

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN DISNEY PIXAR'S 'COCO': UNVEILING CULTURAL TRADITIONS AND FAMILY BONDS

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DOI : 10.21107/prosodi.v19i1.28576

Received 21 December 2024; Received in revised form 21 December 2024;

Accepted 21 December 2024; Published 07 April 2025.

ABSTRACT

This study examines the Disney movie, *Coco* (2017) through Stuart Hall's Cultural Studies Theory and Murray Bowen's Family System Theory to explore cultural traditions and family dynamics in the movie. Employing a qualitative method and collecting data primarily from documentation, this study investigates how Disney represents Mexican traditional culture, particularly *Dia de Los Muertos*, the day of the dead, in maintaining individual identity and protecting family bonds. Hall's theory emphasizes how the movie portrays cultural traditions and representations. Bowen's theory reveals the importance of family roles, family reconciliation, emotional dynamics, differentiation of self, and multigenerational transmission. The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of cultural diversity and the complexities of familial dynamics. This study contributes on intercultural communication by illustrating animated movies may be effective and powerful instruments for emotional and cultural education connection.

Keywords: *Dia de Los Muertos, family dynamics, Mexican traditions, identity.*

BACKGROUND

Disney and Pixar studio production released another movie with a cultural background called *Coco* in 2017. Set in Mexican culture and history, the director of *Coco*, Lee Unkrich, reveals a place in Mexico that inspired him to make a fictional village with rich Mexican culture. According to the New York Times, Unkrich said that he and his team took a trip to explore and research Mexican culture from its roots. Deep-dived into Mexican culture, Unkrich was mesmerized as he discovered one of the famous Mexican cultures called *Día de Muertos*, mainly known as the Day of the Dead. In his interview with Deadline in 2017, he unfolds the history of the Day of the Dead by mentioning that this tradition is not only about culture but also about family bonds that tight families from generation to generation. How they remember their loved ones from time to time, and how each generation passes stories about families to the next generation. The more he digs into Mexican culture and tradition, particularly about the Day of the Dead, he tells himself and his team that this tradition might have the potential to become a movie because of its color, music, and the family bonds that are suitable for emotional sides for a Pixar movie.

Coco tells the story of the Rivera family, who share a deep love for music. The narrative begins with the family's patriarch, who abandons his family to pursue a career as a musician, leaving behind a legacy that shapes the family's future. As the family struggles to cope with his absence, they eventually establish a successful shoe-making business, known as the Rivera shoe shop, which becomes a symbol of their resilience and unity.

The movie follows Miguel Rivera, a young boy with aspirations of becoming a musician like his idol, Ernesto de la Cruz. Despite his family's disapproval, Miguel secretly practices music. On the eve of *Día de Muertos*, he discovers a photograph of his great-great-grandmother alongside a man holding a guitar resembling de la Cruz, leading him to believe that the famous musician is his ancestor. This revelation sets Miguel on a journey to connect with his family's past and navigate the complexities of life and death.

Día de Muertos is a celebration that encourages families to remember their deceased loved ones by sharing stories and honoring their memories (Marchi, 2013). During this tradition, families create an *ofrenda*, or altar, adorned with photographs, candles, traditional foods, and marigold flowers (*Flores de cempasúchil*) to welcome the spirits of their ancestors (Leija, 2020). Nurlaili et al. (2022) conducted a qualitative study on the representation of Mexican traditions in *Coco*, utilizing Stuart Hall's theory of cultural representation. Their findings revealed that the film incorporates eighteen elements of Mexican culture, including architecture, arts, cuisine, cultural events, musical instruments, spirituality, and language.

