

Original Research Article

Female Undergraduates' Perception of Feminism Depictions in *The Woman King* Film

ABSTRACT

Aim: This study sets out to ascertain the opinions of female undergraduates on feminism depictions contained in the movie *The Woman King* (2022).

Study design: The study used focus group discussion to elicit data from female undergraduates in Anambra State, Nigeria, in order to determine the inherent feminism themes in the select movie and ascertain how they perceive them.

Methodology: Three universities were randomly selected from the nine universities in the state to represent the three forms of university ownership in Nigeria, which are federal, state and private universities. 12 focus group discussants were purposively selected from each university based on their availability and willingness to participate in the exercise. Analysis of data were done and presented thematically.

Results: It showed the various themes female undergraduates identified from the select film and female empowerment through leadership was most striking among them all. Their views about the feminism depictions are those of inspiration and thought-provocation.

Conclusion: The study recommends that film makers should be more diverse in creating feminism perspectives to provide a more comprehensive representation of feminism ideals and experiences and give a deeper exploration of feminism struggles within historical contexts that would offer a richer understanding of the challenges faced by the female folks.

Keywords: Depictions, Feminism, Female undergraduates. Film, Perception, Movie

Introduction

Film as a medium of communication has been recognized by film scholars to be a mirror that reflects the society and like every other medium of communication, its depictions of ideas, certain people, and a given phenomenon go a long way to determine how the world perceives them. Film as a mass medium known for its entertaining nature, is also very relevant in informing and educating its audience, (Onyejelem et al, 2021). Film has been mirroring the society by reflecting the activities of human beings, socio-cultural patterns and various problems faced by man. It has been used as a tool to bring to bear lots of societal challenges and setting agenda for the populace to discuss. It is truly an agent of social and behavioural change, (Obiora, 2022). Film does not only play a role in the entertainment, education and socialization of citizens in a country, but also helps in the formation of ideas, attitudes as well as the representation of ideologies (Obiora & Adikuru, 2024; Obiora & Uche, 2024a; Obiora & Uche, 2021).

Film is an art, a language, a medium for entertainment, education, information, inspiration, and so much more. Scholars (Obiora & Adikuru, 2024; Obiora & Uche, 2024b; Onyejelem et al., 2023; Nnabuife et al., 2023; Obiora & Uche, 2021; Obiora & Odoh, 2020; Ojiakor & Obiora, 2019) have noted that a film can contain ideologies, empathy, misconceptions, beliefs and stereotypes which can be uncovered with critical eyes. These scholars have argued independently that how a given phenomenon, ideas, people, objects, events are depicted in films influences the manner at which film audience see them in real life. This means, that the way feminism has been presented in *The Woman King* movie might have shaped the way female undergraduates perceive feminism

Feminism is the ideology that all genders should have equality in all aspects of life; social, economic and political, (Adikuru & Nwammuo, 2022). Female gender has been restricted to engage only on domestic aspect, while the male is allowed to have other public activities. Women have been denied lots of rights; from owning a property, to having education, have certain jobs or rise to certain positions in their career paths or participate in public activities like politics, (Adikuru, 2022). Some married women have been denied the right to exercise control over their own children their husbands permit them. Some societies till date, still compel their women to dress, act, and speak in certain manner. Feminism rose to fight against these inequalities and ensure that both men and women are given equal opportunities to strive in society as much as either has the potential and willpower to do so.

Although, feminism has been perceived with varieties of dimensions, different movements with opposing aims and objectives, like eradicating gender discrimination and stereotype and trying by all means to achieve equality of gender in culture, law, behaviour and every given opportunity, (Varial, 2023). One of the most striking problems that feminism aims to rectify is the popular gender inequality inherent in all societies and countries. This inequality is prevalent in African societies and Nigerian society is not left out, (Obiora & Nwafor, 2022) which manifests in forms, like unequal pay, limited access to education, unequal employment opportunities, and restricted roles and expectations based on gender. Feminism also aims to curtail all forms of violence against women, which include but not limited to domestic violence, sexual assault, human trafficking, and honour killings, (Adikuru, 2022). Addressing these issues requires societal awareness, legal reforms, and support for survivors, which the vehicles of mass media like film (*The Woman King*) has major role to play.

