormality, enables him to be critical of the perceived stances of disability rights activists and scholars towards disability/disabled people. In addition, Aaron makes it clear that he thinks normalization efforts aren’t coming from society, but from disabled people themselves:

Aaron: I think disability advocates and scholars seem to insist that disabled people are normal and try to instill this idea into the minds of people in general. I don’t understand why they claim this way. Why are we treated the same as disabled people? Why do they analogize us with disability, being uncomfortable, impaired and malfunctioned? It doesn’t make sense at all.
R: Why do you think they (disability scholars and advocates) would do so?

Aaron: I think they try to earn something out of it. Disabled people are not a majority. Anyway, they (disability advocates and scholars) have to persuade the majority of people. So they use this kind of rhetoric, “disabled people are not different.” But obviously, they are (different)….I think it is not society but disabled people themselves that wanna be normal.

Aaron’s suspicion on the activists and scholars’ stances and his own claim that disabled people aspire to be normal is supported by Hans’s anecdote. Hans tells a story about a mildly disabled man he met through charity work in his church:

Hans: My mother volunteers for many charity things. Through the charity organized by her church, I happened to help a physically disabled man in his early 20s. He was preparing for a GED exam, so I tutored him…

R: What about him? Please, go on...

Hans: He told me that he felt very uncomfortable about being treated differently. Even though he had the same ability to do well as normal people, society wouldn’t recognize and appreciate his ability at all because of his disability. Society never sees him as a normal person, either.

In the above dialogue, Hans critiques society for denying the disabled man’s ability. Although he acknowledges the disabled man’s ability and society’s indifference to accommodating him, his well-intended social commentary reveals its dependence on
ability/disability binary and its “limitation” to accommodate the needs of those who do not conform to ability category. For example, those not assumed to meet ability criteria or not willing to adopt the “normal” identification would likely be excluded in his social critique. In other words, disabled people want to show their abilities corresponding to what society wants and to abandon their disability identities. As a consequence, social responsibilities for disabled people are absolved and social oppression of disabled people are justified. In Hans’s critique, disability as a social problem remains a mere signifier with no space to explain this disabled man’s oppression.

Hans’s reception of the ability concept serves to consolidate normalcy, too. In his description of the physically disabled man, Hans attempts to contrast sameness and normality with difference/abnormality. In other words, normality and sameness serve as reference points, which people aspire to and which become almost mandatory for all. By contrast, abnormality and difference are constructed as universally deviant or something that people innately want to avoid.

In the dialogue below, Hans’s construction of normality and sameness reveals its compulsory nature, and even extends to define humanness. As opposed to his approval of individual choice for a disabled fetus, Hans does not give any exception for abnormal/different identification. Furthermore, normality expands its territory in defining “us” and “human.” Those outside normality become unnatural, inhuman, or not “like us.”

Hans: If he had been treated like us, he would not be in that bad situation.

R: Then, treating him (a physically disabled man) like a normal person solves all of his problems?

Hans: Not his every problem, but…great portion of it.
R: Why do you think that he wanna look normal? Would it be a problem if he chose difference?

Hans: Well, let me put it this way. Everybody wanna be normal. It’s natural. He is like us. He is human, so he is supposed to look like us.

You folks (disability rights activists) need to know what disabled people really want.

**Audiences’ acceptance of a normatively feminized and sexualized Gongju**

The normalizing rhetoric of “they are like us” or “they wanna look like us” is also made evident in many other participants’ narratives of disability. In these narratives, the rhetoric manifests itself on the bodies and minds of disabled people in the films and social world as a form of rehabilitation. That is to say, a disabled female Gongju in *Oasis*, who had been thought of as genderless and sexless, is feminized and sexualized in the participants’ narratives. Under the banner of humanness or personhood, disabled people are problematically normalized in response to the tastes of these nondisabled participants.

To begin with, the participants tend to normatively sexualize Gongju by feminizing her in the ways that the film ask them to. Pointing out the problematic scene in which Gongju starts to be particular about her physical appearance, which immediately follows Jongdu’s sexual assault on her, nearly all participants deeply accept the film’s egregious logic that Gongju would be sexually awakened by rape. In the participants’ narratives of disability, disabled people are normalized by their perceived abilities to love and have sex in an ableist forms. Some of the male participants tend to conflate the rape scene with a sex scene and most of the female participants, who rightly condemn the rape scene as violent, rather than sexual, still, like their male counterparts, eventually accept the film’s egregious argument that Gongju’s sexual awakening would follow. Many of the participants, including Aaron, Chris,
Ethan, Hans, Amy, Brit, Fiona, and Hannah admit to newly learning that disabled people are capable of love and sex. This leads me to believe that their positive reception of the result of the rape scene stems from the film’s preference towards sexualizing, feminizing Gongju in an ableist form. In other words, such perceived abilities in the realm of sex and love are used as the points of entry that the participants initiate to identify with Gongju in particular and disabled women in general, and as evidence that disabled people can become potentially normal like themselves. In order to be normal, disabled people prove the ability to perform what these nondisabled people construct as normal.

To begin with, these participants reveal their preconceptions of love and sex of disabled people, commenting, “I was surprised that disabled women can do things like that (Amy),” “I had never thought they were able to make love (Brit),” or “It was a total shock” (Hans). The film, *Oasis*, is at the center of the participants’ discussion of love and sex of disabled people. In their discussion, they particularly focus on sexual encounters between Jongdu and Gongju, and Gongju’s subsequent change in the film. The participants find Gongju’s heterosexual femininity familiar and start to identify her as “one of us.” That is to say, Gongju’s newly acquired female identity allows her to be qualified as “normal.” In the film, Gongju also passes as a beautiful, nondisabled woman in her own fantasy and seeks to restore her broken femininity.

With regard to this, Amy reveals her previous notion of disabled people as genderless and her perspective change on that preconception at the same time, commenting, “I didn’t distinguish disabled people alongside a gender line...they were just disabled to me.” However, after watching Jongdu and Gongju’s sexual encounter and Gongju’s subsequent fantasies, Amy comes to realize “they are sexual beings” and “they (disabled people) are men and women like us.” Amy identifies the ability to have sexual intercourse as the main
qualifications of being a man or a woman. Such identification leads Amy to believe that disabled people are part of “us.”

Amy’s new identification with disabled people is facilitated and confirmed by Gongju’s yearning to be normal in her fantasies. Amy takes as example the fantasy scenes, reflecting on Gongju’s desire to be a normal woman. Amy says, “Gongju just wanna be a normal woman like everyone else, though she has a disability.” In her above comment, being normal ends up meaning the absence of disability, as well as “like us” or the “majority.”

Amy’s emphasis on normative femininity as a ticket to the normality regime tends to naturalize Gongju’s sudden change to a more feminized subject, as well as to absolve Jongdu of sexually assaulting her. More importantly, such emphasis serves to erase Gongju’s disability identity. Amy explains:

Isn’t it natural (for a woman) to show off her feminine attributes before a man she loves? Gongju puts on make-up, trying different clothes. She wanna look feminine in front of her lover. She is a woman first, disabled second…

Pointing out the scene in which Gongju starts to interest her physical appearance, Amy highlights Gongju’s normative femininity and naturalizes such performance. However, Gongju’s normative femininity is achieved through neutralizing Gongju as a disabled subject. In order for Amy to describe normalcy and traditional femininity, Gongju’s disability must be removed, or at least contained. In other words, Gongju’s femininity and normality can only be created at the expense of her disability identity.

