



The Powerful Male Hero: A Content Analysis of Gender Representation in Posters for Children’s Animated Movies

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Abstract

Findings across a wide body of research suggest that media targeted at young audiences often portray characters according to stereotypical gender roles. Childhood is a particularly sensitive time in gender identity development, and logic from social cognitive theory suggests that repeatedly observing these stereotypes can have a lasting influence on young audiences’ worldview. Building on previous research investigating gender role displays in film content, and with the expectation that content creators use movie posters to convey a one-shot summary of films to audiences, we conducted a content analysis on the gendered power depictions of the main characters in movie posters of 152 popular U.S. animated children’s feature films produced over the last 80 years. Findings revealed that main characters were more likely to be male and that males were portrayed as more powerful. These results add to a growing, yet substantial, body of research illustrating the prevalence of stereotypical gender role portrayals across virtually every popular medium with which children come into contact. We discuss our results’ implications for potential short-term and long-term effects of exposure to films’ gender role stereotypes on young viewers’ real-life gender role expectations.

Keywords Content analysis · children’s movies · Gender roles · Gender identity · Socialization

At a young age, children begin to develop their gender identities as well as expectations about how different genders should behave in society. By the time they enter elementary school, most children’s gender identities are well-developed (Levy et al. 1998). A child’s gender role identity is closely tied to their self-perception because it influences how adults and peers interact with them. Repeated interactions with and observations of others can shape children’s expectations of the “proper” way in which one should behave based on their gender. Importantly, the interactions and observations thought to shape children’s gender identities and role expectations

include both those they witness in the real world and those they view in mass media (Berryman-Fink et al. 1993; Larson 2001). Previous research by Goffman (1976, 1979) has suggested that mass media representations often reflect a larger societal expectation of gender roles and that exposure to these representations can reinforce gender stereotypes in viewers.

Logic from social cognitive theory (SCT) suggests that repeatedly observing social behaviors can have a major influence on an individual’s understanding about the social world (Bandura 1977, 2002). Scholars expect the effect of social observations to be particularly influential during developmental years because children are still learning how to attend to, store, and replicate the behaviors and values they witness in media (Barr and Hayne 1999). Due to this sensitive period of development, investigating the content of children’s media is an essential first step to understanding media’s socializing influence on the development of gender role identities as well as gender stereotypes. Children and media scholars have examined the gender role stereotypes present in advertising targeted at children (Bakir and Palan 2010; Browne 1998; Larson 2001; Matthes et al. 2016) as well as several types of children’s entertainment media including books (Hamilton et al. 2006; Kortenhaus and Demarest 1993), television

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(Aubrey and Harrison 2004; Leaper et al. 2006), video games (Behm-Morawitz and Mastro 2009), and movies (Baker and Raney 2007; Hoerner 1996). The consistent findings of this research largely suggest that across media targeted at young audiences, actors and characters are portrayed in line with stereotypical, traditional gender roles.

Despite numerous investigations into the depiction of gender roles in children's media content itself, questions remain about the extent to which gender role stereotypes may manifest in the promotional material of these media, namely movie posters. Building on previous content analytical studies which investigate gender role displays in advertising and films, and as a foundation for examining these displays' influence on children's attitudes and behaviors, the present study examines the nonverbal power depictions of both the male and the female main characters in movie posters of popular U.S. animated feature films over the last 80 years. With the understanding that movie studios use movie posters to quickly and efficiently express a film's themes to audiences (Ghaznavi et al. 2017; Ivacic-Kos et al. 2014; Tziamtzi et al. 2015), our investigation is centered around the fact that movie posters illustrate how studios interpret the core message emphasized by the film's narrative. We begin with a discussion of movie posters as a medium, go on to describe previous research on gender representations in children's media, and finally present a study designed to examine the gender role stereotypes found in movie posters of popular animated films.

