

Cinema as an Agent of Inclusion: Disability Representation and the Cultural Construction of Inclusive Societies

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ABSTRACT

Background: Disability has been visible on cinema screens for more than a century, yet the field still lacks a working answer to a question that matters as much to policy as to scholarship: under what conditions does that visibility actually amount to inclusion, rather than a more palatable form of exclusion? Existing scholarship tends to examine representation, production, audience response, or accessibility in isolation, leaving the interactions between these dimensions largely unexamined.

Methodology: This study adopts an exploratory case study design. Cinema itself is treated as the bounded case, analysed through thematic framework built from convergent evidence across the field: representation, national and cultural context, participation, audience reception, and access infrastructure. The evidence base draws on theoretical, empirical, and policy scholarship in film studies, disability studies, audience research, and cultural-accessibility research, published largely between 2000 and 2025, and is read through this thematic framework rather than through content analysis of a single film or festival.

Findings: The analysis exposes a contradiction that single-theme studies routinely miss: representational progress and disabled exclusion from authorship regularly coexist within the same film culture, and affectively positive, inspirational images can leave the underlying biased premise intact the assumption that disabled worth must be extraordinary to be legible at all. Corroborating evidence from a recent large-scale semiotic analysis of ninety years of Bollywood cinema is integrated directly into the framework, grounding its claims in a concrete national case rather than Western examples alone.

Conclusion: Inclusion is not a property of a text but of a media ecology; it is produced only when narrative agency, disabled-led production, and accessible circulation move together. Where they do not, cinema reproduces exclusion under cover of visibility; where they do, cinema becomes an active agent in constructing, rather than merely depicting, an inclusive society. The study closes by setting out concrete priorities for comparative, longitudinal, and intersectional research that the current evidence base cannot yet support

Keywords: disability representation, inclusive cinema, participatory media, accessibility, cultural construction, disability studies.

INTRODUCTION:

Cinema rarely functions as a neutral window onto disabled lives. Since its earliest decades, film has used disabled bodies to generate pathos, mark villainy, or supply narrative shorthand for moral and physical deviance, and these patterns have proven remarkably durable even as social attitudes toward disability have shifted (Safran, 1998). The question this study addresses is not whether disability appears on screen itself evidently does, with increasing frequency but whether that appearance does any inclusionary work at all. Can a medium built on spectacle, narrative economy, and emotional manipulation actually help construct a more inclusive society, or does it simply repackage exclusion in more sympathetic packaging?

This study treats that question as a case study problem rather than a simple content-analysis exercise. Rather than asking only how disabled characters are depicted, it asks how disability functions as a cultural technology operating across five interacting themes: what stories are told about disabled people, whose national and cultural context shapes those stories, who controls the means of telling them, how audiences actually respond, and whether the infrastructure surrounding a film's circulation allows disabled people to participate as intended publics rather than incidental viewers. The claim developed here is that these themes rarely move together. A film may be

representationally progressive while remaining a product of entirely nondisabled authorship; a festival may showcase disability-themed cinema while its own booking system is inaccessible to wheelchair users or blind patrons. Understanding cinema's relationship to inclusion therefore requires holding several dimensions in view simultaneously.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CINEMA AS A SITE OF CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION

Cinema does not merely mirror an already-existing social order; it participates in organising who counts as normal, capable, dependent, threatening, or fully human (Campbell, 2009). Mitchell and Snyder's (2014) concept of narrative prosthesis is foundational here: disability recurs across storytelling not incidentally, but because it supplies a ready-made device for generating metaphor, crisis, and narrative closure, typically at the expense of the disabled character's own interiority. Chivers and Markotić (2010) extend this through the "problem body," arguing that disabled bodies on screen are constructed within hierarchies of difference rather than depicted as neutral variation. Crip theory pushes the analysis further still, redirecting attention away from the disabled body as inherently lacking and toward the social production of "compulsory able-bodiedness" as the norm against which disability is measured (McRuer & Bérubé, 2006; Kafer, 2013).

