



# Representation of Human Struggle With Dwarfism In Ghanaian And Nigerian Movies

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**Abstract:** Dwarfism is a rare genetic condition characterised by short stature. In many countries, including Ghana and Nigeria, anecdotal evidence indicates the employment of persons with dwarfism as actors and actresses in movies. However, there are limited studies on the experiences of persons with dwarfism within an African context. The current study attempted to fill this knowledge gap by exploring the portrayal of persons with dwarfism in African movies. Out of 208 movies screened, 26 Ghanaian and Nigerian movies filmed and posted on YouTube within the past decade met the preset inclusion criteria. These movies were reviewed and thematically analysed with a focus on the portrayal of persons with dwarfism. The results were summarised into five key themes: a) non-acceptance or rejection, b) familial tensions, power struggles and persistence, c) social/marital relationship acceptance, d) stereotyping and survival, and e) employability and social status. Notably, in many of the movies, individuals with dwarfism faced challenges in being accepted by both their nuclear and extended families. The study offers directions for future research and makes recommendations for promoting more positive portrayals of persons with dwarfism in African movies. Strengthening positive representation may contribute to improving public perceptions, reducing stigma, and fostering a more inclusive society for persons with dwarfism.

**Keywords:** Movies, Dwarfism, Portrayal of Persons with Dwarfism, Disability Portrayal, Social Inclusion, Stereotyping and Stigma

## 1. Introduction

Dwarfism exists in over 200 forms, the most common being achondroplasia, which is characterised by short stature and often a disproportionate body size, affecting approximately 250,000 individuals worldwide (Murton et al., 2023). The average height for adults with dwarfism is around 4 feet (121 cm), though variations occur depending on the underlying condition (Pritchard, 2021). Notably, more than 80% of individuals with dwarfism are born to parents with average stature (Agrawal, 2020). Without appropriate support systems, persons with dwarfism may experience significant challenges in navigating physical environments (Pritchard, 2016). Accordingly, dwarfism is understood as a form of physical disability due to the interaction between body structure and environmental barriers (Pritchard, 2021; Pritchard, 2016). However, despite this classification, the condition remains under-recognised as a disability in many sub-Saharan African societies. In these contexts, persons with disabilities are at heightened risk of social subjugation (Anthony, 2011; Baffoe, 2013; Opoku et al., 2022), particularly because disability is frequently misinterpreted as stemming from supernatural forces or ancestral punishment (Anthony, 2011; Baffoe, 2013). Meanwhile, research and advocacy continue to call for strengthened support systems and rights-based implementation for individuals with disabilities (Chataika et al., 2012; Mohamed et al., 2019; Shakespeare et al., 2019).

Although movies are principally associated with entertainment (Sharma & Bumb, 2022), they are simultaneously a vehicle for educating society about social realities and emerging concerns (Binay Yaz & Bal Yilmaz, 2022; Ikpo, 2025). Movies reflect societal norms, practices, and beliefs, thereby shaping audience interpretations of particular groups (Do Nascimento, 2019). As Dawn (2014) observes, film functions as a powerful tool for projecting what occurs within society. Consequently, the characters created and portrayed by filmmakers guide audiences on how to understand and define the groups represented (Aley & Hahn, 2020; Dawn, 2014). The representation of any racial, cultural, or minority group in media has therefore attracted considerable scholarly attention (Pietri et al., 2021). Representation studies seek to examine how groups are constructed in film and mass media to reduce stereotypes and support a more inclusive social image (Houston, 2024). For persons with disabilities, who constitute a marginalised population historically subjected to exclusion, poverty, discrimination, and social isolation (Holcomb & Latham-Mintus, 2022; Opoku et al., 2019; Saran et al., 2023), media portrayals can either reinforce prejudice or contribute to positive attitude change. Indeed, contemporary disability rights frameworks advocate for inclusive visibility and dignified portrayals (Chataika et al., 2012; Mohamed et al., 2019; Shakespeare et al., 2019), and film remains a notable medium through which such change can be advanced (Ikpo, 2025).

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Despite a growing interest in disability representation globally, scholarly engagement from sub-Saharan Africa remains limited. Existing research has predominantly focused on general disability narratives (Botha & Harvey, 2024; Esien, 2024) or on specific groups such as individuals with mental health disorders (Aroyewun-Adekomaiya & Aroyewun, 2019; Atilola & Olayiwola, 2013; Ikpo, 2025; Mfoafo-M'Carthy et al., 2016; Thanny & Shittu, 2023). For example, Aroyewun-Adekomaiya and Aroyewun (2019) reported that mental illness in Nigerian movies is frequently depicted as spiritual in origin and treated through unconventional means, often accompanied by portrayals of abuse and rejection. More recent findings demonstrate some improvements in representation, although mental illness continues to be framed as taboo (Thanny & Shittu, 2023). These shifts indicate evolving portrayals, yet they underscore that cinematic representation remains strongly influenced by deep-seated cultural beliefs.