Movie Posters: A One-Shot Representation of Films

Although often overlooked as a form of advertising, we argue that movie posters are a powerful communicative device wherein senders (content creators) attempt to convey a one-shot representation of how they view the film, while also attempting to mass market it to a diverse audience. On the receiver end, film posters set the audience's expectations about what a film might contain (Eastman 2000), thus contributing to the decision of whether to commit to watching the film.

From the perspective of a sender (i.e., content creator), the main goal of a movie poster is to create a compelling story through the use of images and text to effectively interest consumers to view the advertised film (Uchida et al. 2011). This goal needs to be accomplished efficiently because movie posters are designed to capture the essential information of a film to be comprehended by a viewer with just a glance (Ivacic-Kos et al. 2014) and to sell the themes of a movie to convince audiences to view film (Burty 2013; Juliantari 2014). Beyond simply communicating what the film is about, creators must also ensure that the message portrayed in the poster will be positively received by a wide audience (Burty 2013; Chen and Gao 2014; Juliantari 2014). One way to ensure this favorable impression is to

illustrate the societal norms to which an audience is accustomed on the poster, thereby portraying that the film is relevant to that society's audience (see Kafitasari 2013).

From the receiver's perspective, movie posters become a frame that regulates how the film is perceived and understood (Scheufele 1999). Framing theory examines the manner in which small changes in how an issue or event is presented can create changes in the audience's opinion (Chong and Druckman 2007; Entman 1993). By analyzing frames, scholars can examine the ways in which the audience's consciousness is influenced by communicated information. For example, the movie poster for the movie *Anastasia* depicts the male hero saving the female lead as she is falling off a train. Beyond simply offering insight into a scene that audiences can expect to see in the film, this image communicates that the female character requires the male character's protection.

We argue that movie posters have received relatively little attention by researchers and practitioners who are concerned about the messages that media send to young audiences. Although movie posters may only be capable of featuring a limited amount of information about the movies they are promoting, the manner in which the main characters are portrayed can communicate a whole host of information to audiences about the gendered power dynamics between the main characters.

In order to communicate a large amount of information in what constitutes a snapshot of the film, movie poster creators often rely on visual cues to act as a heuristic for audiences. One visual cue that creators rely on most often to describe their film is the use of color (Fagerholm 2009). For example, romantic comedy movie posters typically utilize pink or flesh-tones to show the femininity of a film, whereas the posters of action movies emphasize blues, grays, or black, to depict a film's masculinity. Creators also include taglines to tell the story of their film (Mahlknecht 2015). For example, the movie poster for *Shrek* included the tagline "The greatest fairy tale never told," and the movie poster for *Tangled* stated "They're taking adventure to new lengths." *Shrek's* tagline suggests that this is a fairytale unlike any seen before. The tagline of *Tangled* is referring to Princess Rapunzel's extraordinary long hair, while stating that is not just a princess movie (for girls), but an adventure (for boys).

The cue of interest in the current study relates to the creators' depiction of characters (Kim and Sieun 2019), specifically with regard to their display of gender role dynamics. Like color cues, we would expect that the inclusion and placement of differently-gendered characters (i.e., gender role cues) are intentional on the part of the creators as they attempt to leverage observers' existing understandings about gender roles in order to efficiently summarize their film on a poster. After all, content creators are aware that young boys tend to avoid products that appear feminine and young girls tend to avoid those that appear masculine (Schor 2004). By

emphasizing gender role cues in their movie posters, creators can communicate large amounts of information about their film to audiences simply by choosing to depict different gendered characters or by altering the placement of those characters on a poster. The current study serves as an initial attempt to understand how gender is depicted in movie posters.

Gender Prevalence in Media

Beyond movie posters, many previous studies have found that females are underrepresented in media compared to males (e.g., Collins 2011), which some have argued may reflect the lack of importance society places on the role of women (Steyer 2014). In fact, this representation bias introduces young viewers to the idea that males have more worth than their female counterparts, due to the importance that media places on male roles, all while diminishing female roles (Wietzman et al. 1972).

