

ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

DISNEY KIDS: A STUDY ON THE RECEPTION OF A
GLOBAL MEDIA GIANT BY ETHIOPIAN
CHILDREN IN ADDIS ABABA

BY
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DISNEY KIDS: A STUDY ON THE RECEPTION OF A GLOBAL MEDIA
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IN ADDIS ABABA

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Abstract

With the penetration of global media contents particularly Hollywood films in Ethiopia in the early 1990s and afterwards, local audiences have been able to be exposed to American movies. A significant part of this audience is made up of Ethiopian upper-middle-class children in Addis Ababa who are exposed and attracted to the animation features produced by the all time leading manufacturer of children's films and literature, the American based Walt Disney Company. *Disney Kids: A Study on the Reception of a Global Media Giant by Ethiopian Children in Addis Ababa* attempts to investigate how the specified children in Addis Ababa, in the midst of their everyday lived reality, make meaning out of the animation and cartoon films that are produced in another setting. The study, by using focus group interviews and in-depth individual interviews, explores how Ethiopian upper-middle-class children make sense out of global texts and images as represented by Disney in the context of their everyday life.

The findings of the study exhibit that local culture, values, and interests have a significant role to play in the interaction between the global and the local. Intricate responses of respondents reveal that there is no easy way of establishing a definitive nature of the global's penetration to the local. This challenges the fundamental premise of the media imperialism thesis that the authentic, traditional and local culture of 'Third World' countries like Ethiopia are becoming battered out of existence as a result of the dumping of large quantities of media products by Western, particularly American, media conglomerates like that of the Walt Disney Company.

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

Disney Kids: A Study on the Reception of a Global Media Giant by Ethiopian Children in Addis Ababa aims to investigate how Ethiopian upper-middle-class children in Addis Ababa negotiate with media contents of one of the colossal and long time global media conglomerates, and the all time leading manufacturer of children's films and literature, the American based Walt Disney Company. In other words, this study attempts to investigate how the specified children in Addis Ababa, in the midst of their everyday lived reality, make meaning out of the animation and cartoon films that are produced thousands of miles away. Simply put, the study is about the presence of the global in the local, and more importantly how the local deals with it.

The theoretical framework of the study engages with the media imperialism thesis which claims that the West, particularly the United States of America is dumping large quantities of media products to weaker, more specifically 'Third World' countries. As a result, it is claimed, the authentic, traditional and local cultures are becoming battered out of existence. As the theoretical bedrock of this study, I will discuss the premises of the media imperialism thesis in light of the broader concepts of globalization and global media culture. I will also reflect upon some of the cardinal critics of the imperialist theory's assumption that global media messages manufactured and processed by the few and

concentrated global media conglomerates like the Walt Disney Company are effectively homogenizing the national identity and culture of developing countries like Ethiopia in favour of Western values and interests.

Such being the make up of the theoretical context of this study, some of the specific questions I would like to address include whether upper-middle-class Ethiopian children merely adhere to the homogenization repercussion as put forward by proponents of the media imperialism thesis and whether there are any ingredients that come in between the interplay of Disney's animation features and the messages they impart, and the reception of these messages by the audience, the children.

To this end, I will be navigating through some of the debates and arguments of some of the most influential scholars and researchers that stand for and against the premises of the media imperialism thesis (Galtung, 1971; Schiller, 1976; McQuail, 1983, 2002; Tunstall, 1977; Dorfman & Mattelart, 1984; Tomlinson, 1991; Boyd-Barrett, 1998; and Rantanen, 2005a), the genesis of which dates back to the 1970s when the world was overwhelmed by the unfolding of the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO).

The remainder of this chapter discusses the background of the study and the statement of the problem, highlights objectives, significance, scope and limitations of the study, and puts forward key research assumptions, methodological proceedings and thesis organization.

1.1 Background of the Study

1.1.1 A Personal Note: Why Disney?

It goes without saying that Disney is one of those brands that are impossible to avoid in the major cities of the world together with the likes of Coca Cola, McDonalds, Ford, Nike and Microsoft. I was ten years old when the Socialist *Derg* regime was overthrown in May 1991. This event led to the importation of Hollywood films among other things to Addis Ababa. Disney was one of those big names to sneak through.

Being born and raised at the metropolis around Bole where the new face of Addis Ababa was fast growing, I was lucky enough to participate in the wave of VHS cassettes that started flooding the city. Although my mother and other members of the family brought home films of different genres, I was limited to watching cartoon and animation films. I always loved Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White and many others who made me laugh and cry all the way to my late teenage years. I didn't have any idea what lay beyond the fun in these films except that most of them, when they begin, show a picture of a house fading in to be followed by something that reads "Walt Disney Pictures".

Today, my understanding of Disney is defined in different circumstances. In October-November 2006, I had the opportunity of participating in the lectures of Dr. Kristin Skare Orgerate and Dr. Oddgeir Tveitin as part of the Media and Globalization course which

would tremendously impact my academic course thereafter. It is in this way that I have come to know that the Walt Disney Company, the manufacturer of the animation films I adored as a child and as a teenager, is associated with some striking facts and figures—generator of more than \$23 billion a year in revenues making it the second largest media company in the world; producer of world wide animation hits like Mickey Mouse, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Cinderella*, *Pocahontas*, *The Lion King*, etc.; owner of 10 U.S. television stations including five in the top five markets, television production companies (Buena Vista Television, Walt Disney Television), cable television channels (Disney, ESPN, ESPN2, ESPNNews, Lifetime, A & E and History Channel), film studios (Disney, Touchstone, Miramax, Hollywood Pictures, Caravan Pictures); and so much more (Demers, 1999, pp.2-3).

Prior to the Media and Globalization course, another incident that contributed considerably to the build up of this thesis is my encounter with Professor Larry Strelitz from Rhodes University, South Africa, who introduced me to the enchanting practice of qualitative research. His article *Global Media/ Local Meanings*, which deals with the consumption of American soap operas and pornographic films by South African youth, was a great inspiration for me especially in getting me acquainted with the media imperialism thesis and its criticism. I was also impressed by the MA thesis entitled “An Investigation into the Popularity of American Action Movies Shown in Informal Video Houses in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia” (Assefa, 2005), written by an Ethiopian student who

studied at Rhodes University, which deals with how Ethiopian youth make meaning out of American action films they watch.

What finally made me decide to stick to this research topic is one simple encounter. I was accidentally in a boutique when a child by my side started crying all of a sudden whose young mother seemed to be very disappointed and embarrassed. The boy wouldn't stop crying and I asked his mother what he wanted. She told me that he wanted her to buy him a T-shirt that has the picture of Simba (the protagonist of Disney's *The Lion King*) on it which was hanged very conspicuously in the boutique. She then said that she would have bought him the T-shirt but its size is XXL and thus is very large for him. In an attempt to negotiate with the kid, I approached him and told him that mama will buy him any other T-shirt which would fit him. Then he said "I want that T-shirt or I want nothing". Back home, when I thought about what that little boy said to me, it helped me to decide the topic of my research.

I have to say, it is therefore, the fusion of my childhood fantasy for Disney, my introduction to media and globalization in my academia and one accidental encounter with a six year old Disney fanatic that finally made me engage myself in this research.

1.1.2 General Background of the Study

As Hammond and Grosse have written, globalization “is definitely the buzzword of the 2000s.” The last two and half decades saw globalization intensify its influence and practice throughout the world via its economic, political and cultural manifestations (2003, p.285).

The relationship between the concept of globalization and media and communication immediately impacts the transformation of spaces of interaction between people, information, institutions and cultural traditions around the world. Sreberny-Mohammadi and associates state that “[i]n contrast to the historical tendency for communication media to be used to *vertically integrate* societies within the contours of the nation-state, emerging patterns of social interaction, political organization and information flows are being supplemented by trans-national, *horizontal integration*” (1997, p.xii).

With the rise of advanced communication technology and digitization, the media has perhaps become the most visible engine that makes people around the globe experience the presence of globalization more than ever. von Feilitzen argues:

The intricately interrelated processes of globalization and media globalization are tightly interwoven with world economy and market forces, with political systems, and with relationships of dominance and dependence between countries and cultures as well as between rich and poor people within and between nations (2002, p.13).

This complexity gives rise to a great amount of questions about the nature and causes of globalization and media globalization—and also about the consequences or influences of these processes (von Feilitzen, 2002, p.13).

According to von Feilitzen, the emergence of media as a new global force gives vent to a new global audience out of which a good third of the world population are children and young people under 18 years of age (2002, p.14). Media culture produced for children, and media culture that children come into contact with, von Feilitzen writes, constitute “an essential—and perhaps the most rapidly growing—part of media globalization” (2002, p.14). She further states:

Media culture produced for children include popular music produced on radio, CDs and cassettes; globally distributed films and TV programmes directed at or watched by children and young people on national and satellite television, video, and in theatres; interactive games and the Internet; certain international print media; advertising and marketing of licensed merchandise worldwide, such as toys, clothes, foods, drinks and other products; as well as intertextuality and direct convergence of much of these media, media contents and merchandise (von Feilitzen, 2002, p.14).

The fact that global media presents such an enormous new opportunity for the children of the world prompts stakeholders of children’s rights including the State, NGO’s , the academic elite and several different international organizations to revise their understanding of the relationship between global media and children and raise new questions of new dimensions.

Gigli (2004) states that a look at the world media landscape for children and the youth immediately presents two opposing themes: opportunities and risks. For example, globalization of media brings opportunities to broaden children's outlooks and provide more equal access to information, but it also threatens cultural identification and values. Technological advances bring the promise of new skills and greater youth participation in society, but also increase the risk of child exploitation and informational divides (Gigli, 2004).

The case in urban Ethiopia is no different. Global media in the forms of the Internet, television, radio, magazines and newspapers are becoming increasingly accessible in urban Ethiopia and most noticeably in the capital Addis Ababa. With more and more video, DVD, and VCD renting houses being opened in the city and satellite television services spreading, children's opportunity for access and consumption of global media particularly American films and popular culture is increasing. The fact that electronic equipments and satellite subscriptions are becoming more affordable and easily accessible consequently paves the way on investigating how global media products are consumed by local audiences.

Children as consumers of the global media make up a significant part of the local audience in Ethiopia, especially in Addis Ababa where accessibility is relatively better. Although there are a number of films, movies and other motion pictures that are readily available for children either in video cassettes, DVDs or VCDs or televised satellite broadcasts, there is a

huge interest, perhaps because of enormous availability, in the productions of the global media giant Walt Disney which is the most popular conglomerate in the making of children animation and cartoon films.

Together with Coca-Cola, Disney is perhaps the best known brand name in the world.

Westcott states:

The Walt Disney Company is, in many ways, the paradigm of the global media company and certainly the main reference point in the children's business. The company is present in almost every sector of media activity: film and TV production, broadcasting (both free to air and thematic), home video, licensing and merchandising (2002, p.70).

Most people know of and have personal experiences with one or more of the company's products. Moreover, the Walt Disney Company is amongst the oldest global media conglomerates. Most people therefore develop their experiences with Disney in relation to a tradition of reception which they may accept or oppose but which they can rarely ignore. Taken together, the global reach and the age of the Walt Disney Company makes it a unique object for studying children's contemporary reception of media globalization, a process that is invariably situated within and shaped by patterns of family and peer interaction and cultural preferences (Drotner, 2002, p.112).

In essence, the presence and dissemination of global media in Ethiopia is a quickly growing enterprise and this may give the implication that Ethiopian children are potentially consuming it or, at least, have the right to consume it. The nucleus of this study, as such,

emerges here: what does this mean for children's and young people's cultural identity and participation in society? I believe an understanding of the relationship between the global media with particular reference to Disney and how children receive media messages is of paramount importance for understanding the presence of global media in the lives of children and the dynamics it plays in the make up of their worldview.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

In the midst of the plethora of global information flow and media contents production, dissemination, and consumption, the position and role of developing "Third World" countries in the process has been an issue of debate for decades. While the media imperialism thesis identifies these nations as passive recipients and mere consumers of the media contents poured by the media moguls of the West (Galtung, 1971; Schiller, 1969; Tunstall, 1977; Dorfman and Mattelart, 1984), very few research agendas attempted to investigate the issue from the receiver's end or the audience's perspective in the African setting (Strelitz, 2001, 2002; Nyamnjoh, 2002).

Ethiopia is no exception. Although the presence and distribution of global media products in the country is pervasive, it is, to my knowledge only Aseffa's *An Investigation into the Popularity of American Action Movies Shown in Informal Video Houses in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia* (2005) that has attempted to address the presence and reception of global media in local context through ethnographic audience research. The vitality of researching how local audiences make meaning out of the global media contents should be taken as an

indubitable agenda for Ethiopian media and globalization researchers taking into consideration the country's array of complex social contexts and communal values and norms that can insinuate their own share of roles in the interplay between global media messages and local audiences.

Even more marginalized and ignored are the children of the country, who make up 43 percent of the total population (CIA: The World Factbook, 2007). The little attention given to children as potential receivers of global media messages doesn't pass unnoticed as it is an agenda that the world is stepping up into. von Feilitzen states:

Little light is shed upon the role of media globalization in the lives of a good third of the world population who are children and young people under 18 years of age, in spite of the fact that media culture produced for children, and media culture that children come into contact with, constitutes an essential—and perhaps the most rapidly growing—part of media globalization (2002, p.14).

As Carlsson points out, "...new media technology and the change we note in the media order have a profound influence on the conditions and cultures of young people", as a result of which for many children in the world today, "culture is something they partake of via electronic media" (2002, p.9). In effect, this study challenges the traditional but popular view that perceives children in general and Ethiopian children in particular as passive members of the society by investigating how they make meaning out of the global media messages they receive as represented by Disney animation features. The study seeks to develop an understanding of their side of the story from their perspective in an attempt to

shed light to an indispensable research agenda that is yet to catch the attention of many researchers.

1.3 Significance of the Study

Apart from raising new questions with regard to the relationship that exists between global media and Ethiopian children and the other factors that come in between, the significance of this study is primarily hinged on its contribution to the building blocks that shed light to the perspectives, outlooks and perception of Ethiopian children on the global media they are becoming increasingly exposed to. Children are groups of the society that we make decisions on behalf of, and understanding their views and needs from their own perspective will fortify the validity of those decisions which can impact their lives in multifarious ways. Out of the four basic principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), giving due attention to the views of the child makes up a fundamental part, and as Hamelink writes, this principle “...is evidently essential to the field of information and communication as it expresses the notion that children have the basic right to be listened to and to have their views taken seriously” (2002, p.33). In effect, the result of this study, beyond triggering further questions about how Ethiopian children feel about their rapport with global media and raising awareness to the prominence of giving a serious attention to the views of the child, provides implications of the role of the global media to the Ethiopian child set in his/her day-to-day lived reality.

Media studies about children and the youth, especially the impact of global media on these segments of the society of Ethiopia, are yet to flourish in order to better understand the relationship between global media and the rights of the child. Few attempts have been made to promote this cause, thus making this particular study important in contributing to the build up of more research. Understanding what kind of influence global media poses on the operation of children's rights would certainly be of huge interest to the different stakeholders involved in the protection and promotion of children's rights including NGOs, the State, and international organizations, who, one way or the other, formulate the decision-making class.

Furthermore, the state of the upper-middle-class Ethiopian children, set in the deluge of global media contents, in relation to the provisions of the CRC can have its own connotation that may intrigue the attention of the specified stakeholders on issues related to the child.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The chief objective of the study is examining the extent to which upper-middle-class children in Ethiopia welcome, adapt, reshape or ignore the media messages of American animation and cartoon films they watch as represented by Disney. The study also aims to investigate some of the factors which make the children feel and act the way they feel and act (like the perception of homes as perceived 'safe' grounds). In other words, the study

investigates how Ethiopian upper-middle-class children make meaning out of the Disney animation features they are exposed to in the midst of their routine lived reality.

1.5 Research Assumptions

In the course of conducting this research, I start from Drotner's observation that "children are as visible to media conglomerates as they are invisible to the scholarly eye in most empirical reception studies made on media globalization" (2002, p.111). Having placed this argument as the motivating agency of this study, I also take the assumption that global media conglomerates, as represented by The Walt Disney Company in this case, are powerful vehicles of Western capitalist interests and societal values. In sharing this view, however, I am also critical to the argument that local audiences in general and children in particular who dwell in "Third World" countries like Ethiopia—the receiving end of the global media stream—are passive recipients of the global media messages as meant by the producers and thus are doomed to homogenization.

1.6 Methods of the Study

The study will adopt a qualitative methodology of data collection. The application of this particular methodology is of great relevance to this study as the goal is to provide thick description of the relationship between the context of consumption and the inner thoughts of children on how they interpret their experiences of global media.

A description of children's and youth's thinking about their impressions of the global media they tune to and whether they accept, adapt, reshape or even reject the messages transmitted through them is at the centre of this study. This is why interviews, both individual and focus group, are very essential to the study. Group interviews are important in that they "can be stimulating for respondents, aiding recall with a flexible format" (Fontana and Frey, 2000, p.652).

The sample units of the study are classified into two groups. The first set contains children who belong to the 6-7 age group whereas the second are in the range of 11-12. According to Drotner, "the youngest age band represents the core group of juvenile Disney users, while the older age band represents children who are growing out of Disney while still being objects of the company's globalized production and distribution pattern" (2002, p.115). As for the individual interviews, a total of six children were selected from all the groups, each representing one group.

The researcher has given a special attention to prestigious public, private and missionary schools in Addis Ababa with a prior assumption that the targets have a relatively greater exposure to the global media scenario, both because they have a greater probability of accessing global media due to the fact that children in private schools enjoy a greater advantage of affording to access video cassettes, DVDs, VCDs and televised subscriptions of Disney's animation and cartoon films and other related products.

Targets for the interview were drawn from the population by use of purposive sampling.

1.7 Scope of the Study

The Walt Disney Company is a multi-faceted production company that is by no means limited to the production of children animation films. Disney's empire is a prodigious composition of creative content (theatrical films, home video, television, theatrical productions, audio products and music publishing); consumer products (children's products, educational products, arts and collectibles); internet and direct marketing (on-line business, consumer product marketing, publications); theme parks and resorts (theme parks, Disneyland resort, Walt Disney World resort, regional entertainment, cruise line, celebration, Anaheim Sports Inc., Walt Disney Imagineering); media networks (television, radio, cable television), and so much more (Wasko, 2001: pp.43-62). This study, however, is limited to Disney's animation features that are available in DVD, VCD, and VHS formats and satellite televised broadcasts that are currently the Company's gateway in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. As a result, although I realize that Disney is a massive empire, my study is solely limited to the specified products for reasons of availability and focus.

1.8 Limitation of the Study

Interviewing the children was not an easy thing as I was a total stranger to them but the help I received from insiders (their teachers) helped as they (the children) started to open up eventually. I faced some stiff bureaucracy in my attempt to get access to some of the

children which forced me to reschedule and delay my programme to interview the children. I had some very tight moments in the course of making this research as a result of the short span of time I had considering the actual time the project began, which was in March 2007.

If only not for the limited time available for carrying out this research, employing an extended data would have fortified some of the results of the study.

1.9 Thesis Organization

This thesis is made up of seven chapters. This first chapter deals with the general feature of the paper including the background of the study, statement of the problem, and also objectives, significance, scope, methods and limitation of the study.

Chapter Two, the literature review, deals with some of the salient literature of media, globalization and children. This chapter also presents the chief premises of the media/cultural imperialism thesis and its critic, which represents the theoretical framework of the study.

An overview of the target media producer of this study, The Walt Disney Company, is discussed in the third chapter. This chapter includes an illustration of Disney's historical background, the Company's global empire and its contemporary global status.

The fourth chapter is where the methodology of the study is discussed. Details of methodology paradigm selection, data collection methods, sampling size and techniques are also presented.

The fifth chapter sheds light into the social context of the study and explicates the historical explanation of the rise of global media in Ethiopia. This chapter also discusses how Ethiopian upper-middle-class children are set amongst societal traditions and norms that play important roles in the children's media behavior, particularly how they come into contact with Disney.

Chapter Six deals with the data presentation and interpretation, and discusses how Ethiopian upper-middle-class children negotiate with Disney. It discusses how Ethiopian children who are set in the traditions and norms of the society make meaning out of the Disney animation films they regularly have contact with. Streamlined with the premises of the media imperialism thesis and its critique, this chapter discusses Disney as an agent of symbolic distancing, Disney as exporter of Americanization, individualism and modernity, attitude of children on local productions in the plethora of Disney exposure and perceptions of gender roles in Disney as compared to local tradition.

Finally, Chapter Seven concludes the thesis, highlights key findings and provides recommendations for further research.

Chapter Two

LITERATURE REVIEW

Globalization, Global Media and Children

2.1 Introduction

In this Chapter, I will discuss literature dealing with debates surrounding globalization, global media and children. Investigating and examining this is central to the study as the research deals with global media as the source of media content pertinent to the study; globalization as a process that enables global media products reach audiences throughout the world; and children as receivers and consumers of global media messages—all strongly related to the essential target of this study, the Walt Disney Company, one of the few gigantic media conglomerates of the globe and at the same time popular for its films and animation features targeted towards children and young people. The chapter goes on to discuss the media/cultural imperialism thesis and its critique, a fundamental theory to this study with direct relevance to media globalization.

