"We All Love Cinderella but…": How Young Nigerian Parents Engage with Portrayals of Women in Disney Animated Films

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Abstract

This study investigated how young Nigerian parents engage with Disney's portrayals of women in animated films. The study employed a qualitative research approach. Drawing on the Audience Reception Theory and the Parental Mediation Theory, the research examined how these parents interpret and mediate Disney's gender representations in their parenting practices. Data were collected from 20 university-educated parents, aged 25 to 35 years, across various professions in two diverse urban locations, using a guided snowballing technique. The participants were those who had recent exposure to female portrayals from Disney productions. Findings showed diverse media consumption patterns and a high level of exposure to Disney content. Disney animated films were accessed via a wide variety of platforms such as Disney+, Amazon Prime Video and Disney Channel. Findings also revealed varied interpretations of Disney's portrayals, including perpetuation of gender stereotypes and depictions of empowerment. In addition, parents employed restrictive, active and co-viewing strategies to mediate these representations. They expressed concerns about gender socialisation and the reinforcement of cultural values. In the young parents' navigation of negative portrayals through active mediation and restrictive mediation, they questioned and sieved Disney content for their children and also engaged in open communication where they discussed Disney content with their children. They also used the films to teach cultural values. Stay-at-home mothers used these films more than the other groups of parents. This study highlights the relationship between media, culture and parenting in shaping gender attitudes.

INTRODUCTION

Disney animated films have long played a significant role in shaping gender perceptions among audiences worldwide. With their widespread reach, these films influence how femininity and masculinity are constructed, particularly through the portrayal of female characters (Clarke et al., 2024). While classic Disney princesses, such as *Snow White and Cinderella*, have historically embodied passive and dependent traits, more recent productions, such as Moana (2016) and Frozen (2013), depict female characters with greater agency, resilience and independence (Hine et al., 2018). These evolving representations reflect broader shifts in gender norms and expectations over time, aligning with contemporary discourses on female empowerment and gender equality (Dundes et al., 2019).

However, despite extensive scholarship on gender portrayals in Disney films, much of the existing literature on how people engage with the representations of women has focused on Western audiences, overlooking how diverse cultural contexts influence the reception of these creative products (Clarke et al., 2024; Dundes et al., 2019; Tóth & Lassú, 2023). Therefore, there is a need to explore how audiences

in other contexts engage with Disney's representations of women because media consumption is not universal, and cultural norms play an important role in shaping how audiences interpret and engage with gendered narratives (Tehrim & Jahan, 2024).

In regions such as Nigeria, where traditional gender roles lay emphasis on values such as respectfulness, submissiveness and modesty of women (Akpan, 2015; Ifegbesan & Azeez, 2024), it is not clear how parents perceive and respond to Disney's evolving depictions of female characters. Given the role of parents in shaping children's gender socialisation (Luisi, 2022), understanding their perspectives is crucial in assessing the broader implications of global media narratives on local cultural values. As Disney films continue to be consumed by audiences across the world, it is important to explore whether the evolving gender representations in these products, which have shifted from the portrayal of women as weak to the portrayal of the empowered woman (Dundes et al., 2019; Hine et al., 2018), for instance, align with or challenge the expectations that parents in non-Western societies have for their children. This study, therefore, examined how young Nigerian parents engage with Disney's portrayals of women, how they interpret these representations within the context of their cultural values and how they mediate these portrayals in their parenting practices. In this study, "women" (to be used interchangeably with the adjective "female") are Disney animated film characters that exhibit physical attributes traditionally associated with femininity. These characteristics include slender physiques with small waists, curvaceous hips and busts, long, flowing hair, large expressive eyes, full lips and rosy cheeks. Such attributes are emblematic of Disney princesses and are exemplified by characters such as *Cinderella* (Dundes et al., 2019).

The study was guided by the following overarching research question:

How do young Nigerian parents engage with portrayals of women in Disney animated films?

Based on this key question, the following sub-questions became crucial:

1. What mediation strategies (restrictive, active or co-viewing) do Nigerian parents adopt when engaging with Disney animated films that portray women?
2. How do Nigerian parents decode the portrayals of women in Disney animated films?
3. How do Nigerian parents perceive the implications of portrayals of women for their parenting behaviours?
4. What are the determinants of how young Nigerian parents engage with portrayals of women in Disney animated films?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study draws on two theories: the Audience Reception Theory and the Parental Mediation Theory. The idea of audience reception, as captured in Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, was used to explore how young Nigerian parents construct meaning from Disney films' gender portrayals. Hall argues that media messages are encoded with preferred meanings by producers but are subject to various interpretations by the audience, based on their sociocultural contexts. These interpretations can be dominant, negotiated, or oppositional (Hall, 1980). The dominant interpretation means that the audience has accepted the message at face value, without questioning or challenging its meaning, while negotiated interpretation means that the message has been accepted but the audience goes on to bring their experiences or perspectives into the interpretation. Oppositional interpretation entails rejection of the media message, often because it conflicts with the values of the audience.

Stuart Hall's framework is complemented by the Parental Mediation Theory (Clark, 2011; Rasmussen et al., 2016), which emphasises how parents actively engage with media to shape their children's media experiences, either through restrictive mediation (limiting access), active mediation (discussing content) or co-viewing (watching together). Parental engagement with media encompasses how parents select, monitor and discuss media content with their children (Clark, 2011). The Parental Mediation Theory would categorise the engagement of young Nigerian parents with Disney's portrayal of women in animated films into restrictive mediation (limiting access to the films), active mediation (discussing content with children) and co-viewing (watching together with children), with active mediation relying on and also having the

potential to enhance critical thinking and media literacy (Rasmussen et al., 2016). These theoretical perspectives provide a foundation for analysing how young Nigerian parents interpret Disney's evolving portrayals of female characters and how they mediate these representations in their parenting practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Disney's portrayals of women

Scholars argue that Disney productions are well known for their iconic female characters, such as *Cinderella* and *Moana* (Hine et al., 2018; Tóth & Lassú, 2023). However, previous research has highlighted numerous issues with gender representations in Disney animated films, for example, the portrayal of Disney heroines such as *Snow White* and *Cinderella* as passive, helpless and in dire need of rescue (Hine et al., 2018). These portrayals are an extension of the negative portrayals that Disney has been criticised for in the past decades (Uzuegbunam & Ononiwu, 2018). Studies have criticised the negative portrayals of women, especially princess characters, in Disney films released before 2009 (Hine et al., 2018). England et al. (2011) suggest these female characters portrayed by Disney often embody traits and behaviours traditionally associated with women, such as weakness and a reliance on men for salvation or codependency. Hine et al. (2018) suggest that these portrayals reflect the social contexts of their time, indicating that women were seen as weak and dependent on men by society.