Previous media research has measured the presence of gender in two ways. First, scholars have examined the presence of gender by simply counting the frequency of females and males present. Research using this method has consistently found male characters to be more prevalent than female characters across a range of media (Macklin and Kolbe 1984; Riffe et al. 1989; Smith 1994). A second way in which the presence of gender has been examined in media is through counting the depiction of male only, female only, or mixed genders. In line with the findings of simple frequency count studies, research using this methodology also has found significantly more male-only portrayals than female-only portrayals across a range of media (Browne 1998; Larson 2001). As such, in the present investigation of popular children's animated movie posters, we propose that animated movie posters will portray more male than female main characters (Hypothesis 1). We also predict that animated movie posters will feature male characters together more frequently than female characters together (Hypothesis 2a), male and female characters together (Hypothesis 2b), male characters alone (Hypothesis 2c), or female characters alone (Hypothesis 2d).

Gender Role Stereotypes in Media

Beyond just how often females and males are represented, research also has demonstrated a range of gender role stereotypes depicted across various media. For instance, compared to male characters, females are portrayed as passive (Wietzman et al. 1972), needing the help of males, (Kortenhaus and Demarest 1993; Wietzman et al. 1972), doing more household work (Anderson and Hamilton 2005), and performing more nurturing activities (Holub et al. 2008; also see Sink and Mastro 2017). In contrast, male characters are

portrayed as unemotional, aggressive, dominant, and tough (Scharrer and Blackburn 2018).

Repeated exposure to stereotypical gender role portrayals in media content is thought to have lasting effects on observers' beliefs about men's and women's roles in society. Logic from social cognitive theory (SCT; Bandura 1977, 2002) contends that one manner in which observers acquire beliefs that adhere to gender role stereotypes is through vicarious learning from mass media (Bussey and Bandura 1999). That is, by observing male and female media characters rewarded for aligning with traditional gender role expectations or punished for behaving against gender role expectations, observers vicariously learn that behaviors conforming to traditional gender roles are good and behaviors that do not conform to traditional gender roles are bad (Bandura 1977, 2002; Bem 1981). Indeed, Scharrer and Blackburn (2018) found that exposure to television programming that emphasizes stereotypical gender roles was a positive predictor of viewers' advocacy for traditional gender roles (also see Gerbner et al. 2002; Morgan 1982; Signorielli 1989).

In addition to shaping normative beliefs about men's and women's roles in society, repeated exposure to gender role stereotypes in mass media can also shape viewers' individual identities (Steyer 2014). For instance, previous scholars have demonstrated that continuous exposure to gender role stereotypes can influence viewers' self-esteem (Tsao 2008), leading to a diminished ability for young viewers to create positive self-concepts (Peterson and Lach 1990). Additionally, observing gender role stereotypes can influence young viewers' expectations of what is "proper" for their gender (e.g., men as strong breadwinners and women as primary caregivers; Tsao 2008), potentially leading children to avoid classes, hobbies, sports, or careers that do not reflect the gender role norms they are accustomed to viewing in media and have grown to expect in real life. Thus, mass media's lack of strong female role models may prevent young girls from reaching their full potential, whereas overly masculine characters may put pressure on young boys to reach for unattainable standards.

Goffman's Categories of Gendered Power Dynamics

Importantly, mass media are often explicit in their portrayal of society's gender expectations. For example, in most advertisements, men are portrayed to have more social weight by exuding confidence, authority, and competence, whereas women are more often depicted as being childlike and submissive (Kortenhaus and Demarest 1993; Wietzman et al. 1972). In an attempt to codify the gender role expectations depicted in mass media, Goffman (1976, 1979) argued that media do not reflect how men and women actually behave, but rather the way society would have us believe they behave. Goffman was

particularly concerned about the manner in which media portrayed gender relations, specifically those in which males are shown to have power over females. Investigating the nonverbal depictions of power such as body height, use of hands, eye gaze, facial expressions, head posing, and body placement in advertisements, Goffman (1979) deduced six categories through which the portrayal of power between male and female characters could be assessed.