These frameworks matter for a study of inclusion because they explain a pattern that a simple presence/absence count of disabled characters would miss entirely: visibility is not self-evidently emancipatory. A disabled character can occupy considerable screen time while still functioning as a vehicle for able-bodied reassurance through pity, through the restoration of normalcy, or through inspirational spectacle that flatters nondisabled viewers more than it represents disabled experience (Zhang & Haller, 2013). By contrast, cinema that redistributes narrative authority tends to locate disability within an ordinary social world, as one attribute among many rather than the organising fact of a character's existence (Sukul et al., 2025). The theoretical claim underlying this study design is that inclusion, understood this way, cannot be assessed through textual analysis alone. It has to be traced across representation, authorship, and access simultaneously, because each theme can mask deficiencies in the others.

3. CASE STUDY DESIGN AND RATIONALE

This study adopts an exploratory case study design, treating cinema as a bounded cultural system through which the construction of disability inclusion can be examined in depth. The design is exploratory because the study addresses a question for which the literature does not yet offer a validated explanatory model under what conditions cinematic visibility of disability amounts to inclusion rather than a more palatable form of exclusion so the aim is to map the terrain and build an integrative analytic framework rather than to test a predetermined hypothesis. The design is theme-based because the case is not read chronologically or through a single narrative arc but is instead analysed through a set of themes distilled from convergent patterns across the literature, in the manner characteristic of thematic case-study research. Rather than analysing a single film or festival, the case is constructed at the level of the medium itself: commercial, independent, national, and festival cinema considered together because the central argument concerns interactions between themes that no single film can fully illustrate. The evidence base, which functions as the data corpus for this design, draws on an integrative synthesis of scholarship published largely between 2000 and 2025, with particular density in the 2015–2025 period, spanning textual and discourse analysis, content analysis, multimodal critical discourse analysis, participatory and co-creative research, intervention studies measuring audience attitude change, and policy and legal analysis of cultural accessibility.

Five analytic themes structure the case: representational inclusion (how disability is narratively framed), contextual variation (how national and cultural settings inflect that framing), participatory inclusion (who authors and produces the work), reception (what measurable or reported effects screenings have on audiences), and infrastructural inclusion (whether the pathways of production, submission, exhibition, and access are themselves navigable by disabled people). This structure was chosen because it recurs, in varying terminology, across the disability-film and cultural-accessibility literatures reviewed, suggesting it captures a genuine analytic consensus rather than an artificial imposition on the material. A limitation acknowledged at the outset is that the literature base does not contain a single peer-reviewed study directly comparing mainstream commercial cinema against independent cinema on shared coding categories; where such comparisons are drawn below, they are necessarily inferential, built from adjacent studies rather than a controlled head-to-head design.

Consistent with an exploratory, theme-based case study design, the five themes were derived inductively rather than imposed a priori: they were identified through their repeated, convergent appearance albeit under varying terminology across the theoretical, empirical, and policy literatures reviewed, and were then adopted as the organising categories for reading and reporting the evidence in Sections 4 through 8. This inductive derivation, together with the deliberate inclusion of theoretical, empirical, and policy sources side by side within each theme, functions as this design's form of triangulation, guarding against conclusions that rest on a single type or genre of evidence. Framed as a research question, the case asks: under what conditions does cinematic representation of

disability function as genuine social inclusion rather than a more palatable form of exclusion, and through which observable themes can this be traced across a national and global film culture?

4. THEME ONE: REPRESENTATION -FROM PITY AND PROSTHESIS TO AGENCY

The most stable finding across the literature is the persistence of a narrow repertoire of disability tropes in mainstream cinema: the pitiable or pathetic figure, the supercrip whose worth is legible only through extraordinary achievement, the sinister or criminal disabled villain, the family burden, and the maladjusted character whose narrative arc trends toward being "better off dead" (Black & Pretes, 2007). These are not incidental characterisation choices; they function as ideological forms that position disability as a deviation from valued normality, reproduced with striking consistency across otherwise very different film cultures (Prasad et al., 2018). The supercrip trope deserves particular attention because of its internal contradiction. It renders disabled worth legible through heroic struggle and extraordinary accomplishment, often signalled through explicitly inspirational language, and some disabled viewers report genuinely preferring supercrip narratives to purely pitiable ones, since the former at least validate possibility rather than helplessness (Kama, 2004). Yet a positive emotional response from some viewers does not settle the political question. A narrative in which disabled worth must be earned through spectacular achievement still accepts, rather than challenges, the premise that ordinary disabled existence is insufficiently interesting or valuable on its own terms (Zhang & Haller, 2013). Positive affect, in other words, is not equivalent to inclusive politics.