The Woman King film tells the story of the Agojie, an all-female troop of warriors of the real-life West African Dahomey kingdom, today's Republic of Benin. It looks into how bold women who are fearless warriors navigate through the prevalent and long-lasting problem of unequal gender

rights. The movie seem to be based on the inspiration of seeing women doing exploit and being led by same women to achieve success in spite of inequalities they had to suffer, like not been allowed to marry or bear children because they are warriors and thus belong to the king but the male warriors were allowed to do so. Here lies the problem, inequality depictions; why are they not allowed to marry or have children like their warring male folks? How do they navigate around their emotional feelings of loving someone? Why do they have to give this much up just to be a warrior?

The foregoing may be perceived worrisome for younger women and girls like female undergraduates in Anambra State, Nigeria. The manner at which the producer of *The Woman King* film portrays the narratives of these Agojie may influence the way female undergraduates perceive women and their ordeals as they navigate towards their life goals. Hence, this study is set out to ascertain various feminism themes portrayed in *The Woman King* movie; determine the views of female undergraduates on the feminism depictions in film; and examine factors that influenced the perception of female undergraduates.

Literature Review

Feminism

Feminism can be seen as a movement that has the interest of pursuing equality for women in social, cultural, economic and political environment. One of the objectives of feminism is to protect those who are stereotyped because of their gender status. Varrial (2023) opines that issues feminism seek to address include; equality in employment and wages, freedom to own property irrespective of gender, right to quality education by all and sundry, autonomy of one's body, marital, parental and legal rights for women and girls. In other words, feminism seeks to ensure the need for women and girls to have equal opportunities with men and boys in all areas of life engagements. This invariably implies that feminism is out to challenge and pull down the

existing systems of inequality and stereotyping raised by disparity in gender as it recognizes that all human beings must be treated with equal respect and dignity.

In contemporary society, men have been seen in a way as the dominant force in making the major decisions in political, economic, social and cultural sectors. Lewis (2021) noted that the patrilineal structure of most societies is due to colonization and imperialism by Europeans. Hence, feminism focuses on the philosophy that women's population is about half of the global population, so to achieve a social advancement, there is imperative need to involve women equally with men, (Adikuru & Nwammuo, 2022).

Furthermore, the difference in treatment of gender can be traced to the socio-cultural roles given to women. As Amobi (2023) explained that the society's definition of being a man or woman is demonstrated by the roles played by both men and women in a given society. Generally, women have been tagged weak while men are seen as strong. This is even expressed in phrases like 'why are you crying like a woman?' Men are not expected to show emotions of weakness or expressed themselves in too many words as women are those ascribed with such features. Amobi (2013, p. 14) stated that the way women are seen as thus, "women are classified as weak, inferior and should remain in the background, while men are classified as strong, dominant, the better gender group and conquerors". The way the media also depict the gender roles may either reinforce the ideology and assumptions that women are lesser creatures than men or may alleviate the assumptions, (Obiora & Nwafor, 2022). Therefore, this work aims to enquire into themes of how feminism was presented in *The Woman King* movie and explore how female undergraduates perceive the depictions.

Review of Empirical Studies

Research shows media to be one of the many influences on how people, ideologies, phenomenon are seen or perceived, (Obiora & Uche, 2024a; Obiora & Uche, 2024b; Obiora & Uche, 2021; Obiora & Odoh, 2020; Allan & Coltrane, 2020). The media is the most pervasive

way images and messages are communicated to people (Obiora, 2022), and as an agent of socialization and information, the media play a key role in the disseminating processes of communication to ensure that society is not only informed, but that it is maintained. With the prevalence of media channels especially film and social media, society is bound to be impacted with what they obtain from the media, (Uwem, 2023; Obiora & Chukwuemeka, 2023). Hence, people's perspectives are influenced by what they consistently consumed from the media.

Wilk (2024) investigated the depictions of women in 2018 American most grossed films, comparatively looking at film directions by men and women as to ascertain the influence of gender roles in film depictions. The study was anchored on critical mass and critical actor theories to examine the impact of women who are film makers on the portrayals of female cast and crew members. Results showed that movies directed by women show more percentages of female characterization and female crew involvement in major roles but had significant difference in budgeting and grossing when it is compared with that of the male directors.

Fedorova (2023) examined the stereotypical representation of women in the Hollywood film industry and noted that the film industry generally depicts women through a patriarchal lens as women are portrayed to socio-cultural roles of wives, lovers, and mothers. Also, more value is added to woman dignity while they play these roles rather than being depicted as independent and intelligent. Moreover, women in the film industry are presented as charming objects, made to look appealing to men and for entertainment. However, the researcher noted that the film industry has started making a paradigm shift, thanks to feminist movements that challenge gender stereotypes representations in films.

