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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **Designing Moral Narratives through 3D Animation: Youth Identity and Cultural Reflections in Ghana's *Pressure* Music Video**

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**| ABSTRACT**

This paper explores *Pressure* (2024), a 3D animated music video by Ghanaian musician Akwaboah, as a cultural artefact that visualizes the ethical and psychological dilemmas confronting Ghanaian youth. The narrative, delivered in Akan, depicts a young man whose financial struggles push him toward questionable choices, ultimately underscoring the consequences of material obsession and societal pressure. Through photorealistic design, culturally embedded symbols, and emotionally nuanced storytelling, the animation functions as both a moral allegory and a mirror of contemporary youth identity. Drawing on animation theory, visual semiotics, and postcolonial media perspectives, the study examines how *Pressure* reimagines African digital storytelling by blending traditional values with modern design techniques. A qualitative approach was adopted, using purposive sampling to engage industry practitioners, animation educators, and selected audiences. Their insights provide context for understanding the role of 3D animation in shaping moral discourse and contributing to social commentary in Ghana's evolving media space. The findings reveal that digital animation deepens narrative engagement while creating opportunities for critical reflection on ethical challenges within youth culture. The paper concludes with recommendations for advancing animation design and education in Ghana, highlighting its potential to address social issues through culturally resonant and ethically grounded storytelling.

**| KEYWORDS**

3D Animation, Digital Storytelling, Ghanaian Youth, Cultural Identity, Moral Narratives, postcolonial media, visual semiotics.

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### **1. Introduction**

Contemporary Ghanaian artists increasingly embrace digital media, particularly animation, to address social, political, and economic issues (Mensah, 2020; Esseku et al., 2023). Animation has become an important tool for preserving Ghana's cultural heritage, engaging audiences with traditional folklore, dance, and historical narratives (Esseku et al., 2023). In recent years, Ghanaian contemporary art has gained international attention through exhibitions, workshops, and digital platforms (Kwami, 2019; Woets, 2019). Artists now use new media forms and site-specific work to explore themes of globalization, liberalization, and cultural connectivity (Woets, 2019). Among these artists, members of the blaxTARLINES KUMASI collective, including Dorothy Amenuke and Ibrahim Mahama, exemplify the innovative ways Ghanaian creators engage with global audiences (Kwami, 2019). Within this dynamic context, *Pressure* (2024), a 3D animated music video created for Ghanaian musician Akwaboah, stands out as a cultural artefact that visualizes the emotional and psychological toll of societal expectations on young people.

African animators are also redefining digital storytelling more broadly. Their works safeguard oral traditions, myths, and legends, while incorporating motifs, attire, and symbolic objects that highlight deeper cultural narratives (Callus, 2018; Kushiator, Rahman and Ofori, 2020; Piliang et al., 2023). Well-known projects such as *Kabongo*, *Tinga Tinga Tales*, and *Zambezia* illustrate the potential of African animation to compete globally while fostering cultural renaissance (Azi, 2012). These initiatives show how animation can function as both a form of preservation and a vehicle for education and social reflection (Mayowa, 2020).

The Akan language further enriches this cultural landscape. As the most widely spoken language in Ghana, Akan remains central to communication, yet faces challenges of transmission across generations (Agyepong, 2017). Scholars have highlighted its rich sociocultural communicative traditions and its growing relevance in technological innovation, including natural language processing models (Agyekum, 2011; Azunre et al., 2021). Its presence in *Pressure* reinforces the music video's cultural grounding and underlines the significance of language in sustaining identity.

The video narrates the story of a young man rejected for his lack of financial stability. His eventual resort to theft symbolizes the crushing weight of societal pressure, particularly around wealth and material success. This allegory critiques the consequences of equating personal worth with possessions, while emphasizing the dangers of unethical decisions. Through stylized realism, expressive lighting, and symbolic visual cues, the animation transforms a personal struggle into a culturally resonant journey of identity and morality.

