

**Representations of Persons with Disabilities in the Media:
A Case Study of Ghana's Local Movie Industry (Kumawood)**

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Abstract

From very primitive notions about persons with disabilities to a society that has become more accepting to persons with disabilities, Ghana has made some recognisable progress in this regard. Such progress includes reduced stigmatization, the establishment of Persons with Disability rights act in 2006, incorporating disability studies in mainstream university curriculum, among other initiatives. Such progress is seen in how the media, especially the news media for more responsible and progressive representations of persons with disabilities with the result that there is greater opportunity and access to all facilities and services for disabled persons. This research focuses on Kumawood, one of the most powerful and influential movie companies in Ghana. In particular, this work explores and analyses the impact and influence of representations of persons with disabilities in Kumawood productions, and the positive and negative attitudes and perceptions that might result from these representations. The aim of the research is to identify if such progress is evident in the local movie industry. The literature review covers the progress made in disability research in Ghana and focuses on how impactful media is on the notions of disability, most especially in a developing country like Ghana.

Keywords: Disability, Media Representation, Kumawood Movies, Progress.

Dedication

This paper is dedicated to my parents who have always been pillars of hope and encouragement. To every person with a disability living their best life each day. You are the source of inspiration and your stories have inspired many including myself to soar above my daily challenges.

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Chapter 1.

Introduction

1.1. Background

My memory is drawn a few decades back as a young child in Ghana. I am reminiscing a day in the hall when on National television when I watched a movie where a woman who wore short hair and a pair of large eyeglasses played a role of an evil mother. She was mean, overly strict and punished her children mercilessly anytime they strayed off the right path. She played the role so well that after watching the movie, I still have the perception deeply rooted in my mind that every woman who wears short hair and a pair of large eyeglasses is automatically a very strict and mean person. This notion has stuck with me and throughout my life I have been confronted with this notion on several occasions. In as much this experience might be unique to me or common to several people, there is no doubt that film, television and other forms of media have a very strong influence on the perceptions of audiences. Today, notions and perceptions people hold can in some measure be attributed to the content that they listen to, watch and engage with on diverse media platforms.

Persons with disabilities are a crucial part of every nation's population. Despite the limitations that persons with disabilities may face they still have every potential to render their unqualified service to the communities in which they live and have the right to feel involved and integrated as much as possible.

According to the *World Report on Disability*, there is an estimated number of about one billion people in the world who live with some form of disability (WHO, 2011). The United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs Division for Inclusive Social Development asserts that, "there are approximately 1 billion persons with disabilities in the world, or 15 per cent of the global population" (World Report on Disability, 2011). The report further states that "in both developed and developing countries, evidence suggests that persons with disabilities are disproportionately represented among the world's poor and tend to be poorer than their counterparts without disabilities" (WHO, 2011). People with disabilities constitute about 10% of the population in every country. Ghana's population as at 2017 stood at 29, 463, 643 million which suggests, according to the statistics that some 2, 946, 364 people in the country have a

disability of one kind (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2018). Experts have predicted that there is a high possibility that the numbers would increase with time due to climate changes, natural disasters, a rise in chronic diseases and mental health disorders. With the statistics mentioned above, there is a need for all stakeholders to contribute ongoingly in creating an environment that does not hinder progress but harnesses the best potentials of persons with disabilities.

Over the years, in many African countries, especially where this research is focussed, persons with disabilities continue to face numerous challenges. These challenges range from issues of access to basic services and amenities, access to employment opportunities, heavy stigmatization and mockery which includes name-calling to continued association of a disability to a spiritual cause Baffoe (2013). Some fifty years ago, when a child was born with a disability, parents would sacrifice the child to a deity rather than keep this 'curse' in the family Naami & Hayashi (2012). Today, some parents and family members resolve to pray and visit prayer camps where pastors exploit them and take advantage of their situation. Countless stories remain untold of persons, usually women and children who have one disability or the other who have been abused, molested or sexually assaulted by persons they trust or by complete strangers who take advantage of them (HRW, 2012). Though the narratives of abuse, discrimination and unequal access to opportunities may have changed over the years due to some measure of sensitization, advocacy and education Tuakli-Wosornu & Haig (2014), there still remains a large number of persons of disabilities who encounter different barriers in their daily routines.

Ghana has been recognised as one of the countries in Africa that has made meaningful progress when it comes to harmful beliefs and perceptions around persons with disabilities; however, there have been more calls by international organisations, and by persons with disabilities and advocacy groups for more effort to be invested in achieving standards that encourage equal rights and opportunities for persons with disabilities. According to Naami & Hayashi (2012) people in Ghana have become more accommodating to persons with disabilities and are open to creating a more enabling environment. Today, several Ghanaian parents are dedicated to ensuring that their children born with disabilities are getting access to good education Ewart (2017) and to greater opportunities for employment.

With a growing local film industry that narrates stories that reflect the Ghanaian culture, coupled with the established link between the media and its influence on perceptions and

behaviours when it comes to persons with disabilities, there is more research conducted on the narratives on and representation of persons with disabilities in Ghana's most popular film industry *Kumawood*. Yamoah (2014). Assessing the representation of persons with disabilities through *Kumawood* is relevant to understanding the daily narratives on persons with disabilities and how they are portrayed. Impressions formed by media representations are particularly impactful when the person or groups depicted are a visible minority in society or rarely featured, thereby rendering the few portrayals much more salient and memorable.