Examinations of Disney films produced after 2009 indicate several positive developments: princess characters exhibit a broader spectrum of romantic scenarios, demonstrate a mix of masculine and feminine traits, participate in rescue missions and, occasionally, dismiss romantic pursuits altogether (Dundes et al., 2019). After 2009, more Disney princesses were depicted as empowered, meaning that they were able to protect and provide for themselves, unlike earlier representations in which they relied on male characters for support (Hine et al., 2018). For example, Hine et al. (2018) argue that the films *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), which features Princess Aurora as its main character, and *Moana* (2016), showcasing Princess Moana, highlight the significant differences between the outdated gender roles depicted during the Disney Classical Era (1937–1959) and the more modern roles presented in the Disney Revival Era (2009–2022). Hine et al. (2018) argue that the female Disney character Aurora, categorised as a "Classic Years Woman", is predominantly passive, with her destiny shaped by others, such as Prince Philip who raised her from the dead with a kiss. In contrast, *Moana* embodies a strong and independent character with a well-rounded behavioural profile, displaying a higher proportion of masculine traits than feminine ones (60% to 40%, respectively) (Hine et al., 2018).

There has been extensive analysis of the representations of female characters in Disney animated films, particularly focusing on the contrasting portrayals of classic and modern princesses (Dundes et al., 2019), but there is a notable gap regarding the specific engagement and interpretation of these portrayals by diverse cultural audiences. Most studies have primarily centered on Western perspectives (Dundes et al., 2019; England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018), leaving a significant lack of exploration into how young parents from the global South perceive and interact with these portrayals of women in Disney films. Given that cultural contexts can influence the reception and interpretation of media, it is important to investigate how young Nigerian parents understand the representations of female characters in Disney films, especially in light of the cultural values and beliefs surrounding female gender roles within Nigerian society, including those associated with respectfulness, submissiveness, chastity (Okunnu, 2024), and expectations of decorum (Akpan, 2015; Ifegbesan & Azeez, 2024). This gap is particularly relevant as the narratives presented in Disney films not only reflect Western ideals but also have implications for global audiences, particularly in countries with differing cultural norms and values regarding gender.

Furthermore, while the literature indicates a shift towards more empowered female characters in Disney films produced after 2009 (Dundes et al., 2019), there remains a lack of qualitative insight into how these changes are received by non-Western audiences, particularly in terms of their implications for parenting, education and the socialisation of children. Understanding the perspectives of Nigerian parents can provide a richer and more diverse view of the impact of Disney's evolving portrayals of

female gender roles and can contribute to broader discussions about global media influence on gender socialisation.

Determinants of how parents engage with Disney portrayals

There have been investigations on the factors influencing parents' interactions with Disney portrayals. One significant element is parental demographics. Luisi (2022) found that parental mediation approaches are often linked to parents' gender, with fathers typically setting rules and mothers engaging more in daily discussions with their children. However, parent's media literacy, rather than gender, can also determine their mediation style (Luisi, 2022).

The demographics of children have also been found to influence the extent to which discussions about gender in Disney films occurs. As children grow older, parental mediation generally decreases, with parents more actively regulating media consumption for younger children (12 and under) compared to adolescents (Collier et al., 2016). Furthermore, a child's gender may affect how parents approach media management, with female children receiving more attention during television viewing than male children (Behm-Morawitz et al., 2022; Luisi, 2022).

Luisi's (2022) research investigated whether specific parental traits and social identities influenced the willingness of 190 parents to talk about media portrayals. The results from the study conducted by Luisi (2022) indicated that parental involvement, fandom and nostalgia played a significant role in parents' readiness to discuss Disney movies with their children. Parents who regularly watched Disney films with their children identified as Disney fans and felt nostalgic. These parents were more inclined to have conversations about these movies. With regard to the determinants of Nigerian parents' interactions with female gender representations in Disney animated films, the results from the study conducted by Luisi (2022) would imply that social identities – such as fandom – might significantly influence discussions regarding the representation of women in Disney content within Nigerian homes. Recognising these elements could help explain the factors that influence how young Nigerian parents approach discussions with their children around the portrayals of women in the media.

Beyond Disney-specific engagement, Nikken and Schols (2015) examined parental mediation strategies across digital media use among young children. Their study found that children's media skills and activities significantly influenced parental mediation styles, with variations depending on whether children engaged in educational content or passive entertainment. They identified five key mediation strategies – co-use, supervision, active mediation, restrictive mediation and monitoring – demonstrating that children's media skills played a stronger role in shaping mediation approaches than parental attitudes about media. These findings point to how parental mediation is not only reactive but also adaptive, influenced by children's evolving digital competencies and behaviours. Similarly, Livingstone et al. (2015) emphasise how socio-economic factors, particularly income and education, shape parental mediation of digital media use. Their study revealed that higher-income, more educated parents were more likely to employ diverse mediation strategies and balance restrictive rules with efforts to promote offline activities. In contrast, lower-income, less educated parents tended to rely on stricter mediation strategies but were often ambivalent about digital media, reflecting concerns over both its risks and benefits. Notably, Livingstone et al. (2015) highlight how parental digital literacy also played a role, with more technologically proficient parents demonstrating greater confidence with regard to managing their children's media use. This suggests that mediation strategies are not uniform but are shaped by intersecting socio-economic and technological factors.