This paper analyzes how *Pressure* employs 3D animation as both an artistic medium and a narrative device to communicate themes of inner struggle, societal burden, and liberation. It examines how technical design choices such as modeling, rigging, lighting, and rendering interact with cultural symbolism to produce meaning (*Click here to view the **Pressure animated video**: <https://youtu.be/HPuTTEA2imk?si=B5o1hPQGTaOccf4j>*). The study is guided by three research questions:

- How does the animation visualize the theme of “pressure” as a compelling moral narrative?
- What cultural symbols are embedded, and how do they reflect Ghanaian social realities?
- In what ways does the technical design contribute to the emotional tone and impact of the video?

African digital animation is still an emerging field, yet projects like *Pressure* demonstrate how local creatives are blending global techniques with indigenous values (Okome, 2017; Ogunleye, 2021). This paper situates *Pressure* within broader discourses of African animation and postcolonial visual culture, arguing that such works not only mark a technological shift but also contribute significantly to the re-imagining of identity, morality, and social commentary in African visual media (Manovich, 2001; Wells, 1998).

## **2. Literature Review**

The integration of 3D animation into African visual storytelling reflects a dynamic intersection of technology, tradition, and creative expression. Animation, as Paul Wells (1998) observes, possesses the unique ability to “mediate the abstract and the representational,” allowing artists to explore complex emotions and social realities through stylized forms. This interpretive capacity resonates deeply in African contexts, where oral traditions, symbolism, and metaphoric communication remain central to cultural expression.

The semiotic dimension of animation has long been discussed in relation to meaning-making. Eisenstein (1949) and later Manovich (2001) emphasized how visual elements such as movement, color, and composition become carriers of symbolic weight. African 3D animation increasingly demonstrates this capacity, embedding local cultural codes into narrative structures. Nigerian projects, for instance, have employed 3D design to showcase Igbo identity (Morgan, 2020), while global works such as *Avatar: The Last Airbender* illustrate how cultural motifs enrich animated storytelling (Abdullah & Abdullah, 2020). Traditional Disney principles of animation, dating back to the 1930s, still inform contemporary practice, ensuring that character design and motion styles retain aesthetic harmony and narrative clarity (Carter, 2016). Within African contexts, the movement known as “Afrimation” underscores animation's potential to preserve heritage and drive digital innovation. Landmark projects like *Kabongo*, *Tinga Tinga Tales*, and *Zambezia* illustrate how cultural heritage is actively reimagined within global animation landscapes (Azi, 2012). In works like *Pressure*, such semiotic layering encodes emotions of fear, aspiration, and constraint into the visual design of the narrative.

Although African animation scholarship is still emerging, it is gaining traction as an area of critical inquiry. Okome (2017) and Onuzulike (2020) argue that reclaiming African narratives through digital media is essential to counter external stereotypes and foster authentic representation. Independent Ghanaian studios such as Parables Studios, AnimaxFYB, and Mills Studios exemplify

this effort, using tools like Blender, Autodesk Maya, and Arnold Renderer despite limited resources (CGAfrica, 2024). These initiatives not only demonstrate technical skill but also situate animation as a form of cultural self-determination.