Goffman's (1979) categories include: (a) relative size, (b) function ranking, (c) feminine/masculine touch, (d) ritualization of subordination, (e) licensed withdrawal, and (f) the family. *Relative size* is determined by examining the physical height of the individuals depicted in relation to each other. Because physical height is believed to correlate with social weight (i.e., power, authority, office), the tallest individual portrayed is assumed to have the most power. *Function ranking* relates to the importance of the behaviors that are being depicted in the scene. Function ranking is identified by assessing the roles of the characters based on the task they are performing, such as a doctor examining a patient or a police officer arresting a criminal. Social weight, or power, is given to the individual whose task relates to the most important rank of the scene. *Feminine/masculine touch* is measured by observing how individuals use their hands. Goffman observed the uses of hands to be ritualistic such that lightly touching one's body transmits the idea that the individual is fragile or precious, whereas firm grips show a utilitarian use of the object or other individual. Feminine touch involves using hands or fingers to cradle, caress, or trace the outline of an object. Lightly touching or stroking oneself is also considered to be a display of feminine touch. In contrast, masculine touch involves firmly holding, grasping, or manipulating an object or another person and is seen to be used more by male characters.

Licensed withdrawal is depicted when a character appears to be mentally removed from the scene. It is also seen when a character appears to withdraw from situations or others in the scene. This drifting from reality creates the idea that the character is in a state of helplessness and becomes dependent on other individuals to protect them. *Ritualization of subordination* is seen when a character physically lowers him/herself while another character remains upright. Sitting or lying on a low surface while another individual remains standing is considered to be a submissive act. Also included as ritualization of subordination is manipulating the body to position oneself into a "cute" pose or performing childlike behaviors (e.g., skipping or jumping). Goffman's last category, the family, examines the use of a nuclear family to present the importance of the cultural images associated with the family unit. Due to lack of focus given to family in animated movie posters, we did not examine this category in the current study.

By identifying the presence of these categories in advertisements, Goffman (1979) concluded that advertising

expresses a stereotypical ideal of gender, with men being portrayed as having more power and social weight over women. His findings have been replicated in other forms of media, with results overall showing that male characters are depicted with the most power through relative size, function ranking, and masculine touch. In contrast, female characters are depicted with little power, showing low social status with more depictions of feminine touch, ritualization of subordination, and licensed withdrawal (Belknap and Leonard II 1991; Kang 1997).

Using Goffman's (1979) framework, the present study examines movie posters for children's feature-length animated films to determine the gendered depictions of power that are most prevalent. Notably, Goffman's work relied on a purposive sample of advertisements, which made it difficult to generalize to the larger population of mass media. Even so, we would expect that Goffman's findings would replicate with a sample of movie posters. Thus we asked: Are male or female main characters in animated movie posters associated more often with stereotypical gendered power dynamics of (a) relative size, (b) function ranking, (c) feminine/masculine touch, (d) ritualization of subordination, and (e) licensed withdrawal (Research Question 1)?

Method

Sample

To obtain a sample of movie posters for popular animated films, we first consulted a list from [rottentomatoes.com](https://editorial.rottentomatoes.com/guide/100-best-animated-movies/4/) (https://editorial.rottentomatoes.com/guide/100-best-animated-movies/4/; "100 Best Fresh Animated Movies", 2018) containing the highest rated feature-length animated films from 1937 to 2017. We recorded the animation studio of every movie on the list. Each animation studio website was then examined to (1) ensure the studio was based in the United States and (2) obtain a complete list of their animated film releases. To ensure that the movie posters were designed for children, only films with a G or PG rating were used in the sample. These exclusion criteria resulted in a sample of 165 movie posters to be used for analysis. However, movies which were not a full feature-length film (e.g., *Fantasia*), contained live action (e.g., *The Lego Movie*), or used stop motion animation (e.g., *Chicken Run*) were removed from the sample as they were not hand- or computer-drawn feature-length animated films. These 13 movie posters were instead used as practice material for the training sessions.