Similarly, in Africa and elsewhere, persons with dwarfism increasingly appear in movies; however, scholarly investigation of how they are portrayed is notably absent. This gap is critical, as cinema is closely intertwined with local histories, cultural values, and the transmission of beliefs (Botha & Harvey, 2024). The present study, grounded in intercultural communication perspectives, recognises that movies serve as storytelling platforms through which Ghanaians and Nigerians communicate their cultural understandings of dwarfism to national and international audiences. Cultural narratives around disability in both contexts frequently originate from metaphysical explanations, often leading to social exclusion and spiritualised interpretations (Anthony, 2011; Baffoe, 2013; Opoku et al., 2022). Although governments have pledged to maximise the potential of persons with disabilities through policy interventions, persons with dwarfism remain an understudied and underserved minority group in sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting the need for scholarly attention.

Therefore, this study aims to explore how persons with dwarfism are represented in Ghanaian and Nigerian cinema. Both countries are signatories to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and are recognised as leading forces in African film production (Botha & Harvey, 2019). The UNCRPD mandates state parties to promote awareness and positive images of persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2006). As storytelling and film remain central channels for transmitting cultural heritage from generation to generation (Atilola & Olayiwola, 2013; Botha & Harvey, 2019), analysing these portrayals sheds light on the cultural meanings attached to dwarfism in contemporary African society. Accordingly, this study was guided by the research question: How are persons with dwarfism represented in Ghanaian and Nigerian movies?

### 1.1. Representation of Individuals With Dwarfism In Movies

Research on the representation of persons with dwarfism can broadly be divided into two strands: those documenting positive portrayals (Castillo et al., 2023; Cepeda, 2019) and those highlighting negative portrayals (Adelson, 2005; Backstrom, 2012; Cepeda, 2019; Pritchard & Kruse, 2020). On the positive end of the spectrum, contemporary media has increasingly presented actors with dwarfism in more nuanced, empowered, and realistic roles. For instance, actors such as Peter Dinklage have received significant international acclaim for prominent characters whose role identity is not confined to dwarfism. This is well illustrated through the portrayal of Tyrion Lannister in *Game of Thrones* (2011), a role that challenged long-standing cinematic stereotypes and shifted public perceptions, leading to broader casting opportunities for actors with dwarfism (Pritchard & Kruse, 2020). Similarly, Jo Berry's leading performances represent a remarkable shift from traditional roles that historically emphasised comic relief or villainy. Her roles in television dramas such as *Onanay* feature complex characterisation, including a hardworking mother navigating life's challenges, while *Little Princess*, although humorous in nature, still provides a central narrative role focused on strength, resilience, and self-determination (Castillo et al., 2023; Cepeda, 2019).

Conversely, the negative portrayal of persons with dwarfism has been extensively critiqued in media scholarship. Historically, individuals with dwarfism have frequently been cast in demeaning and stereotypical roles (Adelson, 2005; Backstrom, 2012; Cepeda, 2019; Pritchard & Kruse, 2020). Pritchard and Kruse (2020) note that such portrayals have often prioritised entertainment value over talent, reducing persons with dwarfism to spectacles rather than artists. Shakespeare et al. (2010) observed a persistent cultural fascination with dwarfism, contributing to recurrent hyper-visibility in entertainment spaces. This fascination is deeply rooted in history, dating back to ancient courts and continuing into the Victorian era's "freak shows," where people with dwarfism were exhibited as curiosities (Backstrom, 2012). Iconic films such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) further cemented caricatured depictions, reinforcing comedic stereotypes and limiting public perception of individuals with dwarfism (Adelson, 2005; Backstrom, 2012; Pritchard, 2017). Moreover, the use of derogatory language, such as *unano* and *pandak* in the Philippine context, continues to perpetuate dehumanisation by associating dwarfism with mythical or humorous figures (Cepeda, 2019). Pritchard (2019a) argues that such media constructions play a significant role in reinforcing societal biases, resulting in discrimination, restricted opportunities, and limited social acceptance.

Taken together, existing literature suggests that media portrayals of persons with dwarfism have evolved, showing encouraging progress yet remaining inconsistent. Although more empowering roles have emerged, continuous efforts are required to ensure portrayals that acknowledge the full humanity, agency, and capabilities of individuals with dwarfism. Importantly, scholarship on these portrayals remains predominantly Western, and findings are inconclusive due to the limited attention given to African cinema. As such, the representation of persons with dwarfism in Ghanaian and Nigerian movies remains under-researched and demands scholarly focus.

### 1.2. Contextualisation

The current study draws on the social model of disability, which advocates for creating enabling environments that facilitate the full participation of persons with disabilities, including those with dwarfism. This model emerged as a challenge to the medical-rehabilitative paradigm that conceptualises disability primarily as an individual problem requiring expert intervention (Shakespeare, 2004). Within that paradigm, disability signifies deficiency, prompting paternalistic attitudes and an emphasis on overcoming limitations rather than supporting agency. As Boray (2011) argues, such a viewpoint reinforces portrayals of persons with disabilities as dependent and unfortunate, thereby perpetuating social marginalisation.

In response, the social model reframes disability as a socially constructed phenomenon, shifting attention to structural and environmental barriers that restrict individuals' opportunities (Barnes, 2019). From this perspective, individuals are constrained

not by their impairments but by inaccessible systems, prejudicial attitudes, and exclusionary practices. Therefore, the removal of societal barriers, through rights-based policies, inclusive legislation, and universal design, is critical in enabling persons with disabilities to develop and express their full potential. In the context of film, this model underscores the need for portrayals that challenge harmful stereotypes and instead promote the visibility and contributions of persons with dwarfism as valued members of society.