1.2. Significance of the Study

Representation of persons with disabilities in the media is a matter of global concern as it contributes immensely to the overall perception of disability and disabled people. The way persons with disabilities are represented in the media could either contribute positively or negatively towards the behaviours of people towards them. By highlighting the representations of persons with disabilities and the stereotypical portrayals found in local movie productions in Ghana, the research brings to light the flaws and successes if any, in the representation of persons with disabilities.

The research could ultimately be shared with local movie producers, advocacy groups, media regulatory agencies and other international organisations that have the well-being and promotion of disability rights as their mission. This research aims to encourage the development of positive ways of creating more appropriate and suitable content that would contribute to changing the creative art industry in Ghana, especially influencing *Kumawood* to be an impactful avenue where persons with disabilities are represented responsibly and accurately.

The research may also encourage further study in the local communities in Ghana to investigate the current conditions of persons with disabilities, their challenges, successes, people's perceptions and the various avenues for which their voices are heard. The analysis of how *Kumawood* represents persons with disabilities can open an array of inquiries to elaborate and to challenge the existing literature on the progress in the lives of persons with disabilities and how the communities in which they live are becoming either stepping stones or hindrances to their successful integration in terms of opportunities, access and rights.

1.3. Focus of the Research

As Ghanaian movies are well recognized for their portrayal of Ghanaian culture and their narration of stories of current social practices, what are the portrayals of, and narratives about persons with disabilities in Ghana in movies produced in, and about Ghana?

1.4. Research Questions

The following research questions serve as a guide for the findings and discussions. The research questions are comprised of the main research question and secondary research questions to provide more detail as to what the research seeks to achieve. The questions posed will be addressed in terms of both scholarly literature and through a content analysis of five selected *Kumawood* films. These questions ultimately serve as conceptual vehicles toward a comprehensive analysis of the subject matter.

1. How do *Kumawood* movies represent persons with disabilities?

How are persons with disabilities portrayed in *Kumawood* movies? Are they portrayed as able-bodied people who can rise above the challenges that they face? Do these portrayals of persons with disabilities reflect the narratives of the progress that has been made when it comes to persons with disabilities and the struggles they face? What are the story lines and what belief systems are associated with persons with disabilities in *Kumawood* movies?

2. Do *Kumawood* movies encourage positive/negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities?

What are the attitudes towards persons with disabilities communicated in these movies? Are they ones of acceptance or rejection? Are persons with disabilities portrayed with humour and/seriousness, or both? What messages do these movies communicate to the audience?

1.5. Theoretical Framework

In conducting research, it is important that the researcher bases discussion and analyses on solid theoretical foundations that can elucidate the meaning and context to the research. Theories informing this research include, media representation, labelling and critical disability theory which, taken together, help explain the representation of persons with

disabilities in Kumawood movies in Ghana. These theories are further explained, discussed and applied throughout the paper.

1.5.1. Media Representation

The media's role in shaping the thoughts and perspectives of society is critical. Such media influence is accomplished through the texts, images, audio, video and other forms of presentation that to a large extent impact the dialogues and beliefs of the audience that consume the content. It is the content that people are exposed to that affect their behaviours and habits.

1.5.2. Media Labelling

According to Cobbinah (2013), "labels construct identity or in other words labels are the languages used to classify people objects, products and services". Labels are very powerful because they are the associative tags that are given to people. Clearly, the influence of media and the power of labels are at the core of discussions around representations of persons with disabilities. The research will expand on the labels and review in the findings how the labels in *Kumawood* movies could potentially encourage or discourage positive attitudes towards persons with disabilities in Ghana.

1.5.3. Critical Disability Theory

Critical disability theory is an emerging theoretical framework for the study and analysis of disability issues. Hosking (2008). According to Baffoe (2013), the Critical Disability Theory is a member of a family of critical theories that provides a broad perspective for addressing issues in contemporary society. According to Bohman (2005) as stated in Baffoe (2013), the critical disability theory is formulated towards explaining the flaws in current social reality, identify the actors to change the reality, and provide clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation. This study focuses on aspects of the critical disability theory as propounded by Hosking (2008) which are the models of disability, language and disability rights. The focus will be on language and rights as both topics are central themes in this research.

Chapter 2.

Literature Review

2.1 Disability in Ghana

This chapter traces the origins of conceptions of persons with disabilities in Ghana and reviews literature on beliefs and attitudes then and now. Some fifty to hundred years ago, when a child was born with some form of disability in Ghana, the family or the community they lived in perceived the individual to be a curse and family members encouraged the parents of the child to return the child back to the river god or the deities. Munyi (2012) states that in some Zimbabwean and Kenyan communities, children with disabilities were a symbol of a curse befalling the whole family. Other persons with disabilities would be classified as outcasts in the community and not deserving to be part of the community. This narrative is not only popular among Ghanaian communities. According to Desta (1995) persons with disabilities in Africa were considered hopeless and helpless. Such people in some communities were chained and kept in caves so that the sin that they had committed that led to their condition would not bring curses to the (Muni, 2012) Persons with disabilities faced the most atrocious and inhumane conditions and treatment. To understand the basis for such treatment, it is important to revisit some believes and notions surrounding persons with disabilities, and establish the reasons given for such treatment of persons with disabilities in Ghana in the past.