Expanding on the findings of Nikken and Schols (2015) and Livingstone et al. (2015), Dias et al. (2016) explored parental mediation practices across European contexts and demonstrated how cultural norms and technological access influence digital engagement strategies. Their study, which included qualitative interviews with families in Belgium, Germany, Latvia and Portugal, found that parents predominantly acted as "gatekeepers" who controlled both access to and use of digital technologies. Dias et al. (2016) found that their mediation practices were shaped by their perceptions of digital technologies as either responsible entertainment or educational tools, ultimately influencing the types of content children could

access. While parents primarily employed restrictive mediation (focused on time limits rather than content regulation) and supervision, the study conducted by Dias et al. (2016) also revealed a gap between parental perception and actual control over children's digital consumption. Dias et al. (2016) found that some parents assumed they had more oversight than they actually did, illustrating the challenges of ensuring children's online safety despite strict mediation efforts. These studies reveal what can be described as a complex landscape of parental mediation, where factors such as children's media skills (Nikken & Schols, 2015), socio-economic background (Livingstone et al., 2015) and cultural context (Dias et al., 2016) all interact to shape how parents regulate their children's media engagement.

The literature reveals three major patterns in parental engagement with Disney content: co-viewing, active mediation and restrictive mediation. Co-viewing, as seen in Asawarachan's (2016) study, highlights shared enjoyment but limited critical engagement. In contrast, Luisi (2022) emphasises active mediation, where parents facilitate discussions on sensitive themes such as gender roles. Tóth and Lassú (2023) showcase restrictive mediation, where parents curate media consumption to avoid perpetuating undesirable stereotypes. The studies illustrate cultural and contextual differences in how parents engage with Disney media. While Thai parents (Asawarachan, 2016) often accepted Disney films' educational and moral value (dominant readings), United States (US) non-White parents (Luisi, 2022) actively negotiated their children's interpretations, reflecting Hall's encoding–decoding model. Similarly, Mason (2017) found oppositional readings among audiences who critiqued Disney's gender stereotypes, aligning with Luisi's findings on critical engagement.

Literature establishes the need for more scholarship on parental engagement, particularly in relation to Disney films. The review highlights how parental engagement with Disney varies across cultural contexts, such as Thailand (Asawarachan, 2016), the US (Luisi, 2022), Hungary (Tóth & Lassú, 2023) and Norway (Sørenssen, 2018). However, there is a gap in research on African parents, particularly Nigerian parents. This study fills this gap by exploring how young Nigerian parents engage with portrayals of women in Disney animated films.

Studies such as Luisi (2022) and Mason (2017) show that parents – especially mothers – engage in discussions about gender stereotypes in Disney films. However, they also highlight gaps in how effectively these discussions address problematic portrayals. This study builds on these findings by examining whether and how Nigerian parents engage with representations of women in Disney animated films. Tóth and Lassú (2023) show how Hungarian parents' values shape their Disney film preferences (such as traditional vs. independent princesses). This study looks at how Nigerian cultural norms, religious influences and societal expectations shape parental engagement with portrayals of women in Disney animated films, given the paucity of research in this area. Moreover, while previous research (Behm-Morawitz et al., 2022; Luisi, 2022) found that mothers tended to engage more in daily discussions about gender themes, while fathers were more likely to set media rules, it is not clear whether this pattern applies in Nigerian households, where gender roles and parenting responsibilities may differ. This study contributes to understanding how Nigerian fathers and mothers navigate conversations about femininity in Disney films.

Furthermore, most research on parental mediation of Disney content is rooted in Western frameworks, such as Clark's (2011) typologies and Hall's (1980) encoding–decoding model. Therefore, this study provides an opportunity to assess whether these theoretical frameworks adequately explain Nigerian parents' engagement with Disney portrayals of women or whether alternative models are needed to account for local cultural and social dynamics. Over all, this study expands research on parental media engagement in the Nigeria context, due to limited research in this regard.

METHODOLOGY

We adopted a qualitative research approach because it provided the necessary depth and flexibility to explore how young Nigerian parents engage with portrayals of women in Disney animated films. This methodology was particularly suitable as it emphasises meaning, context and interpretation (Campbell & Domene, 2024; Dehalwar & Sharma, 2024), allowing us to capture the complexities of parental

perceptions, attitudes and interactions with gendered media content.

The interpretive nature of qualitative research was essential for examining the ways in which cultural, social and personal factors influence parents' engagement with the portrayals of women in Disney animated films. Thus, qualitative methodology was not just an appropriate choice but a necessary one, as it aligned with the study's objective of uncovering the deeper, context-dependent processes underlying parental engagement with portrayals of women by Disney.

Data collection method

In-depth online interviews conducted via Zoom were used to collect data, with each session lasting between 30 and 55 minutes. Open-ended questions encouraged detailed explanations and arguments (Hansen & Świderska, 2024). An interview guide was ussed to facilitate data collection.

Participants and sampling procedure

A total of 20 Nigerian parents, aged 25 to 35, participated in the study. Participants were purposively selected based on specific inclusion criteria. The first criterion was "exposure to Disney animated films". Participants had to demonstrate familiarity with Disney films featuring female protagonists, such as this in *Cinderella*, Frozen, Moana, Beauty and the Beast and The Little Mermaid. This was assessed through a short pre-screening questionnaire, which asked potential participants to list the Disney animated films they had watched that portrayed women (and briefly talk about the plot), how frequently they watched them and whether they discussed these films with their children. Second, eligible participants had to be parents of at least one child aged between 2 and 12 years, ensuring relevance to the study's focus on parental mediation of children's media exposure. This rigorous screening process ensured that participants possessed the necessary exposure and engagement levels to provide meaningful insights into the research questions.