The first section of this chapter deals with the concept of globalization. It gives a historical background of the concept, presents attempts and challenges of defining it, and puts forward the different approaches of globalization. The role of global media as part of the process of globalization is then discussed. The discussion features a definition and description of global media, debates important to the issue, and implications for

developing countries. The next section takes a brief look at children as global media consumers; and those theories which purport that children constitute a passive audience.

The next topic deals with the media/cultural imperialism thesis which stands as the theoretical framework of this study. Historical background, definitions, perspectives, scholarly debates and criticism of the theory are illustrated and described. Other components of this section include an analysis of Disney's global operation with that of the arguments of the media imperialism thesis and the relevance of the theory in contemporary media globalization studies. The last section summarizes and concludes this chapter.

2.2 The Globalization Debate

Much alike to the last quarter of the bygone 1900s, globalization still remains—perhaps with even more vigour and presence—to be a concept of enormous interest and debate in the first decade of the 21st century . Not a precise concept to define or describe in the midst of the plethora of its manifestations like global warming, global trade, global terror, global media, etc, the notion of globalization has produced fans and cynics who have approached it according to their outlooks and assumptions. As a result, according to Rantanen, “it is difficult to separate the consequences and causes of globalization” (2005a, p.6). It is, however, to be noted that globalization is the watchword of the day although an uncontested definition for its nature is far from being reached. In his introduction to *A Globalizing World? Culture, Economics and Politics*, Held states:

There is a widely shared—almost taken for granted—view that the world is changing more rapidly and dramatically at the start of the twenty-first century than ever before. Although it may not be a term we all use, many of the changes seem to be associated with something that has been called ‘globalization’ (2000, p.6).

Amongst the many definitions put forward by different scholars and authorities of the field, one of the most ‘neutral’, (Rantanen 2005a, p.6) is that of Giddens’ who identifies the concept as:

the intensification of world-wide social relations, which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa. (Giddens, 1990: p.64)

Held reinforces this view by illustrating how stretched social relations across nation-state boundaries in terms of social, economic and political processes are strengthened. However, he goes on to further outline what he calls “distinctive features” of globalization which integrate an intensification of flows and networks of interaction and interconnectedness that transcend nation states; an increased interpenetration of economic and social customs, “bringing apparently distant cultures and societies face to face with each other at local level, as well as on a global stage”; and the rise of global institutional infrastructures like that of the United Nations organization which plays a role in the political and social sectors of nation states (Held, 2000, pp.15-17).

Rantanen, while interviewing Anthony Giddens about his perspectives of what she calls “the ‘G’-word” states that “as it [globalization] has been taken everywhere by everybody, it

has lost much of its precision,” and is thus “a portmanteau term” (Rantanen 2005b, p.67). The last decade and a half have seen globalization acquire an all pervasive meaning, thus implying many processes and ideas. In effect, “[f]rom the creation of a ‘global village’ where all share similar insights and access to a process of technological colonization where cultural imperialism acquires a global dimension, globalization as a concept has remained illusive” (La Pastina 2005, pp.36-37).

As difficult as it is to define globalization, there is the challenge of identifying what we mean by the “global”. Sometimes it is used to describe phenomena that are not nation specific; sometimes to signify anything that involves more than one country; sometimes it alludes to general processes and sometimes to purportedly “universal” values (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 2005: p.14).

Such illusiveness of closely, if not exactly, defining the concept of globalization partly tails from the different positions and perspectives that make up the debate on the issue. Held sums up these perspectives in three categories termed as globalist, inter-nationalist and transformationalist. Globalists, he argues, are believers of the presence and process of globalization; they do not doubt its impact and network in contemporary society and see it as “an inevitable development which cannot be resisted or significantly influenced by human intervention, particularly through traditional political institutions, such as nation-states” (Cochrane & Pain, 2000, p.22). In fact, globalists tend to regard globalization as “the single most important fact of contemporary history” (Scholte, 2000, p.17). Whereas

positive globalists point to the benefits of globalization and see the results of globalizing influences as a change to be welcomed, negative or pessimistic globalists see the world as becoming less diverse and more homogeneous. For inter-nationalists, alternatively known as skeptics, globalization is a “myth, or at any rate is much exaggerated as a distinctively new phenomenon, and emphasize continuities between the past and present” (Cochrane & Pain, 2000, p.22). In identifying this group from the rest, Shirato and Webb state:

The skeptics...consider that what we are experiencing at present is simply a continuation of trends that developed in the period of European colonial expansion, peaked during the period 1870-1914, and were interrupted by the two great wars and the ‘cold war’ of the twentieth century; so for them globalization is principally ideological, present more in the discourse than in reality (2003, p.7).

A third—transformationalist—approach goes half way to agree with the globalists and internationalists while discarding their ‘extreme’ positions. Transformationalists, according to Cochrane & Pain, believe that “globalization represents a significant shift, but question the inevitability of its impacts. They argue that there is still significant scope for national, local and other agencies” (2000, p.23).

These perspectives on globalization are not all about the debate on the definition of the concept, but also positions and attitudes towards its consequences in the make up of society. Optimism over globalization has been attributed to the hopes of justice around the globe as it can “open new avenues for solving the problems of injustice and poverty through trade technology, transfer, knowledge, and a keener awareness regarding shared

values like democracy and human rights” (Carlsson, 2002, p.7). According to Scholte, many credit globalization as an agent of unprecedented democratization as “multiparty politics, ‘free and fair’ elections to representative institutions and legal guarantees of civil rights have become the worldwide norm for national government” (2000, p.35). Martin Wolf again argues that the dynamics of globalization today contribute immensely to the emergence of free flow of information as a result of which “a regime that wants its people to be fully engaged in the global economy cannot prevent them from gaining access to the extraordinary range of information, including that about their own country,” therefore making despotic regimes unsustainable (Wolf, 2004, pp.18-19).

Such outlook, however, doesn't represent the comprehensive predilection of people about the supposed sequels of globalization as it is deemed of having unfavorable ends to society. One such view is put forward by Hammond and Grosse (2003, p.286) in which they summarize the pitfalls of globalization as being the threat of loss of national identity resulting from the homogenization of lifestyles around the world; a peril to national identity as exhibited by the reduction of the number of languages used around the world, with English striking a solid blow to all other languages by becoming the *lingua franca* of the internet while the general number of vernacular languages used in multilingual countries is declining; and a threat to national sovereignty as a result of “the ability of multinational firms to circumvent the powers of uni-national governments” (Hammond and Grosse, 2003, p.286). Firms can make decisions about where to locate production, how to distribute their products, and even what information and funds to transfer across national

borders—almost without regard to national government concerns. Similarly, Giddens, cited in Rantanen attributes nuclear proliferation and new terrorism to aspects of globalization, which, according to him, ultimately intersect with weapons of mass destruction. He states:

...violence is very much a problem of globalization. New cultural confrontations and ethnic divisions around the world are part of these processes, and some of these processes are very acute and mostly diasporic. They happen within countries and at the same time across countries (Rantanen, 2005b, p.75).

2.3 Global Media and Transnational Media Conglomerates

Media play a fundamental role in the process of globalization. “[W]ithout mass media and modern information technology,” Carlsson writes, “globalization as we know it would not be possible” (2002, p.8). One aspect of globalization is media globalization which refers to “the worldwide expansion of media production and distribution companies that trade on the emerging global media market” and is, therefore, “primarily the global proliferation of a small number of media conglomerates” (Hamelink, 2002, p.36). Media plays an important role in the dynamics of the world’s politics, economy, entertainment, and thus the process of globalization. Media’s presence can hardly be ignored in today’s global livelihood as without it and modern information technology, “globalization as we know it wouldn’t be possible” (Carlsson 2002, p.8). In illustrating the prominence of global media as an engine of the process of globalization, Herman and McChesney state:

The global media provide the main vehicle for advertising corporate wares for sale, thereby facilitating corporate expansion into new nations, regions and markets. On the other hand, the global media’s news and entertainment

provide an informational and ideological environment that helps sustain the political, economic and moral basis for marketing goods and for having a profit-driven social order. In short, the global media are a necessary component of global capitalism and one of its defining features (1997, p.10)

A global medium is “a media organization that generates print or electronic messages or programs for dissemination to large numbers of people around the world” whereas others prefer the term transnational media corporation, meaning “an organization that has operations in more than one nation” (Demers, 1999, xxiv). Global media, according to Chan, are “primary modes of cultural globalization” whose foundation is laid upon transnational media who run operations across national boundaries (Chan, 2005, p.25). Today, a very small number of global media companies control the production and distribution of media items including the likes of AOL-Time Warner, The Walt Disney Company, Bertelsmann, The News Corporation, Viacom, Sony, Havas, and Universal.

The debate on the global media, just like that on the broader concept of globalization, evidences extreme of exponents and opponents. According to Demers, optimism over the presence and development of global media is reflected by free-market media economists and media executives:

Because global media are products of or are heavily influenced by Western culture, they help spread values like representative democracy, free speech, equality for women and minorities, and the notion that a diversity of ideas is important. Global media also are more tolerant of nonmainstream or unorthodox ideas that are entrepreneurial media, which tend to reinforce traditional value systems. And global media have the potential to help integrate disparate countries and cultures into a global village, reducing the potential for war or social conflict and increasing understanding across cultures (1999, p.5).

Such optimistic view, however, is contested and criticized by others on the other side of the extreme who believe global media are agents of inequality and marginalization primarily manifested by what has come to be known as the digital divide. According to Mutula (2004, p.123), the Digital Divide Network perceives the phenomenon as the gap between those who can effectively use new information and communication tools, such as the internet, and those who cannot. The digital divide “runs a jagged course between countries, but also within countries, often coinciding with other ‘divides’: income, ethnic, age and gender” (Carlsson, 2002, p.8).

These critics also challenge the idea that global media promotes democracy and democratization. They argue that global media possess and exercise too much power which represents a major threat to good journalism and democratic principles. In summarizing this argument, Demers states:

[G]lobal media, the critics contend, are less likely to publish information that offends powerful groups or elites, because that kind of content could alienate advertisers, news sources or consumers and sink the bottom line. In fact, many critics argue that the news and entertainment content becomes less critical of dominant ideas and institutions as media become more “corporatized”. And the end result is less diversity in the so-called *marketplace of ideas* (1999, p.4).

2.4 Global Media and Children

At the other end of the global media domain are receivers of the media content—the audience—out of which a good third are children and young people under the age of 18 (von Feilitzen, 2002, p.14). According to Carlsson (2002, p.8), however, the ratio varies

between regions; whereas children and youth account for half the population in the least developed countries, in developed or industrialized regions of the world the figure is 22 percent. Ninety percent of the two billion children in the world live in what we call poor countries whereas the remaining 10 per cent dwell in what we know as wealthy countries.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989, states that a child means “every human being below the age of 18 years unless, under the law applicable to the child , majority is attained earlier” (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 2005, p.37). Although such is the universal understanding of the childhood range as forwarded by the United Nations, Keyes and Buckingham suggest:

Children are frequently defined as a ‘special’ group, with particular characteristics, needs and vulnerabilities that set them apart from adults. Ideas about childhood are frequently used to justify controversial decisions about social control, about the distribution of resources and about the use of public space. Yet childhood is not fixed or given, either culturally or historically. On the contrary, there is a constant struggle over its meaning—a struggle which arguably has become much more intense in recent years, as the boundaries between children, youth and adults in many societies have begun to blur (1999, p.5).

Such diverse and at times contradictory approaches in constructing and defining what we mean by childhood have their own implications on how media ought to function in this regard. According to Keyes & Buckingham “[t]he status of children as, in some respects, a ‘special’ audience is an abiding preoccupation in debates about media policy (1999, p.5).” In this light, children as a cultural group and as a television audience exhibit different

tastes, interests and social, economic, and cultural characteristics although the idea that children are alike in the specified dimensions is prevalent. The latter perspective, according to Keys, is counterproductive because “if children as a social group are not acknowledged as a group with diversity in interests, intelligence, taste, class, race, culture, and religion, as well as age and gender, then the particular and specific needs of children are ignored” (1999, p.4). He further states:

Media policy development must address a number of complex issues, including access, training and education of industry practitioners to an inclusive and plural understanding of the child audience; encouragement of diversity (cultural, genre, format, content, scheduling and media source); provision of education and training for a media-literate and competent child audience; recognition of the crucial role of public broadcasting in the media environment; continuation of regulation and funding structures that balance out the demands of the market and support ‘quality’ programming; and an incorporation of children’s rights to participation in the production and presentation of media, together with an understanding of the responsibilities that go with those rights. (1999, pp.10-11)

Although the implications of global media to the child are yet to be studied and researched vigorously, challenges and opportunities surround the debate immensely. According to von Feilitzen and Bucht (2001), the ever increasing presence of electronic and digitalized media is accompanied by hopes and fears. As a result, they argue that “[s]atellite television has aroused expectations of greater freedom of choice and equal access to information for all, but also fear of standardization, more violent entertainment, advertising, pornography and discriminating portrayals of gender, social groups, cultures and nations” (2001, p.27). Although the general portrayal of global media in the scope of the fears it puts forward can

be summarized this way, Nyamnjoh points out specific challenges it poses to the African context and setting:

If globalization is a process of accelerated flow of media content, to most African cultures and children it is also a process of accelerated exclusion. While African cultures are marginalized by the streamlined information and entertainment menu served by global media conglomerates, the bulk of African children are only spared by the fact that global availability is not synonymous with global affordability (2002, p.43).

Such view can be seen as an aspect of the digital-divide phenomenon discussed earlier in this chapter. However, Nyamnjoh goes on to state that “even elite African children who can afford access to national and global media content are often reduced to consuming media burgers conceived and produced without their particular interests in their mind” (2002, p.43).

As such, the intricately interwoven concepts of globalization, global media and children and young people shall be addressed simultaneously in the light that children are as much potential consumers of global media products and thus make meanings and constructs out of these products. In doing so, however, we need to take into account the fact that “media globalization embraces all media and all aspects of media—the production, the content, and the audience sides—and affects all cultures of the world” (von Feilitzen, 2002, p.14).

2.5 The Media/Cultural Imperialism Thesis

The arguments, perspectives and illustrations presented so far in relation to globalization, global media and the Walt Disney Company culminate to what came to be known as the media imperialism thesis, also alternatively referred as cultural imperialism thesis.

The popularity of the media imperialism thesis dates back to the 1970s during which much concern about the penetration of western media was felt by then developing countries that were at the wake of independence. The General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) brought the theme of the way the media of the richer world operated towards the domination of world public opinion or a source of moral and cultural pollution, after which the much acclaimed movement towards a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) propped up. NWICO strived for the promotion of a fairer and more balanced exchange of information among nations (White, 1994, p.21).

The concept of media imperialism, as such, has come to the focus of research and debate since at least the 1970s (Galtung, 1971; Schiller, 1976) at the same time the NWICO debate started drawing interest. Watson and Hill define media imperialism as a term used to describe “the role western media play in dominating ‘Third World’ developing countries through communication systems” (1984, p.173). They further state:

Crucial to the notion of media or cultural imperialism is the understanding of the relationship between economic, territorial, cultural and informational factors. In the age of western economic colonialism in the nineteenth century the flow of information is a vital process of growth and reinforcement. Where the trade went, so followed developing media practice and technology, reflecting the values and assumptions of those who owned and manned the service (1984, p.173).

Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, was one of the popular figures who stood against the so called flood of 'westernization', "a systematic way of disseminating American values and interests through the likes of the global television music of MTV, the global news of CNN and the global box office hits of Hollywood which conflict with local cultures undermining local values and identity" (Williams, 2003, p.217). For Nkrumah and his supporters, Williams writes, "if colonialism is a form of imperialism—that is the direct control of one nation by another—neo-colonialism is cultural imperialism, with the media one of the vehicles for the transfer of western values and attitudes" (2003: p.217). According to Steven (2003), US political and economic influence has been enormously backed up by US film and music. "Where the marines, missionaries and bureaucrats failed, Charlie Chaplin, Mickey Mouse and the Beach Boys have succeeded effortlessly in attracting the world to the American way" (2003, p.23).

The application of the terms "media imperialism" and "cultural imperialism" basically point toward an analogous understanding, both referring to the dominance of the values and interests of the West—and particularly of the United States—over what came to be known as the 'Third World' nations. In elucidating the significance, implication and application of the concepts, Williams states:

If imperialism is the dominance of one nation over another, media imperialism is the dominance of one nation's media system by another, and cultural imperialism the dominance of one nation's culture by another. The problem is that the media are the main vehicles for the transfer of cultural values from one nation or society to another. The term 'culture' or 'way of life' is also fraught with definitional problems. Some scholars choose to use media imperialism in a narrow way, examining only the transfer of media products and media practices, while others see the term as synonymous with cultural imperialism (2003, p.218).

Another way of examining the relationship between the concepts is the view that media imperialism forms an integral part of cultural imperialism. According to McQuail, talking about cultural imperialism as media imperialism generates "the question of the centrality of the media in claims about cultural imperialism" (2002, p.225).

In essence, the media imperialism theory claims that "authentic, traditional and local culture in many parts of the world is becoming battered out of existence by the indiscriminate dumping of large quantities of slick commercial and media products, mainly from the United States" (Tunstall, 1977, p.57). The theory puts forward one way flow of information reflecting the values, culture, interests and agendas of the western owners and moguls of the media. According to Schiller, "domination is precisely what cultural imperialism is all about" (1969, p.328). Schiller (1969) argues the media and media technology are part of the conspiracy by the American military-industrial complex to maintain its economic, political and military domination of the post-war period. He sees American television exports as part of an attempt by the American military industrial complex to subjugate the world. He argues that the declining European empires had been replaced by an emerging US empire; one arm of this empire being the US-based,

transnational communication industries, which Schiller saw as working in collaboration with western (predominantly US) political and military interests (Watson and Hill, 1984, p.173). In his book *Mass Communications and the American Empire*, Schiller defines cultural imperialism as the

sum of the processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how the dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating centre of the system (1969, p.9).

Denis McQuail, in his famous *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, states that “most of the issues surrounding the global mass communication have a direct or indirect connection with the thesis of ‘cultural imperialism’ or the more limited notion of ‘media imperialism’” (1983, p.221). He further states:

Both concepts [cultural imperialism and media imperialism] imply a deliberate attempt to dominate, invade or subvert the ‘cultural space’ of others and suggest a degree of coercion in the relationship. It is certainly a very unequal relationship in terms of power. It also implies some kind of overall cultural or ideological pattern in what is transmitted, which has often been interpreted in terms of ‘western values’, especially those of individualism, secularism and materialism (1983: p.221).

In summarizing the media imperialism thesis as a manifestation of the effects of globalization when mass communication is framed from the point of view of the national societies at the receiving end, McQuail outlines some important features of the theory as follows:

- Global media promote relations of dependency rather than economic growth
- The imbalance in the flow of mass media content undermines cultural autonomy or holds back its development
- The unequal relationship in the flow of news increases the relative global power of large and wealthy news-producing countries and hinders the growth of an appropriate national identity and self-image
- Global media flows give rise to a state of cultural homogenization or synchronization, leading to a dominant form of culture that has no specific connection with real experience for most people (1983, p.222).

At the heart of the media imperialism thesis are the global media conglomerates which produce the media contents that overwhelmingly storm the world. The headquarters of the world's twenty largest media conglomerates are all located in industrialized nations, the majority of them being in the United States, out of which the focus of this study, The Walt Disney Company, is one of the forerunners of the business along with the likes of AOL-Time Warner and Viacom. In attempting to place Disney in the cultural imperialism theory framework, Steven states:

In tandem with equally prominent brands, such as McDonalds and NIKE, Disney products are impossible to avoid in any major city of the world. It's this never-ending flow of McWorld values and products that makes a concept like cultural imperialism so compelling (2003, p.24).

More interestingly, Disney has been singled out as a major actor of media imperialism in the work of Latin American commentators Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart in their study *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic* that sought to demonstrate how the seemingly wholesome and innocent world of Walt Disney concealed American values. Tomlinson in highlighting Dorfman and Mattelart's argument states:

From analysis of Disney comics they [Dorfman and Mattelart] argue that a catalogue of ideological values are apparent: an obsession with money and 'compulsive consumerism'; racial and stereotypical representations of Third World nations, in particular the 'infantilisation' of the peoples of these countries; anti-communist and anti-revolutionary propaganda; presentation of capitalism as natural, unchangeable and morally justified, and constant reference to the Third World as 'exotic' and a source of wealth, 'there for the taking' by adventurous westerners (1991, pp.41-45).

Although media/cultural imperialism as a theory of research and debate has come to the academic platform basically since the 1970s, it has generated renewed and increased interest in recent years because of numerous reasons including "the quickly increasing global reach and speed of the internet and other forms of information and communication technology (ICT), the phenomenal growth and influence of American-exported cultural industries, and the shifting state of international relations and global politics in the aftermath of 9/11 and the American-led war on Iraq" (Hamm and Smandych, 2005, p.4). It is also equally important to note that the significance of the media imperialism thesis on the present day has got close ties with the phenomenal outpouring of public concern and academic research on globalization and neo-liberalism.