According to Avoke (2002) as stated in Baffoe (2013), “the general attitude in many communities in Ghana children with intellectual disabilities is that ‘children of the rivers and forest’ and, in the past, they were returned to the forest or to the rivers under the guise of helping them ‘to go back to where they came from’ (p.189).

Fefoame (2009) explains that persons with disabilities were linked to parents who had one time treated an animal in a cruel manner Baffoe (2013). The child with disability they had brought forth was direct payment for the wicked they had done. Once a person was born with a disability, a community was inclined to purge or banish that person because of a belief system that connected disability with a spiritual cause or bad omen. However, Field (1937) as stated in Munyi (2012) offers an account quite different from what is mostly popular in most Ghanaian communities. He states that in the Ga community, persons with disabilities were treated with more sympathy; what he describes as great kindness. This is an interesting account in that it is

very different than most studies that note that persons with mental disabilities were taken advantage of and treated inhumanely. With these notions, it was impossible for a child or a person with a disability to thrive or become successful in the community. Again, in the Ghanaian community, when people were envious of another person's success or did not want a family member to inherit a family's wealth, one of the things they did was to resort to black magic. The family member or co-worker would visit the shrine or the fetish priest to ask that something evil would happen to the targeted person. The fetish priest would then suggest that the person be struck with blindness, epilepsy or a disability of the sort, which would make the person incapacitated and unable to function as normal people do. Such beliefs have been held, and still have a bearing on some communities in Ghana today.

With this introduction on the origins of the beliefs surrounding disability in the past, it is important to also state that there have been some positive developments in the contemporary Ghanaian community when it comes to the treatment of persons with disabilities. While it may be true that there exists a wide gap in terms of the creation of systems of improved accessibility to education, services, health facilities, as well as reducing the level of stigmatization, the Ghanaian society has seen some clear development with regards to some aspects of disabilities such as support, perceptions and treatment from families, government, religious and advocacy groups and the media.

There has always been a call for disability to be recognised with a legal backing where persons with disabilities would have the right to access crucial services that would eventually guarantee their inclusion in the community and in the future remove all barriers that hinder their daily activities and prevent them from accessing opportunities. It is instructive to consider the statement of purpose of [The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol]

The purpose of the present Convention is to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity. Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. (UN, 2006, pp. 8-9)

In Ghana's quest to align itself with the purposes of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol*, the first *Disability Rights Act* was passed in Ghana in the year 2006. According to Tuakli-Wosornu & Haig (2014) the goal of

the Disability Rights Act was to ensure that by the year 2016, persons with disabilities had equal access to a variety of services and equal employment opportunities. Included in the goals set for the passing of the Disability Rights Act in Ghana were equal employment opportunities, access to public places, reduced or subsidized transportation, the creation of the National Disability Program, among others. With the passing of the Disability Rights Act also came some other developments. The Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, one of Ghana's leading public universities, kick-started a Disability Studies, Rehabilitation and Development programme at the School of Medical Sciences (SMS). According to the Project Manager Dr Anthony K Adusei, the aim of the program was to find ability in disability. He stated that this was going to be done "through capacity building to help address all forms of disability be it physical, visual, speech and hearing, mental and intellectual" (GNA, 2008, p. 1). The project was the first of its kind in West Africa to be initiated in 2008. There has also been an increase in the number of advocacy groups and religious activity to address issues of stigmatization and inequality when it comes to persons with disabilities in Ghana.

Although literature on progress in disability is minimal in Ghana, there is a large number of studies that suggest that one of the fundamental and underlying challenges facing persons with disability in Ghana is stigmatization. Other challenges that have been mentioned in the review are acknowledged by disability studies researchers, but most conclude that stigma comes first when it comes to persons with disabilities in Ghana. Tuakli-Wosornu & Haig, (2014) states that "Although there is evidence of growing public acceptance of PWDs, widespread stigma toward those with disabilities persists often because of non-biologic conceptions of disability".

2.2. Disability and Media

According to Article 8 Sub section (2) of the *United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol*, to ensure that persons with disabilities are fully integrated into society and to reduce the negative attitudes people show towards them, all organs of the media are encouraged to portray persons with disabilities in a manner consistent with the purpose of the present Convention United Nations (2006). The convention recognises the media's ability to influence people's perceptions about different phenomena and thus encourages all media to be a source of positive influence to realise the goals that have been stated in the convention.

In the same light, Quinlan and Bates (2009) state that “mass media have a great influence on society’s perceptions of people with disabilities” thus the images that are shown of persons with disabilities have a strong influence on how the target audience perceive them. Not only does the study draw attention to how the media influences people’s perceptions about disabilities especially when what is portrayed on the screen is negative, but also states that such problematic portrayals of persons with disabilities have an impact on the persons with disabilities themselves. Zhang & Haller (2013) state that “the distorted media representations of social minorities group can even affect social or minorities groups’ actual performance and their own perceived identity”, p. 321. Interestingly, according to Cunningham (2016) most studies have shown that the media are linked to the negative stereotypes that are associated with persons with disabilities. Thus the consistent portrayal of persons with disabilities as people to be pitied and always helped (Ben-Zeev, Fein & Inzlicht 2004) could increase the chances of a person with disability watching such content to perceive themselves in that light. The same happens vice versa.