Purposive and snowball sampling were employed to secure the participants. The recruitment process began with an initial eligible participant who met all selection criteria listed above. This participant was picked from the personal contacts of one of the researchers. After an interview with this first participant, she was asked if she knew other parents who also frequently engaged with Disney animated films and were actively involved in their children's media exposure. These referrals were then contacted and subjected to the same screening process to ensure they met the inclusion criteria before being recruited into the study. To maintain diversity, participants were encouraged to refer parents from different professional backgrounds. This approach helped mitigate potential biases that could arise if all participants were drawn from a single professional group.

The participants contacted for the study were accidentally resident in two metropolitan cities in Nigeria – Port Harcourt and Umuahia. Participants residing in Port Harcourt and Umuahia were still deemed suitable for the study because these two cities have a growing middle-class population and increasing internet penetration (Izeogu, 2016, 2018) that facilitate access to global media content online (Cunningham & Craig, 2016). The two cities also provided a balanced perspective from mid-tier metropolitan areas where Western media exposure can be said to intersect with deeply ingrained traditional values.

The study aimed for diversity in occupational and socio-economic backgrounds to capture different perspectives. Participants included both male (n=6) and female (n=14) parents engaged in various professions such as civil service (n=3), banking (n=2), teaching (n=2), lecturing (n=3), business (n=2), digital content creation (n=1) and nursing (n=1). Monthly incomes ranged from N60,000 (approximately $35) to N2,000,000 (approximately $1,176). In addition, six participants identified as stay-at-home mothers, adding perspectives from parents engaged in full-time caregiving. This diversity allowed for a broader understanding of how socio-economic status might influence perceptions of gender portrayals in media.

While the study's sample size of 20 participants may limit the generalisability of findings, it was appropriate for qualitative research, which prioritises depth over breadth (Gabriel et al., 2019). The relatively small sample enabled detailed exploration of personal experiences, parental reflections and nuanced interpretations of gender portrayals in Disney films.

This study specifically focused on educated parents (defined as university graduates) due to their potential for critical engagement with media content and gender portrayals. The views of Livingstone et al. (2015) suggest that educated audiences are more likely to be aware of global gender discourse, media influence on socialisation and the implications of stereotypical representations; their educational background positions them to analyse and articulate how gender portrayals in Disney animated films might reinforce or challenge traditional gender roles within Nigerian society.

Data analysis technique

The researchers manually analysed the interview transcripts using thematic analysis, identifying, assessing and summarising patterns or themes. Following Braun and Clarke's (2012) recommendations, the researchers engaged in a rigorous thematic analysis of interview data collected from the participants. This process involved four key phases, adapted specifically to the study focus on media consumption and gender portrayals in Disney films.

First, familiarisation with the data was achieved through repeated reading of interview transcripts, allowing the researchers to develop a comprehensive understanding of participants' perspectives. During this phase, initial impressions were manually noted, with recurring ideas such as "concerns over gender roles in Disney films" and "positive reception of strong female leads" emerging early in the process. Second, initial codes were generated by systematically organising the data into meaningful units. Key phrases from participants, such as "I don't like how the older Disney princesses just wait to be saved" and "My daughter loves Moana because she's adventurous and doesn't need a prince", were highlighted and assigned codes such as "passive female portrayals" and "empowered female characters". These codes captured contrasting viewpoints on gender representation in Disney films.

Third, related codes were clustered into broader themes, derived inductively from the data. One dominant theme, "Young Nigerian parents' decoding of Disney portrayals of the female gender", emerged from codes such as "perpetuation of gender stereotypes" and "portrayals of empowerment". Another key theme, "Media consumption patterns", encompassed codes such as "frequency of viewing", "media platforms used", and "co-viewing practices".

These themes reflected participants' concerns about gender messaging in children's media and their active role in shaping their children's viewing experiences. The themes were then refined and contextualised with supporting quotes, ensuring they were firmly rooted in participants' lived experiences. The theoretical frameworks of the encoding–decoding model and Parental Mediation Theory guided the interpretation, helping to explain how parents critically engaged with media content and mediated their children's understanding.

Finally, themes were reviewed for consistency by cross-checking them against the coded data and the entire dataset. Redundant or overlapping themes were merged, ensuring clarity and coherence in the findings. This systematic approach ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the data while reflecting the study's research objectives.

Ethical considerations

The participants provided informed consent and were informed about the study's objectives. Their anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms. Identifiers such as "Participant 1" were used to identify the participants instead of their real names. The researchers maintained open communication with participants throughout the research process, and qualitative data were securely stored on the cloud and Google Drive. The ethical measures taken in the study ensured participant safety and data integrity (Shaw & Satalkar, 2018). Informed consent clarified the study aims and maintained transparency (Nijhawan et al., 2013).

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Engaging with female gender portrayals in Disney animated films

Throughout our interactions with the participants, a significant theme emerged regarding how parents engage with portrayals of women in Disney animated films. The parents discussed the mediation strategies they employed in this engagement. The sub-themes identified during the data coding process included media consumption patterns, critical consumption of media content, empowerment-seeking and open communication.

Media consumption patterns

One dominant theme that emerged from the qualitative data was the media consumption patterns of the participants. With regard to viewing frequency, as an aspect of the participants' media consumption patterns, we found that their responses in this aspect varied widely, with some parents watching these animated films with their children regularly (for instance, Participant 10 and Participant 2) and others less frequently (for instance, Participant 18). A stay-at-home mother who frequently watched Disney films with her children captured the views of four other stay-at-home mothers thus:

> I frequently watch Disney films featuring female characters with my children. They adore these films and particularly admire the princesses so much, often wanting to imitate them. (Participant 10; stay-at-home mother; female, aged 30)

Another participant, a teacher, indicated that watching Disney films was a regular activity in her household, adding that she had watched Disney for up to 15 years, since the childhood days of her first child:

> We watch all the time. I and my girls constantly rewatch their favourite Disney princesses, like Moana, singing along with the movies like in *Frozen*. We watch in the evenings when I get back from work, as well as on weekends and during holidays ... I have been watching with them for up to 15 years since I gave birth to my first daughter ... (Participant 2; teacher; female; aged 33).