In addition, Gongju’s normative femininity leads other participants to understand Jongdu’s sexual attack in romantic ways, and therefore his attack is further exonerated as her newly assigned femininity is naturalized. In parallel with Amy, Chris is impressed with the
film’s unfolding of Gongju’s female side. He says, “I fully appreciate the film because it captures how Gongju opens her eyes for love because she wanna be loved by a man, like average women…finally she becomes a woman.” In Chris’s statement, normative femininity qualifies Gongju as an average woman, while a man is constructed as an agent of finishing a woman’s femininity. In line with this problematic romanticization, Chris tends to defend Jongdu’s assault on Gongju by highlighting their innocent love, second sexual encounter based on mutual consensus—rather than first one, and nondisabled family members’ prejudice. Chris explains:

In the movie (Oasis), it’s not a rape at all. They just love, even if it started off strangely. We (audiences) carefully saw the whole movie, but their families (Jongdu & Gongju) saw the snapshot only. It is natural that they concluded he (Jongdu) raped her because they didn’t see the whole picture. This assumption may apply everywhere when a disabled person meets with a nondisabled person. In this situation, nondisabled people tend to overlook the process, but to focus on the moment or result only.

In addition, Chris’s next comment demonstrates that Gongju’s reassigned normative femininity is made possible only through denial of disability. Chris points to Gongju’s fantasy as nondisabled as a last resort to escape from her miserable life resulting from disability. That is, disability becomes a signifier of trouble, which propels Gongju to imagine herself as nondisabled:

I came to realize why she (Gongju) imagines herself like that (as an unimpaired woman)… If I wanted something unreachable so badly, I would imagine myself in the same way she did. Her disability is
not curable. For her, the fantasy seems the only way to keep her out of misery.

Furthermore, Gongju’s newly acquired normative femininity not only serves to conceal its denial of disability, but also to romanticize symbolic and physical violence against her. Put simply, her normative femininity is a direct result of violence against her. Fitz attempts to explain how Gongju changes to a more feminized subject in the film with the essentialized concept of a “female instinct:”

Fitz: She (Gongju) changes. She seems sexually aroused by seeing two neighbors having sex. She starts to show her soft side. She applies make-ups on her face, while watching it.

R: What factors do you think makes her do stuff like that?

Fitz: Probably, by instinct. Finally, she recognizes she is a woman.

In a similar way, Ethan attempts to understand Gongju and Jongdu’s relationship in romantic terms by saying that “Their love reminds me of an old saying, ‘Love conquers all,’ even if you or your partners are crips, idiots, or whomever.” In his statement, disability loses its voice, caught in a discourse of the supposed greatness of heterosexual love.

Hans praises the film’s emphasis on Gongju’s femininity as an opportunity to break stereotypes against disabled people. He explains: “There is a good intention in the movie. It’s like a stereotype breaker. Disabled people are humans. They can be as happy as normal people.” However, his positive reaction to the film is based on the denial of disability in the first place. For his understanding, disability is synonymous with non-productivity. Paradoxically, disabled people can be happy as long as they don’t have disabled kids. Hans continues to explain:
I know most normal people would have such stereotypes against disabled people. But luckily enough, we are exposed to some of the films like this one (*Oasis*) which describe disabled people who enjoy happy life. In such films, they have productive life, having nondisabled kids, stuff like that.

Aaron conceptualizes what happens in *Oasis* as the mirror of society. He firmly believes that nondisabled and disabled characters in the film reflect nondisabled people and disabled people in real life. He points out non disabled people’s far-reaching misconceptions of disabled people with regards to love and sex:

From their perspectives (nondisabled characters in the film),

disabled people can’t do anything or express themselves. These sorts of things are dominant ideas about disabled people. They (people in general) take it for granted that disabled people are weak, harmed all the time. Even though they (Gongju and Jongdu) enjoyed sex in the movie, their sex was mistaken for a rape. To their (nondisabled) eyes, disabled people’s sex is always abnormal. Their sex is out of the question (to people in general). This way of thinking is an example of social recognition of disabled people, isn’t it? I think this movie well reflects such reality disabled people face.

By taking as example nondisabled family members’ exploitation of disabled characters, Aaron not only reveals the impacts of these misconceptions on disabled people, but makes it clear that the misconceptions lead to exploitation and serve nondisabled people only. In other words, nondisabled people very often take advantage of disabled people on the grounds of the misconceptions about disability.
Gongju’s brother (who witnesses and mistakenly understands their sexual encounter as a rape) tried to settle this issue with Jongdu’s family and demanded money for settlement. One more thing, using his sister’s disability benefit, he stole a new apartment from her. What about Jongdu’s family? His family led him to go to prison for covering up his elder brother’s wrongdoings. These incidents well evidences how people in general view disabled people and how these views affect disabled people. People exploit disabled people after all, even though they pretend to sympathize with disabled people.

However, Aaron’s critical stance towards the misconceptions and the exploitation is watered down in his second interview by his essentialist notions of gender and disability and dualistic thinking of dis/ability. These understandings help him to understand why the nondisabled characters (their families) in the film mistake Jongdu and Gongju’s consensual sex for a rape. He indirectly implies hierarchies between and within gender and disability, but does not problematize them further. Rather, he seems to take for granted the nondisabled people’s misunderstanding. He attempts to essentialize the power differentials, on the basis of the body attributes socially enforced to each disabled character. For example, he does not seem to consider the gendered aspect of disability and vice versa. Relying heavily on the body attributes and the degrees of their attendant stigmatization, Aaron unintentionally supports the misinterpretations and possibly even the exploitations of disabled people. I argue that social critique based on a less nuanced understanding of disability works to reinforce negative stereotypes, to support social and environmental segregation, and to mask the lived realities of disabled people.
In the conversation below, Aaron constructs Gongju as a victim and Jongdu as a victimizer based on their socially enforced gender and disability. He highlights the characteristics of gender and disability accorded to the characters and employs them as the justifications for the disadvantages each character experiences in the film. In order to make this formula (victim vs. victimizer) work, he places Jongdu in a male/nondisabled position. On the one hand, severe and mild disability binaries, partly defined by visual images, play out and help Jongdu move to a more privileged, but vicious territory. On the other hand, Gongju’s visibly severe disability is accentuated to fit in the less-privileged victim role. More importantly, overshadowed by the victim vs. victimizer role playing, nondisabled people are absolved of their responsibilities for the misconceptions and the exploitations. I argue that the essentialist notions of gender and disability not only justify the disadvantage of disabled people, but serve to obscure nondisabled people’s exploitation. The participants’ refocus on individualist explanations removes space for critique of nondisabled people’s complicity with able-bodied privileges, only to reinforce and perpetuate existing power imbalances between and within gender and disability. Aaron states:

They (nondisabled family characters in *Oasis*) did very bad things, but I sort of understand why their love (Gongju and Jongdu) was mistakenly considered a rape (by their nondisabled family members). Sol Kyung Koo (actor playing Jongdu) is a normal-looking man. It means he is physically stronger one. He looks a bit slow. But he looks almost nondisabled. I don’t think he is disabled at all…but Gongju is a woman who is severely disabled. Her wounded body is hyper-visible. In their (other nondisabled characters) minds, she
(Gongju) has to be a rape victim, rather than a person who pursue sexual pleasure.

Aaron’s critical engagement with the nondisabled people’s exploitation weakens, replaced by his understanding of disability and perceived privileges of disabled people. To begin with, he states that “disability is not a privilege,” so “it shouldn’t be used as an excuse for everything.” Aaron provides a fictive accident example, in which nondisabled people are made to be responsible for disabled people’s “innocent” mistakes caused by their own disabilities:

This is an extreme case, though. If a disabled (blind) man was followed by a person, a door was thrown open, being hit against the door and injured himself, how would others see this accident?