The Day of the Dead itself is a celebration of a family to always remember their deceased family by telling stories about their life from generation to generation (Marchi, 2013). As they celebrate this tradition, they will prepare an *ofrenda* or an altar where they put photographs of their loved ones, candles, traditional Mexican foods, a meal for 'them', and marigold flowers or *Flores de cempasúchil* (Leija, 2020). According to Nurlaili et al., (2022), the paper they wrote mainly talks about Mexican tradition represented in the movie, *Coco*. The method they used was a qualitative method by the theory proposed by Stuart Hall about Cultural Representation. By this research, the result shows that there are eighteen Mexican cultures from the movie,

including architecture, creative arts, foods, cultural events, musical instruments, spiritual sides, religion, as well as the Spanish language itself.

According to Hall's, members of one's culture tend to produce and exchange cultural signs with each other through languages, images, signs, etc. to represent what they believe in their culture (Hall, 1989). Other than Hall's statement, members of one's culture can communicate through their clothing and even place to classify their culture's uniqueness (Jhally, 2005). This statement aligns with research done by Ayuningtyas (2019) regarding the representation of Middle Eastern culture in Disney movie, *Aladdin*. In her research, Ayuningtyas examined how media and Disney portray the Middle Eastern culture through *Aladdin* the movie that was released in 2019. This study by Ayuningtyas aimed to show viewers how Disney portrays Middle Eastern culture and how Western ideology influences the audience's perception of the movie. The researcher analyzed the movie using theories from Stuart Hall about Cultural Representation and Orientalism by Edward Said to examine the research questions. The result of this study shows how Disney is able to represent Middle Eastern culture through the setting and the costumes of the characters in the movie. The researcher highlights the architectural setting such as buildings made of sand and how dates and camels are widely visible which is known as the identity of Middle East Country. The second previous study is done by Nurlaili et al., (2022) by employing Stuart Hall's theory of Cultural representation. The researchers found eighteen representations of Mexican culture from Disney's *Coco*.

While previous studies done by Ayuningtyas (2019) and Nurlaili et al., (2022) have examined the representation of cultural elements in two Disney movie, *Aladdin* and *Coco*. There are significant gap that differentiate with this study. Both of the previous studies examined the cultural representation from Western ideology, meanwhile this study explore family bonds within cultural context using theories through Murray Bowen's family system theory and Stuart's Hall cultural studies. By examining family bonds in Disney's *Coco* movie, this study has 2 main objectives. Firstly, it seeks to analyze how Disney represent family bonds within their narratives in *Coco*. and lastly to investigate how family system influence individual behavior and relationship in the family situation.

METHOD

This research uses qualitative research to identify problems in this paper. The qualitative research suits the social issues that occur in society, particularly this paper, which is concerned about the tradition and family bonds in the Disney-Pixar movie *Coco*. This paper uses two theories from Stuart Hall called Cultural studies and Family System theory from Murray Bowen. The first thing to do to analyze the paper is to research the problem that want to discuss. Second, the writer chooses to use *Coco* as the subject of the paper because it represents the problem that the writer wants to discuss, about tradition and family bonds. After watching the movie, the researcher began to read the journals and articles related to the Mexican tradition and family bonds to deepen the knowledge in researching the paper. The last step is to analyze both the movie and the data materials using the two theories chosen.

DISCUSSION

The Disney Pixar's studio production released a movie with Mexican culture called *Coco* in 2017. A movie directed by Lee Unkrich portrays the journey of a boy named Miguel who travels into two realms meets his deceased family member and pursues his dream as a musician. This study aims to show Miguel's dynamic in exploring the land of the dead which is rich with cultures using the theory of Stuart Hall called Cultural studies also the Family System theory proposed by Murray Bowen.

1.1 Mexican Traditions

4.1.1. *Día de Muertos*

The Day of the Dead or *Día de Muertos* is a Mexican holiday season that is primarily held every November 1st and 2nd. People believed that during these two days, the souls of their ancestors came to visit their families. This originality comes from Mexico's indigenous cultures, particularly the Aztec or Mexica people. (Johansen & Johansen, 2021). They believe, that when someone is dead, it means that they are in a temporary realm where they still live the same as before they died. They can visit their family every year on *Día de Muertos*.