However, another participant, a businesswoman, indicated that watching Disney films was not a regular activity in her household:

> We do not watch it always ... It is just once in a while. I do not have the time and my children help me in the shop ...We can watch on Sundays or during holidays just to relax, but it is not an everyday thing ... (Participant 18; business woman; female; aged 35).

Analysis revealed that some Nigerian parents, particularly mothers, frequently watched Disney animated films with their children (for instance, Participant 2; teacher; female; aged 33). The regularity of this activity suggests that these films are an integral part of their family entertainment and bonding time. For Participant 10, who is a stay-at-home mother, Disney films serve as a consistent source of entertainment and engagement for their children. The statement from Participant 10 reflects a routine where Disney films featuring female characters are watched "frequently", highlighting the children's affinity for the princesses and their desire to emulate them. For the working mothers who were part of the study, Disney films are a staple during the evening relaxation and weekends. The routine of Participant 2, which involves watching Disney animated films with her daughters after work and during holidays, points to the films' role in family bonding and the children's enjoyment of these characters. The frequent viewing of Disney films indicates a cultural integration where Western media is embraced within Nigerian households. This could point to a broader trend of globalisation and the appeal of Disney's storytelling and character development.

In addition, numerous participants indicated that they watched Disney films on a range of media platforms (Participant 14; Participant 16; Participant 17). Participant 17, who is a stay-at-home mother, aged 32 years, indicated that:

> I can say that we watch on many platforms, we have Disney+, Amazon Prime Video, Disney DVD/Blu-ray and the Disney Channel. I always have to subscribe our cable TV for my children to watch Disney. (Participant 17; stay-at-home mother; female, aged 32).

This extensive access highlights the considerable exposure of some Nigerian parents who regularly watch Disney content with their children (such as Participant 14; Participant 16; Participant 17) to Disney animated films that feature female characters. In addition, the mention of both digital platforms (streaming services and digital purchases) and older media (DVD/Blu-ray) suggests that the Nigerian parents who frequently watch Disney content with their children have adapted to both modern and traditional forms of media consumption. This diversity in points of access increases the likelihood of frequent and varied exposure to Disney films. This consistent exposure could significantly influence children's perceptions of gender roles and characteristics. The availability of Disney films on demand and across different platforms ensures that these films are easily accessible whenever parents or children want to watch them. This constant availability could lead to repeated viewings that reinforce the messages and potentially make the portrayals seem true (Winter, 2024).

The findings that suggest that the participants, especially the stay-at-home mothers (for instance, Participant 17), regularly watch these films with their children, is consistent with previous research. Asawarachan (2016) suggests that parents in Thailand also create time to regularly watch Disney movies with their children. However, this study expands Asawarachan's (2016) study by highlighting that the young Nigerian parents who participated in this study accessed these films across various platforms, including Disney+, Amazon Prime Video and Disney Channel. This variety of media platforms emphasises the widespread availability and consumption of Disney content among Nigerian families, which we see as the starting point of whatever influence it can have on them.

The result that indicated that Nigerian parents, particularly stay-at-home mothers, frequently watched Disney films with their children aligns with the co-viewing aspect of the Parental Mediation Theory, where parents watch media alongside their children. Co-viewing, as a form of mediation, can have some implications that are worth mentioning. We can talk about a shared media experience where watching films together fosters family bonding and provides opportunities for shared discussions about the content. For instance, through co-viewing, parents can address the narratives, themes and characters portrayed in Disney films, guiding children's interpretations (Asawarachan, 2016; Luisi, 2022).

The finding that some Nigerian parents (Participant 14; Participant 16; Participant 17) access Disney films through multiple platforms such Disney+, Amazon Prime Video and Disney Channel reflects the increased availability of global media content. This widespread accessibility seems to encourage regular co-viewing, making it easier for families to incorporate these films into their routines. However, while co-viewing ensures exposure to shared media experiences, it does not inherently encourage critical engagement. The Parental Mediation Theory suggests that active mediation, where parents deliberate and discuss the media's messages, is a more impactful way to develop children's media literacy as without active discussions children may passively absorb the messages, including stereotypical gender roles, as seen in many Disney films (Clark, 2011). However, the phenomenon of co-viewing can still be considered as important because the combination of regular co-viewing and the variety of media platforms highlights the growing penetration of globalised media into Nigerian households. This access points to a foundational opportunity for young Nigerian parents' critical engagement with Disney content, where they can guide their children through complex themes and reinforce critical thinking and cultural pride by doing so. Here, co-viewing can be considered a springboard for active mediation.

Consumption of media content

The young Nigerian parents we spoke to applied critical consumption of media content to manage their children's exposure to Disney animated films that feature female characters. One participant, a mother whose occupation is content creation, emphasised that:

> I deliberately watch these movies with my daughters and discuss their content ... (Participant 9; content creator; female; aged 29)

Another parent who is a lecturer highlighted her strict approach to reviewing media content:

> We do not watch just anything in my house. Before allowing my children to watch a Disney movie, I Google it to ensure that it is in line with our culture. I hear some of these films even portray gay characters. We don't want that. I ensure that the movies my children watch do not promote harmful stereotypes (Participant 6; lecturer; male; aged 35).

The findings on the critical consumption of media content among the young Nigerian parents we interviewed align with broader literature on parental engagement with Disney films, particularly in relation to co-viewing, active mediation and restrictive mediation. The two parental perspectives in the findings reflect different approaches to media regulation, both of which resonate with existing research on mediation strategies. The mother who watches Disney films with her daughters and discusses their content demonstrates active mediation, which Luisi (2022) found to be more common among non-White parent–child dyads in the US. This approach is also in line with Asawarachan's (2016) findings on Thai parents who engaged in co-viewing, though the Nigerian mother's engagement was more critical, reflecting a deeper awareness of gender representations. Similar to the gendered mediation patterns observed by Luisi (2022), the mother in the Nigerian context (Participant 9) appeared to take a more hands-on approach to discussing media portrayals with her children.