In a study on the representation of women in movies, Okunna (2020) found that women are often criticized by their inability to bear a child in Nollywood movies. This, in support of Swift's (2013) stance indicates that when women are valued based on their fertility in movies, it

cultivates the perception that in reality, women are essentially child bearing machines and a failure in this capacity ultimately calls for abusive and contemptuous treatments.

The current study on female undergraduates' perception of feminism portrayed in *The Woman King* movie diverges from the existing body of empirical studies as it focuses on a specific academic and cultural demographic within Nigerian context and delved in examining only one film; *The Woman King*, how feminism depictions are presented and how female undergraduates perceived these depictions.

Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on the Reception Theory of the media which emerged from literary studies through the works of Hans-Robert Jauss in 1960s. It focuses on how the audience of media interpret and make meaning of media messages (film depictions). It is also known as Audience Reception Theory, (Asemah et al., 2017). It dwells on the ideology that media contents are dynamic and not fixed as the audience of such media contents interpret based on their social, cultural and personal experiences. Reception theory opines that audience goes through three stages when they are trying to make meaning out of media messages, (Media Theory, 2023). These stages include the dominant stage where the audience shares the same meaning of the messages with the producer of the messages because they share same social and cultural background, hence their interpretation of media messages aligns with that of the producer. Then, the second stage which is called the negotiated; this stage happens when the audience interpret media message partly different from the message producer due to difference in their socio-cultural background. Though this stage may still incorporate partly acceptance of what the message producer has. Here, some audience may accept while some may not accept. Then the last stage, which is the oppositional, here the audience outrightly rejects the intended meaning the message producer sends out and interpret the message in a way that is opposing the intended message of the producer. This theory is related to this study as the female

undergraduates may interpret the feminism depictions based on their social and cultural background. Their interpretation of feminism depictions may be in tandem with the intended message of the film producer or may outrightly be different from it as the producer of *The Woman King* film is an American that has different social and cultural background with the female students in Anambra State who belong to the West African part of the globe.

Methodology

Focus Group Discussion was used in this study as research design for examining the perception of female undergraduates in Anambra State, Nigeria. Three universities were purposively selected to represent federal, state and private universities and these three universities include: Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka; Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam; and Madonna University, Okija. There were three focus group discussions, one held in each school with 12 students making up each group. The selection of the female students was based on availability to be exposed to the movie as well as available for the discussion. A discussion guide was used to moderate the discussions and thematic analysis was used to identify and analyze patterns and themes within the data collected during the discussions.

Data Analysis

One of the feminism themes respondents identified is the empowerment of women through warring prowess; the ability to fight to death defending what one believes and loyal to. The Agojie warriors, as portrayed in the film, embody a sense of physical strength, the ability to remain strong and steadfast on the battle field typically reserved for men in historical and cinematic contexts. Another theme related to feminism is the theme of leadership. As all female war troop women are in charge of training and making decisions of who, what and how to get victory at war. They were not left to sing and serenade the men of war, rather they broke the

glass ceiling and remain what can be referred to as today's board of directors. This theme of female empowerment through leadership challenges traditional gender norms and presents women as capable leaders in both battle and governance.

Another key theme identified by female students is the struggle for equality. The characters in the film fight not only for their survival but also for their right to be recognized as equal to their male counterparts. This theme resonates deeply with the respondents, who see it as a reflection of their own aspirations for gender equality in contemporary society. The film also portrays the theme of solidarity among women, highlighting how collective strength and support among female characters are crucial in overcoming adversities. This theme reflects the importance of unity and mutual support in feminist movements, as acknowledged by the students.

Furthermore, the depiction of women challenging societal norms and traditional roles is a central feminist theme in the movie. The film illustrates how the characters defy conventional expectations and carve out spaces for themselves in roles traditionally dominated by men. This challenge to normative gender roles aligns with the feminist ideals of breaking down barriers and expanding the opportunities available to women. Overall, the portrayal of these feminist themes in "The Woman King" aligns with the students' understanding of feminism as a movement that seeks to empower women, challenge gender norms, and promote equality.