According to Zhang & Haller (2013), there are three models for portraying persons with disabilities. The three models according to Clogston (1990) which have largely been referenced by most literature mentioned here are the medical model, the social pathology model and the super-crip model. Most media content produced is based on these three models described by Clogston. Content analysis of published media content revealed that persons with disabilities were always portrayed as persons who relied on doctors for medical assistance (medical model), persons who were at a disadvantage socially and so had to rely on other people for support (social-pathology model) or persons who had attained some phenomenal achievement by performing actions that ‘normal people’ do, in spite of their limitations (super-crip model). About the Ghanaian context, Avoke (2002) mentions the religious model as one of the models that would facilitate the understanding of disability issues. These four models used in Avoke (2002) will be used in the content analysis to gain a better understanding of the representations of persons with disabilities in the local movie production setting in Ghana.

A number of studies indicate that most of the content produced in relation to persons with disabilities contributes to stereotypes. According to Cunningham, (2016) “Such stereotypes are habitually at the very core of overt and covert, direct and indirect and persistent discrimination against persons with disabilities and consequently can affect their right to equality” (p.24). What makes these negative portrayals more harmful is that according to

Cunningham (2016), they translate into practical policies, laws and practices that cause harm to persons with disabilities.

Media influence on perceptions of disabilities and the facilitation of discussions, attitudes, policies and practices around them cannot be underestimated. Most African-focussed research has been concerned with news representation, special education, disability rights and laws with very little focus on local movies that depict culture. Findings in this study would thus inform producers, law makers and regulators of local Ghanaian movie makers and create a more influential platform to fuel positive attitudes for persons with disabilities. The research could enhance further research on how local productions could be used as a medium for changing negative narratives, depicting progress and enhancing positive representations of persons with disabilities.

Chapter 3.

Methodology

In conducting my research, I sought to analyse the representations of persons with disabilities in the local movie industry with a focus on the largest and most influential industry in Ghana - *Kumawood*. I analysed the movies for labels used in describing persons with disabilities in the selected movies and explored the thematic issues in the movies in relation to language, rights and access to amenities.

3.1. Content Analysis Research Design

Qualitative content analysis was used in this study to describe the representations of persons with disabilities in local movies in Ghana. The methodology for this project was chosen based on the value and relevance of content analysis among disability and media research scholars.

According to (Ogundola, 2013) content analysis is considered as a means through which concealed messages in media texts could be understood. In justifying his choice for using content analysis in understanding how labels and frames contribute to stigmatization of persons with disabilities, Cobbinah (2013) cited Neuman's (1997) definition of content analysis as, "Words, meanings, pictures, symbols, ideas or themes, or any message that can be communicated. The "text" is anything written, visual, or spoken that serves as a medium for communication".

Thus, the selection of Kumawood movies speaks to Neuman's description of the "visual text", and in this way, these movies are appropriate for the analysis to follow. According to Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2011) as cited in (Ogundola, 2013), "content analysis is appropriate for the study of topical issues; comparison of media coverage of similar events; and mass-mediated representations of historical or current events" (pp. 228-289). Thus, the choice of content analysis for this research facilitates the understanding of how Kumawood movies portray persons with disabilities and can aid the researcher to analyse the content through the literature available and bring out the topical issues from the movies selected.

3.2. Kumawood Movies

Over the years, *Kumawood* movies have been considered as the most influential local movie industry Ghana. *Kumawood* movies have become popular due to decline in the success of what Yamoah (2014) describes as ‘Glamour movies’, which are movies produced in Accra. The name *Kumawood* comes from Kumasi, where most of the *Kumawood* movies are produced. The name *Kumawood* has been linked to other industries such as Hollywood, Bollywood and Nollywood.

The distribution channels and the rise in avenues to access the *Kumawood* movies have also contributed to the growing success of this movie industry in Ghana. People access *Kumawood* movies from local movie vendors, public sales on trucks in public places such as markets. I have watched many the movies on public transit as these movies are shown in buses for long distance trips. Another way Ghanaians access these movies is through online uploads on YouTube or on television. Most of the actors in *Kumawood* movies have gained popularity and today are household names in and as well appear frequently and prominently in advertising campaigns and public awareness projects.

Although *Kumawood* movies have been well recognised for their popularity and the promotion of culture in the Ghanaian community by portraying the core of Ghanaian culture, there have been some critiques on the quality of production and very weak story lines. Still, according to Adjei (2014), there has been a significant improvement in the quality of productions. *Kumawood*’s ability to portray culture has been emphasized by scholars that have expressed interest in the film industry in Ghana. As Adjei notes, *Kumawood* films “tell the Ghanaian story”. He states that the story lines easily resonate with Ghanaians and cites one of the very popular *Kumawood* movies entitled *Kumasi Yonko* as one of the movies that was hailed for its apt description of the low income Ghanaian who resides in a compound house.

The ability of *Kumawood* to tell the Ghanaian story and the availability to a larger number of Ghanaians are reasons for choosing the industry for this research. Ghanaians living abroad access these movies to connect with their culture and identity. In line with the focus of the research to discover how *Kumawood* portrays persons with disabilities, five *Kumawood* movies were selected for this research. The movies were selected based on the number of views on YouTube. Since the research also focuses on assessing how *Kumawood* portrays persons with disability, the movies selected had an actor playing the role of a person with a

disability. The disabilities highlighted in the movies selected range from persons with visual impairments, a disfigurement, speech disorder, stroke among others.