2.6 Critique of the Media Imperialism Thesis

Although the media imperialism thesis has won an enormous interest among scholars and academicians of the globalization affiliation, it has had its critiques too. The 1980s and the 1990s were especially notable in the rise of criticism against the imperialism theory by scholars (Boyd-Barrett, 1982; McQuail, 1994; Tomilson, 1991, Golding & Harris, 1997) whose criticism was "influenced by audience studies and cultural studies, both of which

gave attention to the independent role of culture...something which media/cultural imperialism theorists had missed” (Rantanen, 2005, p.78).

Rantanen (2005), in her book *The Media and Globalization*, summarizes “one of the most comprehensive critiques” of the media imperialism thesis as put forward by Boyd-Barrett (1998) who admitted some of the flaws of the original theory:

- 1.It assumed that nation-states are the basic building blocks within the field of global media activities, and that there is a simple association between particular media and particular countries. In fact, media systems are often complex hybrids of different agencies and actors, and thus it is not advisable to make a simple identification of whole corporations with particular national identities. This is precisely why we need to make account of the multi-dimensionality of media activity.
- 2.It further assumed that it is in the interests of the country to reject or oppose media imperialism on the part of another country in the name of national interest. However, there is often no single national interest but separate media enterprises, which compete against each other both nationally and globally.
- 3.It did not consider the strategic social structural position of the individuals and interest groups who benefited from facilitating US market entry or even from taking their own initiatives.
- 4.It did not take into account the question of the audience, but concentrated solely on the production process.
- 5.It tended to identify the USA as the single centre of a process of media-centric capitalist influence, which flowed outward to the rest of the world in the form of television programmes.
- 6.It assumed that these programmes had an inevitable and self-sufficient ideological effect upon their helpless audiences on the periphery.
- 7.It considered experience of media to be beyond the scope of research, or to be simply a homogeneous phenomenon (2005, pp.78-79).

McQuail further goes on to state that most of the propositions arising from the media imperialism thesis tend to frame global mass communication as “a process of cause and

effect, as if the media were ‘transmitting’ ideas, meaning, cultural forms from place to place, sender to receiver” (1983, p.223). In other words, the media imperialism thesis does not take into account the active participation of the receiver or the audience in shaping and constructing meaning out of the media messages absorbed from the media content.

The understanding of culture poses yet another challenge on the champions of the imperialist thesis as the question of what is ‘authentic’ and ‘traditional’ about cultures needs to be carefully addressed. Culture is dynamic not static, always in process of change. True, outside influences shape cultures; however it is often impossible to distinguish culture in the modern world as being purely locally produced, as most local cultural practices have “traces of previous cultural borrowing or influence” that have become assimilated and naturalized (Tomilson, 1991, p.91). As such, if there is no continuity or uniformity in national cultures then “the impact of global media and culture should be seen as simply another part of the dynamic evolution of national identities” (Williams 2003, p.222).

According to Williams, “[w]hile the cultural imperialism thesis came to exercise a great hold over the policy makers and peoples of the so-called Third World, many scholars reject the thesis for being too pessimistic” (2003, p.220). Tracy (1985) attacks the failure to provide empirical evidence in support of the thesis. According to Tracy, the thesis, by focusing on texts and company reports rather than the “realities of individual lives”, fails to address the cultural meanings of these flows (1985, p.45). Much of the research, according

to Fejes (1981), describes the flows of westerner American-made mass media material into a country, with the assumption of ideological and cultural effects. Advocates of the media imperialism thesis, Tomlinson argues, “simply assume that reading American comics, seeing adverts, watching pictures...has a direct effect” (1985, p.45). Reeves (1993) cited in Williams (2003) states that the thesis lacks an explanation of how particular values and practices associated with particular media products are reproduced in the consciousness of “dependent people” as well as within the structures of dependent societies (Williams, 2003, p. 220).

Research that has been done into audience responses to globally popular TV programmes challenges the media imperialism thesis. A classic example of an American television ‘export’ is the prime-time soap opera, *Dallas*. In economic terms, Moores (2005) writes, this programme has been highly successful outside as well within the USA, making a large profit for its producers and distributors. The programme was exported to countries in various parts of the world during the late 1970s and early 1980s, “ranging from Turkey to Australia, from Hong Kong to Great Britain”, when it was regarded by certain cultural commentators “as yet more evidence of the threat posed by American-style commercial culture against ‘authentic’ national culture and identities” (Ang, 1985, pp.1-2). *Dallas* was sometimes seen, then, as a symbol of media and cultural imperialism, but as Liebes and Katz argue in their research *The Export of Meaning: Cross Cultural Readings of Dallas*, we need to be wary of any automatic assumption that its global commercial success is evidence of a transnational, imperialistic “export of meaning”:

Labelling something imperialistic is not the same as proving it is. To prove that *Dallas* is an imperialistic imposition, one would have to show...that there is a message incorporated in the programme that is designed to profit American interests overseas,...that it is accepted uncritically by the viewers and allowed to seep into their culture (Liebes and Katz, 1990, p.4).

Katz and Liebes (1990) conclude that it is almost impossible to understand how American products are perceived around the world. According to Williams (2003), they argue the thesis rests on three dubious assertions: that there is an American message in the content and form of the media, that the message is perceived by viewers and that it is perceived in the same way by viewers in different countries. “By neglecting audiences”, Williams concludes, “cultural imperialism underestimates the challenges to Americanization or westernization in different parts of the world. There are many vital currents of opposition or resistance from local communities to cultural dominance” (2003, p.220).

Another critique of the media imperialism, Terhi Rantanen, argues that the theory has given too much weight to the role of the global in the homogenization of culture. According to Rantanen, as much as the global can be homogenizing, so can the national. In effect, the impact of the national as a homogenizing factor is ignored in the analysis. The media imperialism school has “romanticized the national, instead of seeing it as potentially as oppressive as the global” (2005, p.80).

In conclusion, definitional problems, terminological vagueness, lack of empirical evidence to support the thesis, as well as the belief that the world is more complex than the picture painted by cultural imperialists led to a rethinking of the thesis (Williams, 2003, p.222).

2.7 Conclusion

The literature review has provided an essential presentation on the conceptual frameworks, academic debates, scholarly writings and perspectives of the important themes of globalization, global media, children and media, and the media/cultural imperialism thesis. Definitions, debates and outlooks on the concept of globalization have been discussed; meaning and implication of global medium as part of the broader context of globalization have been presented; and the approaches, perceptions, and attitudes of children as global media consumers have been introduced.

The final part of the chapter gave the theoretical framework of the study—the media/cultural imperialism thesis—including historical development, definitions, scholarly debates and outlooks, criticism, and contemporary relevance.

Chapter Three

THE WALT DISNEY COMPANY: AN OVERVIEW

3.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with the Walt Disney Company, producer of media messages and contents for the targets of this study. A discussion of the company's position of and contribution to the global media landscape, its history, global empire and operating segments and activities make up the chief parts of this chapter. A discussion on Disney is essential in creating a sensible image of the dimension and extent of influence the company's network enjoys throughout the world. Investigating Disney, in essence, logically tails from a general overview and understanding of the company itself, which is why this chapter is dedicated to this cause.

The first section of this chapter provides a brief explanation of the Walt Disney Company's position in the global media landscape to be followed by a historical analysis of its foundation, development and conglomeration. The next section focuses on the global empire of the Walt Disney Company and how it has come to be one of the big names in the global media landscape. The final section explicates the operation segments and the different activities Disney is involved in as part of its global expansion. The last section concludes the chapter.

3.2 Disney, Global Media & Global Audiences

The emergence of global media is a phenomenon that essentially stands at the heart of the broadest concept of globalization. As Herman and McChesney write, “[a]lthough global media are only one part of the overall expansion and spread of an increasingly integrated global corporate system, they complement and support the needs of non media enterprises” (1997, p.10). They further state:

On one hand, the global media play a central economic role, providing part of the global infrastructure for non-media firms, and facilitating their business just as the growth of domestic commercial media supports corporate growth within countries. The global media provide the main vehicle for advertising corporate wares for sale, thereby facilitating corporate expansion into new nations, regions and markets. On the other hand, the global media’s news and entertainment provide an informational and ideological environment that helps sustain the political, economic, and moral basis for marketing goods and for having a profit-driven social order. In short, the global media are a necessary component of global capitalism and one of its defining features (1997: p.10).

Central to the global media landscape are the major players of the system, the dominant first tier of the global media oligopoly. These are what we alternatively know as global media conglomerates that own an array of vast media production, distribution, and sales outlets. As Herman and McChesney (1997, p.70) observe, Time Warner, Disney Bertelsmann, Viacom and News Corporation are the five largest media firms in the world in terms of sales and are also the most fully integrated global media giants. News Corporation, Time Warner, Disney, and Viacom have huge film and television production facilities and are in intense competition for success in the booming global television market

An indispensable unit of the global media family, The Walt Disney Company became the world's leading media mogul in 1995 following its takeover of Capital Cities/ABC while at the same time increasing the company's U.S. assets in news and sports programming and adding publishing and multimedia to its area of control (Wasko, 2001, pp.36-37). Although Disney's global leadership was ousted by the merging of AOL/Time Warner in 2000 (Drotner, 2002, p.113), the company's brand value remains the leading brand name in the media/entertainment industry today (Best Global Brands, 2006). The Company generates more than \$23 billion a year in revenues, an income which is only surpassed by AOL/Time Warner. In fact, the Company is so big, Demers writes, "that its yearly sales exceed the gross domestic product of more than half of the countries in the world" (1999, p.2).

Disney remains the chief producer of children animation films despite the fact that its overall leadership in the global media landscape was overtaken by the above mentioned merging of AOL/Time Warner. This, according to Raffaelli, can be attributed to Disney's continuous improvement for excellence in the animation industry: "Disney was the first to make a colour cartoon (*Flowers and Trees*, 1932); the first to build the 'multiplane' camera, the first to study and perfect the technique of lip synchronization. Nothing was left unexplored in the quest for maximum credibility" (1999, p.115).

A look at the Disney's achievement unveils that the company has produced some of the most successful films in history. The list includes the first animated film with sound,

Steamboat Willie, which starred Mickey Mouse, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Fantasia*, *Flubber*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Lion King*, *Pocahontas*, *Toy Story*, *A Bug's Life*, *The Love Bug*, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, *Old Yeller*, *The Great Locomotive Chase*, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, *Dumbo*, *Bambi*, *Pinocchio*, *The Reluctant Dragon*, *Song of the South*, *The Living Desert*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin*, *Three Men and the Baby*, *Good Morning Vietnam*, *101 Dalmatians*, and *Pretty Woman* (Demers, 1999, p.2).

The Walt Disney Company today is far more than an animation factory due to its long standing policies of diversification and synergy which make up part of the reason for Disney's extended and consistent presence in the leading pack of the global media conglomerates. True, synergy—the cooperative action of different parts for a greater effect (Wasko, 2003, p.170)—is not a new development for the Walt Disney Company. “From its inception”, Wasko writes, “Disney created strong brands or characters that were marketed in various forms (mostly through films and merchandise) throughout the world...Over the past few decades, the possibilities for synergy have expanded even further with the addition of cable, home video, and other new media outlets” (2003, p.171). The diversification of Disney's venture today has led the company to own multi-faceted media/entertainment industries. In attempting to exhibit these tentacles of Disney and its position in the global media landscape, Herman and McChesney list the company's holdings as follows:

- Several major film, video and television production studios including Disney and Buena Vista;
- Theme parks and resorts, including Disneyland, DisneyWorld, and stakes in major theme parks in France and Japan;

- Consumer products, including more than 550 Disney retail stores worldwide and products that capitalize upon the Disney ‘brands’;
- Three music labels including Hollywood Records and Walt Disney Records;
- Book publishing, including Hyperion Books and Chilton Publications;
- The U.S. ABC television and radio networks;
- Ten U.S. television stations and twenty-one U.S. radio stations;
- A 14 percent stake in Young Broadcasting, which owns eight television U.S. stations;
- U.S. and global cable television channels Disney Channel, ESPN and ESPN2;
- Holdings in Lifetime (50 percent), Arts and Entertainment (37 percent), and History Channel cable TV channels;
- Newspaper and magazine publishing, including seven U.S. daily newspapers and three specialty magazine publishing companies;
- A 20 to 33 percent ownership in five European commercial television companies: the continent-wide Eurosport network, the Spanish Tesauro SA, the German terrestrial channel RTL2, the German cable channel TM3, and Scandinavian Broadcasting System SA, which capitalizes upon the commercial broadcasting boom across Northern and Central Europe, launching new channels in Austria, Hungary, and Finland in 1997;
- Controlling in the NHL Anaheim Mighty Ducks and the Major League Baseball Anaheim Angels;
- A 20 percent stake in TVA, a Brazilian pay-TV company (1997, pp.81-82).

Such diversity inevitably enabled Disney to win the attention of a considerable amount of global audience. According to Wasko, “[w]hile exposure to Disney products is typically strong during childhood, some of the same products are still enjoyed by adults, while other products are specifically designed for adults” (2001, p.185). “Despite the oft-cited emphasis on children,” Wasko continues, “Disney’s products cut across age groups in assorted ways and thus may have multiple meanings” (2001, p.185). This implies that Disney’s diversified activities are aimed at a variety of consumers, not just parents and children. Such diversity and complexity calls for a consideration of multiple factors that define Disney audiences. In this regard, Wasko states:

...to understand “Disney audiences,” it is necessary to consider the highly promoted image of Disney as a brand, the widespread availability and unique exposure to Disney products at different periods of peoples’ lives, especially, but not only during childhood, as well as other audience differences, including class, gender, race and nationality (2001, p.186).

3.3 Walt Disney: A Historical Background

The Walt Disney Company for much of the 20th century and beyond has been a leading name in family entertainment, and it consistently ranked among America's top 50 corporations (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2007). Since its genesis in the early 1920's to this day, Disney is probably one of the most familiar brand names in the world and remains, if not uncontested, a forerunner in the entertainment business. The fact that Disney enjoys such a pervading success contemporarily may not be singled out as a unique subject of interest as there exist a number of other companies with success stories worldwide. However, what makes Disney distinct and at times inimitable is the rather intimate relationship that it has created in its more than 80 years of history of existence with the children of the world orchestrated by its creative personnel who managed to lift up the Disney brand so high that it may prove difficult to ignore. As Budd observes:

Compounded of the company's shrewdly constructed imaginary personalities, stories, themed fantasy spaces, and merchandise that tap into trans-cultural myths of magic and childhood innocence, the general reputation for quality goods and services, and the indigenous responses of millions of children and adults all over the world, all tied highly together with highly professional image, brand, and infrastructural management, this aura, this trusted reputation, is the envy of many other multinational corporation (2005, p.24).

Such tradition, such system, as many would argue, is primarily attributed to and generated by the founder of the company himself, Walter Elias Disney, who exercised strong ownership, leadership and management during his life. As Janet Wasko has argued, it is sometimes “difficult to separate the history of Disney the man from that of Disney the company” (2001, p.7).

Walter Elias Disney was born in Chicago, Illinois, on December 05, 1901. A fourth son for his father Elias Disney and his mother Flora Call, Walt developed what would later become his passion and profession in Kansas, a place where he could sharpen his artistic tilt when he began to study cartooning with a correspondence school and attended classes at the Kansas City Art Institute and School of Design later at his stay. While winding up the significance of Kansas City to Walt Disney in contrast to his childhood town of Marcelene, Gabler narrates:

If Marceline had been where Walt Disney forged his fantasy, Kansas City was where he forged his personal mythology...For Walt Disney, Marceline had to be recaptured, but Kansas City, the grit against which his life would rub, had to be remembered to show from what he had risen. In Kansas City, Walt Disney not only began to channel his escape; he began to create the idea of Walt Disney—the idea of someone who beat poverty, hardship and neglect (2006, p.19).

After serving his country at WWI in France, Walt returned to Kansas City, where he began his career as an advertising cartoonist. Here, in 1920, he created and marketed his first original animated cartoons and later perfected a new method for combining live action and animation (Walt Disney: A Biography, n.d). Disney met commercial artist Ub Iwerks, who

would later become an important part of Disney's future success, and the duo started their own business, drawing cartoon advertisements and illustrations. However, "neither partner seemed to think of Iwerks-Disney as a long-term proposition" (Gabler, 2006, p.86), thus ending up bankrupt in the early 1920s. The failure occurred partly as a New York film distributor cheated the young producers after they did a series of animated cartoon sketches called Laugh-O-grams and the pilot film for a series of seven-minute fairy tales that combined both live action and animation, *Alice in Wonderland*.

October 16, 1923 marks the official establishment of the Disney Company, initially called The Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio, with Walt doing his cartoons and Roy taking care of the finances. Soon after, Walt married Lillian Bounds who bore him two daughters, Diane and Sharon.

After a disappointing spell in 1927 during which the now-famous betrayal of Charlie Mintz and his staff, in which Mintz stole away Walt's then-popular cartoon character *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit*, Disney's next creation marked the legendary upheaval of Disney the man and Disney the company. Initially called by Walt as Mortimer, Mickey Mouse has become "the most popular character of Walt Disney's animated cartoons and arguably the most popular cartoon star in the world" (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2007). Pat Williams while describing the importance of Mickey Mouse to the Disney Company suggests:

Though the family of Disney characters grew with the introduction of Goofy, Donald Duck, Pluto, and more, Mickey remained the distinctive Disney symbol. He appeared in every conceivable guise, from a cowboy to a fireman, from a ghost-buster to a giant-killer. He was Walt's alter ego. His battles against Pegleg Pete symbolized Walt's battle over adversity. Mickey always found creative ways to triumph—and so did Walt (2004, p.54).

The introduction of Mickey Mouse brought financial stability to the Disney company and encouraged Walt and co-producer Ub Iwerks (now back together with Walt again) after the disappointment they encountered in *Oswald, the Lucky Rabbit*. Walt himself esteems the significance of his legendary creation very high: "Mickey mouse to me is a symbol of independence. Born of necessity, the little fellow literally freed us of immediate worry" (Williams, 2004, p.54).

Walt and Iwerks animated two cartoons featuring Mickey Mouse, *Plane Crazy* and *Gallopin' Gaucho* but it was *Steamboat Willie* which appeared in November 1928 that was the first official Mickey Mouse cartoon to be released. *Steamboat Willie* was historical in that it is the first cartoon featuring synchronized sound, with Disney providing Mickey's voice (Encarta Encyclopedia, 2007).

The success with Mickey Mouse has brought Walt enormous motivation and he began making the Silly Symphony cartoon series. In 1932, the film *Flowers and Trees* earned Disney the first of his 32 personal Academy Awards for the best short cartoon category as the studio became a pioneer in colour animation. Five years later, he released *The Old Mill*,

“the first short subject to utilize the multiplane camera technique” (Encarta Encyclopedia, 2007).

Walt was a kind of person who was never satisfied with what he had already accomplished and soon he was involved in another mammoth film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* which became the company’s and the world’s first animated feature. This ambitious project charged the company a massive \$1.5 million by the time it was completed in 1937. Many questioned the sanity of spending this much money on an animated feature, and the film came to be known as “Disney’s Folly” as a result. But *Snow White* was “an immediate hit, setting attendance records around the USA, with box office grosses of \$8.5 million within its first three months of release” (Wasko, 2001, p.14). *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* received great acclaim, earning a special Academy Award and placed a historical input to world of animation. Gabler reports:

And at least as far as animation was concerned, it ushered in a new era. After *Snow White*, one could not really go back to Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. One had to move forward. As Walt told a visitor who had come to the studio not long after the feature’s release, “We became aware that the days of the animated cartoon, as we had known it, were over. Now everything would be different” (2006, p.131).

The next 25 years after the release of *Snow White* saw Walt produce the classic cartoons and animations that the world cherishes to this day including *Fantasia* (1940) which successfully synchronized classical music and animation; *Pinocchio* (1940), the outset of Disney in translating classic fairy tales to feature animations; and *Bambi* The movie was

followed by other successful feature-length films, including *Fantasia* (1940), which combined classical music with animation; *Pinocchio* (1940), further establishing the Disney pattern of turning classic fairy tales into animated features; and *Bambi* (1942).

The Walt Disney Company enjoyed a massive success in the 1950s to become one of the chief producers of live-action and animated film for theatres and television. Animated features produced in this period include *Peter Pan* (1953), *Lady and the Tramp* (1955), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1961), and *The Sword in the Stone* (1963), whereas live-action movies such as *Treasure Island* (1950), *Robin Hood* (1951), *Old Yeller* (1957), *The Shaggy Dog* (1959), and *The Absent-Minded Professor* (1961) also received great acclamation.

Animation was not as popular as it used to be and Disney decided to invest his resources more on live-action films in the 1960's. *Swiss Family Robinson* (1960), *The Absent-Minded Professor* (1961), *That Darn Cat* (1965), and *Follow Me, Boys!* (1966) were among the live-action films of this period, but it was *Mary Poppins* (1964), a combination of live action with animation, "which made \$31million in the USA, and \$45 million worldwide, as well as being nominated for 13 Academy Awards" (Wasko, 2001, p.22).

