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Research Proposal: Gender Stereotypes in Disney Films

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Abstract

Do Disney films use gender stereotypes? If so, what role has the second-wave feminist movement had on gender stereotypes in Disney films? These questions are important, as children look to images in popular culture to understand who they are in the world. In order to answer these questions I will use content analysis to analyze feature length animated Disney films to identify and describe gender stereotypes. I expect to find that Disney films contain gender stereotypes and these stereotypes will be more prevalent before the critiques of second-wave feminism took hold in the culture. If my hypothesis is correct, further research should be conducted to determine if and how the third wave feminism may have affected the amount and type of gender stereotypes in Disney films.

Specific Aims

This research proposal aims to answer two main questions. The first question is, do feature length animated Disney films contain gender stereotypes? The second question is, how does the quantity and quality of gender stereotyping change before and after of the second-wave feminist movement?

Introduction

Our society exposes children to gender stereotypes on a daily basis. Institutions such as families, schools, television, and books expose children to gender stereotypes (Denny 2011). McCabe et al. (2011) examined gender discrimination in 20th century children's books. They found that male characters are represented twice as often as females in the book titles and 1.6 times as often as the central character. McCabe et al. (2011) suggest that this disparity between gender representations in children's books shape how children understand gender, leading

children to assume that males are more important than females because the children see more male characters in the books. An examination of children's books over time shows that portrayals of gender equality is uneven, nonlinear, and tied to patterns of feminist movements (McCabe et al 2011).

Not only do children learn about gender through books, but also through structured activities. Denny (2011) researched the differences between Girl Scout and Boy Scout activities and handbooks. Denny (2011) found that activities geared towards girls dealt more with group projects and art, whereas the boys' activities encouraged assertiveness and pushed boys toward scientific pursuits. Handbooks instruct girls to use critical thinking skills and to become "up-to-date traditional women". The Boy Scout handbook encourages "heteronormative masculinity" (Denny 2011). Heteronormative masculinity is defined as the set of lifestyle norms that men should abide by in order to complement the "natural" roles in life. It also suggests that heterosexuality is the normal sexual orientation and that sexual relations should only be expressed between a man and a woman.

As our society becomes more reliant on technology there has been a shift from structured activities and books to television and movies. Television and movies have become one of the leading teachers to young children. The Wonderful World of Disney has become a mastermind in our culture and according to Ward (2002), author of *Mouse Morality*, Disney has the ability to shape the way children think about who they are and who they should be. Drotner (2001) agrees with Ward by stating that children use a variety of forms of media to determine who they are and what the world is like.

The Disney Corporation has not only dominated children's movies, television shows, and books, but they have also infiltrated the material world. Disney designs clothing, school supplies, backpacks, shoes, lunch boxes, and a variety of toys that further embeds the Disney characters into children's minds. However, the most influential aspect of the Disney Corporation is the feature-length animated films (Tanner, 2003).

One question that needs to be addressed is what impact do these Disney films actually have on children? Some critics have suggested that children simply watch these animated films for pure entertainment and that they do not take away any prospective meanings from the films. Others suggest that children use popular stories and fairy tales to make sense of who they are and to further understand their surroundings (Tanner 2003).

Researchers have found that although Disney tells stories about individualism, friendship, and the power of courage, the stories really convey messages of gender inequality and racial hierarchies (Hass, 1995; Gagnon, 1994). However, "pro Disney" researchers find that Disney is a positive influence (Faherty, 2001). The majority of these researchers are called in-house researchers because they typically work for the Disney Corporation. There is also research that is viewed as neutral towards Disney where researchers have found both stereotyping in the films and yet also find "balanced treatments of controversy" that include issues of race, gender, and morality (Faherty, 2001).

Faherty (2001) sought to answer the question of negative moral messages which examined how race, gender, and social vulnerability are portrayed in Disney films. In the research, Faherty (2001) used systematic, quantitative content analysis to study a purposive sample of 19 Disney films. Of these films, 15 were listed in The Walt Disney Company's 1998

Fact Book as the most popular Disney movies based on unit sales for home entertainment in the United States. The remaining four films were post-1998 and were added to ensure currency. Faherty found that Disney films underrepresented female characters and Asian, African-American, Arabic, Hispanic, and American Indians characters. Another aspect of the study focused on vulnerability and how it is portrayed in the movies. Faherty found that physical disabilities, low intelligence, and being overweight were all vulnerabilities that were mocked in Disney films. Faherty's findings suggest that children are taught that race is a hierarchal system, and making fun of children that are different than themselves is accepted by society. These are not moral messages that most parents would purposely teach their children (Faherty 2001).

Tanner (2003) studied Disney films and found that 82.3% highlighted the expectation that couples should marry and have children. While only 36.4% of the movies contained both mothers and fathers, the films marginalized fathers and portrayed mothers as central to the family. Disney films portrayed fathers as controlling, aggressive, protective disciplinarians who expect their children to earn their love rather than giving it unconditionally. The primary stereotypes regarding mothers included mothers as primary caregivers and protectors (Tanner 2003). Although both Faherty and Tanner provide insight into the presence of gender stereotypes found in Disney movies, that is not the main focus of their research.