Others mostly seize the moment and the result only and think that it’s the fault of the (nondisabled) person following. I don’t think it’s fair.

In this fictive case, Aaron conceptualizes disability as a source of problems and disabled people as troublemakers, and more importantly nondisabled people as possible “victims” of troublemakers. He extends such an understanding to his interpretation of the film, *Oasis*, and firmly insists that disability should not be used as an excuse for “everything.” He explains: “This movie (*Oasis*) is the same thing. Disability is not a privileged thing. We understand their hardships. But, they should not use their disability as an indulgence.” Once again, disability is framed as a means of making an excuse, while disabled people are constructed as those who would lie for their own benefit.
**Supercripping disabled bodies and minds**

Treating disabled people as normal entails expectations about their participation in, and potential contribution to society. In a culture that values independence and control over the body, let alone the mind, overcoming one’s disability is paramount. In conjunction with this expectation, most of the participants talk about the model of “overcoming disability,” though some participants question the plausibility of the model. Regardless of being critical of the overcoming disability model, all of the participants demand that disabled people prove something spectacular.

Many of the participants embrace the model of overcoming disability. Aaron emphasizes the importance of contributions to be made by disabled people by comparing and contrasting a blind man who accidentally bumps into a door and harms himself with a contributing disabled member, such as Helen Keller. In this hierarchal formation, the blind man becomes a burden on society, while Helen Keller becomes a contributor. In other words, one’s disability is judged by how much control the person has over his disability and contribution he makes to society. Therefore, those who “overcome” their disabilities are seen as closer to the “normal” than those who do not. Aaron states:

There are many successful disabled people out there. They are really nice people and do the good things for society. For example, Nightingale—an inspiring lady. In spite of her disability, she became an icon to everyone, including nondisabled persons.

**Ethan:** Helen Keller?

**Aaron:** Right, Helen Keller. I think this girl is totally different from others who are heavily dependent or do nothing else.
Similarly, Chris polarizes disabled people into two groups—sympathetic and non-sympathetic—according to the productivity of disabled people. Their productivity is judged by their self-determination to overcome disability. In this regard, “begging” rhetoric associated with disabled people stand in stark contrast with overcoming disability rhetoric. To begin with, Chris divides disabled people into pitiable and non-pitiable; such division well reflects the importance of productivity in judging and classifying disabled people. Chris states:

I feel pity for hard-working disabled people but not for lazy (disabled) people… laziness is not a good excuse for being disabled.
Without any efforts on the part of individuals, society cannot help them. I am sure that there must be several areas that they (disabled people) can work in. If there are not, they should develop their own jobs.

The overcoming atmosphere echoes and supports what Chris believes to be worthy of pity or sympathy. When Chris is asked to describe his interaction with disabled people, he tells about the story of a documentary’s main character who has a huge tumor on her ankle, which causes her mobility issues. He sympathizes with the female character, saying that: “Because of the bump on her ankle, she couldn’t put on her shoes or walk. She had a hard time financially, too because she couldn’t work at all because her bump.” Identifying the problem as arising out of her disability, Chris imagines her life as “pitiful and “awful” and expresses his deep concern over her; “While watching the documentary, I wished I were a doctor and cured her. She tried everything to survive herself against all odds.”

Foregrounding his admiration for her hard work and self-determination, Chris moves to the other half of the group, disabled beggars. He states: “There are many disabled beggars in public places. I don’t like them at all….I feel unpleasant when I see them.” Sharing
another anecdote of helping an old lady who uses a wheel chair go up a huge staircase, he makes it clear about his discomfort in helping “lazy” disabled beggars that “I don’t give them any help. I mean a financial help. I don’t give them money. To tell you the truth, I think they could have overcome their own disabilities.”

Chris also elaborates on such discomfort by exemplifying the supposedly fake performances of disabled beggars in a subway:

How come they (disabled beggars or beggars who “pretend” to be disabled) make people so uncomfortable? They even bring their own children... They present a pathetic family show... How awful their show is! I am not impressed by their fake performance, unless they do show me something…

When Chris is asked to elaborate on his phrase “show me something,” he brings up an old saying, “Heaven helps those who help themselves,” and emphasizes the necessity of a “strong will and hard work ethic” for overcoming disability. The overcoming disability rhetoric infused with conceptions of hard work and strong determination helps Chris to compare and contrast disabled people. For example, he compares disabled beggars with the woman with a tumor in terms of determination and productivity. He states: “The woman (with a tumor) tried hard, but these (disabled) beggars do nothing else. If they (disabled beggars) had tried hard, they must find a way to overcome their disabilities.”

Chris’s view of non-hardworking disabled people is extended to those who are considered more desirable citizens. He summarizes his meritocratic perspectives on disability:

I believe any society should be composed of hardworking people.

Even though they are disabled, there should be something they can do and contribute to society. If you work hard, you will succeed.
Your status will be moved up. I don’t understand why they lose such opportunity and complain about everything.

Such “overcoming disability” narratives are a recurring theme in the discussion of *Malaton*. The participants describe the film as an “inspirational story,” a “human triumph story” and a “human drama,” putting it under the so-called “overcoming difficulty” genre. In such a genre, disabled people are expected to make an effort to conform to an able-bodied ideal and are under pressure to prove themselves, to convince others that they are doing their best to fit in, and to illustrate that the impact of their impairment is minimally significant in making them who they are. These are some of the expected responses of disabled people to living with impairments in a world that is dominated by the individualized medical discourse of disability.

In a similar vein, several participants clarify that for Chowon, completing a marathon race is less important than proving something to society. In this respect, Julie says, “A marathon race is a good opportunity for Chowon, since he needs to show that he is competent enough…. He would be willing to jump in any competition as long as it would confirm his ability.” Fiona adds: “Chowon should take a risk. I know a marathon race can be really dangerous to especially disabled people…But they (disabled people) seem to want to prove something to society.” Brit also states: “If a person wishes to have a higher ability, he has to work hard. For (disabled) people like Chowon, it is imperative to work extra harder and show something über extraordinary.” A wealth of literature in Disability Studies points out social pressures for disabled people to be normal and productive, and reveals the impacts of those pressures on disabled people (Davis, 1997, 2002; Garland-Thomson, 1997; Kafer, 2003; McRuer, 2003, 2006).

Ben and David seek to complicate the “prove something” concept by
acknowledging social pressures on disabled people or their families. David explains: “Society figures out that they (disabled people) cannot have a normal life. Only when they do something more than normal people do is their ability recognized.” Ben asserts: “It’s not only society, but a mother’s (Chowon’s) desire to prove him competent. The mother tries to normalize him through the race. At least, she wanna tell society that her son can do anything as normal people can.” In spite of their acknowledgement of social prejudices against disabled people and their recognition of the capacity of disabled people, both Ben and David rely heavily on ableist and binary thinking. Consequently, the social prejudices they critique effectively play themselves out within the range of normality and ability, and even broaden their power. Taken to its extreme, those who do not conform to the social requirements (e.g., normal and able) are worthy of social prejudices.

More often than not, several participants link Chowon’s overcoming disability story with other barrier-overcoming ones, in relation to class, gender, and national independence. To begin with, Chris characterizes the key elements of “overcoming disability genre:” physical endurance, mental strength, self-determination, competitiveness, and individual/national hardship associated with able-bodied concepts of masculinity. He equates the genre with other “in spite of” stories. While emphasizing the above-mentioned elements, disability becomes reduced to something to “get over,” along with other barriers, such as gender, class, and national independence. In addition, a more fundamental question about why disabled people try to prove something is overlooked.