The female undergraduates in Anambra State generally view the portrayal of feminism in *The Woman King* as both inspiring and thought-provoking. Many respondents expressed admiration for the film's portrayal of strong, capable female characters who defy traditional gender roles and assert their autonomy. The depiction of the Agojie warriors as fierce and skilled fighters who hold significant power in their society resonates with the students' views on the importance of representation in media. They appreciate how the film challenges stereotypical images of women and presents them in positions of authority and respect.

The students also noted that the film provides a in-depth portrayal of feminism, acknowledging the complexities of female empowerment within a historical context. They see the film as a representation of feminist ideals that goes beyond mere surface-level empowerment and delves into the deeper struggles and triumphs of women asserting their place in a patriarchal society. The emphasis on themes such as leadership, solidarity, and breaking societal norms aligns with their own views on feminism as a multifaceted movement that addresses various aspects of gender inequality.

However, some students raised concerns about the film's historical accuracy and its potential for perpetuating certain stereotypes. They discussed how the film's dramatic elements might overshadow the historical realities of the Agojie warriors, potentially leading to misconceptions about their true role and experiences. Despite these concerns, the overall consensus among the students is that the film offers a compelling and impactful portrayal of feminism that is both relevant and empowering.

Female students in Anambra state stated the following as factors that influenced the perception of feminism as depicted in *The Woman King* film: First is the film's portrayal of strong female characters that resonates with the students' own experiences and aspirations. Many respondents identified with the characters' struggles and triumphs, finding inspiration in their depiction of female empowerment and leadership. This personal connection to the film's themes plays a significant role in shaping their perceptions.

Another influencing factor is the cultural and educational background of the students. The emphasis on gender equality and feminist ideals in their academic studies and societal discussions contributes to their understanding and interpretation of the film. The students' exposure to feminist theory and gender studies in their curriculum allows them to critically engage with the film's portrayal of feminism and assess its relevance to contemporary issues.

The film's historical and cultural context also plays a role in shaping the students' perceptions. The depiction of the Agojie warriors in a historical setting adds depth to the feminist themes and provides a broader context for understanding the characters' experiences. The students' awareness of historical and cultural narratives influences their interpretation of the film and its portrayal of feminist ideals. Finally, the influence of peer discussions and media reviews contributes to the students' perceptions. Conversations with fellow students and exposure to critical reviews of the film help shape their views and provide a platform for evaluating the film's portrayal of feminism. These factors collectively contribute to the students' overall perception of "The Woman King" and its representation of feminist themes.

Discussion of Findings

The analysis of the data reveals that there are some significant feminist themes that resonate deeply with the female undergraduates in Anambra State. One of the most notable findings is the theme of female empowerment through leadership and warring prowess. The Agojie warriors, depicted as strong, autonomous figures, challenge traditional gender norms by occupying roles typically reserved for men. This aligns with the scholars' idea that film does not only play a role in the education and entertainment of her audience, but helps in the formation of ideas, attitudes as well as the representation of ideologies (Obiora & Adikuru, 2024; Obiora & Uche, 2024; Nnabuiife et al., 2023; Onyejelem et al., 2023; Obiora & Uche, 2021). The Agojie warriors' depiction not only challenges historical gender norms but also contributes to a broader understanding of female strength and capability. This portrayal serves as a counter-narrative to the stereotypical representations of women in media like the works of Jimi et al. (2022) and Federova (2023), thus fostering a more nuanced and empowering image of female leadership. The film also portrays the Agojie warriors' struggle for recognition and equal status, reflecting a critical aspect of feminist discourse. In this same vein, Lewis (2023) discussed how the world is striving, including media portrayals, seek to address gender inequality and challenge

stereotypes. Depictions in *The Woman King* film resonates with these global efforts by presenting women as active agents in their own empowerment, rather than passive recipients of male validation. This depiction underscores the importance of portraying women as equal and competent, which is crucial in challenging entrenched gender biases. Another significant theme is solidarity among women. The film emphasizes the collective strength and support of female characters, aligning with feminist ideals of mutual aid and unity. As Okunna (2020) noted, media often perpetuates stereotypes that reinforce gender inequality. *The Woman King* counters this by illustrating how solidarity among women can be a powerful force in overcoming adversity. This theme highlights the importance of community and collective action in feminist movements, offering a positive portrayal of women's cooperation and mutual support. Also, the film challenges traditional societal norms by depicting women in roles traditionally occupied by men. This defiance of gender norms aligns with feminist goals of breaking barriers and expanding opportunities for women. As Amobi (2023) discussed, media portrayals often reflect and reinforce cultural stereotypes. By presenting women as warriors and leaders, depictions in *The Woman King* disrupts these stereotypes and promotes a more progressive view of female roles.