Because of the variety of findings regarding Disney and their impact on the youth, further research is warranted. This topic should be researched more thoroughly not only because of the observed discontinuity between researchers, but also because it is important for parents and society to know what children are learning, and to get a quantitative and qualitative description of gender stereotypes in Disney films. This research proposes to use content analysis to examine gender stereotypes in feature-length Disney films. Gender stereotypes are defined as

generalizations about gender attributes, differences, and roles of the individual. The gender stereotypes that may be present in these films are teaching children stereotypical ways they should act based upon their gender. The purpose of this study is not to determine the degree or the effect that Disney has on children, but is to measure gender stereotypes in Disney films. I expect to find that Disney films portray the female characters as nurturing caregivers and the male characters as independent, dominant, and adventurous. The study will also be analyzing how the second-wave feminist movement may have changed the portrayals of gender in Disney films.

The second-wave feminist movement (1960's-1980) came out of the Civil Rights and anti-war movements when women began to band together to fight against gender discrimination. The Women's Rights movement addressed a wide range of issues including reproductive rights, workplace inequalities, family inequalities, and perceptions of gender and sexuality. Because the second-wave feminist movement fought against discrimination and to broaden the perceptions of gender, I expect to find less gender stereotypes in Disney films after this movement.

Project Design

This study will involve the use of quantitative content analysis in which three testers will examine, record, and code examples of gender stereotypes found in Disney films. The sample of Disney films will be selected through stratified probability sampling. The sampling frame will consist of only Disney feature-length animated films.

A list of 60 feature length animated Disney movies will be generated and 10 of the movies will be analyzed. Stratified random sampling will be used to determine which movies are analyzed. The 60 movies will be split into two groups; pre and post second-wave feminist

movement. Noting that it is difficult to say when one era of a movement ends and another begins, I will divide the sample as follows. The pre second-wave feminist movement movies will consist of movies released between 1950-1980. The post- second wave feminist movement movies will consist of those released between 1981-2011. Five movies in each group will be analyzed. Movies will be selected randomly by numbering the films and using a random number table to select the sample. Using stratified random sampling also ensures that the researcher is not choosing the movies that he or she believes will contain the most gender stereotypes. The study will not use the top grossing films as the sampling frame (as most research on Disney has done) because using all the films will promote a more accurate representation of Disney.

The testers will record gender stereotypes presented in the selected Disney movies. The gender attributes that the testers will be watching for include the following:

- Independent
- Financial provider
- Active
- Dominant
- Competitive
- Adventurous
- Nurturing
- Dependent
- Passive
- Emotional
- Timid
- Sympathetic

As the testers examine the 10 movies, they will be recording every occurrence of the above mentioned characteristics in a chart. The testers will indicate which sex (male or female) portrayed the characteristic and they will also note the time at which it was portrayed. The time the characteristic is portrayed in the movie is important so that the testers can reexamine these characteristics at a later time to ensure intercoder reliability. Appendix A provides the coding sheet that will be used by the testers to chart the observed gender characteristics.

Along with recording the gender stereotypes portrayed in the movies, testers will also write down the names and sexes of the main character and the three main supporting characters. This will allow the researcher to quantify which sex is most often the leading character, and which sex constitutes the supporting characters. These findings will help further detail the gender stereotypes.

In an initial effort to ensure intercoder reliability, two pilot movies will be observed and analyzed before the random sample of 10 are examined. After watching each movie, the coders will compare results and discuss any disparities that may appear between coders. The information from each coder will then be entered into qualitative data management software, NVivo. This program will allow the researchers to store, sort, analyze, and draw conclusions from the information that was gathered from the movies.

Anticipated Results

The proposed research project is expected to conclude that Disney movies released before and during the second-wave feminist movement (1950-1990) will contain a higher number of gender stereotypes than movies produced after the second-wave feminist movement. If my hypothesis is correct, further research should analyze other forms of media including cartoons

and other children's movies to determine if the second-wave feminist movement also had an effect on gender stereotypes portrayed in these forms of entertainment. If my hypothesis is incorrect and the second-wave feminist movement has no correlation with portrayals of gender in Disney movies then further research should be conducted to determine what social factors were responsible for the gender stereotypes.

Projected Budget

Product	Estimated cost	Total
Nvivo	\$135.00	\$135.00
Blockbuster Membership	\$19.99(monthly)	\$39.98
Printing costs	40 x \$0.08	\$3.2
Total		\$178.18

Budget Justification

The NVivo 9 statistical program will be used to store, sort, and analyze all the collected data. This program is provided for students at the above mentioned cost for 6 months. The Blockbuster membership is needed because not all of the movies to be analyzed will be available at the university and public library. The university library printers will be used in order to cut down on costs. The library charges \$0.08 per paper copied. To allot for three coders watching 12 movies we will need approximately 40 coding sheets.

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Timeline

- Mid December- All movies to be analyzed will be chosen via stratified random sampling
- December 31, 2011- Two pilot movies analyzed and discussed by testers
- January-end of February- all movies have been watched
- March 15- all data entered into NVivo9
- March 30- Conclusions determined and final results drafted
- April 1- first draft of paper completed and beginning revisions and peer editing
- April- Final paper completed and preparation for presentation

- Mid April- Presentation at the Undergraduate Research and Discovery Symposium
- May 15- Expenditure deadline
- May 30, 2012- Final report submitted by this date

Appendix A

Movie:		
Stereotypes	Male	Female
Independent		
Financial provider		
Active		
Dominant		
Competitive		
Adventurous		
Nurturing		
Dependent		
Passive		
Emotional		
Timid		
Sympathetic		
Main Character	M/F	
Supporting Character 1	M/F	
Supporting Character 2	M/F	
Supporting Character 3	M/F	