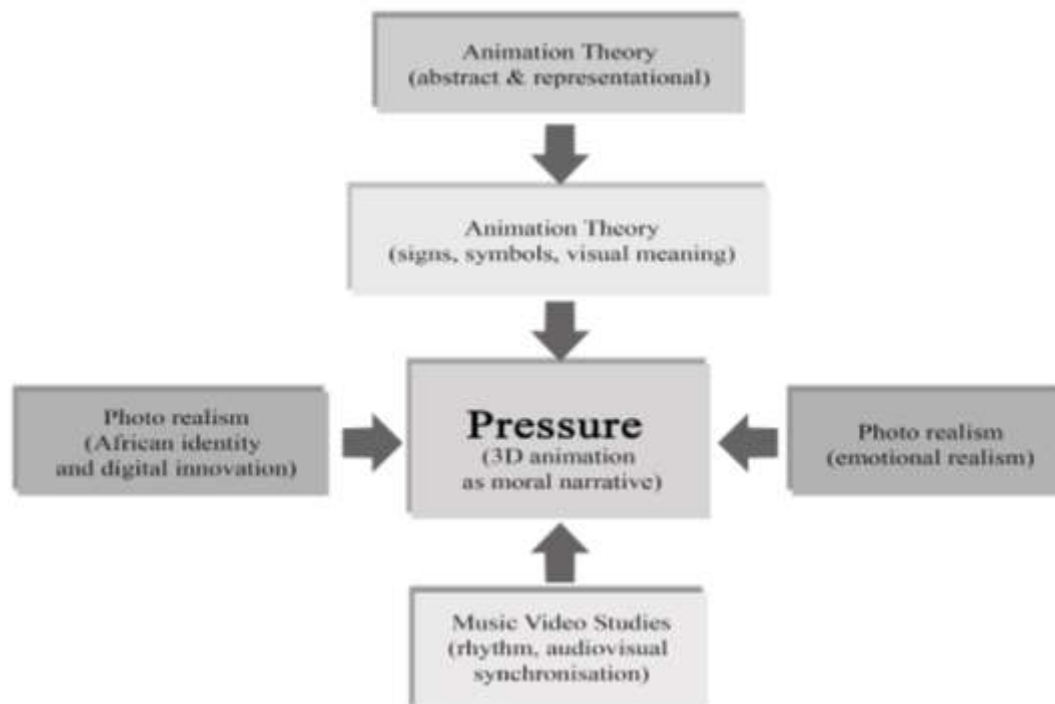
Connections between animation and music video scholarship further contextualize this discussion. Vernallis (2004) highlights how audiovisual rhythm, editing, and synchronization between sound and image shape narrative immersion. In Ghana, music videos function as more than entertainment; they are cultural texts that merge music, dance, fashion, and now animation to comment on pressing social realities. Within this framework, animation expands the expressive capacity of music videos, embedding visual allegories into popular culture.

Another important strand of scholarship addresses the role of photorealism in audience engagement. Kerlow (2009) defines photorealism as the simulation of real-world physics, textures, and lighting, noting its psychological impact on viewers. In *Pressure*, photorealistic design techniques are not deployed to replicate reality but to evoke emotional realism—an aesthetic that mirrors the psychological tension embedded in Akwaboah's lyrics.

The growing scholarship on African animation affirms its role as both an artistic practice and a vehicle for socio-cultural commentary. This study builds on that trajectory, situating *Pressure* within West African animation discourse and assessing its design strategies as part of a broader effort to merge aesthetics, ethics, and cultural identity.

## 2.1 Conceptual Framework

The literature points to five interrelated strands that inform the analysis of *Pressure*: (1) animation theory, which situates 3D animation as a medium for abstract and representational meaning-making; (2) semiotics, highlighting how visual signs such as movement, color, and composition generate cultural narratives; (3) Afrimation, foregrounding animation as a tool for preserving African identity while innovating in digital spaces; (4) photorealism, where technical rendering techniques evoke emotional realism; and (5) music video studies, underscoring how rhythm, editing, and audiovisual synchronization shape immersive cultural experiences. As a whole, these elements form a framework for understanding how *Pressure* operates as both an aesthetic work and a vehicle for moral and cultural reflection.



**Figure 1. Conceptual framework mapping key theoretical strands (animation theory, semiotics, Afrimation, photorealism, and music video studies) onto the analysis of *Pressure* as a design-driven moral narrative.**  
 Source: Authors' own construct (2024), adapted from Wells (1998), Manovich (2001), Vernallis (2004), Kerlow (2009), and Azi (2012).