Media representation has profound consequences for the self-concept and identity development of marginalized groups. Positive depictions may empower individuals with dwarfism to embrace their identities and advocate for their rights, whereas negative portrayals reinforce stigma, internalised oppression, and limited social participation (Ellis, 2018). Dwarfism-related stereotypes can adversely affect access to education, employment, social inclusion, and romantic relationships (Shakespeare et al., 2010). Yet, it remains unclear which representational paradigm, medical or social, predominantly informs portrayals in African cinematic contexts, given that scholarship is sparse. Considering that Ghana and Nigeria are prominent forces in film production in Africa, critically examining their representation of actors with dwarfism is essential in understanding and transforming the socio-cultural narratives surrounding this marginalized community.

## 2. Methods

Individuals with dwarfism have a long association with media production and have frequently been cast as actors in movies globally (Backstrom, 2012; Pritchard, 2017). Yet, in the African context, there remains a substantial gap in scholarly inquiry regarding how this marginalized population is portrayed on screen, despite their increasing visibility in popular cinema. This study, therefore, adopts methodological procedures aligned with previous media-based content analyses (Bellon-Harn, Manchaiah, et al., 2020; Bellon-Harn, Ni, et al., 2020).

The research proceeded through a multi-stage process. The first stage involved identifying the scope of the data to be collected. The study focused on movies produced in Ghana and Nigeria because both countries are widely recognized as leaders in African film production and share a strong collaborative relationship within the industry. Moreover, these movies frequently feature a blend of English and local languages, enabling broader reach and intercultural influence.

The second stage was the selection of movies for inclusion. As the primary objective of this study was to explore the roles and character portrayals of persons with dwarfism in movies, only films in which individuals with dwarfism played a significant or central role were considered. For transparency and accessibility, only movies posted on YouTube were reviewed. YouTube was selected because it is widely accessible, does not require subscription fees, and attracts large viewership in low-income regions (Ekinici, 2020). Given the prevalence of poverty in Africa, YouTube provides inclusive access to cinematic content for diverse audience groups.

Movie selection adhered to the following inclusion criteria: (a) freely posted on YouTube; (b) produced by reputable commercial production companies in Ghana or Nigeria; (c) featuring actors with dwarfism in major roles; (d) delivered in English or accompanied by English subtitles if in local languages; and (e) filmed and posted within the past decade, prior to January 6, 2024. Exclusion criteria included limited viewership (fewer than 5,000 views) and inclusion in ongoing comedic series or episodic content. View count and engagement, such as public comments, are important measures of relevance and viewer interaction (Drozd et al., 2018). Additionally, the exclusion of episodic comedic content was necessary to ensure analytical coherence, as evolving narratives and character arcs in episodic series complicate the systematic examination of long-term cultural impact. In contrast, full-length movies allow for more complete and interpretable depictions of character development and thematic messaging.

The movie search was conducted between October 16, 2023, and January 05, 2024. Two authors and one research assistant independently conducted searches on YouTube, after which the team met to compare retrieved content and verify eligibility. A consensus approach was used to determine the most appropriate keywords and Boolean operators. Name-based searches using well-known actors and actresses with dwarfism were undertaken, including terms such as “Aki and Pawpaw,” “Ebube new movie,” “Yaw Dabo,” “Kompany,” “Don Little,” “Joe Shortingo,” “Wayoosi,” and “Adwoa Smart.” YouTube’s automated recommendation algorithm further expanded the search by suggesting similar content, which was subsequently screened. In total, 208 movies were initially identified and evaluated based on narrative clarity, production completeness, and the prominence of actors with dwarfism in the storyline.

Following movie selection, the data analysis employed a data-driven thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The authors watched all the included movies in full and collaboratively developed preliminary thematic categories. The research team acted as attentive viewers, interpreters of dialogue, and analysts of depictions, focusing on recurring narrative elements and character constructions. The viewing content was systematically documented, read, and reread where necessary. Coding was initially conducted independently by the first and fourth authors. The fourth author’s codes were compared and cross-checked with those generated by the first author to enhance reliability. Peer debriefing sessions involving the research assistant and lead investigator were used to refine interpretations and ensure analytical accuracy, consistent with established strategies for validity in qualitative research (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

An exhaustive list of codes, categories, and themes was then developed, followed by the establishment of a structured coding framework to identify commonalities and divergences in portrayals. Codes were grouped and organised into predetermined themes to facilitate clear comparisons and interpretation across the movies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The principal investigator drafted the initial results section, which was further reviewed by co-authors for confirmation, clarification, and interpretive alignment.

## 3. Results

A total of 26 movies met the pre-set inclusion criteria. Out of these, 11 were produced in Ghana and 14 in Nigeria. Eight actors with dwarfism were featured across the movies, including five from Ghana and three from Nigeria (see Table 1).