Likewise, Chris attempts to extend the genre to other overcoming stories. He takes Kee Chung Sohn’s story5 as exemplar. Ian also adds Chunae Lim’s story to the list. Both of

5 Kee Chung Sohn (1914-2002), the first medal winning Korean Olympian, won the gold medal in the marathon at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. He had been celebrated as a national hero.
them centered on the above-mentioned elements, putting Chowon’s overcoming disability story on the same parallel with other barrier-overcoming stories.

I think Chowon’s story is very similar to other types of “in spite of” stories. You know… a marathon race is a good subject to draw people’s attention at least in Korea. Like Chowon’s, Mr. Kee Chung Sohn is emblematic of human victory. He had to overcome many adversities because the Japanese (colonial) government did not want him to be part of its (1936) Olympic team. But he set the world record, so the government allowed him to join the games. Nothing prevented him from doing what he wanted.

In conjunction with Chris, Ian puts the “overcoming poverty” and “overcoming sexism” stories under the “overcoming difficulty” genre. Illustrating Chunae Lim, a gold medalist in the 1986 Asian Games, as an example, he identifies gender and class as barriers to get over. Ian finds similarities between other stories and Chowon’s because they achieve success “in spite of something”:

Chowon’s story reminds me of another success story. You remember Chunae Lim? This small and weak girl grew up in an extremely poor family. The reason why she decided to join the track team in her childhood was to get free lunch. She had to endure hard training and even corporal punishment by some coaches… Surviving in male-dominated sport like a track is a rare thing. It must have been tough for a small girl like her. Finally, she won several gold medals and became a national hero.

However, such “in spite of something” stories are complicated more by several other
participants, including Amy, Brit, and Hannah. Unlike Chris and Ian, these participants find differences between Chowon’s story and other stories, attribute successful disabled stories to their family members, or question or critique the validity of these success stories. However, in one way or another, these participants use the able-bodied standard to orchestrate their engagement with these success stories. As a consequence, they end up being supportive of the ableist culture.

Amy attempts to compare overcoming disability stories and other overcoming barrier stories. He tends to draw more attention to the differences between the two, remarking: “There are many commonalities between these overcoming stories, but disability would be the hardest one…I mean you are not gonna overcome disability at all as opposed to other difficulties.” Amy developed her observation further that, “Even if they (disabled people) achieve something spectacular, the essence (disability) doesn’t go away.” In the above conversation, Amy makes an important comment that disability as an identity is stable, fixed, and non-fluid, as opposed to Disability Studies scholars’ views on disability. Rather, she finds other social identities more flexible. She supports her argument saying that “in spite of race discrimination, you work hard and succeed, blah blah blah, so your hard work is appreciated by others and thus your status is changed.”

Brit similarly argues that “If you work hard, your status will be upgraded. Your previous poverty or its record won’t be with you anymore. But I am not sure about disability.” Amy and Brit’s comments not only imply a more medicalized and stigmatizing aspect of disability, but also show the limitation of ability/disability binary system, which always empowers nondisabled people and disempowers disabled people.

Hannah attributes overcoming disability to families of disabled people, rather than disabled people themselves. While commenting on Chowon’s cognitive disability, she
questions if Chowon is able to feel a sense of achievement and overcoming disability. In other words, Chowon’s supposed inability to feel a sense of achievement causes him to be disqualified as an overcomer. She comes to conclude that “the credit for overcoming disability should go to a family of a disabled person instead. Their time and effort to take care of disabled family members.” Likewise, Hannah’s standard of an overcomer is embedded in a strong binary, ability/disability.

However, other participants are critical of such overcoming stories, including disability. For example, Candy interprets overcoming disability in different ways. According to her, nondisabled people, rather than disabled people, may benefit from overcoming disability stories. In other words, to nondisabled people, these stories function as not only reminders of their own normalcy, but as vicarious satisfaction through the triumphant acts of those disabled overcomers. Candy states:

Watching one overcoming barriers, difficulties, or hardships, the audiences may have a sense of achievement. It’s like “I can do it or we can do it,” “Even these (disabled) folks did it,” “My situation is a lot better” (than those of disabled people). The audiences may get this sort of illusion. I think these kinds of movies are meant to deliver such message.

Candy also questions the validity of the stories, when applied to reality. She says, “In spite of the wealth of these inspirational stories, I doubt what percentages of these stories are translated in reality. Probably, less than 1%?” Eva also challenged overcoming stories by criticizing media highlight of overcoming disability. She further explains:

The problems lie in a media spotlight. For example, the visually impaired person overcomes barriers and his own disability. The
message is like “He can do anything.” What I hate about this kind of media spotlight is its underlying assumption. In other words, disabled people can’t do anything. Media coverage of disabled people is mostly based on such assumption.

Taking as example a disabled media celebrity, Heeah Lee, a young disabled pianist with only two fingers on each hand, Candy is concerned about sensational media coverage of the pianist and excessively favorable evaluation of her work. Candy emphasizes that the media overly focuses on “inspirational stories or dysfunctional family stories” of Heeah, rather than her work in itself:

When their art is evaluated, the works of disabled artists are often reviewed outside their works, so hardly get a fair evaluation of their artistry. Heerah plays well, but uses only four fingers. Sometimes she is out of tune. There might be many better pianists because they use ten fingers. It’s unfair to get recognized only because of one’s disability.

People are only interested in Heerah’s inspirational story or a spectacle that this four-fingered girl makes, never in the quality of her work. I think she becomes a clown in many aspects.

However, Candy’s well-intended critique of the media portrayals of Heerah Lee as an inspirational and sentimental figure also reveals its complicity with ableist assumptions. Also, her critique does not acknowledge how the works of disabled artists often challenge the concept of “quality” in art, helping rethink and refine standards that may be heavily based on ableism.
Eva makes a similar comment about the artistry of disabled artists. She critiques the overcoming disability rhetoric and the overrated evaluations of disabled artists’ works prevalent in society in general and the media in particular. She unpacks such prevalence by saying that “the underlying assumptions behind such stories are like this. I (nondisabled) thought you (disabled) couldn’t do anything, but you did it like us, so surprising.” In spite of her well-meant criticism and insightful findings, she still assumes an able-bodied notion of standards and in art. Such notions are made plain in her anecdote that she conversed with a curator who arranged to display disabled artist exhibition:

I am wondering why people are so preoccupied with “overcoming” rhetoric. And, the achievements of disabled people are exaggerated.

A few years ago, I happened to converse with a professional curator. The curator said that it would be hard for average artists to hold an exhibition, but if an artist had a disability, his work would likely be praised well and people would find it even miraculous. She added that the barometer should be placed on the qualities of artists’ works, but not on disability per se.

What is of importance in Candy’s and Eva’s narratives is not the fallacy of their criticism, but the fact that their criticism relies heavily on the dis/ability binary and the ultimate standard. Their well-meant ideas and critiques often perform subtle ableism without their awareness of it. Their strong belief in objective/absolute standards serve to hold disabled people to the impossibly high standards of that imagined supercrip. As a consequence, able-bodiedness is left unexplored, hidden behind the concept of objective standards and in art, while actual experiences of disabled people are overshadowed by a few successful disabled people.
In summary, despite the fact that the participants attempt to distance themselves from anything related to disability, including disabled people, the participants also often end up emphasizing sameness, rather than difference, between disabled people and themselves.

Under the influence of “humanist” rhetorics present in the participants’ consciousness and in the films themselves, the participants are led to feminize, sexualize, and supercrip disabled people.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

A summary of findings

Textual analysis

Despite the fact that *Oasis* and *Malaton* are social commentary films, these films do not touch on the complexities of the disability issues nor take into account the lived experience of disabled people. Rather, they reveal a hegemonic vision of disability/disabled people imbued with ableism and sexism, thereby helping consolidate dominant ideologies of male and able-bodied superiority.