The father in the findings presented above (Participant 6) exhibited restrictive mediation, closely monitoring media content before allowing his children to watch it. This approach mirrors the findings of Tóth and Lassú (2023), where Hungarian parents selectively exposed their children to Disney princesses based on their values. The Nigerian father's concerns about cultural representation and stereotypes align with the oppositional readings identified by Mason (2017), where certain audiences critique and reject dominant gender norms in Disney films. His explicit rejection of media content that portrays LGBTQ+ themes further illustrates cultural specificity in media mediation, a factor not explicitly explored in prior studies but relevant to African contexts where romance with same sex, for instance, is seen as taboo. With regard to parental media literacy and cultural context, Luisi (2022) suggests that parental media literacy influences mediation styles more than gender alone. In the Nigerian findings, the media literacy of Participant 9 seemed to inform her active mediation, while the approach of Participant 6 reflected a more conservative stance shaped by cultural values. This aligns with Sørenssen (2018), who identified cultural critique as one of the parental voices shaping media engagement.

Moreover, while Tóth and Lassú (2023) examined restrictive mediation in Hungary, this study provides a non-Western perspective, showing that moral and cultural considerations shape restrictive mediation beyond concerns about gender roles. Participant 6, a Nigerian father, explicitly rejected LGBTQ+ themes; this illustrates how cultural identity influences media censorship, a dimension that has not been extensively explored in prior research. Furthermore, the gendered division of mediation responsibilities seen in Luisi (2022) is also evident in the findings of this study, with Participant 9, a mother, engaging in discussions and Participant 9, a father, enforcing stricter content control. This reflects broader global patterns but also highlights context-specific differences in media censorship and active mediation in Nigerian families.

Empowerment-seeking and open communication

The research indicated that a young Nigerian parent actively searched for Disney animated films that cast strong, independent female characters. This participant, who is a stay-at-home mother, expressed this sentiment:

> I look for Disney films like *Moana* which show women as strong and independent people because I want them to be inspired and be strong and independent also. (Participant 10; stay-at-home mother; female, aged 30).

These insights reflect parents' intentional efforts to provide positive role models for their children and to challenge conventional gender norms. The social cognitive theory would hold that exposure to strong and independent female characters can positively influence children's beliefs about gender roles and their self-perception (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2014). Choosing films that promote female empowerment would mean that some young Nigerian parents could contribute to the broader goal of achieving gender equality in society.

The results also indicated that a young Nigerian parent encouraged open communication with her children with regard to how Disney portrays female characters. This participant, who is a working-class mother, stated that:

> I always tell my children to ask questions and tell me how they feel about these films. (Participant 2; teacher; female; aged 33).

Open communication and dialogue can encourage critical thinking and awareness among children about gender representations in media. Through the creation of an environment where children feel comfortable to express their opinions and ask questions, parents can help them develop analytical skills and discernment. This is consistent with assertions that active engagement with media content can foster discussions that shape children's perceptions and attitudes towards gender dynamics (Luisi, 2022).

In navigating female character portrayals in Disney animated films, some of the young Nigerian parents that participated in the study (Participant 2; Participant 10) applied approaches that included the critical consumption of Disney content, seeking empowered and empowering representations, as well as fostering open communication with their children. These strategies reflect an awareness of how media can influence children's perceptions and values. When young Nigerian parents engage with and discuss media content actively, they play a significant role in guiding their children's understanding of gender roles and nurturing critical thinking skills. Ultimately, these results point to the possibility that informed media consumption and parental involvement could shape children's development in the face of evolving gender norms and societal values.

The result that the participants shared various strategies for navigating female gender portrayals in Disney films, with open communication and dialogue being prominent methods, aligns with Luisi's (2022) findings that parents often engage in discussions about gender stereotypes. However, our study went further to suggest that many of these conversations involved parents actively explaining why certain gender portrayals, such as females as dependent on men, should not be copied. These conversations are predominantly between mothers and daughters. Luisi's research, like ours, also showed that such discussions were less frequently initiated by fathers and were more frequent between mothers and their daughters, highlighting a universal trend of mothers being more invested than fathers in addressing female-gender-related issues with their daughters. The finding that discussions about gender portrayals are more common between mothers and daughters is significant as it suggests that mothers, instead of fathers, deliberately take on the role of addressing gender-related issues with daughters to an extent that can build their awareness of and resistance to traditional gender norms. Conversely, the lesser engagement of fathers in such discussions may point to an African trend that reflects traditional gender roles where fathers may not perceive themselves as primary agents in addressing gender representations

with their children but as mainly agents for financial and material support of children (Mavungu, 2013).

The explicit review and discussion of media content demonstrate how parents actively guide their children's interpretations. This parental behaviour aligns with active mediation and restrictive mediation as key aspects of the Parental Mediation Theory. Parents such as Participant 9 (content creator; female; aged 29) and Participant 6 (lecturer; male; aged 35) engage in deliberate analysis of Disney films, scrutinising their themes for cultural compatibility and the potential reinforcement of harmful stereotypes. For example, the lecturer's pre-screening process reflects restrictive mediation by filtering out content they consider misaligned with cultural or moral values. In addition, the focus on selecting Disney films with strong, independent female characters also resonates with active mediation. Through prioritising films that showcase female agency, the young Nigerian parents that spoke to us tend to disrupt traditional portrayals of women as dependent or passive, thereby providing children with alternative and aspirational narratives. Furthermore, encouraging dialogue about Disney films aligns with active mediation and tends to build a learning environment where children can critically reflect on media messages.

While the findings presented above align with the Parental Mediation Theory, they also extend its application. The findings of this study confirm that individuals can combine active mediation, restrictive mediation and co-viewing, which suggests a more holistic aspect of media mediation. In addition, this study extends the understanding of the Parental Mediation Theory by emphasising the cultural context in which mediation occurs. Nigerian parents' concerns about preserving cultural values (such as rejecting portrayals of LGBTQ+) highlight the relationship between global media influences and local cultural frameworks. This adds a layer of restrictive mediation, where parents limit exposure to content that is deemed inconsistent with their values in a way that ensures that media consumption aligns with their family's cultural and moral principles.