**Table 1:** Description of movies and themes

#	Title of movie	Actors	Themes				
			1	2	3	4	5
1	Yaw Dabo And Kompany, The Electricity Officers <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M2RUsvr8KL0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M2RUsvr8KL0</a>	Yaw Dabo and Kompany (Razak Amissah)		√	√	√	√
2	Megye Wo Girl <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8Ht31kZJQI">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8Ht31kZJQI</a>	Yaw Dabo	√		√	√	√
3	Ahuna Huna <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SyYIRBAucts">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SyYIRBAucts</a>	Yaw Dabo	√	√	√	√	
4	Goliath Beko <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ng-PWWf_1Bc">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ng-PWWf_1Bc</a>	Yaw Dabo	√	√	√	√	√
5	Oyaa Suro Oyaa Part 1 <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r19E5TYiKVU">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r19E5TYiKVU</a>	Wayoosi	√	√		√	√
6	Oyaa Suro Oyaa Part 2 <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DwJdNuZJC4U">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DwJdNuZJC4U</a>	Wayoosi	√	√		√	√
7	Adult Education <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mgigd90Qr4E">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mgigd90Qr4E</a>	Aboske		√	√		√
8	Oyaa Suro Oyaa Part 3 <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VqbTdtfVeBY">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VqbTdtfVeBY</a>	Wayoosi	√	√		√	√
9	Sika Wo Tumi	Wayoosi	√	√		√	√
10	Baabiya Ndwo <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-mjCyQozxIU">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-mjCyQozxIU</a>	Yaw Dabo	√	√		√	√
11	Asem Beba Dabi <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HF6pnQeLLhY">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HF6pnQeLLhY</a>	Yaw Dabo and Joe Shortingo	√	√	√	√	√
12	Okoto Nwo Anomaa 2 <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUo2jjPASbQ">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUo2jjPASbQ</a>	Yaw Dabo and Kompany (Razak Amissah)	√	√	√	√	√
13	Okoto Now Anomaa 4 <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3ExCYIKXzk">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3ExCYIKXzk</a>	Yaw Dabo and Kompany (Razak Amissah)	√	√	√	√	√
14	Billionaire Twins <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MfQhDGgYWQ4">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MfQhDGgYWQ4</a>	Chinedu Ikedieze (Kelly) Osita Iheme (Donald)	√	√			
15	Double Wahala <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckyPCsecfPA">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckyPCsecfPA</a> Duration- 1:31:13	Chinedu Ikedieze & Osita Iheme	√	√	√	√	√
16	Holy One <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbj_PpkcyIQ">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbj_PpkcyIQ</a>	Chinedu Ikedieze & Osita Iheme	√	√		√	√
17	Village Ambassador <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PL9O_6xGNBI">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PL9O_6xGNBI</a>	Chinedu Ikedieze & Osita Iheme	√	√	√	√	√
18	The Battle of 2 Dwarf Politicians Aki And Paw Paw <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvXPq6LyUEg">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvXPq6LyUEg</a>	Chinedu Ikedieze & Osita Iheme		√			
19	Angel with a Gun	Chinedu Ikedieze & Osita Iheme	√	√	√		
20	Mad Twins – Stupid Love <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iabg9tnSVGA">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iabg9tnSVGA</a>	Chinedu Ikedieze & Osita Iheme	√	√	√	√	√
21	The Ravers <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tjqPtf40euU">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tjqPtf40euU</a>	Ebube Obio		√		√	
22	The Web Pt-1 <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BakxWnSndTA">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BakxWnSndTA</a>	Ebube Obio & Osita Iheme	√	√		√	
23	The Web Pt-2 <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ic4I71AerUo">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ic4I71AerUo</a>	Ebube Obio & Osita Iheme	√	√		√	
24	The Web Pt-3 <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ojvoju4DtA">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ojvoju4DtA</a>	Ebube Obio & Osita Iheme	√	√		√	
25	The Web Pt-4 <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RI2zG8vI_mE">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RI2zG8vI_mE</a>	Ebube Obio & Osita Iheme	√	√		√	
26	The Web Pt-5 <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUHJLeq5SsQ">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUHJLeq5SsQ</a>	Ebube Obio & Osita Iheme	√	√		√	

**Note:** Theme 1 = Struggling/fighting for acceptance in families and labelling; Theme 2 = Friends, Fighting and rivalry; Theme 3 = Struggling to have social/marital relationship; Theme 4 = Deviants and living immoral lives; Theme 5 = Employability and social status

### 3.1. Non-acceptance or rejection

A prominent theme observed in the majority of the reviewed films was the non-acceptance and rejection of persons with dwarfism. In 22 movies, individuals with dwarfism were portrayed as encountering hostility or exclusion within their own families. Fathers, siblings, and stepmothers were most commonly depicted as rejecting them, whereas biological mothers more frequently showed empathy and acceptance. Fathers often blamed mothers for having given birth to children with dwarfism,

perceiving this as a source of shame and dishonour. This narrative is evident in *Oyaa Suro Oyaa Part 1*, where the father accuses the mother of bringing disgrace upon the family due to the child's stature.

A similar form of rejection is portrayed in the Nigerian movie *The Web Pt-3*. In a discussion with his wife about their child's dwarfism, Osita (an actor with dwarfism) denies any possibility of fathering more children with her out of fear of having another child with dwarfism. In the Ghanaian movie *Agya Koo (The Father)*, a father questions whether his son with dwarfism is biologically his, reinforcing deep-rooted rejection even at the nuclear family level.