Día de Muertos is often represented by skull or *calaveras*. They decorated the skulls with colorful colors to bring joy and happiness because their ancestors had come to visit them. Besides skulls, other things symbolized this tradition such as marigold flowers or *Flores de cempasúchil*, candles, a traditional bread called *pan de muerto* (bread of the dead), photographs, and papel picado known as cut paper banners. (Brandes, 1998)



Figure 1. Miguel and Abuelita <https://rb.gy/gtje1x>

4.1.2 *Ofrendas* (Altar)

This movie represents the *Día de Muertos* tradition beautifully and realistically. Disney expos the tradition of *Día de Muertos* by showing how people celebrate it by displaying the photographs of their loved ones in an *ofrenda* or altar. They decorated the altar with candles and meals of their families as well as a bunch of marigold flowers or *Flores de cempasúchil* (Brandes, 1998). The purpose of displaying photographs of their deceased family was because it works as a 'ticket' that allows their souls to cross from the Land of the Dead to the living world to visit their family.



Figure 2. Ofrenda <https://rb.gy/fpd57o>

4.1.3. Marigold Flowers

Marigold flowers called *flores de cempasúchil* Spanish and Aztec, have a major part in *Día de Muertos* tradition. During the pre-Hispanic Aztec era, people believed that marigold flowers tied to the Lady of the Dead or the goddess Mictecacihuatl. The smell of marigold flowers is believed to attract the souls of the deceased family from the realm to come to their home. The bright orange color of the marigold represents the sun that shines on the dead souls during the *Día de Muertos* tradition. As they believed that marigolds guide the souls of their families, people created paths on the ground from the cemeteries to their homes until it ended at the *ofrenda*.



Figure 3. Miguel holding a bouquet of marigolds <https://rb.gy/yqdy5>

4.1.4. Mariachi

Mexican music particularly *mariachi* plays an important role in Mexican culture as shown in the movie *Coco*. However, Mexican music is not only about mariachi, it is much broader than that such as marimba, banda, etc. Mariachi itself is a form of traditional Mexican music that was originally shown where a group of people play guitars, violins, and trumpets (Clark, 2005). Mariachi music is known for its wide range of genres that convey multiple emotions from happiness, and celebration, as well as sadness. Mariachi represents Mexican heritage in terms of music in *Coco* since the movie itself celebrates the rich culture of Mexicans by expressing love and pride through music.



Figure 4. Miguel meets Mariachi at the Mariachi Plaza <https://rb.gy/g6g7wm>

4.1.5. *Papel Picado*

Papel picado translated as “punched paper” in English is an art crafting tradition in Mexico that needs some craftsmanship. *Papel Picado* itself has a deep cultural root in Mexico during the Aztec era where people made a similar decoration using tree bark. *Papel picado* often belongs to ceremonies and festivals as a symbol of celebrations. In *Coco*, *papel picado* was seen crafted with a specific design such as skulls, skeletons, marigold flowers, and other symbols related to *Día de Muertos*.



Figure 5. *papel picado* <https://rb.gy/y1o3f0>

1.2 Family Bonds

Coco was released in 2017 by Pixar and gives a broad view of Mexican culture called *Día de Muertos* or the Day of the Dead. This movie not only shows the beautiful and richest culture of Mexican tradition but also the conflict and love of family from generation to generation. Mexicans have a strong bond that tightens the family and tradition together (Council & Relations, 2012).

This story begins with Miguel Rivera, a boy who aims to be a great musician just like Ernesto De La Cruz, a famous musician. The conflict is explained at the beginning of the movie through *papel picado* which shows the story of how the Rivera family hates music. Miguel has a big passion for music, but the rest of his family disapproves of his dream and wants him to be a shoemaker. This conflict starts the clash between Miguel and his family because his family bans music.

The cultural tradition plays a crucial role in the movie, as it shapes the family dynamics and conflict (Council & Relations, 2012). As the movie is playing, it shows us that the tradition and cultures in Mexico, particularly not only about tradition, but it is a string that tightens the relationship of the rest of the family. Miguel takes exploration to the Land of the Dead and encounters his family ancestors that depict the story of his family.