This process resulted in a final sample of 152 animated movie posters from 10 different studios: 47 from Walt Disney Animated Studios, 19 from Pixar, 32 from DreamWorks Animation, 10 from Sony Pictures Animation, 12 from Blue Sky Studio, eight from Illumination

Entertainment, six from Nickelodeon Animation Studio, five from Warner Brothers Animation, five from twentieth Century Fox Animation Group, and eight from Sullivan Bluth Studios. A complete list of movie posters analyzed in the present study can be found in the [online supplement](#).

Coding Scheme

Table 1 summarizes the present study's coding categories. These include the presence/absence of male or female main characters in terms of gender frequency and gender balance (i.e., only males, only females, both males and females, only one male, or only one female). The remaining categories were adopted from Goffman (1979) and were coded for both the male (if applicable) and female (if applicable) main characters: relative size, function ranking, feminine/masculine touch, licensed withdrawal, and ritualization of subordination.

Coding Procedure

The team of coders for this project comprised three coders: One of the authors and two of the author's family members who were unaware of the study's hypotheses. All three coders have experience working on quantitative content analyses of different media and using codebooks other than the one used in the present study. Coder training consisted of two one-hour

training sessions where the group read the coding scheme together, coded practice content that was not used in the present study, and discussed coding discrepancies until agreement was reached. After training, coders were directed to [IMDb.com](#) to find the list of animated movie posters to code. Given that several movie posters are typically released to promote one film, coders were instructed to code the first movie poster that appeared on [IMDb.com](#).

Although many of the animated movie posters contained several characters, coders were instructed to only code for the female and male main characters. To identify the main characters to code, the coders were instructed to read the plot synopsis and watch the movie trailer provided by [IMDb.com](#). The gender of the characters was determined by nonverbal cues: hair length, clothing, makeup, etc. If there was lack of clarity on the gender of the characters, coders were to read the plot synopsis found on [IMDb.com](#) and code gender based on the use of adjectives. If the poster contained more than one main character of the same gender, such as two males, the first character mentioned in the plot synopsis was the one to be coded. For example, in the film *Monsters, Inc.* both Mike and Sulley are considered main characters. However, Sulley is the first character mentioned in the plot synopsis and therefore the male main character that was coded. The entire sample of content was coded by all three coders. Majority rule was used to resolve coding

Table 1 Coding scheme

Categories	Description	Coding Values	% agreement (Krippendorff's alpha)
Gender presence	Coded if the male or female main character is present in the movie poster.	Female present =1 Male present =2	100% (.92)
Gender balance	The category is categorized by the balance of gender across characters in the movie poster	Only boys =1 Only girls =2 Both = 3 Only one boy =4 Only one girl =5	97% (.91)
Relative size	The height of the male and female main characters are compared	Female taller =1 Male taller = 2	100% (.98)
Function Ranking	This category examines the hierarchy of function. Men are the leader or the one with knowledge whereas women typically need help or instruction.	Female =1 Male = 2	98.6% (.90)
Touch (Masculine/ Feminine)	Feminine touch is coded when a character (a) uses hands or fingers to caress, cradle, or outline an object or (b) uses their hands to touch themselves. Masculine touch is coded when a character uses hands or fingers to grasp, hold, or manipulate an object.	Masculine =1 Feminine =2 Both = 3	91.3% (.93)
Ritualization of subordination	Coded when an individual (a) lowers their physical body while another individual remains standing, (b) lays in a prone position on a bed, couch or floor, (c) bends legs, arms, back, or head in "cute" or "innocent" manner, (d) plays, skips, jumps, runs, or preforms any childish activity, or (e) when another individual holds the elbow, shoulder, or hand in a possessive manner.	Yes =1 No =2	95.5% (.89)
Licensed withdrawal	Coded when the character (a) appears emotionally overwhelmed, (b) does not make eye contact with other characters or stares off into the distance, (c) covers or partially covers their face or body, as if hiding.	Yes =1 No =2	90.1% (.85)

disagreements. To assess intercoder reliability, the entire sample of animated movie posters was used. Krippendorff's alpha was used to assess intercoder reliability, and the criterion was set at .80. Intercoder agreement met or exceeded this criterion for all variables, along with percent agreement, is presented in Table 1.