Supernatural interpretations of dwarfism further intensify this exclusion. In *Double Wahala*, a father consults river gods to determine whether his children with dwarfism are of supernatural origin rather than human. In *The Web Pt-1*, Osita's daughter, Ebube, is consistently labelled a witch by her aunt, demonstrating how superstition contributes to alienation. Similarly, in the Ghanaian movie *Baabiya Ndwo*, a father contemplates sacrificing his son, Yaw Dabo, as part of a ritual for wealth, describing him as "useless" yet possessing mystical value. In a poignant monologue, Dabo responds:

*"You gave birth to me, yet you don't want to have anything to do with me. It was not for today, I had no idea that people are prejudiced. God said that he created people in his own image; you didn't need me for anything. You gave birth to me, a nine-month journey. Look at the suffering, how you suffered before giving birth to me. A distinguished person like me, and my father tried using me for money rituals."* (Yaw Dabo, 38:23 to 43:15).

These films also depict the denial of inheritance rights. In *Billionaire Twins*, Osita and Chinedu are excluded from a family estate despite DNA evidence confirming their lineage. Their rejection is justified solely based on their physical stature, with step-relatives labelling them "intruders" and "strangers." Here, exclusion extends beyond social relations to economic marginalisation and intergenerational dispossession.

Public ridicule and derogatory labelling further reinforce rejection. In *Okoto Now Anomaa*, the grandfather of two children with dwarfism questions why their parents continued reproduction despite birthing "undesirable offspring." In *Village Ambassador*, Osita is mockingly referred to as a "semi-colon," demonstrating blatant dehumanisation. Collectively, these portrayals reflect entrenched cultural prejudices that construct dwarfism as a social defect, perpetuating stigma and exclusion from community life.

### 3.2. Familial Tensions, Power Struggles, And Persistence

Another recurring theme concerned the depiction of persons with dwarfism as navigating intense familial and societal tensions, often engaging in struggles for power, legitimacy, or survival. These portrayals highlight how actors with dwarfism are positioned within narratives that intertwine personal agency, cultural expectations, and social hierarchies. In several films, characters with dwarfism are shown as rivals competing for authority within family or community structures. This is exemplified in the Nigerian movie *The Battle of Two Dwarf Politicians*, where Chinedu and Osita engage in fierce political competition. Chinedu reinforces his claim to dominance by asserting mystical invulnerability, "I am not human but a spirit, and no man born of a woman could harm me." Their rivalry escalates into dramatic confrontations, including a dispute over property, with Osita describing himself metaphorically as "thunder and lightning." A philanthropic event further intensifies their competition when Chinedu attempts to invalidate Osita's contribution by offering to fund the entire project, suggesting that earlier donations should be returned. Films also portray familial loyalty intersecting with supernatural belief systems. In *Angel with a Gun*, Chinedu and Osita are depicted as royal heirs resisting threats to their father's throne, including spiritual and physical battles. Their ritual protection scene at a shrine emphasises how mysticism is used cinematically to frame dwarfism, while their intuition regarding their father's abduction reinforces a narrative of heightened spiritual perception.

These tensions are not limited to male characters. In *The Ravers*, Ebube, a female actor with dwarfism, grapples with her brother's relationship with a prostitute whom she believes has bewitched him. She undertakes both physical and spiritual confrontations to protect her family, including prayer rituals and an aggressive fight to expel the supposed negative influence. Such portrayals suggest that persons with dwarfism must constantly defend familial honour and earn acceptance within structures that frequently undermine their legitimacy. Overall, these films depict characters with dwarfism as persistent individuals navigating marginalisation, supernatural labelling, and power conflicts. Their resilience reflects an ongoing struggle not merely for social belonging but for recognition as capable contributors within family and society.

### 3.3. Social/Marital Relationship Acceptance

In 12 movies analyzed, people with dwarfism frequently encounter rejection, either by potential partners or their families, reinforcing stereotypes surrounding their physical stature. A recurring narrative is the outright refusal of romantic interest toward individuals with dwarfism based solely on appearance. For example, in *Baabiya Ndwo (Nowhere Is Cool)*, *Asem Beba Dabi (An Impending Danger Looms)*, and *Mad Twins – Stupid Love*, characters with dwarfism are denied romantic relationships because they do not conform to societal expectations of physical compatibility. In the Ghanaian movie *The Electricity Officers*, Yaw Dabo attempts to court a woman by emphasizing his abilities rather than his size. He pleads, "Don't focus on my height, look at my strength," (29:30–32:50). Despite his confidence, the woman dismisses his advances, refusing to consider a relationship with a man of his stature.

Rejection becomes even more pronounced when relationships progress to the point of marriage. In six Ghanaian movies, even when women willingly pursued relationships with persons with dwarfism, their families vehemently opposed the unions. In *Megye Wo Girl (I Will Snatch Your Girlfriend)*, Yaw Dabo elopes with his employer's girlfriend to the United States but faces rejection upon returning to Ghana for marriage. The fiancée's family voices offensive remarks such as: "Are you going to carry this thing to meet the family?", "Can he father a child?" and "Where do we put this thing?" Additionally, her mother questions whether Yaw Dabo is "a child or a mature man," highlighting the dehumanizing language used in these portrayals.