Under the facade of normalizing and thus humanizing disabled characters, these films problematically sexualize and feminize a disabled woman (in *Oasis*) or villainize a nondisabled mother of a disabled son and making the son a supercrip in *Malaton*. Neither film escapes dominant discourses: hegemonic femininity (especially, caregiver and heterosexual partner roles) overrides disability as a driving force in the films. Failing to meet these standards of hegemonic masculinity and femininity becomes the main drawbacks of disability. Normative ideologies, including patriarchy, nuclear family, traditional gender roles, and above all able-bodied supremacy are not criticized. As a consequence, disability becomes a personal responsibility and its solution rests not with the lack of government or institutional supports but with the moral strength/self-discipline of each individual to do what is necessary to pursue his/her health and well-being. Without a doubt, these films are written and photographed from able-bodied perspectives. Despite evidence of the filmmakers’ possible good intentions, these films serve to assimilate disabled people into mainstream able-bodied culture, while erasing their differences and weakening the potential for their political coalition.
**Reception analysis**

The findings from a reception analysis are consistent with those from a textual analysis, thereby being supportive of Disability Studies scholars’ arguments; that is, the use of disability as metaphor can reveal/reinforce the existing perceptions of disability among nondisabled people. In addition, the reception analysis provides detailed reasons for which well-intended criticism about societal attitudes and oppression against disabled people can help reinforce hegemonic view of disability without critical engagement with the intersectionalities of social identities or connecting the issue of disability from its context of economic and socio-political relations. Three themes emerged from the data collected.

**Theme 1: Hegemonic understanding of disability.**

Most of the participants define disability within a traditional model of disability where disability is understood as an individual problem requiring medical and rehabilitative intervention. However, their definitions of disability inadvertently reveal that disability is a relational concept, constantly compared with and judged against able-bodied norms. Naturalizing these norms is part of othering process, placing “us” (nondisabled) at the center, while putting “them” (disabled people) in the periphery. Although their traditional yet relational comprehension of disability is interwoven with other social markers, class, gender, and sexuality, it is naive to assume that these participants critically engage with the intersectionalities of these markers. Rather, they engage with each identity one at a time; they think in binarism and essentialism. Disability is not only a far more complex interaction between biological and social forces, but also a complex situation where several identities interact with one another. Nevertheless, since the participants’ discussion on intersection is patterned after the medical model and absolute normalcy, it reinforces the hegemonic understanding of disability.
Theme 2: Disability as metaphor and its impacts.

The medical/norm-centered model alone cannot explain the degree of dissociation and dis-identification that these nondisabled participants express. The destructive power of the medical/norm informed model of disability is magnified when combined with disability metaphors. The participants approach the meaning of disability symbolically, rather than literally or existentially. Disability just stands in for the condition of being held back for one’s ideal status. The participants appropriate disability in metaphorical ways that it is confined to the vague concepts, such as “freedom/rebellion,” “mental healthiness,” or miscellaneous “disadvantages.” The findings indicate that regardless of gender and class, the participants employ such metaphors to articulate their supposedly marginalized statuses, rather than to imagine and reflect the marginalized experiences of disabled people. Some of the male participants’ focus on “freedom/rebellion” and “mental healthiness” reflects their repressed male identities and their yearning for full masculine autonomy, while most female participants associate disability with their social disadvantages as women and similarly desire masculine autonomy.

Despite the fact that, to some extent, the metaphors enable the participants to identify with disability/disabled people, their identification is short-lived. The participants, using these metaphors, display a strong notion of an absolute and irreconcilable split in society between those perceived as ‘nondisabled’ and those labeled “disabled.” This assumed split facilitated by the metaphors has the participants gloss over the lived experiences of disabled people. More concretely, they tend to downplay discrimination and oppression disabled people face by means of the following ableist reverse discrimination rhetorics: burden/freeloader narratives, the assumption that nondisabled family members of disabled individuals face undesirable hardships, and the notion of disabled people as potential
oppressors. The participants’ exclusive uses of disability as metaphor and overlooking the experiences of disabled people reveal feelings of fear and guilt. In spite of their attempts to be distant from disabled characters/people, a sense of fear and guilt are still lingering among the participants. They are fearful of becoming disabled or having a disabled child, and they feel a sense of guilt for conspiring with oppressors or oppressive systems which favor themselves over disabled people.

**Theme 3: Normalization of disability and disabled people.**

The participants’ sense of fear and guilt unexpectedly lead them to seek for a quick remedy. They emphasize sameness, rather than difference between disabled people and themselves. Such emphasis takes three forms. First, under the pretext of “they (disabled people) are like us,” “they wanna be normal,” or “we are all human beings,” the participants convert disabled people in the films and social world into those who they think are “normal” and similar to themselves. Second, since *Oasis* problematically feminizes and sexualizes Gongju through her supposedly empowering sexual awakening, nearly all the participants accept the normatively feminized and sexualized version of Gongju as positive, and start to identify with her. This uncritical acceptance of Gongju’s newly acquired subjectivities is the most problematic aspect of *Oasis*. Identification process begins with Gongju’s discovery of sexuality and femininity and culminates in her fantasies in which Gongju becomes a healthy, beautiful, and able-bodied woman. In other words, hegemony of normalcy through the narrative’s sexualization and feminization is cemented by her aspiration to ablebodieness. The participants describe the fantasy scenes as comforting: relief from psychological distress of the narrative.

Lastly, the participants supercrip disabled people in a way that celebrates the negation of disabled identity and trivialize the actual experience of disabled people. Whether
accepting or rejecting “overcoming disability” narratives, their engagement with the narratives reveal oppressive ableist tendencies, especially the assumption of objective standards of ability in general and of artistic merit in particular. In the process, able-bodied ideology remains invisible even for those participants who seem to want to critique it; well-intentioned ideas and critiques often perform subtle ableism without awareness of it. As a result, disabled and nondisabled people internalize these ableist attitudes, disability identity is depoliticized, and able-bodiedness becomes the standard by which all other identities are defined and judged.

The impact of ableist ideology on disabled people is tremendous; not only does it lead disabled people to see themselves as inferior, it disrupt the political unity between disable people by making a hierarchy. Also, this ableist ideology leaves well-meaning nondisabled people and “successful” disabled people complicit with oppressive forces. Therefore, the ideology is reinforced and perpetuated cyclically; without coalition building, visible leadership, and coherent agenda, oppression against any marginalized groups will continue unchecked.

Implications

Within academia

What implications does this dissertation have for Disability Studies, Cultural/Film Studies, and Korean Cultural Studies? First and foremost, this qualitative research on the reception of disability/disabled people can empirically support or modify text-centered analyses of representations of disability within the Disability Studies community. Humanities-based scholars, including Couser (2005), Davis (1997, 2002), Ellis (2008), Garland-Thompson (1997), Longmore (1985), Mitchell and Snyder (1997, 2001), and Norden (1994), have paved the way for critical inquiry into the cultural representation of disability in
literature and film and argued for its assumed impacts on nondisabled/disabled people. However, their textual analyses could be sharpened with more empirical support. My findings support their arguments with empirical rigor and evidence. Both the participants and the films in this dissertation minimally problematize or resist hegemonic representations of disability. Rather, both parties use disability as a metaphor to meet their own needs, while playing down the actual experiences of disabled people. The failure for the participants to fully engage with disability/disabled people is partly due to the conventional narratives, styles, and character development provided by the films and the lack of counter discourses that can subvert the ableist ideologies embedded in everyday lives of the participants.