Results

In our analyses, we adopt adjusted standardized residuals as a method of indicating deviance from proportional distribution. Within each Chi-square test, they are adjusted for the row and column frequency totals, and they indicate which cells contribute (or do not contribute) to a statistically significant Chi-square value. They can be interpreted like any other standardized score: If the adjusted standardized residual is greater than ± 2 standard deviations from the mean (rounded from ± 1.96), then that cell is deemed as a major contributor to the overall Chi-square value, either because the frequency is proportionally underrepresented (< -2) or overrepresented ($> +2$).

Presence of Gender

Hypothesis 1 predicted that male main characters would be present more often than female main characters. Of the 152 movie posters analyzed, there were 233 main characters present ($n_{male} = 142$; $n_{female} = 91$). An overwhelming majority of posters featured a prominent male character ($n = 142$, 93.4%), whereas 59.9% ($n = 91$) featured a female main character. A one-sample Chi-square test revealed that male characters (residual = 25.5) were present in movie posters substantially more often than female characters (residual = -25.5), $\chi^2(1, n = 233) = 11.16, p < .001$ Cramer's $V = .19$. In line with previous research (Macklin and Kolbe 1984; Riffe et al. 1989; Smith 1994), Hypothesis 1 is supported.

The second hypothesis, regarding gender balance, suggested that male characters would be featured more often together than any other combination of males and females together or females alone. All of the animated movie posters portrayed at least one character regardless of gender, whereas 110 (72.4%) contained both male and female characters (which may have included more than just the main characters). Only males were present in 17 (11.2%) movie posters, only females were present in 2 (1.3%), a solo male was present in 21 (13.8%) movie posters, and a solo female was present in 2 (1.3%). A one-sample Chi-square test revealed that combined gender representations were overrepresented (residual = 72.0) compared to representations of only males (residual = -21.0) and only females (residual = -36.0), $\chi^2(3, N = 152) = 188.05, p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .45$. Thus, Hypothesis 2 is not supported.

Stereotypical Gender Portrayals

Research Question 1 asked about the frequency of Goffman's gendered power dynamic categories for both male and female main characters.

Relative Size

Although the height of the characters could not be examined for all movie posters, such as when only one main character was present or when characters were positioned in a way that height could not be measured, the finding of relative size was consistent with previous research. Of the 84 movie posters that contained both a male and a female character, male characters were taller in 42 (50.0%) of the animated movie posters, whereas female characters were taller in 5 (5.9%). As expected, a one-sample Chi-square test revealed an overrepresentation of movie posters portraying male characters as taller than their female co-characters (adjusted standardized residuals = 37.0), whereas movie posters portraying female characters as taller than their male co-characters were substantially underrepresented (adjusted standardized residual = -37.0), $\chi^2(1, n = 84) = 58.26, p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .44$.

Function Ranking

Similar to relative size, function ranking could only be coded when both a male and a female main character were present in the poster. Of the 84 movie posters that contained both a male and a female main character, male characters were depicted as having function ranking in 14 (16.7%) of the posters, whereas female characters were depicted as having function ranking in 3 (3.6%). A one-sample Chi-square test revealed that male characters (adjusted standardized residual = 11.0) were more likely to be portrayed as having function ranking in movie posters than female characters (adjusted standard residual = -11.0), $\chi^2(1, n = 84) = 14.24, p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .27$. Importantly, our analysis also shows that approximately 80% ($n = 67$) of movie posters containing both a male and a female main character showed no difference in function ranking for male or female characters.