Family-based rejection is not limited to potential in-laws; relatives of individuals with dwarfism also discourage them from pursuing intimate relationships. In *Billionaire Twins* and *Asem Beba Dabi*, parents and suitors express disgust toward the idea of marrying someone with dwarfism. In *Oyaa Suro Oyaa Part 1 (Everyone Is Afraid of Each Other)*, Wayoosi introduces his romantic partner to his father but is immediately rejected. Disturbingly, the father takes advantage of the situation by

pursuing the same woman, claiming Wayoosi's stature makes him "unfit" for love. Similarly, in another film, Yaw Dabo's father (played by Agya Koo) mocks his son's relationship because the girlfriend is taller, asking derogatorily: "Is this your rib?" and "You've stolen what belongs to another man" (Agya Koo, 55:03–55:13). These portrayals collectively reinforce discriminatory cultural beliefs that persons with dwarfism are undeserving of romantic companionship or family life.

### 3.4. Stereotyping and Survival

The portrayal of dwarfism in Ghanaian and Nigerian movies reflects a deep-rooted societal stereotype. Across the 22 analyzed movies, individuals with dwarfism are consistently depicted as deviants, deviating from societal norms and expectations. The characters with dwarfism were framed as crooks, thieves, liars, tricksters, and womanizers, entrenching harmful stereotypes. They were portrayed as individuals who are idle, instead of earning a livelihood through legitimate means, resort to immoral strategies for survival. In one of the Nigerian movies, *Mad Twins – Stupid Love*, characters Chinedu and Osita, both actors with dwarfism, were portrayed as adopting extreme survival strategies. In desperation for a livelihood, they feign mental instability to solicit money. The two characters were mistaken for being genuinely mentally ill and were subsequently confined to a psychiatric hospital, further complicating their struggle for identity and survival.

The narrative continues in *Holy One*, where the characters Chinedu and Osita once again resort to deceitful survival tactics. In a scene where Chinedu tricks a palm wine tapper into allowing him to test the quality of the drink, he ended up drunk without any means to pay for it. This interaction serves as a metaphor for the social exclusion persons with dwarfism face, left to maneuver through situations where survival depends on manipulating others, not out of inherent deceitfulness, but as a reflection of the constrained opportunities afforded to them. In another instance, they pose as missionaries with supernatural powers, manipulating a gullible man to gain accommodation.

The stereotype of deviance extends to interpersonal relationships, as seen in *The Ravers*. Here, the character Ebube, a person with dwarfism, undermines her brother's romantic relationship by maliciously sabotaging a meal her brother's partner prepares. This act of deviance highlights the film's portrayal of individuals with dwarfism as disruptors within familial structures. Rather than presenting individuals with dwarfism as integrated members of society, they are depicted as antagonists who undermine social harmony for personal gain. Another prevalent narrative in the movies involves individuals with dwarfism disrupting romantic relationships. In *Megye Wo Girl* (translated as *I Will Snatch Your Girlfriend*), Yaw Dabo, fully aware of his master's romantic involvement with a woman, concocts various schemes to win her over, including stealing money from his master to fund his endeavors. Eventually, Dabo elopes with the woman, leaving his master in anguish.

### 3.5. Employability And Social Status

The majority of movies analyzed (16/26) depict persons with dwarfism as unemployed or unemployable, reinforcing perceptions of low productivity and dependency. In African societies where children are traditionally viewed as future economic contributors to the household, unemployment among persons with dwarfism is interpreted as a burden. This cultural expectation, when unmet, leads to familial frustration and societal exclusion. For example, in the Nigerian film *Holy One*, the father of Chinedu and Osita condemns their lack of economic contribution, asserting: "Look at you. Your mates are in the city fighting for their future; you are here pursuing rats and rabbits, behaving like small children." (1:04). Such remarks signify the deep frustrations associated with the perceived inability of persons with dwarfism to meet societal demands.

Similar sentiments appear in the Ghanaian film *Baabiya Ndwo*, where Dabo's father laments to God about his son's unemployment, asking: "God, what did I do to you? Why did you give me such a son?" Meanwhile, when people with dwarfism do express career aspirations, they are often mocked or discouraged. In one scene, Dabo expresses his ambition to become a footballer, only for his father to respond that he is "the size of the football," implying that he would be physically harmful to the game (Agya Koo, 3:25:35–3:25:53).

Even when employed, characters with dwarfism continue to face discrimination and humiliation. In the Ghanaian movie *Adult Education*, a teacher with dwarfism, Aboske, is confronted by a student who questions his professional legitimacy, remarking: "Who gave him a certificate to teach? The government should have been selective. How could they give him a certificate? How can we respect him?" (Nana Ama McBrowne, 1:08:30–1:08:57). Similarly, when Yaw Dabo and colleagues work as officers for the electricity company, their competence is doubted simply because the role is assumed to require greater height. These portrayals highlight societal assumptions that equate physical stature with capability, thereby perpetuating systemic exclusion and limiting opportunities for economic independence and social mobility.