Five movies were selected from YouTube. Each of the five movies had an average of over 50,000 views. The selection of the movies was based on recommendations from friends and a local movie vendor in Ghana. Each of the movies selected had actors playing the role of a person with a disability and not a person with disability.

3.3. Data Collection Methods

Both primary and secondary data were used as information sources for this research. Since the main source of information was from watching and analyzing *Kumawood* movies, this constitutes the primary data that is, data collected for the first time by the researcher. It is therefore the main source of information and original in character. Primary data are collected for the specific research problem the researcher focuses on. Secondary data according to Hox et al (2006) is the material that is created by other researchers and made available for use. The research relied on literature from other scholars to amplify the body of knowledge that was collected from primary research. Such secondary data was from reliable sources such as books, journals, newspapers and comments from people who had watched the *Kumawood* movies.

3.4. Brief Description of Movies Selected

The movies selected were

1. ***Hyebre Sesafo (Destiny Changer)***

Produced by Samuel Kojo Owusu

Directed by Samuel Kwesi Budu

This movie narrates the story of a man who lives in the village with his two daughters. He also has a brother who lives in the city with his daughter. One of the desires of most African parents is that their daughters would meet the man of their dreams and bring them home, so they could ask for their hand in marriage. In this movie all three daughters are struck with a disability of some sort. The daughters go through many struggles and finally they are delivered

by a Pastor of their disability. The movie depicts the struggles of these persons with disabilities and the power of God over misfortune in a Ghanaian family.

2. *Mmobrowa Asem (Story of a Sad Person)*

O.F Ventures

Produced by Samuel Appiah

Story written by Ivy Seheem

This story depicts the struggles of a young woman who has a mother with a visual impairment. She is confronted by a step-father who hates both mother and daughter due to the mother's visual impairment. This father maltreats both mother and daughter and continuously labels the mother as a curse due to her physical condition. His hatred for both mother and daughter reaches its peak when a man comes to seek the daughter's hand in marriage. He deceives the visually impaired wife and works things out so that his first daughter who he loves marries the man in question. Both first daughter and father eliminate the visually impaired woman by strangling her to death. The movie narrates the story of the daily struggles of a person with a visual impairment living in a poverty-stricken environment.

3. *Enye Se Mapem.*

Vision Nation Films

Richmond Nana Appiah Film

The very active life of a young and energetic boy is cut short when he is involved in an accident that nearly claims his life. His life of partying and making friends abruptly comes to an end since he is bed-ridden and has no hope. His friends abandon him and so does the love of his life. He is confronted with the challenge of living an entirely new life with in his condition. He is rejected by many. He goes to play a football match with his friends, but they turn him away saying a one-and-half legged man cannot play football. He gets an opportunity to have a surgery in the United States and is finally resumes his former position when they give him a prosthetic leg. The movie is inspired by a true story and gives a better description of the phases people with disabilities go through in small cities and towns in Ghana.

4. The Bitter True-Life Story Life of Mansa.

Mansa is a young woman in probably in her early thirties or late twenties who lives with her uncle in the village. She is impregnated by a man who out of the blue leaves Mansa for the city. Mansa goes through the challenge of having to carry the baby alone. Some years later, she gets an opportunity to stay in the city and gets a good education and later is a very successful young woman with stable wealth. When trying to build her career, she encounters the same man who left her to her fate some years ago. He shows remorse and pursues Mansa till she forgives him and lets him back into her life.

Mansa receives the shock of her life when she learns that this man is married to another woman. The woman moves into Mansa's home with her children and in no time Mansa is struck by an experience that renders her wheel-chair bound. Mansa tragically loses her life in the end.

5. *Nifrani Asem* (The story of the blind person)

This movie tells the story of a young woman who has some evil powers and caused her mother's blindness. The evil spirits operate as well in other people to cause blindness in families. The movie focuses on the presence of evil spirits and how they cause different disabilities. Beyond that, the movie depicts the lives of the persons with disabilities and narrates the challenges and troubles they go through in the hands of their caretakers, community and even their own family members.

Chapter 4.

Findings, Discussions and Analysis

4.1. Research Question 1

4.1.1. Derogatory Labels of Disability in *Kumawood* Movies

Labels are at the core of representing persons with disabilities in any form of media. This section highlights and analyzes the language used to describe persons with disabilities in *Kumawood* movies. When used in the context of disability, labels are the actual words associated with persons with disabilities that can have either a positive or negative effect (Cobbinah, 2013). Labels carry so much power because they act as determinants that shape people's choices as to what to accept and what to reject (Agbenyega, 2003). Beyond the fact that labels are used to identify persons with disabilities, another reason why labels are extremely important and have resonance in disability studies is they are the tags and names that other people in society use to address persons with disabilities of any kind. Whether positive or negative, these labels can be influencers in contributing to stigmatization of persons with disabilities or creating more dignified and empowering titles for persons who have disabilities. Again, studies have identified the necessity in being circumspect with labels assigned to persons with disabilities, most especially in the media since audiences engage deeply and frequently with media content and retain media messages.