Cure and normalcy arcs form a related pattern, frequently signalled through recurring visual and dialogic cues hospital corridors, medicalised language, narrative movement toward the restoration of a "normal" body that reinforce the idea that disability is narratively interesting chiefly insofar as it can be resolved, transcended, or used to motivate a nondisabled caregiver's arc (Mitchell & Snyder, 2014). Against this backdrop, the literature also documents genuine, if uneven, movement. Independent and alternative cinema is repeatedly described as a counterspace in which disabled agency and embodied experience are foregrounded rather than filtered through an outside gaze (Carter-Lon, 2022; Vaswani, 2025). Comparative readings of films such as *Black* and *CODA* argue that disability can be reframed as an exclusionary social condition rather than an individual defect, shifting the site of the problem from the disabled body to an unaccommodating social world (Sukul et al., 2025). Even within family-oriented mainstream cinema, recent analyses of Disney-era productions identify more multidimensional characters whose disability does not exhaustively define their narrative function (Ononiwu, 2025).

The overall picture from a 2024 analysis of contemporary mainstream fiction film is instructive: greater nuance is evident in portrayals of acquired physical disability specifically, yet negative stereotyping and emotionally manipulative framing persist alongside that nuance (Botha & Harvey, 2024). Representational progress, in short, is real but partial, and unevenly distributed across disability types, genres, and national film industries.

Genre appears to shape these patterns as much as period does. Comedy, in particular, has been shown to recycle disability stereotypes even where a film's marketing presents it as socially progressive, since comic framing often depends on the same deviation-from-normal logic that underwrites pity and villainy tropes elsewhere (Ljuslinder, 2014). Speculative and science-fiction genres pose a related but distinct problem: disability frequently operates as a marker of moral or technological anxiety, coded into narratives about bodily enhancement, contamination, or otherness in ways that displace disabled experience onto metaphor rather than engaging with it directly (Hladki, 2020). Even long-running franchise fiction is not exempt from this pattern, with genre-specific studies noting that disability tends to be introduced for dramatic utility and resolved for narrative convenience rather than treated as a stable, ordinary attribute of a character's life (Riley, 2022). Genre convention, in other words, functions as an additional theme of constraint on representational inclusion, independent of a director's individual politics.

This means that assessing representational inclusion requires attention not only to whether a disabled character is present, but to the genre logic governing how their disability can be narratively used, since certain genres structurally limit the range of inclusive outcomes available regardless of an individual director's intentions.

5. THEME TWO: CONTEXT - NATIONAL CINEMAS AND THE LOCAL CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING

A second stable finding is that disability carries no fixed cinematic meaning; it is refracted through national, religious, gendered, and institutional contexts that vary considerably across film cultures. Indian and Hindi-language cinema studies link disability representation closely to normalcy, ableism, patriarchy, and charity or medical-model assumptions about dependence (Gorai & Rai, 2024). Mainstream Hindi films have historically structured disabled characters through pity, derision, or an arc moving from pity toward heroism, although recent releases show some movement toward more rights-aware framing (Agarwal & Kumar, 2025). Women with disabilities in this cinema are additionally positioned through an able-bodied and patriarchal gaze that compounds gendered and disability-based marginalisation (Dawn, 2023). A recent critical semiotic analysis spanning ninety years of Bollywood output, coding sixty-eight films from 1936 to 2026 across denotative, connotative, and ideological levels of meaning, corroborates this trajectory in fine-grained detail: disability moves historically from

moral-symbolic and tragic framing, through the supercrip register, toward more recent identity-based and rights-aware portrayals, even as comic-relief and inspirational-figure stereotypes persist within commercial cinema alongside this shift (Srivastava et al., 2026). That study's central claim, that the underlying ideological meaning of disability is gradually turning from fate and burden toward identity and diversity without fully displacing older tropes, offers direct empirical support for the uneven, theme-based pattern of progress this paper argues is characteristic of disability cinema more broadly.