## 4. Discussion

The current study systematically explores how these movies reflect broader societal attitudes towards dwarfism, often reinforcing negative stereotypes, such as the link between dwarfism and supernatural forces, deviant behavior, and social exclusion. Amidst the negative portrayal, the findings also showed the resilience and agency among persons with dwarfism in surmounting the social injustices they face. This portrayal is consistent with broader literature on disability, where persons with disabilities are seen as resilient and capable of overcoming societal barriers placed before them (Harwick et al., 2017). The reaction of persons with dwarfism in the movies could be linked to human responses to stressful situations, particularly the instinctive responses of fighting or fleeing. In day-to-day living experiences, when individuals encounter unfortunate or hurtful events, hormones are released that prompt them either to resist or to withdraw. Fighting is perceived as an appropriate response to abuse or injustices, as it helps to reduce the perception of pain and maintains emotional survival. Without fighting, there could be a repeated and sustained cycle of injustice, abuse, and discrimination directed towards persons with dwarfism. It is apparent that there were not many support, protection, or enabling systems for persons with dwarfism. This leaves people with dwarfism with no option other than to fight for survival, identity, dignity, or respect within both family structures and wider society. It could further be argued that there is inherent strength in disability as advocated by proponents of the social model of disability. This means that persons with dwarfism are able to identify injustice and assert their rights through acts of agency and resistance. This finding underscores the need for persons with dwarfism in Africa to mobilize and organize themselves into advocacy groups to collectively challenge injustices perpetrated against them within society. While persons with dwarfism may be able to take action or fight for their rights, society must also reciprocate by embracing them as equal and valued members of the community.

The sampled movies showcased the constant fight for what individuals with dwarfism are entitled to, particularly in matters of inheritance and social status. In movies where individuals with dwarfism demand what is rightfully theirs, they are often depicted as fighting against overwhelming odds, highlighting their potential for independence, assertiveness, and self-sufficiency despite physical limitations (Pritchard, 2021). In Africa, inheritance is vital in many societies as one's status is linked to the possession of assets and wealth, as well as what can be passed on to children and family members. Once a family head with a disability has an inheritance, they may be able to pass it on to their children or dependents, thus securing their future. However, denial of inheritance to persons with dwarfism could perpetuate a cycle of poverty, which is already prevalent among persons with disabilities in Africa (Banks et al., 2018; Opoku et al., 2019; Pinilla-Roncancio & Alkire, 2021). Inevitably, the denial of inheritance suggests that individuals with dwarfism are not recognized as equal and legitimate members of society. This is an affront to the social model of disability, which calls for parity, dignity, and enjoyment of fundamental rights by persons with disabilities (Shakespeare, 2004). It could therefore be argued that what is portrayed in the movies mirrors the everyday experiences of many persons with dwarfism within African contexts.

Family rejection is another recurring theme in the representation of persons with dwarfism in these movies. Fathers are particularly portrayed as rejecting children with dwarfism, often blaming mothers for the child's physical difference or impairment. This finding aligns with previous studies on individuals with disabilities that reported the likelihood of fathers rejecting or dissociating themselves from children with disabilities (Opoku et al., 2022). In alignment with traditional African gender roles, fathers are expected to be providers, leaders, and protectors of the family (Kehinde et al., 2023). As illustrated in the movies reviewed, nurturing a child with dwarfism, who is perceived as incapable of meeting societal expectations, may be viewed as a threat to a family's future security and caregiving reciprocity (Kutsoati & Morck, 2014). Fathers in the movies who invest resources into raising children may hold negative assumptions that a child with dwarfism will be unable to support them in old age, fueling resentment and harmful attitudes towards these children. However, in light of the social model of disability, denial of familial support could result in individuals with dwarfism lacking access to essential opportunities such as education, health care, and personal development. The rejection by families not only reflects a lack of understanding of the strengths and latent capabilities of persons with dwarfism but also reinforces the need for targeted societal education campaigns to challenge and dismantle these deleterious perceptions.

In society, everyone has the right to pursue intimate affection, procreation, and companionship through the development of sexual relationships. In the reviewed movies, it is clear that persons with dwarfism struggle in their quest to enter into relationships with the opposite sex (Zewude & Habtegiorgis, 2021). In the realm of social and romantic relationships, persons with dwarfism are often faced with repeated rejection from potential partners and disapproval from family members. These challenges reflect broader societal norms in many African societies, where marriage and procreation are highly valued cultural expectations, and those who do not marry or have children are often stigmatized and labeled failures (Dyer, 2007). In the movies reviewed, it is apparent that persons with dwarfism face a triple burden of discrimination: based on their stature, assumptions regarding their inability to form intimate relationships, and societal expectations that they will not be able to produce children (Zewude & Habtegiorgis, 2021). This finding is consistent with the lived realities of persons with dwarfism in other parts of the world, such as Asia and Europe, where they also frequently struggle with sexual and romantic relationships (Ghosh, 2024; Karellou, 2017). The portrayal of dwarfism as a contagious condition further alienates individuals with dwarfism from society and potential partners. This damaging rhetorical image could derail efforts towards promoting the overall well-being and long-term development of persons with dwarfism. The findings underscore the urgent need for positive and empowering media representation to challenge such misconceptions and promote an inclusive and equitable society.

In addition to social and familial challenges, individuals with dwarfism are often depicted in movies as playing deviant roles, such as thieves, liars, and troublemakers, which contradict societal expectations of moral behavior. This negative portrayal, as exhibited in the screened movies, exacerbates the stigma traditionally associated with dwarfism, as deviance is antithetical to the cultural values of respect for elders, communal responsibility, and upright moral conduct (Minty, 2024). Children with dwarfism are depicted as bringing dishonor to families, further marginalizing them and contributing to the perception of dwarfism as a moral or spiritual failing. The association of persons with dwarfism with deviant behavior detracts from their potential contributions to society and reinforces negative stereotypes that hinder social acceptance and belonging. In Africa, individuals who demonstrate good behavior and moral uprightness are usually admired and celebrated by society; however, being linked to bad behavior becomes a strong basis for rejection. In this study, it is possible that society may fail to see the capabilities, leadership potential, and creative strengths of individuals with dwarfism; rather, their perceptions could be heavily influenced by what is portrayed in these movies. According to social modelists, it is vital for society to focus on the strengths, talents, and unique contributions of persons with dwarfism. Doing so has the potential to change the narratives and improve public perception towards persons with dwarfism.