In 1955, Walt was yet successful in opening Disneyland, a huge amusement park in Anaheim, California. Featuring historical reconstructions, displays, and rides—many based on characters and themes from Disney films—it became a successful, well-known tourist attraction. The company expanded this concept with Disney World, which opened in 1971 near Orlando, Florida; Tokyo Disneyland, introduced in Japan in 1983; and Euro

Disneyland (now Disneyland Paris), debuting in France in 1992 (Encarta Encyclopedia, 2007).

After a legendary achievement in his lifetime, Walt Disney died on 15 December 1966, after a serious circulatory collapse following surgery for lung cancer.

3.4 The Disney Empire

The 1960's mark an important period in Disney's history as the company launched a diversified approach in its foundation. As part of this transformation, film products found new dimensions with the production of more live action films alongside animation features, and the introduction of televised broadcasts, theme parks and merchandising as well.

The 1970's may not represent a particularly successful period in Disney's development, part of the reason being "the attempt to cling to the past, attempting to reproduce successful Disney films and avoid the changes being adopted by the rest of the industry" (Wasko, 2001, pp.30-31). Films like *The Apple Dumpling Gang*, *The Unidentified Flying Oddball*, *Night Crossing*, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, and *Trenchcoat* failed to clinch a place in the box office whereas rejected proposals for films like *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *ET: The Extra Terrestrial* eventually became highly successful, both of which became huge box office hits. According to Wasko (2001: p.31), Disney's share of the box office was less than 4 percent by the early 1980's.

With new executives and management known as “Team Disney” installed in 1984 and led by one of the company’s most successful Chief Executive Officers, the 1990s were the Disney Company’s most financially successful decade in history. The revival was heralded by the release of *The Little Mermaid* (1989), an animated feature regarded as Disney’s best such effort in more than 40 years. More animated blockbusters followed, including *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), and *Fantasia 2000* (1999). The company had experimented with computerized animation for the live-action feature *Tron* (1982) and realized the technology’s potential with the enormously successful *Toy Story* (1995) and *Toy Story 2* (1999). Live-action features have also found success, especially *101 Dalmatians* (1996), a remake of Disney’s own 1961 animated feature (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2007).

The 1990s decade was the heyday of Disney’s dramatic progress exhibited after the takeover of Team Disney. Disney has become the world’s largest media company with \$16.5 billion annual revenues after its takeover of Capital Cities/ABC in 1995, a move that tremendously enhanced the company’s position in television, sports programming, and international marketing, as well as adding publishing and multimedia to its operations (Wasko, 2001, pp.36-37). Although Disney’s leadership in the global media landscape was ousted by the merger of AOL/Time Warner in 2000, “none challenge Disney as the primary purveyor of entertainment nor approach its perennial popularity and box-office success in animated feature films” (Artz, 2005, p.75).

In addition to incorporating Capital Cities/ABC, Disney bought Miramax Pictures in 1993 which produced popular hits like *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *The English Patient* (1996). By then Disney had established itself as a colossal media conglomerate in the world primarily because of the foundation of the Buena Vista Home Entertainment which served as “the international coordinator of Disney’s home video and interactive business, followed one year later by the formation of the Walt Disney International, a centralized branch coordinating all overseas activities” (Drotner, 2002, p.113). It was also in the early 1990s that Euro Disney theme park, now called Disneyland Europe, was opened outside of Paris in France. *The Lion King*, one of the most successful animated films produced by Disney in its history, was released in 1994 to become the company’s most profitable movie up to that time. The mid 1990s also saw Disney establish a partnership with Pixar Animation Studios which succeeded in producing big hits like *Toy Story* (1995), *A Bug’s Life* (1998), *Monsters, Inc.*(2001), and *Finding Nemo* (2003). As of this, the company announced it was abandoning hand-drawn animation in favor of the more popular digitally animated movies in 2003.

Although negotiations between Disney and Pixar to extend their lucrative partnership broke down in 2004, the former was finally able to acquire the latter in January 2006 with \$7.4 billion stock deal. In the mean time, though ABC was able to produce hit TV shows like *Desperate Housewives* and *Lost*, “Disney continued to feel the sting of losing the title of animation king” (Encarta Encyclopedia, 2007). Today, Disney’s empire is made up of a number of holdings including Walt Disney Pictures, Miramax Films, Touchstone Pictures, and Hollywood Pictures; Buena Vista Entertainment; the Disneyland theme parks; the Mighty Ducks of Anaheim professional hockey team; ABC Television Network; ABC

Radio Network; ESPN and ESPN2 sports broadcasting networks; and a number of newspapers and other print publications (Wasko, 2001).

3.5 Walt Disney: Operation Segments & Activities

The Walt Disney Company today is not the same as we know it fifty years ago. It is a company that is no longer solely labeled “the animation factory” as it used to be some time ago. Today, the Walt Disney Company has diversified its products much more than its cartoon and animation characters which lifted up its name very high. This should not, however, be understood in the sense that Disney is no longer a forerunner in the animation industry, but rather a mega media outlet that spread its influence to news, sports, live action feature films, theme parks, merchandising, broadcasting and publications, which is perceived by some as a policy against classic Disney. Budd and Kirsch argue:

But as the corporation has grown beyond its classic animated films into live-action features, theme parks, television, radio, publishing, sports, new media, and even urban planning and development, both its internal practices and its attempts to control its increasingly complex, now global public environment have generated multiplying conflicts that begin to contradict the classic Disney publicity image (2005, p.52).

The influence Disney enjoys across the globe today is very difficult to ignore, if not to take part. As Wasko has noted, Disney has carefully designed a system of controlling its products, characters, and images and built a reputation to itself as “a company that produces positive, wholesome, family and children entertainment” (2001, p.70).

As a result, one can notice Disney's contemporary policy of diversification as an important feature of the company's global outreach. It is as such equally important to understand the operation segments or kinds of products and services Disney offers to have a picture of its media dimensions. In this respect Wasko (2001) dissects the operation segments of the Disney Company into creative content, consumer products, internet and direct marketing, theme parks and resorts and media networks.

Disney's creative contents include theatrical films such as *The Little Mermaid*, *The Lion King* and *Beauty and the Beast*. Disney's theatrical releases are not associated only with family-oriented, PG-rated animated films but also the likes of *Pulp Fiction*, *Scream*, *Judge Dredd*, and *Armageddon*, under its labels of Touchstone, Hollywood or Caravan. Home videos make up another feature of Disney's creative contents package which primarily were set up in DVD and VHS formats to release its classic library features. Later, successful animated features of recent times were also released in these formats including the likes of *The Return of Jafar*, *Aladdin and the King of Thieves*, *Beauty and the Beast: The Enchanted Christmas*, *Lion King II: Simba's Pride*, *Pocahontas: Journey to a New World*, and *The Little Mermaid II: Return to the Sea*. Television is yet another ingredient of Disney's creative content which became particularly conspicuous after the takeover of ABC. Examples amongst the many successful animated series comprise *101 Dalmatians: The Series*, *The Lion King's Timon and Pumbaa*, *The New Adventures of Winnie and Pooh*, and *Disney's Hercules*. *Mouseworks*, which featured Disney's classic characters of Mickey, Minnie, Donald, Pluto, and Goofy is another series that came to the screen to a whole new generation in 1999. As part of its creative content project,

Disney is also involved in audio products and music publishing through Buena Vista Music Group which coordinates Disney's various recorded music businesses.

Consumer products are very important components of Disney's marketing venture as well. These merchandise include children's products, educational products, and arts and collectibles. In fact, as far as the tradition of collecting Disney's pieces of art are concerned, Wasko points out that "collecting Disney merchandise has become so popular that trade shows, books and periodicals are devote to its display and sale" (2001: p.51).

In addition to internet and direct marketing and theme parks and resorts, Disney's other most notable activity is that of media networks. With the takeover of the ABC network Disney was able to join the news production business. The company also set up a radio program following the Capital Cities/ABC deal and initiated Radio Disney in 1997 especially designed for children.

The description so far, however, should not be taken as a complete presentation of Disney's operation segments as the vastness of the company and its endeavors present a challenge that is difficult, if not impossible, to provide a complete picture. As Wasko suggests, "it is impossible to include all of this enormous corporation's products and business. However, it is still important to look more closely at the extent of Disney's far-flung empire" (2001, p.42).

3.6 Conclusion

The overview on the Walt Disney has provided a general idea about the company's position in the global media landscape, its historical development, global operation, and types of goods and services of the company. The discussion so far has pointed such important features of the company as the genesis of the world of animation in its studios, its consistent presence in the global media leadership position, its contemporary policy of diversification of goods and services and the appeal of its media content to the children of the world in particular and the global community in general.

Chapter Four

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

This study attempts to investigate how upper-middle-class children in Addis Ababa, in the midst of their everyday lived reality, make meaning out of the animation and cartoon films of Disney. In order to carry out this research, I have employed a qualitative research methodology. The chapter begins with an introduction of the nature of the research design and procedure in which the philosophical underpinnings of the methodological approach of this study—qualitative research—is discussed. Also included in this section is a discussion of the epistemological foundations of reception research which derives from the qualitative research tradition and which makes up the central ground of this study. Later in this chapter, I have discussed the data collection methods I have employed in the study, namely focus group interviews and individual in-depth interviews alongside participants' profile, sampling and selection techniques, interview setting, etc. In each case, I have attempted to describe the methodological significance of the approaches I have used to the theoretical framework of the study.

4.2 Research Methodology: Qualitative Research—Philosophical Underpinnings

As illuminated in the first chapter, the methodological approach in this study is principally qualitative. Fossey and associates attribute the aim of qualitative research to “address[ing] questions concerned with developing an understanding of the meaning and experience dimensions of humans’ life and social worlds” (2002, p.717). Always at the heart of qualitative research is the attempt “to study human actions from the perspective of the social actors themselves,” while describing and understanding, rather than explaining human behavior are the chief goals of studies using qualitative approach (Babbie & Mouton, 2001, p.270). In essence, the purpose of qualitative studies is to describe a phenomenon from the participant’s point of view, the intention of the researcher being listening to the voice of participants or observing them in their natural environments (Orb et al., 2001, p.94).

It is fundamentally this quality of “attempting to view the world through the eyes (perspective) of the actors themselves” which is strongly tied to the epistemological foundations of qualitative research that addresses the question of methodological appropriateness to this study. Such is a principal feature of what came to be understood as phenomenology. The phenomenological theme, according to Bryman, is important to qualitative researchers as it takes the actor’s perspective as “the empirical point of departure” (Bryman, 1984, p.70). In describing the concept further, Bogdan and Tylor state:

The phenomenologist views human behavior as a product of how people interpret the world. The task of the phenomenologist, and for us, the qualitative methodologists, is to capture this process of interpretation. In order to grasp the meanings of a person's behavior, the phenomenologist attempts to see things from that person's point of view (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, pp.13-14).

In this light, the researcher should become more than just a mere interviewer or participant observer. "He or she," according to Babbie and Mouton, "has to make a deliberate attempt to put themselves in the shoes of the people they are observing and studying and try and understand their actions, decisions, behavior, practices, ritual and so on, from their perspective" (2001, p.271). Babbie and Mouton further state that the emphasis on the insider perspective or as it is called in anthropological literature, the "emic" perspective, is especially important "when there are huge (perceived) differences between the researcher and the actors being studied" (2001, p.271). This is of a significant relevance to this study as the actors or targets of the study, as I have stated in the first chapter, are children of ages between 8-9 and 11-12 whereby the worldview they exhibit, the mindset they make up and the values they favour and ignore are supposedly dissimilar and divergent from that of mine.

Qualitative methodology, therefore, represents a divergent paradigm of research tradition which is fundamentally different from quantitative methodology. One key difference of qualitative research over quantitative research tradition is its flexibility. Whereas qualitative methods are typically more flexible, allowing greater spontaneity and adaptation of the interaction between the researcher and the study participant, quantitative research

methods are fairly inflexible (Natasha et al., 2005, p.4). Participants in qualitative research have the opportunity to respond more elaborately and in greater detail than is typically the case with quantitative methods, as the relationship between the researcher and the participant is often less formal than in quantitative research.

Another facet that illustrates the apparent disparity between the two paradigms is the understanding and appliance of setting. As opposed to the somewhat artificial settings of quantitative methods such as surveys and experiments which may employ setting up laboratory conditions, assuming subjects to groups and drawing samples, the appropriateness of qualitative research in studying attitudes and behaviors is best understood within their natural setting (Babbie and Mouton, 2001, p.270). In the latter case, the emphasis on the “natural” is related to the “normal course of events” wherein the qualitative researcher wishes to observe events and actions as they happen without any intervention or interference.

Although qualitative and quantitative researchers are interested in the description and understanding of actions and events, qualitative description primarily calls attention to what Babbie and Mouton refer as “thick description”—a lengthy description that captures the sense of actions as they occur, placing events in contexts that are understandable to the actors themselves (2001, p.272); this is contrary to the quantitative, statistical descriptions that make up the foundations of quantitative research. In illuminating such variance further, Fade suggests:

Qualitative research does not seek to show statistical associations or cause and effect relationships. Instead, the emphasis is on describing or illuminating social phenomena and human experience (Fade, 2003, p.140).

Apart from the features discussed so far, central to the qualitative research tradition is the attitude of understanding events, actions and processes in their context. Whereas defining and describing natural contexts of subjects or actors of a given study is of paramount importance to the qualitative researcher, the quantitative researcher seeks to analyze variables and the relationships between them in isolation or in artificial settings primarily for the sake of insuring generalizability. In this light, Natasha et al. argue:

Although findings from qualitative data can often be extended to people with characteristics similar to those in the study population, *gaining a rich and complex understanding of a specific social context or phenomenon typically takes precedence over eliciting data that can be generalized to other geographical areas or populations* (2005, p.2, emphasis added).

Here, it is important to take in to account the fact that context is not only imperative for the sake of a better description and eventual understanding of events and actions at stake, but also provides the boundary for generalizing results, if there is the need at all. On the subject of generalizability, Popay et al. emphasize that “the aim is to make logical generalizations to a theoretical understanding of a similar class of phenomena rather than probabilistic generalizations to a population” (1998, p.311). In another wording, generalizability, according to Horsburgh refers to “the extent to which *theory* developed within one study may be *exported* to provide explanatory theory for the experiences of other individuals who are in comparable *situations*” (2003, p.314, emphasis on original).

4.3 Research Design: Reception Analysis—Epistemological Foundations

In accord with the theoretical standpoints of the research methods discussed in this chapter which reflect how reception studies ought to be done, it would be both appropriate and necessary to briefly elucidate the epistemological foundations of reception analysis. Reception studies grew popular in the 1980s giving a special emphasis upon the ways that audiences receive media messages; how they react to their reading, listening and viewing; and what audiences do with that experience, and what meanings they make of it (Watson & Hill, 1984, p.246).

A great deal of recent work has focused on the way that audiences resist the constructions of reality preferred by the mass media and construct their own, often oppositional, meanings for media texts. Since much of this work is concerned with detailed investigation of the audience's reception of media messages, it is generally known as reception analysis. According to Williams, reception analysis emphasizes “the ability of audiences to appropriate the meanings they wanted from popular media and cultural forms” (2003, p.199).

Broadly speaking, reception analysis has developed from a combination of traditional qualitative research strategies. In this light, Jensen argues that reception analysis “combines a qualitative approach to media as texts, producing and circulating meaning in society, with an empirical interest in the recipients as co-producers of meaning” (1988, p.3). In highlighting the blend of qualitative approaches notable in the reception analysis tradition, Jensen is referring to the *uses-and-gratification research* (U&G) which deals with what people

do with media, and *textual analysis* which draws on the forms of semiotics and discourse analysis. Although reception analysis shares an interest in *uses-and-gratification research* and *textual analysis*, he notes that the former “seldom moved beyond the psychological relevances of media content for the individual and, further, that these studies have hardly paid sufficient attention to that which is the origin of audience gratifications,” whereas the latter has limited its scope to “the text” with the ambition of “drawing conclusions about the ideological and other social implications of media texts” (Jensen, 1988, p.3).

In reception analysis, audiences are seen, as some writers, most notably John Fiske, suggest, as “active producers of meaning”, not consumers of media meanings. They decode media texts in ways which are related to their social and cultural circumstances and the ways that they individually experience those circumstances (1987: p.71). This argument lifts the position of the audience from being a mere consumer of media messages to constructors of meaning, as opposed to being understood as textual subjects who are seen as relatively powerless and inactive. In placing the role of the audience more than just a textual subject, Fiske argues:

The social subject has a history, lives in a particular social formation, (a mix of class, gender, age, region, etc.), and is constituted by a complex cultural history that is both social and textual. The subjectivity results from “real” social experience and from mediated or textual experience...This social subjectivity is more influential in the construction of meanings than the textually produced subjectivity which exists only at the moment of reading (1987, p.62).

In effect, reception studies have increasingly emphasized “the power of audiences, emanating from their critical and creative abilities, to resist the media” (Williams, 2003, 201). As a result, rather than stressing on the media and cultural audiences as solitary

producers of meaning, reception studies emphasize the pre-eminence of audiences in the production of media meaning and popular culture.

The contribution of reception analysis to media research, according to Jensen, is as diverse as other research traditions although he identifies two aspects that are predominantly manifested. Firstly, as reception is a relatively open activity of making sense, “so that audiences reformulate or perhaps, oppose what is arguably the dominant meaning of the media text” (1988, p.5). This implies that audiences may create their own preferred association between media discourses and everyday discourses that deviates from the ‘expected’ text meanings. Secondly, reception can be characterized as “an ongoing and complex process of affirming or reformulating categories of understanding,” in which media and their contents “are not just accounts of reality but *resources* for daily living and for situating oneself in relation to a range of social and political issues and, possibly, acting on them” (1988, p.5).

As pointed earlier, reception analysis is associated with the qualitative empirical methods of data collection. According to Jensen, although participant observation has been employed to document the every day use of media in anthropological approaches, “it is the *in-depth interview*, in different varieties, which has most frequently been employed to probe the audience experience of media” (1988, p.4). Jensen further highlights that group interviews have proven relevant for the decodings of reception studies. In the same way, as in-depth interviews and focus group interviews are the primary methods of data gathering

for this study, a discussion of their purpose, relevance and application is discussed in the following section.

4.4 Data Collection Methods

In my study, I employed a two stage data collection design in which the stages are linked to one another very closely in such a way that one would offer a lead or draw inferences from the other. The following section discusses these methods—namely focus group interviews and individual in-depth interviews—and how they are going to be employed in the data gathering process.

4.4.1 *The Focus Group Interviews*

4.4.1.1 *Background*

Focus group interviews have turned out to be one of the most popular means for analyzing media audiences especially in the past two decades and, according to Deacon and associates (1999, p.55), have become “closely associated with the *reception analysis* paradigm” (emphasis on original). Although the history and the origin of the focus group research method further back in time and had been applied across various fields of studies, it is with the rise of reception research during the 1980s that it got momentum to play a significant role out of the approaches forwarded by communications and media researchers (Hansen et al., 1998, p.258).

Natasha and colleagues define focus group as “a qualitative data collection method in which one or two researchers and several participants meet as a group to discuss a given research topic” (2005, p.64). Lunt, on the other hand, states that the focus group method “involves bringing together a group, or, more often, a series of groups, of subjects to discuss an issue in the presence of a moderator” (1996, p.80). A variant definition from Carey defines focus group technique as “using a semi structured group session, moderated by a group leader, held in an informal setting, with a purpose of collecting information on a designated topic” (1994, p.226).

Most authors agree that the chief advantage of focus group interviews is the deliberate and purposeful use of interaction in order to generate data (Merton et al., 1990; Kitzinger, 1996; Morgan, 1996). Focus group interviews encourage participants to influence each other through their presence and their reactions to what other people say. Because not everyone will have the same views and experiences in aspects like age, gender, education, access to resources, and other factors, a variety of viewpoints will likely be expressed by participants (Natasha et al., 2005, 52).

Focus group interviews have an edge over individual interviews in such a way that they offer dynamics and ways of “eliciting, stimulating, and elaborating audience interpretations” (Hansen et al., 1998, p.262). What this essentially means is that the interaction and dynamism exhibited in group interviews takes us closer to everyday life experiences better than personal accounts conveyed in individual interviews. In relation to

this, Morgan states that “the hallmark of focus groups is the explicit use of the group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in the group” (1988, p.12).

Although there is a tendency by some critics that focus groups are liable to an inevitable domination and influence of some members and marginalization of others, and thus a bent towards a common frame, Liebes and Katz (1990) argue that this same feature activates a more natural form of data generation:

Group dynamics are such that opinion and participation are not equally weighted; some people have disproportionate influence. But real life is like that: opinions are not as much the property of individuals as public-opinion polling would have us think. Opinions arise out of interaction, and ‘opinion leaders’ have disproportionate influence (Liebes and Katz 1990: p.29).