DECODING DISNEY PORTRAYALS OF THE FEMALE GENDER IN ANIMATED FILMS

The participants interpreted the portrayal of the female gender in Disney productions in multiple as well as varied ways. Sub-themes that emerged in this regard included the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and portrayals of empowerment.

Perpetuation of gender stereotypes

One of the participants from the working-class category viewed Disney movies as perpetuating certain gender stereotypes that might shape children's understanding of gender roles. According to this participant, who is a male civil servant:

> We all love Cinderella but I am worried that Disney films convey to our daughters that they need a prince to save them or that their worth is determined by their looks. Many older Disney movies emphasise the prince rescuing the princess and similar themes. (Participant 6; lecturer; male; aged 35)

Another participant highlighted the detrimental effects of these stereotypical representations:

> The emphasis on romantic love is excessive. Take Cinderella and Snow White, for example, their lives appeared to revolve around the prince. The phrase "Prince in Shining Armour" is always associated with the idea of the prince saving the princess in Disney films. (Participant 8; lecturer; female; aged 35)

Participants, especially those from the working class (Participant 6; Participant 8), expressed concerns that Disney films reinforce traditional gender stereotypes. These concerns focus on the portrayal of female characters needing rescue and the emphasis on their appearance. Participant 6, a lecturer, was worried that Disney films teach daughters that their value is tied to being rescued by a prince or their physical appearance. This perception is rooted in older Disney films where narratives often revolve around a prince

saving a princess, thus promoting a limited view of female agency and worth. Participant 8, also a lecturer, emphasised the excessive focus on love and romantic relationships in films such as *Cinderella* and *Snow White*, where the princesses' lives seem dependent on the prince. The participants' concerns suggest that these stereotypical portrayals could shape children's perceptions of gender roles in ways that may limit their understanding of female empowerment and independence. The views of different scholars (England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018; Uzuegbunam & Ononiwu, 2018) suggest that children might internalise the idea that female characters are passive and reliant on male figures for their success and happiness and that these reinforced stereotypes could have long-term implications for how children view gender roles in real life, potentially influencing their aspirations, behaviours and expectations in gender relations.

Portrayals of empowerment

One of the participants valued Disney films for showcasing strong female characters. This parent, who is a stay-at-home mother, pointed out this beneficial aspect:

> I really appreciate it when I see brave female characters in these films. It is important for our children, especially daughters, to have inspiring people they would want to copy. Moana is a brave warrior princess. When our children watch these princesses, they are motivated. (Participant 12; stay-at-home mother; female; aged 30)

The findings suggest that certain Nigerian parents may hold Disney films in high regard for their representation of empowered female characters. Participant 12, a stay-at-home mother, praised these films for featuring strong, independent role models such as Moana, who inspire their daughters to be brave and ambitious. This perspective points to the positive impact of contemporary Disney characters on children's aspirations, showing them that they can be high achievers. These empowered portrayals tend to provide valuable role models which encourage children to emulate these qualities and foster a more progressive understanding of gender roles. This appreciation contrasts with concerns about traditional stereotypes, highlighting diverse parental perspectives on Disney's influence. These varied perspectives highlight the complex ways Disney animated films can influence parental views of children's gender roles and how this can be influenced by the media. These varied perspectives are consistent with findings from other studies (Asawarachan, 2016; Mason, 2017). Mason's (2017) research particularly highlights that while some parents enjoy Disney movies, others criticise them for problematic gender portrayals, such as the portrayal of female characters as dependent on men for survival. The findings of this study support Hall's encoding–decoding model as it indicates that some of the young Nigerian parents we spoke to do not passively accept media messages but rather interpret them in various ways, often making sense of portrayals of the female gender in Disney animated films in oppositional and negotiated ways.

PERCEPTION OF THE EFFECTS OF DISNEY'S WOMEN'S PORTRAYALS ON PARENTAL BEHAVIOURS

The young Nigerian parents that participated in this study make varied and multiple meanings of how female gender representations in Disney animated films can influence the ways they play their roles as parents. The results in this regard provide insights into how media can influence parenting styles, gender-related socialisation, as well as how cultural values are transmitted. The young parents' perceptions of the effects of Disney's female gender portrayals on their parenting is discussed under two sub-themes: influence on gender socialisation and reflection on cultural values.

Influence on gender socialisation

Two participants (Participant 13; Participant 19) acknowledged that Disney animated films significantly shape gender socialisation, which in turn influenced their parenting practices. A working-class mother shared:

> I am increasingly aware of the content which my daughters absorb from Disney movies. I encouraged them to be strong and independent like Moana. I remind them not to wait to be saved by a prince like in Snow White. (Participant 19; sales personnel; female; aged 35)

Another participant, a stay-at-home mother who watches Disney films with her son, expressed that:

> Watching these films with my son has made me teach him how to respect women and treat them with care. All Disney princes are caring ... There are also the bad women, and I tell him not to marry a bad wife like Cinderella's stepmother. I told him that his wife should be caring and loving and should behave well ... (Participant 13; stay-at-home mother; female; aged 33)

These parental narratives illustrate deliberate efforts by the young parents to counteract harmful stereotypes and mould their children to become responsible, gender-sensitive individuals based on Disney's gender portrayals. Exposure to varied gender depictions in media seemed to encourage critical thinking among the parents, which helps them nurture their children towards developing independence and a sense of respect.