**Key** (how to read Figure 1):

- Each strand (Animation Theory, Semiotics, Afrimation, Photorealism, Music Video Studies) contributes concepts that converge into the central case study: *Pressure* as a *design-driven moral narrative*.
- The vertical flow (top-down) emphasizes theory and semiotics as foundational, while the horizontal connections show cultural identity and visual realism reinforcing the analysis.
- Music video studies connect upward to the broader cultural medium in which *Pressure* is situated.

### **3. Methodological Approach**

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology designed to uncover the symbolic, cultural, and technical layers of *Pressure* (2024), a 3D animated music video by Ghanaian musician Akwaboah. The aim is not to investigate production logistics or audience reception, but rather to focus on how the video's form, structure, and meaning communicate moral and cultural narratives. The approach combines visual analysis, purposive sampling, semi-structured interviews with practitioners, and theoretical perspectives drawn from animation studies, music video scholarship, and postcolonial media theory.

#### **3.1 Narrative Synopsis and Ethical Dimensions**

The narrative of *Pressure* unfolds in a contemporary Ghanaian neighborhood and is delivered entirely in Akan, the most widely spoken language in Ghana. The storyline centers on a young man who develops an interest in a woman from his community. His financial struggles, however, lead to rejection, as the woman chooses instead to pursue another man who appears affluent after being seen driving an expensive-looking car ([Click here to view the Pressure animated video: https://youtu.be/HPuTTEA2imk?si=B5o1hPQGTaOccf4j](https://youtu.be/HPuTTEA2imk?si=B5o1hPQGTaOccf4j)).

Frustrated and disillusioned, the protagonist attempts to change his circumstances through theft, stealing a laptop with the hope of securing a better future. The plot takes an unexpected turn when it is revealed that the seemingly wealthy rival had only rented the flashy car, undermining the image of success that influenced the woman's decision. This twist reframes the narrative, exposing the fragile foundations of material aspiration and societal perception.

The video weaves ethical and moral lessons into this storyline. At an ethical level, it critiques the desire among youth to seek shortcuts to wealth without questioning the authenticity of others' possessions. At a moral level, it emphasizes the value of integrity, dignity, and responsible living over the pursuit of superficial appearances. The animation warns against the dangers of succumbing to societal pressure and material envy, highlighting how such impulses can lead to unlawful or self-destructive choices. Through music, visual symbolism, and narrative design, *Pressure* functions as a cautionary tale that mirrors the realities of Ghanaian youth navigating materialism and socio-economic aspirations.

#### **3.2 Visual and Narrative Analysis**

The analysis is grounded in visual semiotics. Symbolic elements such as color palettes, props, gestures, and spatial arrangements are examined for their contribution to storytelling. Each scene is explored in relation to camera angles, lighting dynamics, and motion design. The progression of visual transitions is interpreted as a reflection of the protagonist's shifting emotional states, highlighting how design elements support narrative meaning.

#### **3.3 Audio-Visual Synchrony**

Given that music videos merge sound and image, special attention is paid to audio-visual interplay. Techniques such as beat-matching, lyrical symbolism, and emotional synchrony are analyzed to understand how rhythm and motion combine to enhance immersion. The alignment between musical shifts and visual changes demonstrates how meaning is created beyond dialogue, reinforcing the expressive potential of animation within a musical context.

#### **3.4 Cultural Symbolism**

Cultural signifiers are treated as essential to interpretation. Fabrics, hairstyles, architectural backdrops, and bodily gestures are decoded using a postcolonial lens, with the aim of revealing how they communicate Ghanaian identity and societal pressures. These details are framed within discussions of African modernity, masculinity, and mental health, offering insights into how design choices embed cultural authenticity into digital storytelling.