Coco tries to draw family bonds and connect the death and life realms through Miguel's family. This movie shows how the soul lives after death and how Miguel's

interaction with souls inside the Land of the Death shapes how his family influences, emphasizes, and implements the guide that his family gave. Through Miguel's great-great grandmother's point of view, Imelda, Disney portrayed how she sacrificed her love only for her daughter, Coco to continue their lives. Imelda took all the music from her life because she felt betrayed by her husband who left her and her daughter only to pursue his dream as a musician. Imelda's story was also shown in Miguel's Journey on how he tried to pursue his dream as a musician that his family disapproved of.



Figure 6. Mama Imelda <https://id.pinterest.com/pin/108790147236037351/>

Guitar and song become one of the symbols of how Miguel's family begins to forgive and try to let go of the past and live for the present. It shows how emotional when Miguel plays a song with a guitar singing "Remember Me" with Mama Coco, who's almost forgetting about her father. When Miguel plays guitar, Mama Coco opens her eyes as she seems to remember her memories with her father when she was a kid. It reveals that "Remember Me" is a song that Mama Coco's father wrote for her when she was a kid, and she still remembers all the lyrics. The photographs that were displayed on the *ofrenda* also show how the family remembers every story of their family from generation to generation.



Figure 7. Miguel and Mama Coco <http://surl.li/iervsb>

The examination of Disney's *Coco* in portraying Mexican traditional culture briefly shows in every part of the movie. This observation aligns with the Cultural Studies theory (1989), which appears through symbols and cultural practices in the movie. Disney uses the Mexican tradition of *Dia de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) as the background of the movie to represent Mexican identity, like the altars (*ofrendas*), marigold flowers, *mariachi*, punch paper (*papel picado*), etc. These elements are crucial to Mexican identity and, thus become important to the story ensuring that the culture is represented with respect.

Moreover, Hall's theory about Cultural Studies (1989) provides insightful details as a framework of how Disney portrays the Mexican tradition of *Dia de Los Muertos*

as an identity of a nation. The idea represents how people understand culture by allowing the audience to engage and connect with an actual narrative that contradicts stereotypes and offers a new perspective. Through these representations, *Coco* encapsulates the essence of *Día de los Muertos* while making sure that the culture it represents is honored and fostering a deeper meaning of cultural diversity.

The Bowen's Family System Theory (1972) also contributes to the emotional dynamics in *Coco*. The key part of this movie was the struggle of Miguel to pursue his dream as a musician. His family banned music due to something bad happened in the past. How Miguel deals with his family regarding his dream reflects Bowen's theory regarding the differentiation of self and how he manages his identity and connection to the family. This is also connected with the family projection process and multigenerational transmission where the emotional wounds are passed down through the Rivera family. This unsolved pain is projected onto each generation and influences their rejection of music. By the end of the movie, Miguel can resolve the generational pain in his family and pave the way for forgiveness and healing. Furthermore, *Coco* shows exemplifies of Bowen's Family System Theory through the multiplicity of family dynamics, generational pains, and conflict, and the journey of acceptance of Miguel and Rivera's family.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, analyzing Disney's *Coco* through Family System Theory and Culture Studies Theory reveals the connection between culture, tradition, and family bonds. *Coco* is not merely a movie that entertains people, it also serves as an intercultural communication complexity discourse that constructs an identity. The movie depicts each character's emotions, their emotional stages, and the traditions involved. Based on the theories applied, the findings reveal how this movie portrays cultural values and family bonds from the theories used. Hall's framework aligns well with these findings, highlighting the cultural practices and symbols representing Mexican culture, such as *Día de los Muertos*. This movie depicts how culture influences identity and fosters belonging through values and customs. Moreover, Bowen's theory on Family Bonds offers insights into self-discovery, family reconciliation, and how an individual can balance personal and familial connections. Future research could focus on comparing family dynamics in *Coco* with other cross-cultural movies and how other cultures represent their problems through Bowen's theory.

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