Touch

In order to examine whether males or females are more often associated with feminine or masculine touch, we examined masculine and feminine touch individually. First, to examine the association of gender and feminine touch, a one-way Chi-square test was conducted to examine with which gender the 47 depictions of feminine touch were most likely to occur. Of the feminine touch depictions, 25 (53%) were displayed by female characters (residual = 1.5), and 22 (47%) were displayed by male characters (residual = -1.5), $\chi^2(1, n =$

47) = .19, $p = .662$, Cramer's $V = .06$. To examine differences in the extent to which different gendered characters used masculine touch, we conducted a second a one-way Chi-square test. Of the 69 instances of masculine touch, the results showed that male characters ($n = 48$, 70%) performed significantly more instances of masculine touch (residual = 13.5) compared to female characters ($n = 21$, 30%; residual = -13.5), $\chi^2(1, n = 69) = 10.57$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .39$.

Ritualization of Subordination

Our sample featured 78 behaviors that depicted a character performing submissive actions in accordance with ritualization of subordination. Inspection of the one-sample Chi-square test's residuals revealed no difference between the 33 (42.3%) male characters (residual = -6.0) and 45 (57.7%) female characters (residual = 6.0) who performed ritualization of subordination (residual = -6.0), $\chi^2(1, n = 78) = 1.85$, $p = .137$, Cramer's $V = .15$.

Licensed Withdrawal

Finally, our sample contained 92 instances of a character performing licensed withdrawal. Of these 92 behaviors, male characters were depicted as performing more withdrawal actions ($n = 57$; 61.9%), compared to female characters ($n = 35$, 38.0%). A follow-up one-sample Chi-square test confirmed the significance of this difference, finding that male characters (residual = 11.0) were more likely to perform licensed withdrawal behaviors compared to female characters (residual = -11.0), $\chi^2(1, n = 92) = 5.26$, $p = .022$ Cramer's $V = .24$.

Stereotypical Sex Roles Across Time

Although we had no theoretical reason to expect differences over time, we also investigated whether the year in which movie posters were produced could affect our results. The results of these analyses provided little evidence to suggest the gendered power dynamics depicted in movie posters have changed across time. Importantly, our analyses were limited by the fact that our sample contained comparatively fewer posters from the twentieth century ($n = 48$) compared to the twenty-first century ($n = 104$). A report of all analyses accounting for the year in which movie posters were produced can be found in the [online supplement](#).

Discussion

Overall, our results indicate the predominance of powerful males and submissive females in movie posters of popular

animated children's films. Specifically, the present study found that, across all movie posters, male main characters were present more often than female main characters. When prominent female characters were present, they were portrayed as smaller, less socially important, and less powerful than male characters. The findings presented here echo those of previous research, suggesting a similar pattern of stereotypical gender role portrayals across a range of media targeted at children (Baker and Raney 2007; Behm-Morawitz and Mastro 2009; Hamilton et al. 2006; Matthes et al. 2016). In the section that follows, we discuss our findings in terms of their implications for both young audiences and those who are concerned about the media children consume.

Presence of Gender

When examining the frequency of main characters' genders, females were underrepresented in movie posters compared to males. This finding is consistent with previous research which has found male characters to be more prevalent in media targeted at children (Macklin and Kolbe 1984; Riffe et al. 1989; Smith 1994). Our supplemental analyses also suggest that this representation does not vary over time (see [online supplement](#)).

Interestingly, films with female main characters in the plot synopses and the movie trailers often did not display the female main character in the movie poster. For example, although the *Lilo and Stitch* film contained both male and female characters, the movie poster exclusively depicted the male main character, Stitch, while omitting a visual representation of the female main character, Lilo. Other films (e.g., *Trolls*, *Despicable Me 2*, and *Robin Hood*) also presented female main characters in the trailer and plot synopses but did not include the female characters on the movie poster, perhaps suggesting that movie poster creators themselves do not view female main characters as central to these narratives. Because previous research has found that this type of gender representation bias introduces children to the ideas that males have more worth than their female counterparts (Wietzman et al. 1972), content creators should strive to ensure genders are represented equally in children's media so that it better reflects reality.

Representation of gender in animated movie posters overall showed that, most often, both genders were present together. However, in most cases the accompanying female characters were secondary characters who appeared smaller or in the background. This does not align with previous research that found groups of male characters be more prevalent in children's advertising (Browne 1998; Larson 2001). Of note, the presence of only male characters being featured more often than female characters in animated movie posters is consistent with previous research.