#### **3.5 Technical Inference**

Although direct production documentation is unavailable, visual evidence provides clues to the software pipeline and technical execution. Elements such as rigging, surface texturing, rendering quality, and compositing workflows suggest the use of

advanced tools like Arnold Renderer. The attention to shaders, lighting, and environmental detail signals a deliberate effort to balance photorealism with stylization, situating the video within contemporary practices of African 3D animation.

### 3.6 Theoretical Framework

Three interconnected frameworks guide the study.

- **Animation theory** (Wells, 1998) provides a lens for understanding how stylization and exaggeration are used to externalize psychological states. In *Pressure*, metaphors such as constricting chains or oppressive lighting demonstrate animation's expressive function in visualizing internal conflict.
- **Music video theory** (Vernallis, 2004) highlights the role of rhythm, editing, and synchrony in creating meaning. The animation's pacing, transitions, and repeated motifs reflect this theory, showing how sound and image combine to form a "gestural narrative."
- **Postcolonial media theory** (Bhabha, 1994; Ngũgĩ, 1986; Okome, 2017; Ogunleye, 2021) enables the analysis of identity, resistance, and reclamation. *Pressure* uses local imagery, hairstyles, fabrics, body language, and urban Ghanaian settings to reclaim a historically Western medium for distinctly Ghanaian storytelling. This positions the video as both a cultural artefact and a political act of narrative ownership.

### 3.7 Ethics and Validity

The study followed ethical research principles to ensure transparency and integrity. Interviews with practitioners and educators were conducted with informed consent, and participants were assured of confidentiality. Purposive sampling was applied to engage individuals with direct expertise in animation and cultural production, enhancing the relevance of insights. Triangulation across visual analysis, interviews, and theoretical frameworks strengthened validity, while reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process to minimize interpretive bias.

## 4. Discussion

The analysis of *Pressure* reveals how 3D animation can function as both an aesthetic medium and a platform for cultural critique. The video translates abstract social anxieties into visual and emotional forms that resonate with Ghanaian youth navigating financial strain, masculinity, and societal expectations. Building on the theoretical frameworks outlined earlier, this section interprets how design choices, ranging from photorealistic settings to symbolic metaphors, construct meaning that is both locally grounded and globally legible.

### 4.1 Visual Style and Photorealism

One of the video's most compelling features is its photorealistic design of Ghanaian environments, illustrated in **Figure 1**. The contextual presentation blends indigenous spatial forms with postcolonial architectural layouts, creating a hybrid setting that mirrors lived experience. As shown in **Figures 2a and 2b**, the use of shaders, textures, and lighting creates immersive spaces that do more than mimic reality and they establish emotional tone. Slow gestures such as slumped shoulders or downward glances communicate psychological burden. Shifts in lighting, from muted gloom to liberating brightness, reinforce Kerlow's (2009) emphasis on light as a carrier of emotional realism. Photorealistic features such as depth of field, atmospheric particles, and the rule of thirds enhance composition, while material qualities like fabric textures and skin rendering deepen immersion. These technical details are not simply decorative; they ground the narrative in a tangible realism that heightens the stakes of the protagonist's struggle.



**Figure1: Photorealistic design of Ghanaian environments.**

*(Source: Authors' own construct, 2024)*

Click here to view the *Pressure* animated video: <https://youtu.be/HPuTTEA2imk?si=B5o1hPQGTaOccf4j>



**Figure 2a: Contextual representation and indigenous spatial forms.**

*(Source: Authors' own construct, 2024)*



**Figure 2b: Contextual representation - hybrid spatial forms.**

*(Source: Authors' own construct, 2024)*



#### 4.2 Character Animation and Emotional Expression

The protagonist is animated with a balance between stylization and realism, allowing for both empathy and symbolism. As Wells (1998) observes, animation can exaggerate gestures to reveal inner truths. This principle is visible in scenes where the character is compressed by abstract forms or weighed down by symbolic chains, demonstrating the invisible but felt force of societal pressure. Subtle details such as eye movements, blinking patterns, and breath rhythms enhance the lifelike quality of the character, as seen in **Figure 3**. These micro-gestures foster a sense of empathy while maintaining the metaphorical register necessary for symbolic storytelling.