Fontana and Frey summarize the advantages of focus group interviews over individual interviews by highlighting that group interviews “are relatively inexpensive to conduct and often produce rich data that are cumulative and elaborative; they can be stimulating for respondents, aiding recall; and the format is flexible” (2000, p.652). Nonetheless, as every other method, group interviews have their Achilles heel which researchers need to watch out:

The results [of group interviews] cannot be generalized; the emerging group culture may interfere with individual expression, and the group may be dominated by one person; and “groupthink” is a possible outcome. The requirement for interviewer skills are greater than those for individual

interviewing because of the group dynamics that are present (Fontana and Frey 2000: p.652)

4.4.1.2 Profile of the Focus Group Participants

I have selected my subjects for the focus group interview from what Deacon et al. identify as ‘preconstituted groups,’—“social and professional groups that already exist” (1999: p.56)—which in my own case are upper-middle-class children who attend their education in private and prestigious public schools in Addis Ababa (Asai Public School, St. Mary’s School and Gibson Youth Academy). Drawing participants from ‘naturally’ existing communities, according to Hansen et al. (1998, p.256), is a common practice among audience researchers using the focus group method as these are people who “already lived, worked, or socialized together” (Kitzinger, 1993, 272).

I have categorized the sample units of the study into two groups taking age as a parameter with the first set containing children who belong to the 6-7 age group whereas the second are in the range of 11-12. I have arranged this following Drotner’s suggestion that “the youngest age band represents the core group of juvenile Disney users, while the older age band represents children who are growing out of Disney while still being objects of the company’s globalized production and distribution pattern” (Drotner, 2002, 115). In order to identify where children with the specified age groups are located, I managed to negotiate with concerned officials of the schools who were kind enough to let me browse through the student’s birth records. My assessment revealed that the first group of children largely

falls between grade levels 1 and 2 while the second group is predominantly available in the range between grade levels 4 and 6. Such being the framework, however, some participants out of the range of the specified age groups slipped through the focus groups. I predicted that as long as the children's age is not less than six (the smallest age of the sampling frame) and not older than 12 (the oldest age of the sampling frame), there wouldn't be a significant variation that would affect the group interaction and dynamics. Only few children with ages 8 and 9 slipped in the first age group, who, as I have later found out, positively contributed to the group discussion.

4.4.1.3 Sampling and Recruitment of Groups

Sampling in qualitative research is primarily concerned with “information richness” (Kuzel, 1992, p.22) in which two essential considerations—appropriateness and adequacy—take central stage (Morse and Field, 1995). In other words, sampling in qualitative research needs to take in to account the importance of identifying appropriate participants who can best inform the study and also the need to recruit adequate sources of information to successfully address the research question and develop a full-fledged description.

My sampling strategy is not random as is usually the case in quantitative research methods, but rather ‘purposive’ or ‘judgmental’ in that “selection of participants is made on the basis of their ability to provide relevant data on the area under investigation” (Horsburgh, 2003, p.311). According to Popay et al., in qualitative research, “randomness and

representativeness are of less concern than relevance” (1998, p.346) as generalizability is not the purpose at stake. If there is such a thing called generalizability in qualitative research, the aim should be making “logical generalizations to a theoretical understanding of a similar class of phenomena rather than probabilistic generalizations to a population” (Popay, 1998, p.346).

Accordingly I have employed ‘theoretical’ and ‘snowball’ sampling techniques which fall under the overall purposive sampling class. I have used these seemingly similar but different variants of purposive sampling technique at different levels of the focus group interview. I used theoretical sampling technique at the initial stages of the focus group interview to select specifically those children with a relatively high exposure to Disney animation films. Morgan (1998) argues that theoretical sampling is a preferred option for focus group interviewing because it is a method that is not concerned about representativeness and generalizability but which rather attempts to bring together people who have similar characteristics. Theoretical sampling “deliberately seeks out respondents who are most likely to aid theoretical development by extending and even confounding emerging hypothesis” (Deacon et al., 1999, 52). In this manner, I deliberately selected children who exhibited higher affiliation with Disney animation films after a preliminary screening. According to Hansen et al. (1998), it is quite customary to employ preliminary screening questions to select the type of participants looked for before formally inviting them to participate in a group discussion. To bring this into effect, I let the older age group (11-12), a total of 197 children, write simple essays which required them to reflect upon (a)

which Disney animation features they have seen; (b) what film(s) they liked most and why; and (c) which characters they liked most and why. Accordingly children who exhibited high exposure and familiarity and good analytical skill were selected and invited to the focus groups. Because the smaller age group (7-8) were too small to write essays, I managed to negotiate with their English teachers to hold discussions instead. Based on themes that are similar to the essay questions, the teachers let the children express their views. Those kids with better exposure and understanding were selected and invited to the focus groups after recommendations from their teachers.

In qualitative research, sampling is an on going process and is thus not pre-determined. According to Fossey and associates, “sampling in qualitative research continues until themes emerging from the research are fully developed, in the sense that diverse instances have been explored, and further sampling is redundant” (2002, p.726). This situation is sometimes referred to as ‘saturation’ during which patterns are recurring and no new information emerges (Kuzel, 1992; MacDougal and Fudge, 2001). In this understanding, after completing the interviews with the six focus groups I had established, I decided to look for other groups perusing new information and knowledge. In order to get the subjects, I employed a slightly different sampling method—the snowball sampling technique—which helped me make up two other focus groups in a relatively shorter period of time. While admitting snowball sampling is not completely distinct from theoretical sampling, Deacon et al. state that it is a sampling technique in which “initial contacts suggest further people for the researcher to approach, who in turn may suggest further

contacts” (1999, 53). I used this technique to get my additional subjects for focus groups (1) not to go through another screening process due to limitation of time; (2) because there are now initial contacts to begin with who can draw other subjects with the desired characteristics from their community; and (3) because there is a very good chance that subjects who might have been skipped during the screening process for different reasons may be included.

<i>Focus Group Membership</i>	<i>Sampling technique</i>	<i>Number invited</i>	<i>Number who attended</i>	<i>Number who did not attend</i>
Children aged 6-7 with exposure to Disney animation features from Asai Public School.	Theoretical	6	6	0
Children aged 11-12 with exposure to Disney animation features from Asai Public School.	Theoretical	6	4	2
Children aged 6-7 with exposure to Disney animation features from St. Mary’s Cathedral School.	Theoretical	6	5	1
Children aged 11-12 with exposure to Disney animation features from St. Mary’s Cathedral School.	Theoretical	6	5	1
High achieving children aged 6-7 with exposure to Disney animation features from Gibson Youth Academy	Theoretical	6	6	0
Less achieving children aged 11-12 with exposure to Disney animation features from Gibson Youth Academy	Theoretical	6	5	1
Boys aged 6-7 with exposure to Disney animation features from Asai Public School	Snowball	6	4	2
Girls aged 11-12 with exposure to Disney animation features from Cathedral	Snowball	6	4	2
Total		48	39	9

Table 1: Focus group interview participation

Although the lower than expected attendance of invited participants despite carefully addressed invitations might have come as a disappointment to me, the focus groups did go ahead with the reduced albeit valid membership. In fact, to my surprise, the most fruitful group discussions which yielded useful insights to the research design were those with the least number of participants, i.e. four.

Creating homogeneity in the group proved to be very fruitful. As Webb (2002, p.30) emphasizes, establishing homogeneity is very important when setting up a focus group as it allows participants to capitalize on their shared experiences. In my case, this was especially true as the participants were very informal in their discussion to one another, and had even ignored my presence sometimes. In most cases, the children belonged to the same class, played together or lived in homes closely situated.

4.4.1.4 The Interview Setting

Hansen et al. quoting Gamson (1992:193) stresses the need to involve people who knew each other for discussions on the “participant’s turf rather than in a bureaucratic setting” (1998: p.271). It was particularly important for me to find a place which my subjects would find ‘familiar’, ‘natural’ and ‘non- threatening’, and not ‘strange’, ‘bureaucratic’, and ‘formal’. As a result, I managed to conduct the focus group interviews with the children in one of their classrooms upon permission in their respective schools. Being well aware of the children’s very young age and their homely nature, other locations would most probably turn out intimidating and insecure for the subjects which, in effect, would negatively influence the data collection process.

The schools that I chose to draw my interviewees from and conduct the interview are all affordable to upper-middle-class families of Addis Ababa. Asai Public School is found at Kirkos sub-city. It is located on Africa Avenue some meters away from Olympia on the way

from Meskel Square to Bole. The school has recently celebrated its 40th year anniversary. It has both primary and secondary schools. Gibson Youth Academy is a privately owned school. It has compounds on both sides of Addis Ababa. The setting of the subjects of this study is the Bole Campus located in Bole behind the Alem Cinema building. Gibson Youth Academy is recently established and has grown in popularity. St. Mary's Cathedral School is a Catholic missionary school that was established in 1957. Found in Arada sub-city, the school is one of the favourites of upper-middle-class families for the enrollment of their children.

4.4.1.5 My Role as Moderator

In illustrating the role of the moderator in focus group interviews, Hansen et al. state that his/ her task is essentially to “‘facilitate’, ‘moderate’, and ‘stimulate’ discussion among the participants, not to ‘dominate’, ‘govern’, or unduly ‘lead’ such discussion” (1998, p.272). In other words, the moderator is there to learn from the group and not the reverse. In this respect, I saw my involvement in the group as an agent that makes sure the discussion is going in agreement with the topics and issues highlighted in the interview guide. I maintained a general balance in the group discussion so that neither participants are dominant nor are passive; and ensured that dialogue occurs among group members rather than between them and the moderator. Although I was in some ways significantly different from the interviewees in aspects of age, educational level, etc., I was able to establish an excellent relationship with them as I grew up passionately watching Disney's animations

and other cartoon films (as I am doing now as well)—a common ground that I understood well.

4.4.1.6 The Interview Guide

According to Dilorio et al. (1994), the purpose of the interview guide is to direct group discussion and to stimulate conversation about the research topic, as well as to ensure that all the desired information is sought. The process of developing questions of an interview guide, the way Kingry et al. (1990) describe it, should progress from general to specific, and non-threatening to more threatening, the purpose being to encourage participation from all members of the group from the start.

In order for the focus groups to remain focused on themes relevant to the research, I designed a set of thematic questions that served as an interview guide. Focus groups, although they offer a great deal of flexibility and openness, must have a ‘focus’ and it is the job of the researcher to “draw up—on the basis of the definition of the research problem and issues and phenomena to be investigated—a guide or manual for the moderator to work from and follow” (Hansen et al., 1998, 24). I drew up the themes partly from the preliminary screening essays and discussions and partly from the building blocks of the media imperialism thesis (individualism, Americanization/Westernization, etc.).

Although the interview guide (see Appendix II) is meant to maintain focus, I did not strictly follow its proceedings and grasped new themes and topics that emerged from the group discussions.

4.4.1.7 Recording the Data

I used two types of recording methods, written notes taken at the time of the focus group discussion and a tape recording. The need to employ two kinds of recording is to provide a back up copy in case a mechanical failure or human error occurs. Prior to launching the focus group discussions, I got permission from the school officials to record the proceedings on a tape cassette. I asked the group participants to introduce their name, age, and class level for the purposes of voice identification and for the sake comparing data across the specified demographic aspects. I have recorded around 375 minutes of data with an average of 47 minute for each group.

4.4.1.8 Analyzing and Reporting Focus Group Discussions

The analysis of the focus group data is likely to follow the same processes as for other sources of qualitative data (Kitzinger, 1996; Holloway and Wheeler, 1996). The dilemma that the researcher usually faces when dealing with the analysis of a large amount of textual data as in the case of focus group interviews is whether to select 'striking' or 'typical' quotes which illustrate, confirm, and enhance the researcher's pre-conceived ideas of the processes

and phenomena which are being investigated, or to remain open to new ideas, unanticipated responses, unexpected conflicts in the statements of participants and so on (Hansen et al., 1998, pp.278-279). In my own case, many of the proceedings and themes that emerged from the group discussions match with the thematic headings of the interview guide, much related to the task of identifying relevant quotes pertaining to the issue being investigated. Nevertheless, one of the most productive features of the focus group discussions was the emergence of unexpected directions out of the scope of the pre-conceived thematic categories of the interview guide. As a result, I have categorized these thematically as well

Since qualitative research claims to represent participants' own perspectives, or subjective experiences of their worlds, it is important to consider the extent to which the qualitative research report reflects the perspectives of those it claims to represent (Fossey et al., 2002, p.730). In effect, to maintain the authenticity of my claims, I used quotations (i.e. participants' own words) juxtaposed with my description and interpretation.

4.3.2 The Individual In-depth Interviews

In-depth interviewing is defined as “conversation with a specific purpose—a conversation between researcher and informant focusing on the informants' perspective of self, life and experience and expressed in his or her own words” (Minichiello et al., 1995, p. 61). In-depth interviews are useful for learning about the perspectives of individuals, as opposed

to, for example, group norms of a community, for which focus groups are more appropriate (Natasha et al., 2005, p.30). According to Beale et al., in qualitative research, “in-depth interviewing is an egalitarian approach to interviewing which develops research relationships and rapport with participants by focusing on the participant’s experiences from their own perspective. In-depth interviews are an effective qualitative method for getting people to talk about their personal feelings, opinions, and experiences. They are also an opportunity for us to gain insight into how people interpret and order the world” (2004, p.141).

My own intention of employing in-depth interviews to my study results from some of the responses and reactions I got from the focus group discussions. As a result as a follow up mechanism, I selected one participant from each focus group who exhibited better knowledge of the animation films they saw. I used semi-structured interviewing method after Bryman’s recommendation that it allows “considerable latitude for interviewees to express themselves freely” (1988, p.46). As I have learnt later, the employment of the semi-structured interview proved to be very useful as it helped me not to get out of focus and context and to maintain minimal guidance.

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to provide the methodological framework of the study. The philosophical underpinnings of qualitative research and the significance and relevance of reception analysis are described in the beginning of the chapter whereas interviewing

techniques, both focus group and in-depth, employed in the study along with other relevant information including sample size, sampling technique, data collection methods and data analysis methods are discussed later on. The following chapter discusses the context in which upper middle class children in Addis Ababa watch Disney's animated features.

Chapter Five

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a general background of the context in which upper-middle-class Ethiopian children come in contact with global media messages as represented by Disney in this study. Attempting to understand the reception of Disney by upper-middle-class Ethiopian children without consulting and investigating their everyday lived reality and the social set up they are confounded in would be incomplete and naïve. The fact that children are groups within the society on whose behalf decisions are made by their parents and their immediate caretakers, makes investigating the context of their everyday living essential.

As Babbie and Mouton state, in qualitative research, “it is only...if one understands events against the background of the whole context and how such a context confers meaning to the events concerned, that one can only claim to ‘understand’ the events” (2001, p.272). Morley also stresses that there is more than viewer’s interpretation of “what is on the screen”, and “that ‘more’ is”, in large part, “the domestic content in which viewing is conducted” (1992, p.158). “I want to argue”, writes Morley, “that it is necessary to consider the context of viewing as much as the object of viewing” (1992, p.157). He further states:

Any analysis of the films subject which does not take on board these issues of the context in which the film is consumed is, to my mind, insufficient. Unfortunately, a great deal of film theory has operated without reference to these issues, given the effect of the literary tradition in prioritizing the status of the text itself abstracted from the viewing context (1992, pp.157-8).

Given this significance of context, I will discuss some of the arguments that explain the background to the rise of the global media audience particularly Ethiopian children who have a great exposure to Disney based on historical and social aspects of the country. The historical explanation to the rise of a local global media audience is related to the recent political history of Ethiopia which saw the country shift from communist, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist ideology to a relatively liberal, capitalist and democratic system. It is argued that when the Socialist Derg regime in Ethiopia collapsed in 1991, this saw the country's exposition to Western and particularly American media contents primarily marked by the flood of Hollywood films which included Disney's animation features. Such American diffusion is noteworthy in light of the argument of Schiller (1969), one of the foremost exponents of the media imperialism thesis, who believes that aggressive selling of American media products around the world is a means of promoting the American way of life and worldview, thereby helping to maintain US power and influence. According to Schiller, the 'Americanization' of the world is the consequence of the way in which seemingly harmless media products such as Hollywood's films or children's cartoon characters reinforce audiences' attachment to consumerism and the 'American way'.

The second aspect, the social cause for Disney's penetration in making contact with local upper-middle-class children, relates to how some perceptions of the society with regard to

children end up facilitating Disney's exposure to children. In this regard, I will discuss how, for example, homes are perceived to be safe spaces for children in Ethiopia, in which, as part of forcing this tradition into effect, parents and immediate caretakers bring 'safe' animation and cartoon films so that children will not want to go out. This way, the parents become oblivious agents of Disney's penetration.

As such, firstly I will highlight some prominent features of Ethiopia in an attempt to provide a general country context. Afterwards, as I have already suggested before, I will discuss some of the recent historical developments of the country that resulted in the rise of global media audience in the local setting with especial emphasis on children's exposure to Disney. I will then discuss some of the social dynamics that determine Disney's penetration to make contact with local upper-middle-class children.

5.2 Ethiopia: General Country Context

The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) covers an area of approximately 1.13 million sq. km, which is equivalent to the combined area of France and England. The CIA Factbook (2007) estimates the current population of Ethiopia to be 76, 511, 887, making it the third-largest country on the African continent behind Nigeria and Egypt. The overwhelming majority of the population lives in rural areas, though growth in urban areas (5.6% annually) is outstripping that in the rural areas (Children's Situation in Ethiopia: Child Rights Analysis, 2002).

Ethiopia is a young country with 43.4% of the population found between the 0-14 years age range (male 16,657,155/female 16,553,812); 53.8% between 15-64 years (male 20,558,026/female 20,639,076); and only 2.7% above 65 years (male 953,832/female 1,149,986). The median age of an Ethiopian is very low, 18 years, with the females' figure (18.1) slightly more than the males' (17.8) (CIA: The World Factbook, 2007). The overall population density, at 45 people per square kilometer, is not high. However, the pattern of population distribution is uneven and not well matched with the distribution of resources. More than 85 percent of the population is concentrated in barely 45% of the total territory (Children's Situation in Ethiopia: Child Rights Analysis, 2002).

A multi-ethnic and multi-lingual country, Ethiopia is made up of 260 ethnic groups or sub-groups, speaking over 210 languages or dialects. Amharic, Tigrigna, and Oromiffa are the most common, spoken by roughly two-thirds of the population. The 1994 census indicates that 32.7% of the Ethiopian population speak Amharic, 31.6% Oromiffa, 6.1% Tigrigna, 6% Somaligna, 3.5% Guaragigna, 3.5% Sidamigna, 1.7% Hadiyigna, and 14.8% other. Amharic and English remain de facto languages of state with English being the major foreign language taught in schools (CIA: The World Factbook, 2007).

5.3 The Emergence of Global Media in Ethiopia: A Historical Discussion

Although there is no empirical data that suggests the exact time of the rise of availability of global media contents in Ethiopia, it is widely believed that global, especially American, media started penetrating and reaching the Ethiopian audience after the collapse of the

Socialist Derg Regime that ruled over Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991 (Assefa, 2005). The Derg, which was made up from a group called the Provisional Military Administrative Council, was established to run the country, with Mengistu Hailemariam serving as Chairman. In late 1974, the Derg issued a program for the establishment of a state-controlled socialist economy. In early 1975 all agricultural land in Ethiopia was nationalized, with much of it then parceled out in small plots to individuals. In March 1975 the last Ethiopian monarchy led by Emperor Haile Selassie I was abolished, and Ethiopia became a republic (Encarta Encyclopedia, 2007).

In 1977, the rise of the Derg to take control of the country led to a complete breakdown of relations with the United States of America, Ethiopia's superpower ally of more than twenty years. The detachment of Ethiopia from the U.S., and its coalition with the then Leninist-Marxist Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.), had its impacts on the media consumption traditions of the Ethiopian people. People were hardly able to enjoy the right to own media devices such as satellite receivers and VHS players as these would have been considered as having western imperialistic tendencies. Individuals with tendencies of extravagant living including owning media gadgets were labeled as *adhari*, which means "opportunist" or "one who lives on the shoulder of others". American made films barely made their way to the public and the national television and the local cinemas which were by then nationalized showed media contents that reflected Marxist-Leninist propaganda.

In the late 1980s Ethiopia lost the support of the Soviet Union, which had become dissatisfied with Ethiopia's political and economic development under Mengistu. And finally in May 1991, the Socialist Derg regime was overthrown after the Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took control of Addis Ababa. This time also marked the collapse of the USSR and the end of the "Iron Curtain", the imaginary line that separated the Capitalist West led by the US from the Communist East led by the former USSR (Assefa, 2005).