Moreover, female undergraduates in Anambra State view the film's portrayal of feminism as both inspiring and thought-provoking. The depiction of the Agojie warriors as strong and capable characters resonates with their perspectives on gender equality and representation as Varrial (2023) noted that what feminism seeks to address is equality for men and women in all ramifications and standard without an iota of discrimination and stereotype against women and girls. The female students appreciate how the film presents women in positions of authority and respect, offering a compelling representation of feminist ideals. This conforms with the studies of Obiora and Adikuru, 2024; Obiora and Uche, 2024; Obiora and Uche, 2021; Obiora and Odoh, 2020; Kurfi and Dahiru, 2020; Ojiakor and Obiora, 2019 that established that the way people,

ideas and objects are portrayed in films affects the way viewers perceive the people, ideas and objects in real life. This means, that the way feminism has been presented in *The Woman King* movie might have shaped the way female undergraduates perceive feminism.

However, some students have expressed concerns about the film's historical accuracy and potential for perpetuating stereotypes. These concerns reflect the need for a more nuanced understanding of feminism within historical context as Swift (2015) stated that media representations can sometimes present misconceptions and reinforce stereotypes. The students' critiques highlight the importance of balancing inspirational portrayals with accurate historical representations. This critical perspective aligns with the need for media to provide a comprehensive and accurate portrayal of historical and feminist narratives. The students' opinions also emphasize the importance of representation in media. As Uwem (2022) noted, global efforts to address gender inequality include improving representation and challenging stereotypes. The film's portrayal of the Agojie warriors as powerful and independent figures supports these global efforts by presenting women in a positive and empowering light. The students' appreciation for this representation reflects the broader impact of media portrayals on perceptions of gender roles and equality.

Several factors influence the perception of female undergraduates about feminism depictions in *The Woman King*. The film's portrayal of strong female characters and feminist themes resonates with the students' personal experiences and aspirations. This connection aligns with reception theory, where audience interpretations, perceptions and attitudes about the media content received is based on their existing social, educational, cultural background. The students' identification with the characters' struggles and triumphs highlights the film's relevance to their own experiences and perspectives on gender equality. The cultural and educational background of the students also plays a significant role in shaping their perceptions. Also, exposure to feminist theory and gender studies in their academic curriculum allows the students

to critically engage with the film's portrayal of feminism. This critical engagement reflects the influence of media literacy on viewers' interpretations of feminist narratives as illustrated in reception theory. As Allan and Coltrane (2020) discussed, media plays a key role in shaping public discourse and perceptions, and educational background can enhance viewers' ability to critically analyze media content. This contextual understanding aligns with Okunna's (2020) emphasis on the need for accurate and nuanced media portrayals. The students' awareness of historical and cultural narratives influences their interpretation of the film and its feminist themes. Peer discussions and media reviews further shape the students' perceptions. Conversations with fellow students and exposure to critical reviews provide a platform for evaluating the film's portrayal of feminism. This social and media context reflects the broader influence of media and peer discourse on viewers' perceptions. As Uwem (2023) noted, media and social interactions play a significant role in shaping public opinion and understanding.

Conclusion

The Woman King film significantly influences female students' perceptions of feminism by showcasing empowering images of women in leadership and combat roles. This portrayal aligns with feminist ideals and challenges traditional gender norms. The film's depiction of female solidarity and defiance of stereotypes contributes to a broader understanding of feminist principles. However, concerns about historical accuracy and potential stereotypes indicate a need for more nuanced and accurate portrayals in media. The students' critiques highlight the importance of balancing inspirational narratives with a clear representation of historical and cultural contexts. This approach will provide a more comprehensive view of feminist themes and enhance media's role in promoting gender equality. Based on the findings the researchers recommend that:

- ❖ Film maker should ensure that future production should contain portrayals that will enhance historical accuracy and more informed depictions of feminism themes.

- ❖ Film producers should include diverse feminist perspectives to provide a more comprehensive representation of feminism ideals and experiences and give a deeper exploration of feminist struggles within historical contexts that would offer a richer understanding of the challenges faced by women.
- ❖ Women and girls should endeavour to get more engaged with media contents that will enrich and support avenues for them to navigate through any struggles that may be facing them.

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