In addition, this dissertation can unfold the perspectives of nondisabled persons on disability representations, which have hardly been examined in the Disability Studies community. The community values disabled people’s perspectives which have been very often excluded on a social and academic scene. However, it should also be recognized that able-bodiedness underlies the oppression of disabled people. This dissertation has paid attention to how able-bodiedness is at play in the minds of nondisabled people. It is suggestive that discussions of disability are almost always organized around those of disabled people, meaning that able-bodiedness is never acknowledged as identities; instead, they are presented as the norm. Moreover, by adding the perspectives of disability from the Far East Asia, this dissertation helps Disability Studies to move beyond its Western-centered tendency, which Disability Studies scholars must challenge.

Second, studying disability in popular media can revive disability as an important academic concern which has received scant attention in Film Studies and Cultural Studies. The literature on Film Studies, Cultural Studies, and Korean Studies is incongruously silent on the issues of disability and this literature fails to acknowledge lens of Disability Studies as
a critical tool. Going beyond ignorance of dis/ability, some scholars have sought to distance themselves from disability as an academic dead-end: they anticipate nothing more than cliché and well-worn territory; revealing the patterns of perceived “deviance” and “lack of intelligence” that have been used to justify the violence/oppression of disabled people are still seen as the only outcomes of research. This reflects medical model. The Disability Studies informed research on Korea provides another forum in which to bring to the foreground the state of disability within Korean society as well as to challenge entrenched whiteness within Disability Studies.

The negligence of disability within the above-mentioned scholarships is also troubling, given that they critically engage with subjectivity and differences (gender, class, race, etc.). Considering disability as a “universal identity” in non-reductionist ways, this dissertation examines how social constructions of disability coincide, collide, and converge with those other markers of identities. In addition, in the field of qualitative audience research, most studies engage with disabled people’s perspectives, not nondisabled people’s. Adding those of nondisabled people to the scholarships not only reveal how able-bodiedness is at work but result in more balanced understanding of disability in general and disability representation in particular.

Lastly, this dissertation evidences that culture plays an important role in defining disability and influencing the lives of disabled people. The findings reveal that disability is not simply an objective condition, but a social characteristic of a person, informed by social and cultural forces, religion, gender, economy, and others. These forces mediate the ways disability and disabled people are received in society. More specifically, in Korea, the meaning of disability has been understood within the Neo-Confucian familial system where the individual ego is the “familial ego” and one’s identity is determined strictly within the
family and family relationships. Within the family-centered society, welfare is still perceived essentially as a family responsibility and disability becomes family matters rather than social ones. Despite the fact that strong family ties provide a safety net for disabled people, strong familism often serves to marginalize disabled people from a public sphere because disability is often thought of as family shame. Such Neo-Confucian values are more compounded by the recent advent of neoliberalism, which emphasizes the superiority of individualism over collectivism, the idea of individual self-reliance as moral responsibility, and the supposed social evils of a culture of interdependency. Within such an anti-social welfare framework, disabled people are likely conceived as social burdens, doubly reduced to the margins. This dissertation makes it clear that a deeper understanding of social and cultural forces, surrounding disability, is indispensable in studying representation of disability.

However, I do not necessarily insist that such socio/cultural forces are exclusively or uniquely Korean phenomena. These misogynistic and ableist elements are built in almost every culture. Korea has simply different sources, formations, and degrees of the elements. I also hope that international readers, including US ones, approach this dissertation in terms of cultural similarities or proximities, with cultural differences acknowledged. Given that the prevalence of medical/deficit models of disability and lack of counter narratives and discourses which disrupt them, the ways disability and disabled people are viewed are very similar in almost all cultures. However, I wrote with the concerns that if the readers were too preoccupied with comparing cultural differences in the dissertation, they might end up making a false assumption that, extremely speaking, “Korean culture is misogynistic,” “the participants in this study are especially ableist,” “Korea is like a hell for disabled people,” “The US is a heaven for disabled people,” or “disabled people in the US must appreciate what they enjoy.” Instead, the dissertation reminds us that both characters in the films and the
participants in this study-researcher included- could be one of us, our family members, friends, and co-workers. Furthermore, oppressive forces and views are similarly everywhere and, hence, my emphasis on cultural proximities allows for space to evoke horizontal empathy and thus locate common struggles.

**Beyond academia**

Representations of disability mediate the relations between disabled and nondisabled people. It is through such representations that the participants in this dissertation construct, negotiate, and consolidate disabled, as well as able-bodied, identities. What is important here is that these participants’ making of disability/disabled people may reflect and shape the ways that marginalized and structurally constrained disabled people are able to negotiate their positions in society (Barnes 1992; Sandell 2010). The findings in this dissertation suggest that these nondisabled participants seem to be trapped in a viscous cycle when it comes to their perspectives on disability/disabled people, shaped by medical, economic, and aesthetic discourses of disability. Because of a lack of information about disability, of contact with disabled people and of alternative narratives of disability in popular culture, ignorance, anxiety, fear, disavowal, and guilt abound among the participants. These ill-informed ideas, in turn, facilitate creation of various fabrications and misrepresentations of disability/disabled people, while those distortions then help contribute to the original misunderstandings. As a consequence, participants fail to fully engage with disability and to understand it as an important part of diversity.

Is there any way to break through this vicious cycle? Several sub-questions remain to be answered. Can nondisabled people politically identify with disability/disabled people? Can they be political allies for disabled people? How can disability identities be politicized without being subsumed by normalization of other identities? How can politicized disabled
identities work together with other social markers for social justice? What roles Disability Studies can play in this alliance? As the findings in this dissertation indicate, participants stigmatize disabled people in the films and social world and their experiences on a hierarchical basis. In this hierarchical identification, disability is reduced to metaphor which serves as a mere means through which to shed light on these nondisabled participants’ perceived social problems/discrimination, while disabled people are relegated to either recipients of charity, one-dimensional heroes, or charlatans. How can disability metaphors be materialized for politically reflecting the lived experience of disabled people? I suggest that this Disability Studies-informed dissertation has several implications for accepting disability as part of human experience and building an alliance between disabled and nondisabled people. More specifically, Disability Studies in general and disability pedagogy in particular help facilitate such inclusiveness and coalition building.

First, a Disability Studies perspective, one that shifts from medical to embodied/social framing, is very useful for nondisabled people to understand and accept disability by removing notions of disability as an individual deficit in need of cure or rehabilitation. The findings reveal that these nondisabled participants understand disability as medically, economically, and aesthetically “deviant” or “deficient,” not as natural phenomena all the human beings experience at any time in the life cycle. By nature of its fluidity as an identity category, disability connects us all. As Davis (1997, 2002) and others suggest, there is a very really possibility that one could become disabled at any given moment, as opposed to other social identities. The fact that none of us is ever more than temporarily able-bodied (Zola, 1985) allows for recognizing disability as a valuable source of lived experiences, rather than pure hardships. A Disability Studies perspective helps to discard the notion that disability is negative and rooted in the individual. By thinking critically about the taken-for-
granted nature of various diagnoses, labels, categories, and conditions, people could move from avoidance, fear, disavowal towards curiosity, acceptance, and fuller understanding, and acceptance.