**Figure 3: Lifelike Character Animation and Emotional Expression.**

(Source: Authors' own construct, 2024)



**Figure 4a: Animated expression – exaggerated expression depicting emotions.**

(Source: Authors' own construct, 2024)



**Figure 4b: Animated expression – depicting emotional weight of societal expectations.**

*(Source: Authors' own construct, 2024)*

#### **4.3 Symbolic Representation of "Pressure"**

The central metaphor is reinforced through repeated symbolic cues. Depressed expressions, pensive gazes, and gestures of surprise, represented in **Figures 4a and 4b**, visualize the emotional weight of societal expectations. This aligns with Bhabha's (1994) and Ngũgĩ's (1986) insights into postcolonial entrapment, where individuals grapple with both internal and external demands. Urban spaces cluttered with noise, surveillance, and material excess heighten the sense of suffocation. Later scenes, however, introduce natural settings, signaling a return to balance and grounding. **Figure 5** captures this contrast, reflecting Okome's (2017) view that local imagery operates as a tool of emotional and political resistance. In doing so, the video makes abstract concepts of "pressure" visible and emotionally accessible.





**Figure 5: Setting the scenes - character depicted in natural settings.**

(Source: Authors' own construct, 2024)

#### **4.4 Audio-Visual Synchrony and Narrative Flow**

The synergy of sound and image plays a central role in shaping narrative meaning. In line with Vernallis's (2004) theory of the music video as a gestural form, moments of lyrical repetition coincide with slowed motion or looped visuals, emphasizing stagnation. Conversely, musical crescendos produce bursts of light, color, and movement, mirroring breakthroughs in the protagonist's emotional journey. These techniques create immersion, allowing the viewer to feel the rhythms of struggle and release. The absence of dialogue reinforces this mode of storytelling, where sound and motion carry the full weight of meaning.

#### **4.5 Cultural Signifiers and Identity Markers**

Beyond technical and narrative achievements, *Pressure* embeds markers of Ghanaian cultural identity throughout its design. Fabrics such as Kaba, hairstyles, and urban architectural details anchor the animation in a recognizable socio-cultural context. These elements, rather than functioning as background decoration, carry ideological weight. As postcolonial media theory suggests (Bhabha, 1994; Okome, 2017), cultural signifiers in digital media are acts of reclamation, positioning African creators within a global digital aesthetic while affirming local identity (Kushiator et al., 2019). The protagonist is thus not only a fictional character but also a symbolic figure navigating the tensions of African modernity.

#### **4.6 Implications**

The analysis of *Pressure* highlights several implications for both creative practice and scholarship. For Ghanaian animation practitioners, the video demonstrates how photorealistic techniques, symbolic design, and audio-visual synchrony can be used not only to enhance aesthetic quality but also to communicate complex moral and psychological themes. This positions 3D animation as a powerful vehicle for ethical storytelling, capable of addressing social pressures such as unemployment, financial strain, and mental health in ways that resonate with local audiences.

For media scholars, the study underscores the need to broaden existing frameworks of animation and music video analysis to account for African contexts. While much scholarship focuses on heritage preservation or postcolonial resistance, *Pressure* illustrates how animation also functions as a contemporary commentary on youth identity, cultural hybridity, and socio-economic transformation. The integration of local signifiers with global design practices reflects an ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity that is particularly relevant to African creative industries.

At a broader cultural level, the implications extend to education and policy. Strengthening animation training in Ghana and across Africa could support the development of socially engaged media that bridges entertainment and critical discourse.

*Pressure* illustrates the potential of design-led storytelling to inspire reflection, challenge stereotypes, and empower communities through narratives that are culturally resonant and ethically grounded.