In October 1992, the proclamation of the Press Freedom Bill by the then Ethiopian Transitional Government was introduced. The document states in Paragraph 3 that "(1) Freedom of the press is recognized and respected in Ethiopia; (2) Censorship of the press and any restriction of a similar nature are hereby prohibited." Part Three further guaranteed the right of access to information: "Any press and its agents shall, without prejudice to rights conformed by other laws, have the right to seek, obtain and report news and information from any government source of news and information" (African Media Development Initiative: The Ethiopian Context, 2005). The immediate impact of these proclamations was the establishment of an array of local newspapers and magazines. These proclamations combined with the deregulation programme set in the country saw Western media products, especially Hollywood films make their way abundantly to the Ethiopian audience in the past two decades, an event, as media imperialism exponents would argue, which is rooted in the role capitalist media play in dominating 'Third World' developing countries through communication systems. Even more, in dealing with the background of such events, writers such as Schiller (1969) argue that the media and media technology are

part of the conspiracy of the American military-industrial complex to maintain its economic, political and military domination of the post-war world.

However, critics disagree with Schiller's conspirational view of the global pre-eminence of U.S. media products (Collins, 1990; Tracey, 1985). They argue that U.S. global media dominance is due to natural advantages which are sometimes presented in aesthetic terms. According to Williams (2003), American television programmes are watched in greater number because they are better made, their plot and narrative are more engaging, the production values higher and characters more appealing, which is attributable to the talent of those working in the U.S film and television industry. More significant are, Williams (2003) writes, the economic advantages enjoyed by the U.S. media and cultural industries. American television programmes, for example, are cheaper than programmes made elsewhere. Williams (2003) further argues that television channels all over the world know they can purchase American programmes made elsewhere. The low cost of American programmes is due to the large size of the U.S. domestic market which, therefore, makes companies recoup the costs of making programmes at home and thus what they sell abroad is all profit. This economic advantage, rather than any conspiracy, Williams (2003) argues, accounts for the dominance of the global media market by U.S. interests.

The case in Ethiopia attests this argument. Today, film renting houses in Addis Ababa where Hollywood films in DVD, VCD and VHS formats are rented for as little as 1-3 Ethiopian Birr (\$0.1-0.31) can be found within a range of 500 meters. There are about half a dozen agents in the metropolis which offer televised satellite broadcasting subscriptions. The number of Satellite dishes that receive free channels (like BBC, the Arab Channel of

MBC, etc.) can be purchased for about 1,200-1,300 ETB (\$125-135), a very affordable price for many upper-middle-class families in Addis Ababa which is why it is very common to see these receivers placed over the roofs of many households. More specifically, the animation features of the Walt Disney Company are basically made available to the audience in one of the following four ways:

- (1) *Video Renting Houses*: These are the most important spots where Disney DVDs, VCDs and VHS cassettes are available along with other Hollywood film products. Like I said, these houses are densely found in Addis Ababa within a range of about 500 meters and their asking price for the films they rent is very cheap, i.e. 1-3 Ethiopian Birr (\$0.1-0.31)
- (2) *Informal Street Vendors*: These are young boys who sell a variety of films out of which Disney's animation make a good portion. They sell both DVDs and VCDs which are most of the time illegally duplicated. The issue of copyright is yet to be seriously taken in Ethiopia although local productions are better protected.
- (3) *Satellite Televised Broadcasts*: Disney Animation features also make their penetration to the free and subscribed satellite televised broadcasts through channels like Disney Channel, Cartoon Network, MBC3, etc.
- (4) *Local ETV Programmes*: Children programmes in ETV—the bi-weekly Amharic *Yelijoch Gize*; the weekly Tigrigna *Embabatat*; and the bi-weekly Oromiffa *Abdi Bori*—show Disney animation features in many episodes.

The shift to the consumption of global media has also been assisted by the incompetence of local production both in terms of quality and quantity. As already argued above, American television programmes are dominant not because of any conspiracy theory as suggested by Schiller (1969), but because they are better made, have engaging plots and narratives, and appealing characters. A good case in point is the major national television station, Ethiopian Television (ETV), which was established in 1964, during the time of Emperor Haile Selassie, with the technical help of the British firm, Thomson. ETV was initially established to highlight the Organization of African Unity (OAU) founding heads of state meeting in Addis Ababa in that same year. Colour television was introduced in 1982 by the military government in order to commemorate the founding of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE). Since its establishment, ETV has remained in the hands of government, with its operations and content regulated by government (African Media Development Initiative: The Ethiopian Context, 2005). These days the common complaint about ETV is of a gradual decline in the quality of its programmes (Simon, 2005). Some viewers, especially in Addis Ababa, subscribe to the South African-based MultiChoice Africa DStv satellite pay-TV service and the ArabSat satellite service.

There have been few significant changes in the television marketplace in the past five years, with the state-owned broadcaster ETV retaining its monopoly on domestic free-to-air TV. A South African private TV company signed an agreement with ETV to broadcast its programmes on ETV Channel 2, but this programming eventually stopped due to problems within the company. ETV Channel 1, which broadcasts in Tigrigna, Oromiffa,

Amharic and English for around eight hours each day except Saturdays and Sundays. On weekends, the broadcast hours increase to a total of more than 16 hours.

The only regional/local free-to-air channel is ETV Channel 2, which broadcasts to the capital city Addis Ababa in Amharic for about four hours per day. This is owned by the Addis Ababa regional government. No new free-to-air TV services have been launched in the past five years (African Media Development Initiative: The Ethiopian Context, 2005).

5.4 How Disney Makes Contact with Ethiopian Children: A Look at the Social Factors

5.4.1 Homes as Perceived Safe Grounds for Children

Ethiopia like most other developing nations is a country where tradition assumes a fundamental role. One such tradition, as Ashebir (2000) puts forward, is that children in Ethiopia are expected and taught to respect their parents, elders, their culture, their tribal traditions and their religion. They have to be obedient in every aspect. A child's interests might well be subordinated to those of the family.

In many ways, as Ashebir further illustrates, the intention of parents is not to deny their children what they need, but to see their children learn whatever they can so that they can be prepared for their future adult life. However, Ashebir argues, like in many traditional societies, the condition of child rearing practices in Ethiopia is basically authoritarian.

One such tradition in Ethiopia which brings great esteem to parents is when their children are known by members of the community for being ‘homely’ and not seen wondering around. ‘Wondering around’ is considered as a *durye*’s¹ activity whereas ‘being homely’ is acclaimed as noble and *chewa*². In the interview I had with the children, one of the important revelations that came into my attention was when they reflected how they rarely go out of their house as their parents strictly forbid them to do so.

Int: Are you allowed to get out of your homes as you like?

Ruth: No, not at all. My mother is always worried that I may become a victim of a car accident.

Dawit: I am also not allowed to go out of home.

Int: Why not?

Dawit: So that I cannot be hit by a car or I will not become a *durye*.

Meseret: My parents do not let me and my siblings go outside of the house. They fear that we may go to dangerous places and meet bad friends who may spoil us and teach us bad language. The times they let us go out of the house, it is only when we are sent to buy stuff from the shops. Even if I am allowed to go at times, they make sure that I am accompanied by someone else.

Delina: I am also not allowed to go out of home. This is because I may face different problems. There are *durye* men who spend all day sitting in the area I live. If I go out from home alone they say some embarrassing things. My parents are well aware of this and for this reason they want me to stay at home.

An important thing to note from the excerpt is that ‘the outside world’, the world that is out of the home, is perceived by the community as “dangerous”, “*durye*’s place”, and the space of the “bad”. The recurrent mentioning of “*durye*” is an indication that the children are set by their parents or their immediate caretakers to recognize people they meet or incidents they face outside their homes as threatening to their welfare and dangerous for

¹ *Durye* is a very common Amharic word which is frequently used to refer to young people who are jobless, always seen wondering outside their homes, and disrespectful of community’s norms.

² *Chewa* is the exact opposite of *durye*. It is an Amharic word that designates someone very humble who at the same time doesn’t speak much especially in the presence of elder people.

their personal growth. In other words, the outside world is seen as insecure, aggressive and threatening, and a zone of “*duryes*”, “bad language”, and “embarrassment”.

The attribute of the outside as ‘the bad’ is not limited to certain groups of the society that parents or caretakers of the children identify as *duryes* alone, but interestingly to individuals and contacts the children identify as friends as well.

Int: Do you have a friend nearby your home?

Ruth: Yes.

Int: Do you go to her home?

Ruth: I go there but it is not to hang around with her but to receive an exercise book or another educational material, because our parents say we will become *duryes* and spoiled. They say if we start getting together with our friends in these early years, we will get used to it and become vagrant.

Int: Do your friends come at your house?

Ruth: No, they don’t; because they are not allowed to.

Meseret: My mother doesn’t let me go out to play with my friend. She says if we stay together for a long time we will become *balegae*³. I rarely visit my friend only when I want to get a book. In the same way, when my friend comes to my house my mother tells me to talk to her quickly and see her off immediately.

Delina: My friend only comes to my home if she missed some classes and wants to borrow some exercise books. In another circumstance, I call her on my birthday and that’s all.

What drew my interest in the above discussion more than the children’s limited communication from the outside world is the fact that individuals they identify as friends are also subject to suspicion in the eyes of parents. As a result, the children are discouraged to spend time with their friends. Meseret’s assertion that “...if we stay together for a long time we will become *balegae*” signifies that she doesn’t only ‘think’ but also ‘believe’ that spending more time with her friend increases the probability of her getting spoiled. Not

³ A common Amharic word referring to someone who doesn’t have respect to elder people, talks bad and too much, and do things that are deemed immoral by the community.

only are the children forbidden to visit their friends, but also not to let them come or stay long in their houses. The narration of Meseret who is supposed to let her friends go quickly when they come to her house is a good case in point: "...when my friend comes to my house, my mother tells me to talk to her quickly and see her off immediately.

An interview with some of the parents of the children reveals that the children's responses are the reflection of their parents' views. The parents of the children are clear in their description that they neither want their children to visit their friends, nor do they welcome a contact of their children to their homes, partly for the directly conveyed reason of keeping the children away from danger and partly for 'face-saving':

Int: Do you allow your children to go out of their homes and play with their friends?

Solomon: It is ok to let the kids go out and meet their friends so that they can develop a sense of confidence. The problem is, since they may not be able to identify what is good for them and what is not, they may inherit some characteristics from the outside world that may be harmful to them. I prefer to get the children the things they want rather than letting them go outside to play with their friends. But if they have to go, there should be the family guidance and control.

Int: Do your children's friends come to your house?

Kasech: I don't usually see them coming here. Actually I don't want them to come as I am afraid this may lure my kids to go to their homes in return. I don't want the children to install a bad name to the family.

In essence, the major theme that emerges from the discussion of the children and their parents is the space of homes to be perceived as safe grounds for children.

5.4.2 Parents as Oblivious Agents of Disney's Penetration

It was this realization that children are alienated from the outside world as prescribed by the society and practiced by the children that ultimately drew me to another question which has a direct relevance to my study: If the children are not allowed to get outside, how do they spend their time at their homes? An insight into my question is provided by Solomon who believes that he prefers to “get the children the things they want [at home] rather than letting them go outside to play with their friends.” When I further probed what exactly he gets for his children at home and whether this includes films, Solomon revealed that he brings cartoon and animation films regularly at home and there is a satellite televised broadcast he has subscribed to so that his children do not develop the desire to go elsewhere. The same applies to the other parents who reiterated Solomon's words, and in almost all of the families' homes there are DVD players, decks and satellite broadcast receivers.

This is significant in that it shows the media contents the children see at their homes are important ways of establishing some kind of communication with the outside world which they are denied. The fact that homes are perceived as safe grounds for children prompts parents to fulfill the needs of their children so that they do not develop an ambition to go elsewhere. The parents, in order to maintain their children at their homes and also to respond to the demands of their children make sure that they have something to be engaged with at their homes which usually are films and media products made available

through DVDs, video cassettes and televised satellite broadcasts through which the likes of Disney sneak through.

As a result, the probability of the children's exposure to Disney is further complemented by the fact that parents prefer their children to see cartoon and animation films which are 'safe' from bad language, pornography and violence. My discussion with Mekbib and Solomon asserts this claim.

Int: What kind of films do you rent for your children?

Mekbib: I usually rent them animation and cartoon films and also comedies. I am not worried to bring these kinds of films because there is a very limited chance that these films show some immoral things which may spoil my children

Solomon: I frequently bring cartoon films for the children. They also love it very much. These films are free from bad language, nudity and violence. They are also educational and funny.

Int: Do you remember the titles of the films you have rented for your children.

Solomon: I remember *The Lion King*. I remember it specially because I watched it together with my children...[laughs]. I don't exactly remember the title of the others, but one was about a girl who was badly treated by her step mother and her step sisters. What was the title?...[thinks]...Sorry I can't remember.

Int: Do you know Disney?

Solomon: What did you say?

Int: Disney.

Solomon: No I don't. What's that?

Although Solomon does not identify Disney as the producer of most of the animation films he rents for his children, he was able to name and describe some of the movies he brought home for his children. The important thing to note here is not whether parents know what Disney is, but rather the trust they develop towards Disney's animation features which are, in Solomon's words "free from bad language, nudity and violence." This implies

that it is not reliable only to deny children from the outside world for fear of insecurity. Parents are wary of, consciously or unconsciously, the fact that the media is the children's channel of communication to the outside world and is thus capable of exposing them to "the bad" and "the violent". As a result, parents like Solomon and Mekbib make sure that the children enjoy a selected exposure of films, the selectors being the parents themselves. What is interesting here and what can be argued is the fact that parents select films that are free from "bad language, nudity and violence", which usually are animation films that are Disney's products. In essence, therefore, it can be argued that parents view Disney (although without knowing what exactly Disney is) as a safe and appropriate media that their children can come in contact with. What this essentially implies is the fact that parents have become oblivious channels of Disney's penetration to children, the audience. They are not aware of Disney but they transport it and facilitate its contact with the target audience.

5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed some important issues that make up the social context of the study. The chapter emphasized on how historical and social factors gave rise to the emergence and penetration of global media in general and Disney in particular. I have discussed how recent developments in the political history of the country resulted in a new wave of the introduction of American films and media products, an event which media imperialism thesis proponents would attribute to the role Western capitalist media play in dominating "Third World" developing countries through communication systems. I have

also discussed the social factors that determine how Disney makes contact with Ethiopian children, especially the way homes are perceived as safe grounds for upper-middle-class children and the oblivious role played by parents in exposing their children to Disney. The next chapter discusses how upper-middle-class Ethiopian children negotiate with and make meaning out of Disney in the framework of the contextual discussion made in this chapter

Chapter Six

PRESENTATION AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

How Ethiopian Children Negotiate with Disney

6.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the presentation and interpretation of findings of the study by analyzing how Ethiopian children negotiate with Disney animation features. Streamlined with the core criticisms of the media imperialism thesis, the chapter analyses the reception of Disney messages and contents by Ethiopian upper middle class children categorized in four sections, namely *Disney as an Agent of Symbolic Distancing and Fantasy*; *Disney as Exporter of Modernity, Individualism, and 'Americanization'*; *Disney Kids: In Defense of the Local*; and *Engendered Disney: Challenging Traditional Sex-Based Roles*

6.2 Disney as an Agent of Symbolic Distancing and Fantasy

According to Thompson (1995, p.175), a critic of the cultural imperialism theory, local audiences make meaning out of the global media messages they receive within the context of their lived social conditions. He argues that the consumption of global media products by local audience often provides meanings which enable "... the accentuation of symbolic distancing from the spatial-temporal contexts of everyday life" (1995, p.175). Thompson further argues that the experience of symbolic distancing which is motivated by the

appropriation of global media messages enables individuals “...to take some distance from the conditions of their day-to-day lives – not literally but symbolically, imaginatively, vicariously” (1995, p.175). This in turn makes individuals take a critical look at their local culture which assumes central stage of their social context This experience of symbolic distancing, he writes, enables individuals “...to gain some conception, however partial, of ways of life and life conditions which differ significantly from their own” (1995, p.175).

Wasko (2001, p.117) notes that many Disney plots revolve around characters wishing to escape from their current setting or situation. Examples can be extracted from Snow White (her theme song, “I’m Wishing”) and Gioppetto (his wish for Pinnocchio to be a real boy), to Ariel (who yearns to be human) and Aladdin (his theme song, “A Whole New World”) (Wasko, 2001, p.117). Wasko further describes that fantasy is not necessarily created by characters alone but also by a fairy or magical being in Disney. “This”, she writes, “is an attractive fantasy—to be able to escape without any effort from one’s current life or world to another more appealing one” (2001, p.118).

As I have already described earlier, the subjects of my study are upper-middle-class children who attend their education at prestigious public, private and missionary schools in Addis Ababa. As shown in the previous chapter, they are very ‘homely’ in that they are rarely allowed to get out of their house as their parents prefer to provide everything they need at home so that the children wouldn’t fancy going out for fear that they will be spoiled

following contact with *durye* or *awdelday*⁴ children. Part of the way parents lure their children to stay at home is by bringing them 'safe' animation films. The children associate themselves with these films and what happens is that they start interacting with their heroes and find ways of evaluating their lives in light of the might and success of the characters they see. One of the interviewees of the study, Esset, 7, compares her fear of darkness to the life of Mowgli⁵ who she thinks is brave despite the dangerous state of his environment.

I am very fearful [laughs]. When mama sends me to the shops or even to our neighbors during night time, I am very much afraid of the dark. I always sing a song while I am walking so that a thief or some other bad person wouldn't take me away. But Mowgli is not like me. Although he lives in a jungle full of beasts and scary creatures, he is never afraid.

Esset is evaluating her fear of darkness in the framework of Mowgli's bravery. In other words, she is critically looking at her fearful nature, an aspect of her lived reality in the context of Mowgli, a global media image, which, according to Thompson (1995, p.175), provides a resource for individuals to think critically about their own lives and life conditions. In another instance, Esset associates her times of loneliness with that of Mowgli, thus experiencing 'symbolic distancing' by learning she was not alone in the solitary situation she once had been through.

⁴ *Awdelday* refers to an individual who doesn't like to work and who spends his/her time going here and there aimlessly.

⁵ Mowgli is the main character of *The Jungle Book*, a young jungle boy raised by wolves. In the movie, Mowgli is featured as a 10 year old, which is around the age he was in Rudyard Kipling's book when he was first kidnapped by the Bandar Log (monkeys). Mowgli is found by Bagheera the black panther, who would become a good friend later, in a wrecked boat.

When I joined this school, I was very much afraid and I was shy. I was scared because I was new and I didn't have any friends. Mowgli was also in the same position because he wanted to have human friends...Slowly, he started getting along with the likes of Baloo⁶. In the same way, I was able to know my class mates well after some time and I was not shy any longer.

Another interesting aspect of the study is the reflection of children on how they wish to imaginatively, symbolically alter their everyday lived reality fancying the things their favourite characters think and do. Drotner stresses that “[c]hildren’s reception is selective and not least with young children it seems motivated primarily by problematics that are focal in their own lives” (2002, p.116). For example, Adiam feels that wearing uniforms everyday at school is boring at times and envies a particular dress she saw in one of the Disney animations she watched some time ago.

Adiam: I remember that shiny dress that the magical old lady gave to Cinderella⁷. You know her step mother and her sisters denied her of this dress. It is so lovely. Don't you remember when the old magical lady made it for Cinderella? I wish I could have that.

Int: What kind of dress was that?

Adiam: It was a shiny long dress which was very wide down the waist.

Int: Why do you want to have it?

Adiam: [Silence]...eh...you know we always wear uniforms here. At least I could wear that dress on parent's day. I am pretty sure nobody else would get that cloth.

Adiam's response signifies the 'problem that is focal in he life'—wearing the same clothes everyday as a requirement of the school—and how she wishes to get hold of Cinderella's

⁶ A sloth bear who befriends Mowgli. He lives life according to his own rhythm. Baloo becomes Mowgli's best friend, and somewhat of a father figure to him, much to the annoyance of Bagheera who believes him to be an irresponsible and careless character

⁷ *Cinderella* is a 1950 animated feature produced by Walt Disney, and released to theaters on February 15, 1950 by RKO Radio Pictures. In the film, a young girl abused by her stepmother and step-sisters is still able to go the ball and win her prince with the help of a pumpkin, half dozen mice, and a fairy godmother.

dress. Adiam singled out the dress as the thing she loves most not because there are other things to choose from, but because the dress represents something that she desperately desires but misses in her everyday life. As a result, by putting on the dress imaginatively, Adiam distances herself from her routine boring uniforms symbolically. Had Adiam had the opportunity to wear whatever clothes she chooses to wear, Cinderella's dress might not have topped the list of her priorities, and thus she wouldn't have distanced herself from her lived reality as there would have been no plight, therefore no reason, to escape from.

A recurring subject that was recited by many children is how the characters of the films they see serve as a fulfillment of how they translate the 'do's and don'ts as put forward by their parents. Thompson (1995, p.175) argues that global images provide a resource for individuals to think critically about their own lives and life conditions. In my interviews with the children, one of the things that they are critical about is the way they are kept at their homes all the time despite their desire to socialize and play together with their friends.

Menelik: I am very much fond of Simba⁸. I especially like the time he spent with his friends Pumba and Timon far from his home after being chased away by Scar and the hyenas. He played and enjoyed his time with his friends, and didn't worry about anything. I really envy this most of the time. Whenever I want to go out of home to play with my friends, I have to find ways of cheating my parents who wouldn't let me go out.