Reflection on cultural values

Parents also contemplated how Disney's depiction of female characters led them to reassess and reinforce cultural values within their families. One stay-at-home mother remarked:

> In *Pocahontas*, the princess climbs trees. I explained to my children that in Igbo culture, climbing trees is not customary. They inquired why Pocahontas was doing it, and I clarified that it might be acceptable in her culture. (Participant 13; stay-at-home mother; female; aged 33)

Another participant emphasised that she preferred portrayals of female gender as respectful and homely, as it helped her remind her daughters of the need to imbibe these values:

> Our girls need to be homely, chaste and respectful. That is who we are as Africans ... Whenever we watch Cinderella, I remind my girls of how respectful and homely they should be... (Participant 16; stay-at-home mother; female; aged 32)

The young Nigerian parents we spoke to (Participant 13; Participant 16) showed complex perceptions of how female gender portrayals in Disney animated films could influence their roles as parents. While one of the participants was aware of gender socialisation and engaged in proactive discussions with their children (Participant 16; stay-at-home mother; female; aged 32), another suggested that these Disney films helped them to reflect upon and reinforce cultural values (Participant 13; stay-at-home mother; female; aged 33). These findings highlight critical media engagement and active parental involvement as important factors that can help young parents to shape the understanding of gender roles and cultural norms among their children.

Some participants suggested that gender portrayals by Disney could impact their parenting (Participant 13; Participant 19). This result is consistent with findings from another study where parents seemed to be guided by Disney portrayals (Tóth & Lassú, 2023). There is also a takeaway from the social learning theory which posits that children learn behaviours by observing and imitating media models (Ivwighren & Chukwuebuni, 2024).

Participant 13 seemed to fear that her children might replicate the gender roles depicted in these films. Therefore, they actively engaged in gender socialisation and communication, using these films to educate their children about gender roles and cultural values. This mirrors findings by Tóth and Lassú (2023) where

parents of preschool-aged children in Hungary who valued traditional virtues such as submissiveness preferred classic Disney princesses such as Snow White, while those favouring independence and resilience selected contemporary characters such as *Belle*, reflecting the deliberate role parents play in shaping their children's media exposure to align with their cultural and aspirational ideals. The results, however, contrast with Asawarachan's (2016) study, which found that Disney films were mainly viewed as tools for learning English, with minimal impact on parenting and gender expectations.

DETERMINANTS OF HOW YOUNG NIGERIAN PARENTS ENGAGE WITH FEMALE GENDER PORTRAYALS IN DISNEY ANIMATED FILMS

Participants were asked about the factors that shaped how they engaged with female gender portrayals in Disney animated films. We found that their engagement was influenced by factors including worries about female gender stereotypes and the parents' own fandom.

Parental worries about female gender stereotypes

Participant 2 seemed worried about how Disney animated films reinforced female gender stereotypes. This concern seemed to influence their engagement and selection criteria. One participant summarised this perspective:

> We are cautious about films that depict women as helpless people. We are mindful of films that focus too much on romance and those that show women as too reliant on men for survival. It is crucial for our children to see diverse, empowered and empowering portrayals of girls. I appreciate that Kiya which airs in Disney Junior channel on DSTV portrays African girls as empowered. I think this can help African girls become confident ... (Participant 2; teacher; female; aged 33)

The concerns raised by the participants with regard to gender stereotypes seem to motivate them to select films that feature strong, independent female characters. This is to ensure that their children receive and are influenced by positive and varied representations of women.

Parents' fandom

Some parents' engagement with Disney animated films was shaped by their affection for Disney. The engagement allowed them to relive childhood memories. One participant remarked:

> I love to watch Disney animated films so much. I love Cinderella. It reminds me of life while living with my parents in Enugu. So, it is easy to watch with my children ... (Participant 10; stay-at-home mother; female; aged 30)

The comment above reflects how nostalgia and emotional connections influence parents' engagement with Disney films. According to Jenkins (2007), fandom influences how people consume media content and ties fans emotionally to the media (Jenkins, 2007). The participant's affection for Disney films was tied to feelings of nostalgia; watching these films allows them to reconnect with cherished memories, resonating with Jenkins' concept of "affective economics", which sees the consumption of media as a phenomenon that is shaped by emotion. The finding that the ways in which the young Nigerian parents who participated in this study engaged with the portrayals of women in Disney animated films are shaped not only by cultural values and expectation contrasts but also by nostalgia and emotional connections is consistent with Luisi's (2022) study, which identified fandom and nostalgia as significant factors.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated how young, university-educated Nigerian parents, aged 25 to 35 years, across various professions in Port Harcourt and Umuahia, engaged with Disney's portrayals of female gender in

animated films. The study adopted a qualitative research approach and drew on the Audience Reception Theory and the Parental Mediation Theory. This study points to the significant role that the media, specifically Disney's animated films, can play in shaping parental practices and children's understanding of gender roles in Nigeria. Findings show that the young Nigerian parents who participated in this study, just like their counterparts in the Western context, critically engage with the portrayals of women in Disney films, often adopting active mediation strategies to address perceived stereotypes or to reinforce values of empowerment and cultural identity. While some parents expressed concerns about the perpetuation of traditional gender stereotypes and the possibility that Disney films may encourage aspects that are not consistent with African culture, such as same sex orientation, others appreciated the evolving depiction of strong and independent female characters, such as Moana.

The study confirms that Disney films are a medium through which parents reflect on and transmit cultural values, blending globalised media content with local traditions. Through the adoption of active discussions, restrictive strategies or co-viewing practices, young Nigerian parents can deliberately attempt to mitigate the potential adverse effects of stereotypical portrayals while incorporating positive Disney representations in their gender socialisation efforts.

While our study points to the relationship between media, culture and parenting practices, it has limitations. The sample size for the study was 20 and this number did not adequately capture the diversity of Nigerian parents. Moreover, certain demographic groups such as older parents (above 35 years) as well as less educated parents were excluded. The focus on an urban context (Port Harcourt and Umuahia) also limits the generalisability of the findings. To address these limitations, future research should aim for a more diverse sample, including participants of various ages and those from various socio-economic backgrounds. In addition, adopting qualitative interviews alongside observational methods could offer a more comprehensive understanding of how Nigerian parents engage with Disney films, while comparative studies across different cultural contexts could further throw more light on how cultural values and expectations can shape sense-making of gender portrayals in Disney animated films.

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