## **5. Findings**

The analysis of *Pressure* demonstrates that 3D animation can operate as more than a vehicle for entertainment. It emerges as a culturally rooted and ethically engaged medium capable of articulating social pressures that deeply resonate with Ghanaian youth. Beyond showcasing technical competence in modelling, lighting, and motion design, the video relies on visual metaphor and symbolic storytelling to address urgent socio-economic dilemmas.

### **5.1 Several key findings stand out:**

- **Narrative Depth:** The storyline engages with lived socio-economic realities such as financial instability, peer comparison, and the lure of shortcuts to success.
- **Cultural Authenticity:** The use of Akan language, local aesthetics, and recognizable cultural signifiers anchors the work in its social context and affirms identity.
- **Ethical Messaging:** The narrative reinforces values of integrity, self-worth, and accountability, offering a counter-narrative to material obsession and social pressure.
- **Emotional Storytelling:** Through visual metaphors, pacing, and character expressiveness, the animation creates empathy and immersion, enabling viewers to feel rather than simply observe the protagonist's struggle.
- **Technological Application:** Despite resource constraints, the production achieves a level of sophistication that aligns with global animation practices, underscoring the potential of Ghanaian studios to compete internationally.

These findings affirm the relevance of 3D animation as a pedagogical and cultural tool. *Pressure* demonstrates how digital storytelling can provoke moral reflection, foster dialogue about identity and youth aspirations, and contribute to cultural preservation in a rapidly globalizing media landscape.

## **6. Conclusion and Recommendations**

The findings from *Pressure* underscore the need to strengthen Ghana's animation ecosystem through education, investment, and collaboration. Educational institutions have a crucial role to play in integrating 3D animation into their curricula, particularly through programs that engage with local languages and cultural narratives. Building such foundations will not only nurture technical skills but also ensure that future storytellers remain rooted in Ghanaian identity.

Support for local studios is equally important. Greater investment from government and private stakeholders can provide the equipment, training, and financial resources necessary for sustainable production. These resources would enable creators to produce high-quality animations that meet international standards while reflecting local realities.

The creative community should also be encouraged to promote ethical storytelling. Embedding moral and ethical lessons in narratives ensures that animation does more than entertain, it educates, provokes reflection, and addresses pressing social issues. Expanding the use of indigenous languages such as Akan can further increase accessibility and cultural resonance, positioning animation as a medium of both pride and pedagogy.

Collaboration across creative sectors holds additional promise. Partnerships between animators, musicians, writers, and cultural practitioners can enrich narratives and ensure both technical excellence and cultural authenticity. Equally important is the documentation and archiving of Ghanaian animation, which would preserve these works as cultural heritage while offering valuable material for scholarly research.

Finally, attention should be given to refining technical quality. Although the *Pressure* animated video demonstrates a high level of sophistication, the movement of characters occasionally lacks fluidity. Applying the principles of animation more consistently and refining motion curves would enhance naturalism and elevate the overall visual impact.

These recommendations reveal both opportunities and challenges. With stronger training pipelines, financial support, and collaborative networks, Ghanaian animation can flourish as an industry that empowers storytellers to merge tradition with innovation. *Pressure* exemplifies the potential of this trajectory, pointing toward a future where African animation is not only culturally resonant but also globally competitive.

The broader significance of this study lies in its contribution to African media scholarship. *Pressure* illustrates how creators are reimagining animation as a space where cultural identity, ethical discourse, and digital innovation intersect. The video demonstrates that 3D animation in Ghana is not a borrowed form but a reworked medium that conveys local realities through globally recognizable techniques. Blending indigenous language, symbolic storytelling, and contemporary design, the work points to the future of African media production, one that resists marginalization, challenges stereotypes, and contributes original voices to global digital culture. As scholarship on African animation continues to expand, works like *Pressure* encourage deeper engagement with the ways animation can serve as a moral compass, a cultural archive, and a transformative tool for youth expression in postcolonial societies.

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