Second, the perspective can help alleviate stereotypes, sensitivity and fear about disability through discussion, and can at its best provide a safe space in which people can critically engage with disability. As the findings indicate that disability narratives constructed by most participants are saturated with uncritical stereotypes, anxieties and fears about disability/disabled people. In this respect, the perspective offers a powerful means of transforming our lived experience by uprooting ideas about disabled people as difficult, passive, childlike, or asexual, as angry, bitter, and combative, or as successful, super-human individuals who have overcome their disability” (Rembis, 2010, p. 22). Discarding the notions of medical model, the perspective increases the chance opening up more genuine dialogue about disability and contextualizes interplay between disability and other identities.

Third, the perspective disrupts the strict binary system and makes the (able-bodied) norms visible. In line with the Disability Studies perspective, the dissertation illustrates that disabled people and their lives are unfavorably juxtaposed with the (able-bodied) norms by several participants. The norms consolidate the power of able(d) bodies—historically male, middle class, and heterosexual bodies—while divorcing them from the realm of public scrutiny. Meanwhile, this binary divide (simple notions of disabled and nondisabled), in turn rationalizes the disempowerment and oppression of disabled people and at the same time, naturalizes the empowerment and privileges of nondisabled people. Within the Disability Studies framework, revealing the injustice experienced by disabled people may develop compassionate empathy towards disabled people and the capacity to care about the inhumane consequences of injustice. Surely these goals are educationally important (Leicester, 2011).
In addition, disability (seemingly antithetical to the ideals of independence and autonomy) opens up another unexplored space between such binaries. The notion of interdependence, situated outside the binary of independence/dependence, is a key for the political alliance between nondisabled and disabled people. Interdependence recognizes the connection between individuals who are mutually and physically responsible to one another without stigmatizing or prioritizing either party (Arneil, 2009). Within the dichotomy of independence/dependence, normal person assisting a disabled person with a task would be construed as an autonomous being who is burdened by the care of a dependent other. On the contrary, if this relationship is viewed as one of interdependence, both parties are thought to benefit from the relationship through an acknowledgment of their connectivity within a power network.

Lastly, the dissertation calls for the coalition building between disabled and nondisabled people. The perspective reshapes the way we see other identities and our own, thereby giving the foundation on which disabled and nondisabled people engage with each other, work together, and transform society. The findings suggest that the identity politics embedded in able-bodiedness results in a hierarchical ranking of subordinate groups. In other words, identities, such as gender, sexuality, class, and disability operate in a hierarchical way that dominant others suppress less dominant others. As a result, it reiterates and reinforces the domination and oppression. Rembis (2010) stresses the necessity of alliance building for ending all kinds of privileges and oppression by saying “In order to move forward and break down the barriers…we (disabled people) must, along with our allies, work toward not only empowering ourselves, but also empowering those around us so that together we can affect real lasting change” (p. 25). Similarly, I contend that coalitions should work squarely within a framework of subordination inflected not only by disability, but by race, gender, class, and
sexual orientation as well. Coalition building effectively challenges systems of oppression and privilege operating inside and outside the subordinate groups and communities. I also suggest disability can be a good starting point in which all subordinate groups and dominant allies find a common agenda. In particular, disability pedagogy is the means through which to facilitate the coalition. According to Nocella (2008), disability pedagogy critiques the socially enforced binary categories and at the same time works against all forms of oppression, domination, and repression. More importantly, disability pedagogy emphasizes people’s collective dependence upon one another and fosters collaborative efforts rather than competitive ones (p. 82). Above all, it values the voices of disabled people and politicizes disabled identities. In other words, this new concern foregrounds disabled people as speaking subjects, (instead of objects of gaze or pity) and understand them as potential creators of an “alternative text” which potentially subvert the oppressive systems. Nocella (2009) further explains:

Society is critiqued for its socially constructed notions of normalcy, average, standardization, objectivity, rationality, and equality. It is here that we understand that all are different mentally and physically, that there exists no norm or average, and that equality is not what social justice educators should promote; rather social justice educators should be promoting respect of differences not of equality. It is here that we will truly understand the importance of diversity (p.105).

In summary, Disability Studies and disability pedagogy have the potential to usher in a world in which we “move beyond the rigid humanistic ideals of the Enlightenment and the equally constraining identity politics of the postmodern era” (Rembis, 2009, p. 56). Surpassing the limitations of binary/essentialized thinking, rigid identity politics, and
normalization, the goal of Disability Studies and disability pedagogy is not “the erasure of dis/abled bodies and sexualities, nor is it the incorporation of disabled people ‘other’ into a humanistic ideal of the separate and independent yet ‘equal’ self” (p. 56). I assert that Disability Studies and disability pedagogy not only promote collaboration, multiple perspectives, and a deeper context from which people can gain perspective of the culture and issues within the disability community.

Epilogue

This dissertation concludes with the two examples that illustrate a contrast between the current status of disability and race representation. The first example concerns Asian American representations surrounding a US film, Breakfast at Tiffany’s (Edwards, 1961), its stereotypical portrayals of an Asian American male, and the 2011 controversy over a plan and subsequent pull out from the public screening of the film at the Brooklyn Bridge Park in the US (Calder, 2011).

In the film, a white actor, Mickey Rooney, performs in yellowface and portrays the grumpy, buck-toothed, heavily accented Japanese American landlord, Mr. Yunioshi. Since the film’s release in 1961, Rooney's stereotyping role has been identified as a racist icon of an earlier Hollywood. In several recent occasions, including the Brooklyn Bridge Park, the public screening of the film have faced protests mobilized by Asian Americans among others and has been often cancelled.

In response to this, the main filmmakers of the film, including the producer, director, and actor, made official apologies or had regrets. In the 45th anniversary edition DVD release, producer Shepherd apologizes that "If we could just change Mickey Rooney, I'd be thrilled with the movie." Director Edwards adds, "Looking back, I wish I had never done it." In a
In a 2008 interview, Rooney said, “if I'd known people would have been so offended, I wouldn't have done it.”

The second example contemplates disabled characters played by nondisabled actors/actresses and their critical success in Korean films. As in many Hollywood and other international films, disabled characters in Korean films are mostly played by nondisabled actors and actresses, and their performances are very often subject to critical acclaim. A nondisabled Korean actress, Ha-neul Kim, received the best actress award at the 2011 Grand Bell and Blue Dragon Film Awards respectively for her role as a visually impaired woman in the serial killer thriller *Blind* (Ahn, 2011). During her acceptance speech at the Grand Bell, the 33-year-old actress burst into tears and said, “Working on this piece very often made me feel lonely, and I felt as if I were going through a long, dark tunnel by myself… But now that I’ve gotten out of the tunnel, I realize I really wasn’t alone throughout the process. There were many people who were there for me and supported me.” Her speech instantly got my attention because it not only reflects her metaphorical use of visual impairment as a “long, dark tunnel,” but also suggests the different treatments between nondisabled and disabled people both in film industry and real life.

The actress successfully walked out of a disability “ghetto” with such entitlements. She received much support during and after filming shooting and even won the two most decorated film awards in Korea by successfully performing a disabled woman. However, what about disabled people in general and disabled actors/actresses in particular? Do they get the same support and accommodations from friends, families, co-workers, and, most importantly, society as this nondisabled actress received? Do disabled actors/actresses have as many opportunities to play disabled characters or do their performances draw critical attention as their nondisabled counterparts do? Can they even be offered to play as
nondisabled roles like their nondisabled counterparts? Why do disabled roles played by nondisabled actors go rarely noticed or even criticized? How can we account for such disparities and collective amnesia? Can Ha-neul Kim and others involved in the film make an apology or at least display regret in the near future for performing so-called “disabledface” to disabled people and the public?