Iranian cinema constructs disability rather differently, frequently linking it to spiritual possibility and social marginalisation, with disability functioning as a coded language for broader political and social critique within a national cinema operating under specific religious and censorship constraints (O'Dell, 2015). Studies of South Korean and Japanese film emphasise family obligation, legal regulation, and interdependence, and comparative adaptation studies show that disabled women in these contexts can be portrayed with creative and sexual agency even as disability continues to function as a narrative device rather than disappearing entirely as a plot mechanism (Nam & Kim, 2025; Rukojć, 2013). European film studies identify a recurring "normality drama" structure in which the narrative arc toward overcoming or normalisation displaces deeper engagement with disabled life as such (Andrews, 2020), while research on Kuwaiti and broader Arab media documents persistent frames of tragedy, pity, and, in some cases, disability read through a lens of divine punishment (Alenaizi & Alshammari, 2021). By contrast, African-focused film scholarship explicitly rejects passive victimhood, recasting disabled subjects as agents of voice and action within a decolonial framework (Onikoyi & Petty, 2025).

The implication for a case study of cinema and inclusion is that no single evaluative template travels cleanly across film cultures. What counts as progressive representation in one national cinema may replicate the very structures another cinema is working to dismantle. Any claim about cinema's inclusionary potential therefore needs to be qualified by the specific moral, religious, and gender order within which a given film industry operates. A related gap concerns intersectionality within these national contexts. Most of the literature reviewed here treats disability as the primary analytic category, examining its interaction with gender, religion, or nationality one dimension at a time. Emerging work on contemporary Indian independent cinema, however, argues for reading disability alongside body size, sexuality, and neurodivergence simultaneously, since disabled characters who also occupy other marginalised positions are rendered largely invisible when studies isolate disability as a single variable (Tripathi et al., 2025). This suggests that context-sensitive analysis of disability cinema remains incomplete wherever it does not also account for caste, class, and sexuality as co-constitutive of how a given disabled character is read within a specific national audience.

6. THEME THREE: PARTICIPATION-AUTHORSHIP, AUTHENTICITY, AND POWER

A significant shift in recent scholarship moves the central question from how disability is shown to who controls the showing. Disabled-led and disabled-authored production is repeatedly identified as a corrective to outside-looking-in representation and to the regressive metaphorical uses of disability discussed above (Muredda et al., 2022). A 2025 Australian study of disabled screen workers found that industry participants explicitly connected authentic representation to disabled audiences as a distinct market and cultural community, arguing that inauthentic portrayals forfeit both cultural legitimacy and commercial opportunity (Debinski & O'Meara, 2025). It is worth being precise about what the evidence does and does not support here. The literature offers strong and consistent support for the value of disabled participation and leadership across script development, consultation, editing, and distribution decisions. It offers considerably weaker support for authentic casting treated as an isolated causal variable, since no study in this literature base isolates whether disabled actors playing disabled roles alone—separate from script, direction, and marketing produces measurably better outcomes (Heart, 2025). What the evidence does show consistently is that when disabled people shape the underlying creative decisions, the resulting work more reliably resists objectification and paternalistic framing (O'Mara, 2012).

Participatory and collaborative filmmaking research is especially significant here because it describes concrete redistributions of power rather than abstract commitments to inclusion. These studies document co-creation processes in which participants become knowledge producers in their own right, shaping script development, editing choices, and sometimes retaining shared or final editorial authority, alongside accessible working practices such as adapted communication styles, transport support, and accessible documentation formats (Muredda et al., 2022). Such practices are not merely procedural courtesies; they alter authorship itself, decentring the singular auteur and disrupting the conventional hierarchy between researcher or director and subject. Underlying this literature is a clear ethical position: screen-production scholarship emphasises consent, community consultation, and accountability when representing disabled people, and explicitly critiques tokenism, "inspiration porn," and paternalistic creative control as forms of objectification rather than inclusion (Thorneycroft, 2025).