Labelling becomes more important issue or theme in a research on *Kumawood* movies which present influential portrayals and narratives of Ghanaian cultures to audiences. Agbenyega, (2003) argues that labelling as a method of constructing disability gains its roots from the social-cultural underpinnings of disability. The beliefs surrounding disability have always had an influence on the words used to describe persons with disabilities. Throughout Ghanaian society and in a wide range of local languages, terms used to describe persons with disabilities are often derogatory. Agbenyega references Avoke's (1997) description of two tribal groups, that is Ewe and Ga, and the terminologies used for persons with 'mental retardation' 'mental retardation', specifically, the terms 'Asotowo' and 'Buluus' meaning "idiots" or "fools" Such labels can decisively disadvantage persons with disabilities and limit the opportunities available to them.

In all five movies watched, the labels used for the persons with disabilities were derogatory. These labels were not only from the people who were close to the persons with disabilities, but also from persons in the community as well as the persons with disabilities themselves. The labels were used on several occasions throughout the films to describe the person with disability and the disability itself.

In the opening part of *Sandra Mmobrowa* (Pitiful Sandra) the father of Sandra (the girl with the visually-impaired mother) inquires why his dinner has delayed. He is told by his daughter that she was working on other chores and so was delayed in cooking the family's dinner. He asks if her mother has eaten. When she responds yes, he says:

'If your blind mother has eaten, why shouldn't I with two eyes eat?'

The father continuously refers to Sandra's visually impaired mother with a demeaning and derogatory countenance. There are about five other statements in the same movie where the labels used to refer to the visual character are demeaning and inappropriate.

In *Enye se Mapem*, (this is not my end yet), when Kwadwo Nkansah, the lead character plays the role of a young boy who gets involved in a near fatal car crash and gets one leg amputated. On several occasions, he is referred to during the movie as a "one and half legged person", not only by his own mother but also by his friends and people in the area.

In *Hyebr3 Sesafo* (Destiny Changer), when Nana Ama Mcbrown the daughter of Kwadwo Nkansah (Liwin) mysteriously suffers a strange disease where she loses her ability to speak well and loses function in her left hand and right leg, she is referred to by her in-law-to-be as 'a thing'. Her mother in-law says to Mcbrown's sister:

"Why should I give the money my son sent to that your sister laying in the room?"

Here the connotation is that the person with a disability has lost her value and is now a thing, not worthy of receiving any form of assistance or favor from her son. These labels used in referring to persons with disabilities in Kumawood movies are harmful as they reinforce the negative stigma people hold about persons with disabilities.

Another instance of derogatory labelling was seen in one of the titles of the movies selected for this research. In the movie, *Sandra Mmobrowa* which translates to mean a person of sorrow, pity and stricken by poverty, Sandra is faced with many challenges not the least of

which is having a mother who is visually impaired. The audience is made to know that one of the reasons why Sandra is labelled and referred to as “mmobrowa” is because she has a mother who is visually impaired. To refer to someone as “mmobrowa” because she is directly associated with a person who has a disability is clearly a negative message for audience of the movie.

According to Ben-Moshe as stated in (Cobbinah, 2013), “When we use terms like ‘retarded’, ‘lame’ or ‘blind’ – even if we are referring to acts or ideas and to people at all – we perpetuate the stigma associated with disability. By using a label which is commonly associated with disabled people to denote deficiency, a lack, or an ill-conceived notion, we reproduce the oppression of persons with disabilities”. According to (Haller, Dorries, & Rahn, 2006), “We suggest that even something as mundane as the words used to refer to a group are important because they have ramifications both for the self-perception of people with disabilities and what the general public believes about disability”. It is evident from the selected movies that labels used in *Kumawood* movies to refer to persons with disabilities are largely negative labels and do not encourage positive attitudes towards persons with disabilities.

4.1.2. Disability as a curse or evil

In this research, it has been well described how over the years, disability has been regarded as a curse and an evil that befalls people who had wronged God, a deity, or have been cursed by a family member or colleague for varied reasons. In all five movies selected for this research, disability was associated with a curse or a misfortune. Ideally, when a person gets into a situation that renders him or her incapacitated, there is some shock associated with the new conditions of living where family and friends must deal with and adjust to the demands of the life the disabled person. In all five movies selected, persons with disabilities were shown as people who had been cursed and the only way to solve the problem was to consult a deity or God for answers and solutions.

In *Hyebre Sesafuo*, all three daughters have a disability; a stroke, visual impairment and another loses her ability to walk. The movie depicts that all three daughters have been struck by a curse that causes their disability. In the movie, the daughters’ disability is considered the result of a family curse and throughout the movie, the daughters’ fathers are on a mission to find out the cause of the disability. In the end, they realise it is an ancestral curse that has caused this disability and the only way the curse can be broken is through prayer by a Pastor.

Some comments from the movie include:

“What have I done to deserve this?”

“What wrong have I done, and why I’m I being punished?”



Figure 4.1. Scene from Eny3 Se mapem

In all five movies, persons with disabilities are constantly referred to Pastors to seek deliverance from the disability. This is also seen in *Nifrani asem* where the daughter of the visually-impaired mother says,

“Why did God give me a blind mother?”

In the movie, all the disabilities depicted were caused by evil spirits. The evil spirits would either cause mental retardation, visual impairment or death.

In *Eny3 se Mapem* after Kwadwo Nkansah is discharged from the hospital, his mother and niece are counseled by the doctor who says,

“We have done all that is medically possible here in Ghana. It is up to him to pray to God for some aid to come so he is able to go outside for much better treatment”.

“You caused your mother’s blindness”.