The aforementioned questions, along with this dissertation, call for more research and comprehensive understandings of cultural representations of disability. First and foremost, future researchers should integrate disabled people who have been marginalized and silenced within and beyond academia. This dissertation attended to the perspectives of nondisabled persons on disability, those who are said to construct dominant understandings of disability. Nevertheless, if future research combines and compares nondisabled and disabled perspectives on disability representation, more balanced results will be expected.

Second, in future research, film texts should be more thoroughly examined, according to film grammar, genre, and political/social/cultural contexts. Even though this dissertation analyzed the two films, with all the above criteria considered, it may lack more intensive and extensive exploration of the criteria. Whether separately or not, future research should incorporate more films and different genres, while situating them within more complicated contexts. Some of the limitations of the dissertation lie in the absence of disability documentaries made by disabled and nondisabled people and of historical overview disability representation in film. In addition, this dissertation may have overlooked the transformative potentials popular film texts may have. Even though disabled subjects are exploited and erased in the two films under investigation with patriarchal, ableist aesthetics, there are still possibilities that these subjects disrupt and resist the rigid order of patriarchal, ableist film languages. More meticulous methodology and analysis of and imaginative
theoretical applications to film texts are necessary to locate a resistive space. If future research incorporates these areas, it will add multi-layered meanings to disability representation research.

Finally, more interview subjects with diverse backgrounds are necessary in future research. In this dissertation, I used a small sample (8 focus groups and 19 follow-up individual interviews involving 19 nondisabled Korean students at a US research university). However, with this selection and organization of a limited number of interviews I do not intend to make a claim about representative sampling or generalizability. These 19 students cannot be said to represent their nationality, age, or social group, either. Focus groups and individual interviews are not designed to elicit generalizable results (Morgan, 1994). The results, then, should be understood as descriptive and interpretive. However, more scientifically rigorous results are expected by more interview subjects with different social backgrounds. I hope that this dissertation helps to push the limits of current theories and methodologies surrounding disability, provides a more nuanced analysis of filmic representations of disability and understanding of complex experiences of disability, and fosters coalition building between nondisabled and disabled people.

This dissertation inquires about political alliances between minority groups. I believe that hegemony can be reproduced and reinforced through the conflicts between and within minority groups and the minority groups’ voluntary mimicking and accepting of dominant positions and values. As in the films, Jongdu, a disabled male in *Oasis*, oppresses Gongju, a disabled female by raping her and Chowon, a disabled son in *Malaton*, suppresses his nondisabled mother, Kyungsook, by psychologically torturing her. All of the characters voluntarily mimic and accept dominant positions and values, including testosterone-filled masculinizing, supercripping, fantasizing, and intensive mothering. These “potentially”
disruptive bodies in the films, with their “liberatory” power, domesticated via the aforementioned normalization efforts, serve the purpose of connecting patriarchy and neoliberalism.

Likewise, nearly all participants in this study join the system which oppresses disabled people and privilege nondisabled people by using uncritical disability metaphor, overlooking disadvantages disabled people face, and glossing over privilege they enjoy as nondisabled. In one well-known example, during the 1992 Los Angeles riots, Korean Americans, African Americans, and Latino Americans oppressed one another. In the midst of their unnecessary feuds, the real victimizers were able to escape their responsibilities and were absolved of them.

Considering that the dominant groups are unlikely to give power to, or share power with, the minority groups, social inequalities do not end until these minority groups cooperate with each other. I am well aware that the cooperation is not an easy task because of each group’s different interest. However, the cooperation seems the only likely way to stop this vicious cycle. In order to facilitate the cooperation, we need to develop “minority consciousness” which puts us together, helps find the sources of common struggles, and recognizes and celebrates differences in each of us. More importantly, we need to recognize power imbalances within and between us. We must challenge any power inequalities in order not to imitate what dominant groups do. We should keep in mind that embracing alternative paradigms which are totally different from the dominant ones is the only way to end this vicious cycle.

Recognizing and politicizing disability provides not only a critique of the dominant ableist perspective on what defines humanness and personhood, but also a theoretical blueprint and practical tool that helps minority groups work together and fight against social
injustice. Thus, disability as politics strikes at the core of oppression and generates the momentum for alliance-building. I hope, on reading this dissertation, many will discover the common struggles and possibilities of solidarity and coalition building.
# APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT

## Group 1

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APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Film
1. What are the most interesting things you’ve found in the films?
2. What do the films tell you about disability and disabled people?
3. Do you agree/disagree with the ways in which the films address disability and disabled? If you agree, why? If you disagree, why not?
4. Who are your favorite characters? What about your least favorite characters? What aspects of them you like the most or the least?
5. Do you find any similarities and differences between disabled characters and yourself?
6. How do the films describe the relationships between disabled characters? What about the relationships between disabled and nondisabled characters?
7. What do you think of how disability and disabled people are represented in popular media (TV, film, newspapers, magazines, etc.)? Can you compare and contrast disability representation in each media?
8. How do such representations affect you in understanding disability and disabled people?

Disability
1. Have you ever seen/interacted with disabled people in your life? If so, tell me about your experiences? If not, why?
2. How do you feel about disability? What does it mean to be disabled?
3. How do you recognize one’s disability?
4. When and how is the issue of disability salient in your life?
5. How does “social world” contrast with popular media?
6. Could you define what you mean by “care”?
7. How do you see yourself in relation to disability and disabled people?
APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM

Syracuse University
School of Education
Cultural Foundations of Education

Consent Form

The Perspectives of South Korean graduate students on disability representations in two South Korean films, Oasis (2002) and Marathon (2005)

My name is Chung Wan Woo, and I am a graduate student in the Cultural Foundations of Education doctoral program at Syracuse University. I am inviting you to participate in a research study. Involvement in the study is voluntary. In order to take part in this study, you must be 18 years or older. This document explains the proposed research study. I am interested in learning more about how South Korean graduate students make sense of disability. You will be asked to watch two films, Oasis (2002) and Marathon (2005) (each roughly two hours long). You will also join two group discussions (one hour each) and meet with me for an individual interview (also one hour long). An estimate of the total time of your participation is seven hours. The interviews will be audio taped to help me remember what was said during interviewing. Audiotapes will be destroyed upon completion of this study.

All information will be kept confidential. In any articles I write or any presentations that I make, I will not reveal any specific details about you (I will use a made-up name for you, and I will not reveal about where you work or where you live). For group discussions, I will do my best to keep all of your personal information private and confidential but absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. However, I will request everyone not to share this information outside of the group.

The benefit of this research is that you will be helping to conceptualize how disability is understood. The risks of participating may include feelings of discomfort. In order to minimize the risks, you have the right not to answer any questions that make you feel uneasy.

In the event that you decide to withdraw from the study, you have the right to do so at any time. If you have any questions about this study you can reach me at wochungwan@gmail.com or 315-395-6418. You also can contact my academic advisor, Dr. Steven Taylor at staylo01@syr.edu, or 315-443-3851. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the investigator, or if you cannot reach me or my advisor, contact the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board at 315-443-3013.

You will be given a copy of this signed form to keep for your records.

Syracuse University
Approved
Expires Jun 8, 2010

350 Huntington Hall / Syracuse, New York 13244-2340
315-443-3343 / Fax: 315-443-9218
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Chung Wan Woo was born and grew up in Seoul, Korea. He is a Disability Studies-informed Cultural Studies scholar, whose research/teaching interests include Disability Studies, Film/Media Studies, and human rights and social justice issues. He is currently working on several research projects, “Disability-themed Film Boom in Korea,” “Human Rights Violation of Disabled Children in Korea,” and “Media Discourses of Disability in Korean American Newspapers.” The projects critically engage with disability in popular media, identify hegemonic/non-hegemonic discourses, and create space for allied individuals to act against social injustice.