Industry-level research on employment within screen production adds a further dimension to this picture. Studies of disabled creators working within established national film and television industries describe a persistent "established-outsider" dynamic, in which disabled professionals are permitted entry into production hierarchies without necessarily gaining influence over the creative or editorial decisions that shape how disability is ultimately

represented (Kuna, 2023). This distinction between mere employment and genuine creative authority is important for policy purposes: diversity metrics that count the number of disabled people employed in an industry can obscure whether those individuals hold positions from which they can actually shape content, and a case study framework attentive only to headcount risks mistaking access to the industry for participation in its decision-making.

7. THEME FOUR: RECEPTION-DOES CINEMA CHANGE ATTITUDES?

The audience-facing literature supports a genuine but conditional claim: cinema can contribute to reduced stigma and greater social inclusion, but effects are neither universal nor guaranteed. Intervention studies using short films, documentary footage, or organised festival screenings have measured outcomes including stigma, social distance, help-seeking attitudes, and behavioural intentions toward disabled people (Walker & Scior, 2013). Some of this evidence is genuinely encouraging: a ten-minute contact-based film was found to improve inclusion attitudes and reduce social distance, with effects partially sustained a month later (Walker & Scior, 2013), while a multimedia school programme combining film, discussion, and structured activities improved children's disability knowledge and attitudes across several measures (Hazzard & Baker, 1982). A film-based intervention addressing disability stigma in western Kenya, and repeated exposure to Paralympic media coverage, have both been linked to measurable attitude improvement in more recent work (Etling et al., 2026; Wu et al., 2026).

The proposed mechanisms are reasonably consistent across this literature. Film appears to function as a form of indirect contact, offering viewers a symbolic encounter that can reduce social distance in a manner functionally similar to direct interpersonal contact, and its effects appear stronger when paired with structured discussion or curricular integration rather than treated as a standalone intervention (Conrad et al., 2014).

The evidence is not uniformly positive, however, and this qualification matters for any claim about cinema's inclusionary power. At least one documentary-based study found no measurable change on a standardised interaction-with-disabled-persons scale, even though associated focus-group data suggested more person-centred attitudes had emerged; a discrepancy that several mixed-methods studies flag explicitly, cautioning that standardised instruments may miss subtle or individualised attitude shifts that qualitative methods can capture (Sommerland et al., 2020). Audience response is also not uniform across disabled viewers themselves: some prefer supercrip narratives precisely because they offer identity affirmation, even when the underlying portrayal is unrealistic, which complicates any simple mapping from "positive representation" to "inclusive outcome" (Kama, 2004). Taken together, this theme of evidence supports a modest but important conclusion: cinema functions best as one component of a broader contact or educational process, rather than as a self-sufficient mechanism for changing social attitudes toward disability.

School-based programmes offer some of the clearest evidence for this conditional effect. A systematic review of school-based disability-awareness interventions found that programmes combining film or video material with structured classroom discussion produced more consistent gains in children's attitudes than screening alone, echoing the broader pattern that cinema works best embedded within a pedagogical process rather than deployed as an isolated stimulus (Soper et al., 2025). A related systematic review focused specifically on programmes addressing attitudes toward children with intellectual and developmental disabilities reached a similar conclusion, noting that programme duration and opportunities for reflective discussion moderated outcomes more strongly than the media content itself (Uria-Olaizola et al., 2025). This body of evidence reframes the reception question productively: the relevant unit of analysis for inclusion outcomes may not be the film in isolation, but the pedagogical or community structure within which a screening is embedded.

8. THEME FIVE: INFRASTRUCTURE-INCLUSION BEYOND THE SCREEN

The final theme addresses a dimension often absent from purely textual analyses of disability cinema: whether the infrastructure surrounding a film's circulation is itself accessible. Disability-focused festival scholarship demonstrates that provisions such as captioning, audio description, sign-language interpretation, appropriate seating, and accommodation for guide dogs are not peripheral amenities but constitutive of how inclusive publics are actually produced (Ginsburg & Rapp, 2017). Accessibility in this literature is treated as relational infrastructure, built through the combined efforts of organisers, volunteers, exhibitors, and disability communities, rather than achieved through any single technical fix (Kuna, 2023).