Fitsum: I guess I have seen the Jungle Book more than three times now. I like Mowgli very much because he does everything that he wants. When he got back

⁸ Simba is the protagonist of the movie and destined ruler of the Pride Lands, an imaginary place where the lions rule the jungle

to the human village, there were rules and regulations which he found difficult to understand. He escaped to the jungle to be free again...I understand Mowgli's situation because my father always says I will fail in my exams if I start going out of my home. I think this is foolish because I can be at my home and yet not study. I want to play football just like the other kids but I am hardly allowed to go out.

Both Menelik and Fitsum referred to global media images, Simba and Mowgli respectively, to take a critical look at the confined way of life they are prescribed to practice by their parents. They are symbolically, not actually, transferring themselves from their everyday lived realities to fantasize a life like Simba and Mowgli who for them are embodiments of freedom and happiness. This experience of "symbolic distancing" by Menelik and Fitsum arises from their criticism of their local conditions, i.e. the perception of homes as solitary spaces for children", which, however, doesn't make them rebel from their everyday routines and the norms of the society which they are supposed to keep.

Fitsum: I know my father's intention is not for me to be unhappy. He always says I have to grow to be a brave man. But for this to happen he says I should study very hard now and be good at school. He is always against my intention of playing football. At times, I thought he was rude, but if I didn't listen to his advice, I wouldn't have been in the first five ranks in my class.

Int: But you said you like Mowgli and the way he is free to do whatever he likes...

Fitsum: Yes I know....but you know I don't think there are really too many people like Mowgli. I don't know any for example. Mowgli fights with snakes and tigers. I think that is not for real. Even big men like you cannot fight a tiger without a rifle...[group laughs bitterly]. I am afraid of a spider let alone a tiger...[group laughs]

The narration of Fitsum in describing the need for him to respect his father's will in particular and the society's norm in general implies that although he is critical to the local conditions he finds himself in, he is aware that the deeds of the character he mentioned, i.e. Mowgli, are too good to be true. In essence, Fitsum understands that, at the end of the day, the stories and images he sees in the movies are not more than mere images and stories. His narration "I don't think there are really too many people like Mowgli" attests the fact that he doesn't take the character and his lifestyle any further than a mere fantasy. As such, the global image as represented by Mowgli does make Fitsum criticize his local conditions, but not rebel; makes him wish, but not act; and makes him transfer symbolically, but not realistically. This, in turn, stands against the premise of the media imperialism thesis that local cultures are doomed to homogenization in the scenario of western media dissemination. In this respect, the children realize that their lived reality, their cognition, and their societal make up can be very different from that of their heroes. Dina's example illustrates this point.

Int: Whom do you like most from the people you see in the cartoon films you have watched so far?

Dina: [thinking...silence] I guess it is Snow White that I like...no, no, no...I forgot the name...It is that girl in *Beauty and the Beast*⁹...the one who is married to the beast in the end...

[Group mumbling]..Belle¹⁰...Belle

Dina: Yes Belle...she is the one I like most.

⁹ *Beauty and the Beast* is a 1991 American animated film, the thirtieth animated feature produced by Walt Disney Feature Animation. This film, one of the best-known of the Disney studio's films, is an adaptation of the well-known fairy tale *Beauty and the Beast*, about a beautiful woman kept in a castle by a horrific monster. It is the first and only animated picture to ever be nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture.

¹⁰ Belle is the heroine of the Disney animated film, *Beauty and the Beast*. Belle is a young woman living in a small French town with her eccentric scientist father, Maurice, though they have not always lived there. Belle possesses a love for books, a hobby that the townspeople find odd for a woman. Belle is a smart and lovely free-thinker, who likes to read and go on adventures within her own imagination.

Interviewer: why?

Dina: I like her because she is very kind and caring. She was very kind to the beast and cared for him all the way. Although it was difficult at times, she managed to tame him so that they can live happily together. I really wish I can have some of her patience. Whenever my little brother messes up my things, I always complain to my mother. She says he is a kid and always tells me to forget about it. I remember after seeing the film, I said to myself if someone like Belle can handle a beast, would it be difficult for me to handle my little brother? The truth is, I barely succeeded [laughs]. He still makes me angry and I know for sure that Belle is way beyond reach.

6.3 Disney as Exporter of 'Americanization', Modernity, and Individualism

A closely related concept to the media imperialism thesis—Americanization—is discussed by Hallin and Mancini (n.d.) in their work *Americanization, Globalization and Secularization: Understanding the Convergence of Media Systems and Political Communication in the U.S. and Western Europe*. Americanization, they write, is associated to the global expansion of mass media industries based in advanced capitalist countries and particularly in the United States resulting in the destruction of local cultures and their replacement by “a single, standardized set of cultural forms tied to consumer capitalism and American political hegemony” (Hallin and Mancini, n.d.).

Much of the critique of cultural imperialism seems to lie in a critique of modernity, a concept very closely associated with Americanization. The term modernity, as contradictory and complex as it may be, according to Tomlinson, has most often been viewed as the idea of the “most general way in which [people] in the West represent [their] cultural experience to [themselves]” (1991, p.140). Berenson in his article *Globalization and Culture: Cultural Imperialism or a Critique of Modernity?* writes that “modernity presents many challenges as the

apparent globalization of culture ensues but the debate over cultural imperialism ignores the vitality and inherently assimilatory nature of human cultures” (2001, p.1). In other words, Berenson’s argument can be interpreted as implying the rather overlooked potential of local communities or the supposed ‘receivers of culture’ in modifying, ignoring or even rejecting the values cherished by the West as ‘modern’.

Modernization, according to Bigsby, is characterized by “lament over a changing world sparked by the distresses of living in a new era dominated by the realities of city life and a technologically-defined environment” (1975, p.6). Such pressures of the continually developing nature of the modern world, Bernson argues, force us to exercise our individual freedom to choose our cultural experience, and this very freedom “condemns us to make individual choices that will define our lives” (2001, p.4). As such, modernity is not a cultural imposition but rather liberation of the human spirit in the cultural sense (Tomlinson 1991: p.149). The process of cultural modernization, Assefa (2005, p.84) quoting Nielsen (1993) writes, is to be sought in the process of “individualization”, the expanding degree of separation of the individual from his or her traditional ties and restrictions.

Taxel attributes the Disney value system to the basic American packages of “individualism, advancement through self help, strict adherence to the work ethic, and the supreme optimism in the possibility of the ultimate improvement of society through the progressive improvement in humankind” (1982, p.14). As arguable as they may be, these qualities described by Taxel didn’t go unnoticed by the children. They especially stressed the

characters' ability to bounce back from failure and their resilience in difficult circumstances.

Liya: They [the characters] try over and over again and finally succeed. In the course of their actions they repeatedly encounter failure but they never give up. In the end you will always see that they live happily ever after or become kings and queens.

Dina: The films taught me not to lose hope in the things I do. For example, if you look at Cinderella, she has finally got the opportunity to be married to the king. She achieved this because she was tolerant and she did not give up. If she complained or lost hope she might have missed the opportunity to be married to the prince and the old magical lady as well.

Elsa: The films always end in joy and happiness. They may make you sad in the beginning or in the middle but the good people always come out triumphant in the end.

The children also revealed how there were instances of the characters' efforts to never give up have provided some form of inspiration in their own life. Dina's story is a very interesting one in this regard.

Mine is related to the story of Cinderella. Some years ago when my arithmetic tutor gave me homework to do, I used to leave it aside if I didn't understand what I was supposed to do. I developed this idea that math is not for me and only some special people can do it. But after seeing Cinderella many times on one of the long breaks I had about two years ago, I changed my attitude towards math. Because she never gave up, she got good results at the end. I was disappointed and worked hard thereafter, not only to improve the way I perform in math, but also to silence my brother who used to mock at me. Now I am clever [laughs] after some good studying.

Consumerism is an idea related to modernity and individualism and is associated with the central premise of the media imperialism thesis which, according to McQuail, implies "some kind of overall cultural or ideological pattern in what is transmitted, which has

often been interpreted in terms of ‘Western values’, especially those of individualism, secularism, and materialism” (1983, p.221). In relation to this, one version of Disney’s individualistic interpretation is presented in Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart’s critique of Disney in their study *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*. According to Dorfman and Mattelart Disney is all about consumerism and imperialistic individualism: “In the world of Disney, no one has to work in order to produce. There is a constant round of buying, selling and consuming, but to all appearances, none of the products involved has required any effort whatsoever to make. All employment is a means of consumption rather than production” (1984, p.61). Such consumerism, Dorfman and Mattelart write, makes money the central quest of Disney’s characters: “Money is the goal that everyone strives for because it manages to embody all the qualities of their world.” (1984, p.66). A good case in point is my interview with Fikirte who wishes the Genie¹¹ in *Aladdin*¹² could provide her with the things she need.

Int: Which film do you like most?

Fikirte: I think it is *Aladdin*.

Int: Why do you like *Aladdin*?

Fikirte: I like the giant plummy creature [Genie] that comes out of the magical lamp when it gets rubbed. He gives you three chances to wish and ask for whatever you want to have and he does that for you.

Int: What three things would you ask the giant creature if you have the magic lamp?

¹¹ Genie is a fictional character from the Disney animated features canon movie *Aladdin*. Like most popular depictions of genies, Disney’s Genie was originally a slave. Though he possessed “phenomenal cosmic powers”, he could only use his powers when the owner of the lamp (his master) made a wish. Each master had three such wishes. The lamp came into the possession of the character Aladdin during the course of the first movie, and remained in servitude until the end of the movie, when Aladdin used his third and final wish to grant Genie his freedom.

¹² *Aladdin* is a 1992 Academy Award winning animated feature film produced by Walt Disney Feature Animation, and released by Walt Disney Pictures on November 25, 1992. The thirty-first animated feature in the Disney animated features canon, it relates a version of the story of Aladdin and the magic lamp from *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights*. In the film, the daughter of a sultan, Jasmine (voiced by Linda Larkin), runs away from home and meets Aladdin (Scott Weinger), who shows her around the city. They meet a genie, acquire a magic carpet, and fall in love.

Fikirte: The first thing I will be asking for is to take me to a place where there are only good people who do not quarrel. Secondly, I will ask him to give me many things which no other man has. And lastly I will ask him to take me to the planets [group laughs].

Fikirte's wishful thinking of making the Genie do the things she wants to have may be interpreted by the imperialistic critic as highlighted earlier in Dorfman and Matterlet's argument "no one has to work in order to produce" in Disney's world. This, nevertheless, doesn't represent what Disney's characters are all about. In another instance, Fikirte has reiterated that she would like to be wealthy, but not in the same way as Cinderella.

If there is anything I wish to have from Cinderella is her patience. I know there is the instance of the old lady who led Cinderella to be wealthy but I don't think that works for me. I know if I don't have knowledge, I will not be wealthy.

Fikirte also realizes that Cinderella's success came after many hardships and difficult times. Even though, there was an element of luck in Cinderella's final triumph, Fikirte believes that Cinderella was not just lucky: "The old lady wouldn't have helped Cinderella in the first place had she been lazy and doesn't help herself. I think she is rewarded for her good ways." Fikirte further relates the story of Cinderella to a real life instance by alluding to a story she remembers from the past.

The story of Cinderella reminds me of a girl in my class while I was in grade two. Nobody liked that girl. They did not like her because they thought the teachers favor her. I know this was not true. They didn't like her because the teachers always told us to be like her. Everybody was saying she would rank 5th from the class but she came up second at the end of the semester. Do you remember? It was the same with Cinderella. Everybody hated her but at the end she came above all of them.

6.4 Disney Kids: In Defense of the Local

As discussed in Chapter Two, the central premise of the cultural imperialism thesis revolves generally around the deliberate cultural domination by powerful nations, especially the United States of America (hence Americanization) over weaker nations. According to the theory, the effects of this type of cultural domination, reflecting the values of western, particularly American capitalist societies are aggressively homogenizing the global culture (McQuail, 1983; Rantanen, 2005).

However this view is contested by Rantanen (2005, p.79), who, while acknowledging the influence coming from outside has been seen as homogenizing, argues that the nature and role of the national as a homogenizing agent has been ignored. “In the same way the global can be seen as either homogenizing or heterogenizing,” Rantanen writes, “so can be the national. Somehow the impact of the national as a homogenizing factor has been ignored in this analysis. The media imperialism school also romanticized the national, instead of seeing it as potentially as oppressive as the local” (2005, pp.79-80).

Rantanen stresses that as much as global media can be homogenizing, the nature of the local media is yet another factor which can translate a similar effect. She states that the challenge is “to be able to see how people are connected to each other not only in their reception but also in their use of media and communications. As a result of this mediated connectivity, they may be influenced by homogeneous media in their localities” (2005, p.80).

In my own study there is an overwhelming attraction to Disney animation films and the children talk of these films highly and with great appreciation and adoration. In many instances, they find it very difficult to compare local productions to Western animation features (as represented by Disney in this case) as they claim there is a huge gap between what the local and the west offer. In comparing the local productions with that of Western ones, Dina gives an interesting illustration.

Int: Have you seen any locally produced films or theatres?

Dina: I have seen children's theatre. It is called *Doctor Kebero*¹³. But I didn't like it.

Int: Why didn't you like it?

Dina: It is not like the ones which are produced abroad. You can see that the actors are humans who are dressed up to look like animals. You can clearly see that someone who is supposed to act like a horse is not a horse; it is a human. You can see their human legs coming out of the costumes. But in films like, say, *Finding Nemo*¹⁴, the fish is a fish and the shark is a shark. They are so real. Even the mouth movement of the fish in *Finding Nemo* is perfectly matched with what they say. Here, you hear a sound coming out of their mouth but there is no movement at all.

Dina's reservation as far as local productions are concerned, for obvious reasons, is related to standard and quality. When she says "you can see their human legs coming out of the costumes" and "...you hear a sound coming out of their mouth but there is no movement at all," there is no phrase or word that states she dislikes the story or the plot. These

¹³ *Doctor Kebero* which literally translates as "Doctor Fox" is an Amharic children's play which is staged in one of Addis Ababa's cinemas—Alem Cinema. In the story, Doctor Kebero acts as a villain who treacherously fools and takes advantage of sheep.

¹⁴ *Finding Nemo* is an Academy Award-winning computer-animated film produced by Pixar Animation Studios and released to theaters by Walt Disney Pictures and Buena Vista Distribution. In the film, clownfish Marlin (Albert Brooks) loses his wife, Coral (Elizabeth Perkins), and all but one of his unborn children he promises that he will never let anything happen to the one remaining egg which he names Nemo. Nemo (Alexander Gould) begins his first day at school and is frustrated and embarrassed by his overprotective father, and takes it to such an extreme that Nemo deliberately disobeys his father by swimming out into open water. The rest of the film shows Marlin desperately looking for his son and the adventures he faces throughout his search.

expressions are rather related to quality and techniques of production, which she compares to the characters of *Finding Nemo*, a Disney animated feature, and finds them short.

Samrawit has also similar observations.

Int: Have you seen any animation film that is made here in Ethiopia where the actors talk in Amharic?

Samrawit: In *Ababa Tesfaye*¹⁵ there is a cartoon film called *Tsehay Memar Tiwedalech*¹⁶. *Tsehay Memar Tiwedalech* teaches children to love education so that we can help our country in the future. I have also seen others. But the actors are put on human hands and are covered by clothes. It is not like the foreign films. The foreign films are better.

Int: Why?

Samrawit: Our films may have stories but the actors are covered with clothes. When they sometimes stretch like this (stretching both her hands up), you can see their hands. Then I know it's all fake.

In her case, Samrawit is most probably referring to children films which are made up of puppet acts. Her observation is once again similar to that made by Dina in that there is once again a reference to lack of good technique in production. But this shouldn't be taken as the case for all.

Fikirte: The animation films that are produced here are not as good as those which we rent from the video stores. They always say do this and don't do that. They say the same thing ten times. This is so intolerable. The foreign films don't have such repeated rules and advises. They show you through practicing it. Everybody knows Cinderella is patient. How did we know this? She never said I am patient so be patient like me. She just simply is like that.

¹⁵ Ababa Tesfaye had been a veteran host for the weekly *Yelijoch Gize* (literally "Children's Moment") programme transmitted on ETV on Saturdays and Sundays. Children usually refer *Yelijoch Gize* as Ababa Tesfaye.

¹⁶ *Tsehay Memar Tiwedalech* is a weekly 10 minutes animation production that is transmitted through the local Ethiopian Television. It is about a little girl called Tsehay who loves to learn alphabets, words and numbers.

Fikirte's dislike for locally produced animation features propped up from an interesting observation she made—an explicit didactic feature of local productions and children programmes. Fikirte's reasoning goes far beyond Dina's and Samrawit's dissatisfaction with regard to format and style.

The mention of 'quality' in the interviews is an important factor towards attraction of films. Strelitz (2004) in his study *Understanding University Student Media Preferences through the Discourses of 'Realism' and 'Quality'* addresses the issue of 'quality' in relation to a theme that emerged in his interviews with Rhodes University students whose preference for global media was as result of its perceived technical quality (camerawork, scripting, acting, lighting and so on). Strelitz further points out that, for most of these students, it was primarily global media are seen to embody 'quality'. While many students had difficulty in defining what they meant by 'quality', it does seem to mean for them a set of technical production standards inherited from North America.

In this regard, it may be argued that both Dina's and Samrawit's perception of how cartoon and animation films ought to be made is set up by Disney's format and style and that any other form of production is unacceptable—thus the effect of homogenization of taste and culture as argued by the cultural/media imperialism thesis. If this is the case and can be deemed plausible, the children are in no way mentally ready to watch and appreciate any locally made animation productions that deviate from Disney's high standard and 'near to perfection' animation features. This, however, is not the case as the children, as contented

as they may be with the quality of the films when compared to the Disney counterparts, are regularly watching locally made children shows and short animation productions.

Int: Do you see children's programmes in ETV?

Nebiyu: Yes. I always watch *Ababa Tesfaye* and also *Tsehay Memar Tiwedalech* on Saturdays and Sundays. I especially like *Tsehay Memar Tiwedalech*. I never saw an Amharic cartoon film before and I am really excited about this.

Int: Why are you excited about Amharic cartoon films?

Nebiyu: Because it's in Amharic. I can't imagine what it would be like if *The Lion King* was made in Amharic. Our country would have been famous all over the world. Our music teacher once showed us *The Lion King* in the music room and he told us it was made in Kenya. He also spoke about Hakuna Matata and told us it means no worries in a certain African language. If that was Amharic even the *ferenjjs*¹⁷ might have known about us.

Nebiyu's reason for watching Amharic cartoon productions (in this case *Tsehay Memar Tiwedalech*) has got nothing to do with any other thing but language. He is excited about the language of the film being Amharic not because of issues related to language literacy but because of a sense of belongingness. This can be a valid argument taking into account Nebiyu's later reference to his hope that his country can be popular for animation film making. In essence, this brings us back to the criticism of the media imperialism thesis in its failure "to take much more account of the active participation of the audience in shaping any 'meaning' that is taken from mass media" (Liebes & Katz 1990). Nebiyu's sense of nationalism which he learns from his interaction with his community offers a space for Nebiyu to reason out why he should care to watch local productions. As a result, we can notice that it is not only format and style that may come to the specified children's

¹⁷ *Ferenji* is a commonly used Amharic word which refers to foreign white people.

minds when tuning to their TV sets but also elements of active participation potentials as an audience. Nebiyu brings another instance to the situation.

Int: But some people say local animation films are not as good as the ones from abroad.

Nebiyu: I know they are not equal. The films from abroad are very good in many ways. They are full of colors; their stories are full of capturing moments and really funny actions. But the films I see which are in Amharic are not that bad. I don't know about others but I like them. I think it is because the stories are familiar to me.

From the excerpt, we can understand that Nebiyu watches both local and foreign animation films but for different reasons. It is especially important to note when he mentions why he likes local films—because of familiarity of stories—as this once again alludes to the significance of the capacity of the audiences to evaluate and interact with the media content they see and how they can make meaning out of their lived reality and the social context they are familiar with. In this case, Nebiyu's desire to watch locally produced animation films and children programmes is determined by the stories he knew from the past which are familiar to him. It is worthy noting that these stories make up part of Nebiyu's lived reality, and ultimately they have influenced him in his decision to watch locally produced animation films. What is more interesting is that, there is a tendency from the children that they would be much more interested to see locally produced animation films if they are made in the standard of Disney films which clearly shows that they are not subject to media imperialism's claim of homogenization or any form of identity crisis.

Int: Will you see Amharic animation films if they are made in the standard of the foreign films?

Fitsum: I would love to see Amharic cartoon films made. If they can be produced in the standard of the animation films *Cinderella* and *The Lion King*, I think

they will exceed the ones that come from abroad. There are lots of reality films made in Amharic like *Yewendoch Guday* and *Latie*¹⁸ which are very funny. There should be cartoon films of such quantity as well.

Dina: Definitely. I like Sinzero for example. Although they always show him dancing, I think he is very good. He seems real and *Habesha* [laughs].