The portrayal of persons with dwarfism in employment contexts further illustrates the depth of marginalization. Indeed, most of the movies reviewed depict individuals with dwarfism as idle, incapable of performing meaningful work, incompetent, or engaged in menial labor. Unfortunately, these negative societal perceptions about persons with dwarfism are often based on stature rather than skill, knowledge, or professional competence, further reinforcing marginalization and negative stereotypes. This representation perpetuates the societal view that persons with dwarfism are unproductive and dependent on others (McKinney & Swartz, 2021; Tan, 2021). In existing literature, there are reports of both children with disabilities experiencing challenges in education (Giangreco et al., 2002) and adults with dwarfism facing limited access to employment (McKinney & Swartz, 2021; Tan, 2021). In African cultures, where the ability to work and provide for one's family is a core measure of a person's worth, this type of negative portrayal undermines efforts to advocate for equal access to employment and skill development initiatives for persons with disabilities. Such portrayals could directly affect policy efforts aimed at promoting inclusion, equal opportunities, and fair labor market participation. Greater media responsibility is therefore required to shift perceptions away from dependency and incapability towards a more humanizing and empowering representation of persons with dwarfism.

#### 4.1. Limitations

The study drew on movies filmed and posted on YouTube over the last 10 years. Therefore, those that were filmed and posted on paid platforms such as Netflix, other streaming platforms, or outside the search range were excluded. YouTube is a popular

platform that is freely accessible to everyone, and, with its strict guidelines, the movies posted could reflect a realistic view of persons with dwarfism in society. Additionally, the study was limited to Ghana and Nigeria; thus, movies featuring individuals with dwarfism from other African countries were excluded. The findings ought to be interpreted within the cultural context of Ghana and Nigeria. As stated earlier, both countries are widely known and are key leaders in movie production in Africa. However, future studies could attempt to understand the portrayal of individuals with dwarfism in movies produced in other African countries.

Additionally, accountability measures were limited by the number of members of the research team and the involvement of only one research assistant. The research team compiled their subjective interpretation of the roles of individuals with dwarfism, thus introducing the potential for erroneous interpretation. The meetings held among the researchers enabled comparison of notes and more accurate summaries of the roles portrayed. Moreover, Author Three is an actress in Ghana, and her practical insights helped to accurately capture the roles played by individuals with dwarfism in movies. Furthermore, the movies included in this study were limited to those in English or those with English subtitles; movies that did not meet the language criteria were excluded. Overall, a major strength of the current study was the inclusion of movies from two African countries to develop insight into the portrayal of individuals with dwarfism in film media.

#### 4.2. Direction For Future Research

This study summarises the roles played by actors with dwarfism in Ghanaian and Nigerian movies. The findings have shown a medicalised portrayal of individuals with dwarfism that has the potential to compound the subjugation of this marginalized group in society. There are certainly many people with dwarfism living in society who are not involved in acting or media activities. It is, therefore, essential for researchers in sub-Saharan Africa to capture the perspectives of persons with dwarfism outside the media space on issues such as the social construction of dwarfism, lived experiences, marital and family relationships, access to employment, and navigating society more broadly. Moreover, future studies may compare the portrayal of persons with dwarfism with portrayals of other disability groups, such as intellectual disability, in movies.

Additionally, one area that rarely emerged in the reviewed movies was the educational experiences of individuals with dwarfism. Future studies may explore their educational journeys to understand their relationships with peers and teachers, as well as institutional measures to enhance the participation of persons with dwarfism in education. Such research is crucial in advancing inclusion and identifying opportunities to challenge discriminatory practices in school environments.

#### 5. Conclusion And Implications of The Study For Rehabilitation

The study reported here documented the representation of individuals with dwarfism in African movies. In this study, it was presumed that the portrayal of individuals with dwarfism could reflect the situation of this marginalized group in society. Unfortunately, the representation of persons with dwarfism in Ghanaian and Nigerian movies reveals a complex intersection of societal attitudes, cultural beliefs, and media portrayals that perpetuate stigma and exclusion. The findings of the study could have implications for the rehabilitation of individuals with dwarfism in African societies.

First, there is a need for policymakers to partner with film producers to discuss their contribution towards achieving an inclusive society. Indeed, there is an absence of guidelines on how minority groups, such as those with dwarfism, should be represented in movies. Policymakers could collaborate with movie producers and disability rights stakeholders to encourage positive portrayals of disabilities and challenge cultural and societal stereotypes. The development of such a legal framework might be guided by the social model of disability, which focuses on the strengths of individuals with disabilities and the ways in which societies can create spaces for those living with dwarfism.

Movies could highlight achievements, talents, and contributions made by individuals with dwarfism, portraying them as individuals who contribute meaningfully to society. In addition, actors and influential persons with dwarfism could be encouraged to form activist groups that advocate for parity and protect the rights of individuals with dwarfism. They could also have representation on film boards to advocate for guidelines supporting positive and respectful portrayals of this marginalized group.

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