Evidence concerning festival submission platforms is particularly pointed. Disability-focused festivals tend to embed accessibility meaningfully into their design, whereas mainstream festivals and generic submission systems frequently offer only incidental or symbolic access provisions (Debinski et al., 2025). This finding is significant because it relocates the inclusion question from textual politics to industry gatekeeping: if disabled creators cannot easily submit their work or navigate professional networks, representational diversity is constrained structurally, well before any question of on-screen content arises. Research on audio description reinforces this infrastructural framing from the audience side. Personalised and enhanced forms of audio description have been shown to improve comprehension, spatial awareness, and narrative immersion for visually impaired viewers, which has led

accessible-filmmaking scholarship to argue that accessibility should be integrated from script development through post-production rather than added retrospectively (López et al., 2018, 2022; Ren, 2025).

Policy and rights-based scholarship situates this infrastructural view within a broader legal and cultural-rights framework, treating participation in arts and culture as intrinsic to inclusion rather than a discretionary add-on (Leahy & Ferri, 2024). Yet empirical work across European, Australian, and Latin American settings consistently documents implementation gaps: weak policy enforcement, inadequate funding, poor venue design, inaccessible booking systems, and insufficient involvement of disabled people in the governance of cultural organisations themselves (Ferri et al., 2022; Reyes-Martínez et al., 2026). The clearest implication of this theme is that inclusive societies are not constructed by representation alone. They depend equally on whether a disabled person can physically enter the cinema, understand the film through appropriate access provision, book a seat without obstruction, submit their own work for consideration, and participate in post-screening discussion as a recognised member of the public rather than an afterthought (Subic & Ferri, 2023).

The professionalisation of accessible filmmaking as a distinct practice reinforces this infrastructural argument. Training programmes in audio description and accessible production have expanded specifically to address the gap between technical compliance and genuinely usable access, on the premise that accessibility produced as an afterthought by non-specialists tends to be markedly weaker than access built collaboratively from pre-production onward (Romero-Fresco, 2019, 2020). Comparative work on audio-description style further shows that the specific choices made in constructing an audio description how much interpretive language is included, how spatial information is sequenced measurably affect visually impaired audiences' sense of presence and narrative immersion, indicating that accessibility is not a binary present-or-absent feature but a design practice with its own quality gradient (Yang et al., 2025). China's expanding barrier-free film movement illustrates this at national scale, treating accessible exhibition as core cultural infrastructure rather than a niche accommodation, with implications for how other large film-producing nations might approach accessibility as a matter of industrial policy rather than isolated goodwill (Ren, 2025).

9. A CORE CONTRADICTION: VISIBILITY IS NOT THE SAME AS INCLUSION

Running through this five-theme analysis is a contradiction that deserves explicit treatment rather than being absorbed quietly into the conclusion. Apparently positive disability visibility can still reproduce ableist assumptions. Inspirational framing, narratives of normalcy restoration, and sanitised positivity may reduce overt stigma in the short term while leaving intact the underlying premise that disabled value depends on extraordinary achievement, comfort to nondisabled viewers, or conformity to normative expectations of embodiment (Emara & Haller, 2025). Parents of children with Down syndrome, in one instructive study, welcomed the shift toward more positive media portrayals while simultaneously worrying that sanitised depictions could obscure the ongoing mistreatment and structural hardship their children actually face (Thomas, 2021).

This contradiction carries two implications for how inclusion should be assessed. First, inclusion cannot be measured through visibility counts or sentiment analysis alone; a film can increase disabled screen time while decreasing disabled narrative authority. Second, affectively uplifting disability cinema may be genuinely useful in some settings—as a stigma-reduction tool in a classroom, for instance while remaining politically limited in others, particularly where it substitutes for structural change in casting practices, production access, or venue accessibility. The most defensible position, drawing on the convergent evidence across all five themes, is that the most inclusive cinema is not necessarily the most flattering or emotionally comfortable image, but the one that best supports disabled agency, narrative complexity, authorial voice, and equal terms of cultural participation.

10. IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOLARSHIP, POLICY, AND INDUSTRY PRACTICE

For scholarship, this case study suggests that future research on disability and cinema would benefit from designs that hold multiple themes in view simultaneously rather than analysing representation in isolation from production context or audience access. A particularly clear gap is the absence of any peer-reviewed study directly comparing mainstream commercial and independent or arthouse disability cinema using a shared coding framework; such a study would allow the inferential claims made throughout this paper to be tested more rigorously. Longitudinal audience research linking specific representational forms to durable outcomes in employment, education, or civic participation is similarly underdeveloped, as is controlled work isolating the effect of authentic casting from the surrounding script and directorial choices that typically accompany it.