Fikirte: I would like to see quality Amharic films being made. Sometimes my sister takes me to the cinema and we watch Amharic films and I love it very much. It feels good to see a film in Amharic. You see I don't have to ask the person next to me what the people are talking about if the language is Amharic.

6.5 Engendered Disney: Challenging Traditional Sex-Based Roles

Byrne and McQuillan (1999, p.66) note that Disney's renaissance in the 1980's was marked by the birth of a newly born women. The first two films in the second wave of the Disney canon, *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*, signal a change in the kinds of experiences of gender that Disney has felt it necessary to address following the transformation of women's roles in postwar America and Europe (1999, p.66).

This development has come to the interest of feminists who have drawn attention, according to Wasko, "to the relatively few women in cultural production, as well as the disregard of women audience members. Feminists argue that it is not surprising that media stereotypes reflect dominant social values, in that media producers are influenced by these stereotypes" (2001, p.132).

¹⁸ *Yewendoch Guday* (Men's Affairs) and *Latie* (Bachelor) are Amharic comedy feature films which won huge popularity after being release in February 2007.

Wasko further illustrates that some feminist critiques include an assessment of where power ultimately lies in society, and unquestionably it is with the males in these stories. Both of the worlds represented in Disney's version of *The Little Mermaid* are patriarchies in which society is dominated by men. But the film also presents "male power as positive and female power as negative" (2001, p. 136).

The perception of female participants of this particular study, although it coincides with the belief that power lies with men in society, deviates significantly from the feminist claim that Disney's representation of gender is an unbalanced one. The fact that the children's understanding of power being accumulated in the male segment of the society may not come as a surprise since there is the awareness that they live in a society where there is an obvious imbalance of power in favor of male domination. Samrawit, who adores the animation feature of *The Little Mermaid*¹⁹ relates the story of the mermaid to her own.

Int: You told me you like *The Little Mermaid*. What have you learnt from the film?

Samrawit: The little mermaid falls in love with a prince from a nearby palace. I like this. The thing is she wants to marry the prince but I don't. She is very obedient to her father who was against the idea of her marrying the prince. She hardly had her ambitions revealed. She suffered a lot. I think I will do the same with my father. I don't know but when I want some money, it is mama I always ask first.

Samrawit stresses the mermaid's obedience to her father and also alludes the story to her own life by explaining how she prefers to ask money from her mother rather than her

¹⁹ *The Little Mermaid* is a 1989 animated feature film produced by Walt Disney Feature Animation and first released on November 15, 1989 by Walt Disney Pictures. The twenty-eighth animated feature in the Disney animated features canon, the film is loosely based upon the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale "The Little Mermaid". Princess Ariel is the protagonist of this animation feature and is constantly depicted as obsessed with the human world.

father. There is some sense of submissiveness that lingers in Samrawit's discussion although there is hardly any implication that she likes it.

One way of understanding Samrawit's perception of *The Little Mermaid* is related to understanding how gender is treated in Ethiopia. Ethiopia is a traditional society and one of its defining features is how gender is used to determine how citizens assume their social roles. A report by Sida entitled *A Profile on Gendered Relations: Towards Gender Equality in Ethiopia* states:

Ethiopia is a patriarchal society that keeps women at a subordinate position, using religion and culture as an excuse. These excuses have for many years been supported by laws and legislation that uphold patriarchy and women's subordination. This has brought about and maintained disparities between men and women, in division of labour, share of benefits, in law and state, in how households are organized, and how these are interrelated (2003, p.10).

The patriarchy that Ethiopia is known for has resulted in the practice of sex-based roles in which men have a defined set of jobs that women are not supposed to do and vice-versa. Such stereotyping of gender based roles, very much visible in adulthood, is something that children are exposed to as well. In the interview I had with them, although there is a clear reference by the children to the society's patriarchal tendencies, I was able to get some intriguing reflections on how children perceive the operation of sex based roles and what they think about it. An example which illustrates how sex based roles are pertinent in the society is provided by Kibrom, a 12 year old boy.

Once I asked my mother to wash some plates and glasses. She then called me 'seta set',...[group laughs]...I begged her but she would never listen. I know she allows me to do things that she wouldn't usually when she is with guests in the house and I deliberately waited for such a moment and loudly said: "Mom, would you allow me to do something if I ask you?" Then she said yes and I asked her to allow me to wash plates. She allowed it and I fulfilled my desire.

The response Kibrom's mother gave when he asked to wash the plates and glasses (a so called women's job in Ethiopia), i.e. *seta set*²⁰, is very interesting in that it shows how deep sex-based roles are rooted in the society. Kibrom's mother called her boy literally "a woman" when he asked to wash the plates indicating how seriously the society attributes roles based on gender. It is, however, also important to note here that Kibrom did not back off and did not accept the tag of *seta set*, which indicates his unconformity to the gender discrimination set in his context. The following excerpt also indicates how sex-based roles are disapproved by other urban-middle class children:

Int: Is there such a thing called men's and women's job?

Ruth: No. This is quite ridiculous. For example, here, it is usually perceived that a carpenter is and should be a man. But a woman can also be a carpenter. We make distinctions here in Ethiopia because we think men are greater than women. This is why we are backward

Dawit: There is no difference between men's job and women's job.

Int: Does this mean a man can bake *injera*²¹?

Dawit: Yes. I don't see any problem with that

This discussion with the children identifies the society as classified into different sets based on gender and having distinct roles to play and jobs to do. Ruth mentions the example of a carpenter being associated to a man's piece of job in Ethiopia and criticizes such labeling of

²⁰ *Seta set*, which literally translates as 'woman-like' is a commonly used Amharic phrase that describes a man who acts like a woman.

²¹ *Injera* is the staple food of Ethiopia which is made from an indigenous grain called 'teff'. It looks like a pancake and is usually accompanied by a sauce called 'wot'.

jobs based on gender. She in fact went on to say that “[w]e make distinctions here in Ethiopia because we think men are greater than women”, an expression which can give the connotation that men’s job are perceived to be superior to women’s jobs. Ruth’s discussion implies that she is well aware of the inequality but she doesn’t tag herself to any ‘labeled job’ as she believes a woman can be a carpenter, the perceived men’s piece of job in Ethiopia. Dawit also identifies himself as someone who does not have any sex based distinctions as far as jobs are concerned when he states that there is nothing wrong with men baking *injera*, a job that is dominantly attributed to women in Ethiopia. Meseret, 8, shares Ruth’s and Dawit’s view.

Meseret: All the people in the countryside classify some jobs as exclusively for men and others for women. They are not right. There is no difference between what men and women can do. A woman can be an engineer as well as a doctor....and also a carpenter... Men can do the same as well. But the people in the countryside say a man can be a carpenter but a woman’s place is in the house. You see, in these places there is discrimination.

Meseret’s argument is basically similar with that of Ruth and Dawit in that she challenges the perceived distinctions that exist between men and women in the things they are supposed to do. However, she specifically attaches the tendency of gender stereotyping in sex-based roles to the countryside. One way of interpreting Meseret’s argument is that her specific mentioning of the countryside as a place where gender discrimination is practiced indicates her preference to position herself in a community which does not discriminate women based on gender.

The discussions show that sex-based roles do exist in the social context the subjects of this study, upper-middle-class children of Ethiopia are set, but these discriminations are eventually fading away as they are resisted and criticized by the children regardless of their own gender. An interesting complement for this argument is featured by Liya in her comparison of *Mulan*²² and *Cinderella*, two Disney animation features with heroines that represent two very distinct characteristics.

Int: How do you compare Mulan and Cinderella?

Liya: In the story of Mulan, we see that Mulan's father was aged but still alive. When war came Mulan shortened her hair and wore the clothes of her father to go and fight in place of him. But when we look at Cinderella, both her father and mother died when she was very little and lived with her step sisters and her step mother.

Int: Is it strange that Mulan becomes a soldier? Can women be soldiers?

Liya: I believe there is no problem with a woman being a soldier. But some old people I know say that a woman can't be involved in activities like farming.

Int: Do you believe women can do these kinds of jobs?

Liya: There is no reason why a woman can't do these jobs. I believe if a woman practices and performs well, she can do any job

There is a definite reference to the society's patriarchal facet when Liya highlights how old people have some stereotypical perceptions upon the roles women and men should assume in the society which should be principally distinct. Although Liya's lived reality is defined in this context, she doesn't accept the claim that there are specific jobs that women should not do, especially those which are tagged by the society as 'exclusively for men'—like farming in her case. She challenges the idea that women are designed only for specific

²² *Mulan* is a 1998 animated feature film produced by Walt Disney Feature Animation, and released by Walt Disney Pictures on June 19, 1998. The thirty-sixth animated feature in the Disney animated features canon, the film is loosely based on various versions of the Chinese legend Fa Mulan. When Mulan's father is forced to fight in the army again, Mulan takes action. In order to save her father's life, she goes to the army for him, disguised as a man. A "dragon" named Mushu from her ancestors and her grandma's lucky cricket help Mulan on her mission. Along the way she meets some unusual friends and falls in love with the Captain. Finally they go to war.

kinds of jobs and praises the way Mulan became a soldier, which in Ethiopia as well as in the then China as depicted in the film, is a man's job. This view is further reinforced by Dina who thinks that women can do what men are prescribed to do.

A woman can do a man's job. It is here that we make these distinctions. I am saying this because my aunt who lives in America visits us some times and tells us how her husband cooks for her while she is at work or while sleeping. This is very rare here.

Interestingly, Dina's reference and appreciation of America as a place where there are no distinctions of jobs based on gender may as well imply that this is a positive value she considers and wants to be transferred in the society she lives in. But what is important to note here is that Dina already has distinction and classification of roles based on gender when she says "a woman can do a man's job." What this essentially means is that there is the assumption that there is an already established 'men's piece of job' in her mind and women's attempt is to claim that piece of job as a shared practice whereas the earlier discussion with Liya doesn't identify the existence of sex-based roles.

In essence, this surely culminates to the traditional vs. modern culture debate. The children are critical of the patriarchy and distinct sex-based role they witness in the community they live in and attempt to prove how this is wrong in light of their reference to their favourite Disney characters. As such, it can be argued that Liya's reference to Mulan as an example of how there is no such thing called sex based roles and Dina's reference to America as a place where men do what is identified as women's job in the community she

lives in imply their approval to these values which they think should be practiced here as well, thus developing the tendency for a transfer of modern culture from the likes of America to their community which they identify as patriarchal.

6.6 Conclusion

I have attempted to present and interpret the reception of messages and contents of Disney animation features by upper middle class Ethiopian children based on some of the basic critics of the media imperialism thesis. Results of the analysis challenge the fundamental premise of the media imperialism thesis which puts forward the “homogenization” agenda of Western, particularly American, values and interests against the weaker ‘Third world’ nations like Ethiopia. Although participants of the study adhered to the Western values of individualism and modernism, they also interacted with their lived reality to modify and even reject some of the messages and constructs of the animation films they watch. In other words, the study shows that participants do not experience a homogeneous phenomenon in their reception of the messages of the animation feature films they see but rather actively interact with their social context to construct meaning.

Chapter Seven

CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction

This final chapter of the study recaps some of the salient issues and findings that arose in the discussion so far. Firstly, I will attempt to summarize what this research has been all about, how it was undertaken and the dominant themes that propped up. Then I will suggest some subjects and themes that have a potential for further research before I wind up the thesis with closing remarks.

7.2 Summary

This study has been conducted with the chief aim of exploring how Ethiopian upper-middle-class children in Addis Ababa negotiate with and make meaning out of the global media messages they are exposed to as represented by the animation films produced by the Walt Disney Company. Specifically, the study explores how and why the specified children accept, modify, or even reject the global media messages they encounter amidst the context of their everyday lived reality. Consequently, I investigated some of the germane societal set ups that have contributed to the exposure of Ethiopian upper-middle-class children in Addis Ababa to Disney animation features. My investigation in this regard shows that homes are perceived as safe spaces for children. This belief prompts parents to find ways of

engaging their children at their homes, out of which bringing them ‘safe’ animation films is one such activity. In this manner, parents become oblivious agents of Disney’s penetration and unconsciously facilitate Disney’s exposure to their children. I have then examined how upper-middle-class Ethiopian children make meaning out of the Disney animation features they are exposed to in the context of their everyday life.

Since the study is about the interplay of the global in the local, I deemed it valid to discuss the media imperialism thesis and its critiques as the theoretical framework of the study. The foundation of the media imperialism thesis lies on the premise that the dumping of Western, particularly American, media contents on ‘Third world’ nations creates a homogenizing effect of values and interests in favour of the former.

In my attempt to explore how upper-middle-class Ethiopian children negotiate with Disney in the midst of their day-to-day lives, I employed focus group interviews and individual in-depth interviews. The interviews were appropriate tools in that they helped me see the reception from the perspectives of the children themselves so that I can understand the meaning they make out of the Disney animation films they see and the complex social settings that come into the interplay between the global and the local.

This research has discussed Disney as the children’s sole means of communication to the outside world amidst their confinement to their homes as per the society’s perception of homes as safe grounds for children. Streamlined with the media imperialism thesis and its

critiques, the attraction of Disney to the children has been discussed in four major themes including how Disney serves as an agent of 'symbolic distancing' and fantasy; the role of Disney as an agent of exporter of 'Americanization', modernity and individualism; how children stand in defense of the local amidst an array of global media exposure; and how Disney challenges traditional sex based roles.

One of the major outcomes of this study is that although the children identify themselves with the values the Disney animation films represent, it is difficult to conclude that they passively adhere to it. The children are not doomed to homogenization as the media imperialism thesis argues but rather interact with the global texts and images they interact with for reasons of quality and aesthetics. They transfer symbolically to the world they are introduced to through the films but are very much aware of the social values they are bound in. In the abundance of exposure to global media, the children still enjoy local productions and mention issues related to nationalism, local language, and story development for the way they watch local children programmes. In another instance, they challenge the patriarchal make up of the Ethiopian society and refer to the Disney animation films they see to validate their case, thus ultimately raising the issue of modernity versus local tradition. As a result, it is, in many ways, difficult to conform to the premises of the media imperialism thesis, as the global media texts' and images' (as represented by Disney in this case) penetration is uneven. The complexity of meanings constructed by the children in their interaction with the global texts and images of Disney makes the task of adhering to or rejecting the penetration of global media messages to the

local audience intricate. The nature of other dynamics like societal make up, beliefs and values do not make the task of establishing a relationship that the media imperialism thesis makes between the global and the local easy, and thus any attempt of trying to define such rapport shall take into consideration the interface between text and context.

7.3 Scope for Further Research

One of the fertile areas for further research is the issue of media literacy in children's understanding of global media messages. In their comparison of global and local productions, the children repeatedly mentioned issues of language intelligibility and quality of contents. An investigation in this area will have implications for aspects to be reconsidered and revisited in the production of local contents for children.

Another important area of further research is in the dimension of the penetration of global media and the production of local programmes for children in light of the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child (CRC). Article 17 of the CRC states that:

States Parties recognize the important function performed by the mass media and shall ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health. To this end, States Parties shall:

- (a) Encourage the mass media to disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child;
- (b) Encourage international co-operation in the production, exchange and dissemination of such information and material from a diversity of cultural, national and international sources;

- (c) Encourage the production and dissemination of children's books;
- (d) Encourage the mass media to have particular regard to the linguistic needs of the child who belongs to a minority group or who is indigenous;
- (e) Encourage the development of appropriate guidelines for the protection of the child from information and material injurious to his or her well-being.

The state of Ethiopian children and the media in relation to the provisions of Article 17 of the CRC and other relevant child right issues are yet to be explored. It is especially important to note how the CRC demands States to encourage both international and national media to produce materials for the promotion of the child's "social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health", and whether this provision is put into effect or not.

Further research can also be done to further probe into how Ethiopian upper-class children negotiate with Disney by breaking down the four thematic discussions of this study and investigating them separately. It is also a possibility for researchers to examine how children negotiate with other global emerging children media content producers (like DreamWorks, for example).

7.4 Closing Remarks

As part of the society and the dynamics that encompass the wonderful kids I had the pleasure of spending some time with, I have, with all love and care, have my myths and prescriptions of the needs and wants of children. This study has challenged my outlooks on

children overwhelmingly in this regard. Children have their needs and worlds that are essentially distinct from our own, and more importantly they can express it. This study has helped me understand that children can actively negotiate with the media messages they are exposed to and can interact with their everyday lived reality to construct meaning. It is in this context that, I hope, my study can contribute to the academic culture of the relatively ignored academic culture of children's reception of media messages from their own worldview and from their own perspectives. It is also my hope that different stakeholders of children's rights including government offices, NGOs, the academic elite and civic organizations take into consideration the importance of listening to children's voices and thus ultimately participating them over the decisions that would impact their lives thereafter.

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APPENDICES

Appendix I

Supporting Letter to Public Libraries, NGOs and Government Offices

To: _____

Addis Ababa

Tewodros Workalemahu Workneh is a third batch student of the Faculty of Journalism and Communication, Addis Ababa University. As part of the requirements of his successful completion of the program, he is involved in conducting a research with a theme of Global Media and Children.

As the resources in your institution, particularly those of library and documentation, will be of great assistance to the successful development of the thesis, the Faculty of Journalism and Communication kindly requests your cooperation for the specified student.

Regards,

Supporting Letter to Selected Schools

To: _____

Addis Ababa

Tewodros Workalemahu Workneh is a third batch student of the Faculty of Journalism and Communication, Addis Ababa University. As part of the requirements of his successful completion of the program, he is involved in conducting a research with a theme of Global Media and Children.

As the profile of the targets of his study fit to the children learning in your institution, we ask for your kind assistance to let him conduct interviews with the selected number of students which he is going to specify.

The Faculty of Journalism and Communication would like to thank you in advance for your cooperation.

Regards,

Regards,

THEMATIC QUESTIONS

Individualism and Optimism

1. How do the children narrate the story of the Disney animations they see?
2. Which parts of the films make the children's emotions intense and sustain their suspense?
3. How do the children feel about the ending of the films?
4. What characters do the children associate with success through individual efforts?
5. What do the children understand from success of the characters?

Symbolic Distancing and Fantasy

1. How do the children compare their lived reality to that of the films they see? Are there times that they wished to be like the characters they favour?
2. Do the films provide any way out from their lived reality (perhaps as a means of being big and strong, potent, commanding, etc)?
3. Is there anything that the youth particularly like about watching Disney movies? Does it have anything to do with their lived reality?

Modernity

1. Has the watching of Disney movies changed the way the children see their lived reality and culture in any way?
2. Are there any aspects of the movies/characters they attempt to imitate?
3. Is there any aspect that the children used as a point of reference to challenge traditional views and conservatism?

Heroes and Heroines—Gender Issues

1. Why do the children like watching Disney films?
2. Which films do the children like most and why?
3. Do the characters the children favour got anything to do with their gender?
4. Do heroines attract girls better than heroes?
5. Do the children give a special attention to violence? Does it happen that a specific gender prefers or denounces violence?

Local Content

1. Do the children follow local content produced for their age? How do they evaluate it?
2. Is there any way that they compare the standard of local content to the standard of Disney products? (The case of Sinziro for example)
3. Do the children see local cinema and theatre?

Americanization and Westernization

1. Is there anything that the youth dislike about Disney films?
2. To what culture or tradition do the children associate Disney films?

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR INDIVIDUAL IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS FOR CHILDREN

1. Can you please kindly tell me your name, how old you are, and which grade you are in?
2. Do you remember when you have started watching cartoon/animation films?
3. What do you know about Disney?
4. In what way do you see the animation films you have watched so far (TV/VCR/DVD/Televised satellite broadcasts)?
5. Which animation film have you liked most? Why?
6. Think of the animation film(s) you like most. Which part of the film do you like and remember most? Why?
7. Do you like watching cartoon/animation films? Why?
8. Who is (are) your favorite actor(s)/ character(s)? What aspects of your favorite character(s) do you like?
9. Do you watch the films alone, together with your friends, siblings, parents or any other people?
10. How do you compare real feature films with animated feature films?
11. Do you always understand the language in the films you see? If not, how do you solve the problem?
12. Do you have the opportunity to watch children animation films that are locally produced?
13. Do you like the animation films/theatres that are locally produced?
14. How do you relate the story you see in the cartoon films to your own lived reality? Is it similar or different?
15. What do you think of America?
16. After watching the animation films/ features you have seen, what do you think of the culture you live in (with friends, family, school, etc.)?

17. Is there anything you would like to tell me about the cartoon animation films you have seen so far that we have not discussed so far?

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR INDIVIDUAL IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS FOR PARENTS

1. Can you please kindly tell me your name and what you do for living?
2. Do you allow your children to go out of their homes as they like?
3. Do the friends of your children come to your house? What is your feeling about it?
4. Do you allow your children to watch any film they like?
5. What kinds of films do you prefer your children shall watch?
6. How do your children access the films they see?
7. Do you watch films together with your children? What are your feelings about it?

Declaration

This thesis is my original work. It has not been presented for a degree in any other university and that all sources of material used for the thesis have been duly acknowledged.

Tewodros Workalemahu Workneh

July 16, 2007.