These statements all point to disability as a consequence of a curse or a spiritual cause, and generally eschewing rationale and scientific explanations.

The same is seen in Sandra Mmobrowa who repeatedly refers to her mother's visual impairment as a curse. She believes she is cursed because she has a mother who cannot see and makes continuous reference to her mother's condition in the movie. Similarly, in *Nifrani Asem* (The story of a blind person) where all the instances of visual impairment are depicted to have been caused by a spiritual force. This is not clearly seen in *Enye se Mapem* and *The bitter true life story of Mansa*. Although the cause of their disabilities is attributed to excessive partying and having the wrong people around them, the movies portrays the period of having the disability as a time of hardship and rejection.

Another representation in the movies depicts persons with disabilities as a humiliation to society and thus and thus deserving of ostracization. When Kwadwo Nkansah's second daughter becomes visually impaired in *Hyebre Sesafuo*, her mother-in-law to be comes to counsel her and asks her to stay indoors as people in the community would make her disability a point of discussion.



Figure 4.2. Scene from Hyebre Sesafuo (Destiny Changer)

The same situation is seen with Kwadwo Nkansah's first daughter who has her father counselling her to remain indoors when she suffers a disease referred to in the movie as a stroke. Her father meets her outside on his way back home and asks her why she is outside. He tells her to remain indoors and not come out since it is embarrassing for other people in the community to see her in her current state. *Enye se mapem* also shares the same idea, where Kwadwo Nkansah who has lost one of his legs in the accident prefers to stay indoors and not go outside. His attempt to mingle with old friends is met with hostility and discouraging words.

All the movies selected were produced in the last five years. As discussed in the literature review, Ghana has made some progress with disability and according to (Naami & Hayashi, 2012) people in Ghana have become more accommodating to persons with disabilities and are open to creating a more enabling environment. This is not seen in the representation of persons with disabilities in *Kumawood* movies as most of the stories depict rejection and re-enforce attitudes and beliefs of the past towards persons with disabilities. Still, the narratives in the movies selected, suggest that disability is still a curse and that persons who have a disability may have committed an evil or have been cursed by someone who does not wish them well. If these movies can be understood as a reflection or account of broader social and cultural norms, values, and attitudes, we can see how disability in Ghana can be seen as the cause of stigmatization in Ghanaian society; and indeed, the portrayals in these movies can be regarded as complicity in perpetuating stigmatization.

4.1.3. Disability as an object of Pity

The world gradually is shifting towards creating more spaces and opportunities where persons with disabilities are being encouraged each day to look beyond their disabilities and focus on living their best lives above the challenges. In *Reframing Disability? Media, Disempowerment and Voice in the 2012 Paralympics*, by Daniel Jackson et al, it states that “power and empowerment are thus central concepts to any discussion of media representations of disability and disability sport”. (Jackson et al, 2012; p.2) The movies selected can be analysed in terms of the “power” of traditional belief systems to “disempower” persons with disabilities.



Figure 4.3. Scene from nifrani asem

In *The Bitter True Life Story of Mansa*, when Mansa has a disability, she is surrounded by her enemies and has a daughter who stays with her to help her with some of the chores in the home. But when the daughter has to go to school, Mansa is unable to cook for herself or perform any duties in the home. When her daughter has to leave for school, her daughter weeps uncontrollably and mentions some of the things her mother cannot do herself when she is left alone at home, especially in the presence of her rival. Similarly, in *Hyebre Sesafu* all the daughters that have a disability become pitiable objects to the extent that one character exclaims,

“If it were not for blindness I would not be this sad”.

4.1.4. Unable to live a successful life

The characters in all the movies selected who had disabilities were represented as persons who were unable to live successful lives. Their lives were only successful when they had been delivered and restored back to their former state before the disability. In both *Hyebre Sesafuo* and *Enye se Mapem*, the daughters of the fathers in the movie are only approached for marriage only after they had been healed of their disability.

In *Enye se Mapem*, when Kwadwo Nkansah, the lead character had a surgery in the States to correct his disability and restore his ‘one-and half-leggedness’ as referred to in the movie, his dreams of becoming a music megastar begins to be a reality and all his friends who abandoned him in the movie are now seeking and begging him for a comeback. He realises

great success only after he has received treatment and has become fully acceptable to his community and circle of friends. He can chase after his dreams only after he has had a successful surgery and can walk on his two feet.

In *The Bitter True Life Story of Mansa*, Mansa loses her job after she loses her ability to walk. She eventually loses her life due to the level of pain and stress she goes through. Mansa's world of opportunity and her dreams are crushed when she has a disability. In the movie, Mansa is devastated and cannot keep her job or live her life as she previously did because she has a disability. Such representations could create and reinforce stereotypes and disadvantage persons with disabilities in Ghana, an issue that has been central for many advocacy campaigns and human rights activists. In Ghanaian culture, when a woman marries it brings honor to her parents. A good marriage is perceived as one of the most rewarding things for any parent. In *Hyebre Sesafuo*, all daughters are proposed to by the man of their dreams only after they have been 'delivered' from their disabilities. These men reject the women they were to marry because each woman has been struck by a disability considered shameful by their parents. This scene reaffirms very primitive notions that some cultures have in Ghana and in other parts of the African continent that persons with disabilities cannot be worth marrying. It is unfortunate that a movie meant to educate through entertainment leaves the audience with the notion that persons with disabilities can only be successful in matters of love and relationship when they have been healed or restored by a pastor or a medical expert.