For policy, the infrastructural theme carries the clearest implications. Cultural policy frameworks that treat accessibility as compliance with minimum legal standards, rather than as integral to how inclusive publics are produced, are likely to continue generating the implementation gaps documented across European and Latin American contexts. Embedding disabled people in the governance of festivals, funding bodies, and submission platforms not merely as consultees but as decision-makers appears to be the factor most consistently associated with meaningful accessibility in the literature reviewed here.

For industry practice, the participation theme offers the most actionable lesson. Authentic casting decisions, while symbolically important, cannot substitute for disabled involvement earlier in the production pipeline. Studios and production houses seeking genuine inclusion, rather than its appearance, would do better to invest in disabled screenwriters, consultants, and editors from the earliest stages of development, since this is where the literature locates the strongest and most consistent effects on how disability is ultimately narrated.

10.1 Priority Directions for Future Research

Building on the gaps identified across all five themes, four priorities stand out as most likely to advance the field. First, direct comparative studies of mainstream versus independent or arthouse disability cinema, coded against a shared framework, would allow the inferential claims in this study to be tested rather than assumed. Second, longitudinal audience research is needed to establish whether attitude change measured immediately after a screening translates into durable outcomes in employment, education, or civic participation, since almost all current evidence is short-term. Third, causal designs capable of isolating authentic casting from the script, genre, and directorial choices that typically accompany it would sharpen an area where the literature currently offers strong correlational but weak causal evidence. Fourth, more intersectional work is needed that reads disability alongside gender, caste, class, sexuality, and religion within the same analytic frame, rather than treating these as separate lines of inquiry, following the model suggested by recent work on indie cinema's neurodivergent, queer, and fat representations (Tripathi et al., 2025). Integrated designs that combine textual analysis, disabled creators' own accounts, and disabled audience reception within a single study would additionally help close the gap between what a film appears to do and what it is actually experienced as doing by the communities it claims to represent.

11. LIMITATIONS

This case study is built from an integrative synthesis of existing literature rather than original primary data collection, and its conclusions are accordingly bounded by the scope and quality of that literature. As noted in Section 3, the evidence base lacks a direct, peer-reviewed comparison of mainstream and independent disability cinema on shared coding categories, meaning several comparative claims in this paper are necessarily inferential. Evidence isolating authentic casting as a distinct causal variable, independent of script and directorial choices, remains thin. Long-term evidence connecting specific representational strategies to durable societal inclusion outcomes as opposed to short-term attitude change following a single screening or intervention is similarly limited across the reviewed studies. Finally, the literature synthesised here is unevenly distributed across national film industries, with considerably denser coverage of North American, European, South Asian, and East Asian contexts than of many African, Latin American, and Southeast Asian cinemas, a gap that constrains how confidently the theme-based framework proposed here can be generalised globally.

12. CONCLUSION

This study has argued that cinema can function as an agent of inclusion, but only under specific and jointly necessary conditions. Representation matters because film helps define disability as defect, spectacle, or ordinary human variation. Participation matters because disabled authorship shifts narrative authority away from outside observation and toward lived authority. Infrastructure matters because inclusive publics are materially produced through captioning, audio description, accessible booking systems, and accessible submission pathways, not assumed into existence by good intentions. National and cultural context mediates all three, meaning no single template for inclusive cinema travels unmodified across film industries. And audience reception, while genuinely responsive to well-designed interventions, cautions against treating any single film as a sufficient vehicle for social change.

The strongest formulation supported by this synthesis is that cinema contributes to the cultural construction of inclusive societies not when it simply represents disability, but when it reorganises the surrounding media ecology around disabled participation in authorship, in imagined audience, and in physical and sensory access to the screen itself. Where pity, cure narratives, inspirational spectacle, and disabled exclusion from production persist, cinema continues to reproduce exclusionary social imaginaries even as visibility increases. Where disabled leadership and accessible infrastructure align with narratively complex representation, cinema does more than depict inclusion: it participates in building it

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