4.1.5. Persons with disability as targets for verbal and physical abuse

In many of the movies selected for analysis, persons with disabilities are portrayed as targets for physical and verbal abuse. The movies selected were spiked with insults and other derogatory comments that were directly against the person with a disability.

Kumawood movies are generally known for the liberal use of insults and curse words in the local language. Such language has been criticized by many audiences of the *Kumawood* movies, especially in relation to children who watch these movies. When most of these insults are directed towards persons with disabilities and the disabilities are used as a point of reference, it becomes offensive and has the power to affect audience attitudes towards persons with disabilities.

In *Sandra Mmobrowa*, Kwadwo Nkansah, the husband of Sandra's mother who is visually impaired is asked how he is faring in his marriage, and he replies:

"I didn't think I would marry a blind person. In this world, if you want things, you get cheap things".

In another scene of the same movie, Sandra's father places a stone in the path of the visually impaired woman. His intention is for her to fall and get hurt. As she manages to move away from the stone because she holds in her hand a cane to direct her path he yells;

"I have always known you have been faking your blindness".

Numerous other examples can be found in scenes in the other four movies, where persons with disabilities are verbally attacked or physically abused. This is mainly because they are portrayed to be defenseless and have no power or strength to retaliate or defend themselves when they are attacked. For example, in *Nifrani Asem* where persons with disabilities are maltreated, spoken to in very harsh tones and are blamed for theft. The movie also features scenes where persons with visual impairment are beaten by people they live with.

4.1.6. Other Representations

Of the five movies selected there are two instances where the movies depict persons with disabilities as persons who attempt suicide and believe they are actually better off dead. In *Hyebre Sesafuo*, Kwadwo Nkansah's family all come together to set themselves ablaze but for the timely intervention of one of the community elders who interrupts the process. They believe that by burning themselves to ashes, they would be free from any curses or evil that have come their way. This happens in *Enye se Mapem* where Kojo Nkansah decides to end his life since he has a disability now. He plans to consume rat poison to end his very bitter life that has caused him depression and sorrow. He is also interrupted by a pastor who talks him out of his plans to kill himself.

Though such depictions were evident in two of the movies, the other movies had persons with disabilities question their existence in the world and doubt their value to their community. None of the persons with disabilities actually took their own life, but were instead interrupted or met with a confrontation, which stopped them from carrying out suicide.

Chapter 5.

Conclusion

Considering how persons with disabilities in *Kumawood* movies are represented in the first part of the findings, it is evident that to a large extent, *Kumawood* movies do not portray persons with disabilities in a positive manner. The movies selected portrayed persons with disabilities as people who were objects of pity, who had very derogatory labels used to describe them, as persons who were targets of insults and maltreatments, and as persons who were ostracized from the community.

As well, the movies selected portrayed disabilities as something associated with evil. One dominant representation was that persons with disabilities could only live successful lives when they were delivered or 'made whole' by the touch of a spiritual leader or through a medical procedure.

None of the movies were used positively as channels to promote the rights and capabilities of persons with disabilities. Although some of the movies subtly carry messages of encouragement, it is evident that the derogatory labels and terms used dominate the representations of persons with disabilities.

The several negative portrayals do not encourage responsible, positive, and helpful depictions of persons with disabilities. The comments and attitudes towards persons with disabilities as evidenced by the use of abusive words, by attacks on the person's disability, and emphases on the limitations and the need to pity the disabled, will clearly reaffirm any existing prejudices that audience members might have toward persons with disabilities.

While much of the scholarly literature argues that Ghana has moved from deeply entrenched traditional and prejudicial attitudes towards persons with disabilities and is gradually moving toward a more well informed, enlightened and progressive approach to, and accommodation of disability, *Kumawood* movies reviewed for this research have perpetuated negative and harmful stereotypical representations of disability. It is important to emphasize that this thesis is not arguing that media representations in *Kumawood* films are a direct cause of stigma and discrimination directed at persons with disabilities. A long and substantial literature on media analysis has long established that media effects are neither direct nor unmitigated,

and clearly such effects are embedded in broader social and cultural determinants. Still, it can be stated without qualification that the *Kumawood* representations of the persons with disabilities promote negative perceptions and reinforce problematic behaviours and attitudes among the public.

The representations also have the potential to influence the perceptions persons with disabilities living in local communities have about themselves. Most of the portrayals stated in *Kumawood* movies have been described by many scholars as a hindrance to the progress and efforts at integrating persons with disabilities in the society to have equal opportunities.

This thesis can be understood as a guide to, and encouragement of further research, first and most broadly in terms of the role of media representation in the creation and perpetuation of stereotypes of persons with disability, and second with the problems and solutions to stereotype and stigmatization in local Ghanaian communities.

This work concludes with the observation, and the advocacy that *Kumawood* could be mobilized as a platform to harness positive depictions of persons with disabilities and as a medium for education and the reduction of stigmatization Ghanaian communities. *Kumawood* could take important and decisive measures toward more responsible and progressive representations including actively involving persons with disabilities in content development for movies yet to be produced, the portrayal of not only challenges of persons with disabilities but their successes, the use of language that builds and inspires persons with disabilities, and the creation of a regulatory body that would work towards guidelines to ensure that persons with disabilities are properly and responsibly represented.

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