Stereotypical Portrayals

Coupled with the fact that males are present substantially more often in movie posters, they also are portrayed as more powerful through relative size and masculine touch. In addition to being represented less often, female main characters were shown with less variety, typically not performing behaviors thought to be stereotypically masculine or powerful (Goffman 1979). Considering that, when they were present, females were represented as less powerful compared to males, this narrow view of gender roles may be providing young audiences a limited window through which to consider their gender's function in society.

Because movie posters are designed to communicate large amounts of information about a film in one illustration, the manner in which movie poster creators choose to depict the characters is of critical importance. Depicting characters in stereotypical gender roles may not only influence audiences' interest in the film, but also the gendered expectations of what audiences can expect from the main characters. Although beyond the scope of the present study's inquiry, logic from SCT would suggest that continuously viewing stereotypical gender roles in mass media can shape viewers' understandings about the social world, as well as the viewer's personal gender identity (Bandura 1977, 2002). That is, through repeated exposure to the ubiquitous portrayals of stereotypical gender roles in movies, viewers may vicariously learn that reward comes to those who conform to society's gender role expectations and punishment is given to those who do not conform to society's gender role expectations. Additionally, from a cultivation perspective, these findings suggest that heavy viewers of media may internalize that males are more powerful and females weak and in need of protection (Gerbner et al. 2002). Greater representation of female characters in movies, their associated posters, and in children's media in general may allow for more opportunities for characters to be depicted outside their traditional, stereotypical gender roles.

Overall, the present study's findings showed that Goffman's (1976, 1979) gendered power dynamics, which have been demonstrated in advertisements for adults, are also very much present in movie posters from children's animated films. Several of the findings examining Goffman's power dynamic categories in movie posters are consistent with previous research (i.e., relative size, and masculine touch). Yet not all of the findings aligned with stereotypical gender role expectations. For example, in the category of licensed withdrawal, when present, both male and female characters were shown to be mentally removed from the scene over half of the time, with male characters performing the behavior more frequently. This may be a "framing" tool used by creators of animated movie posters to show the approachability of characters, making them more attractive to a young audience. However, some movie posters did depict characters acting

outside their expected gender role. For example, the poster for the film *Brave* shows a young woman with untamed red hair standing alone with her bow and arrow. The *Brave* poster suggests that the film may not offer a typical damsel in distress plotline, but instead a story of a strong young woman who has the capability to defend herself. Although less common, movie posters such as *Brave* do suggest that the creators of children's media have the capability of expanding their depictions of gender representation.

The present study adds to a growing body of research suggesting stereotypical gender role portrayals in children's media. A concerned public may be interested in the findings of such research because it would allow parents and caregivers to choose media that may encourage young audiences to consider gender beyond the confines of traditional, narrowly defined stereotypes.

Limitations and Future Directions

Three main limitations were present in the current study. First, this project was limited in scope by only examining animated movie posters from production studios in the United States. Because other studios do release films in the United States (e.g., Studio Ghibli), an examination of those posters should be considered. Future research should not only consider animated movie posters originating from studios in other countries, but also examine the extent to which one poster may differ based on the country in which it is disseminated. This would provide a deeper understanding of how promotional material may be adapted by content creators to fit the gender role stereotypes of specific target markets.

Second, this project did not examine the posters of films which are targeted at adults, but popular among children as well. Future research might adopt a wider sampling frame in order to include media that is targeted at adults, but often consumed by children. Although speculative, children may look to adult-targeted media content for an indication of how they "should" act, which could potentially contribute to even more of a lasting influence on their gender-identity development than media content that is specifically targeted at their age group.

Finally, some of the coding categories (e.g., function ranking) were sparsely present. Though this prevalence was part of what the study was designed to examine, greater variance in the representation of these categories' values may be achieved through the use of a bigger sample of movie posters. Importantly, we view our initial content analysis as a foundation for future research attempting to examine the effects of exposure to media featuring gendered stereotypes on children's gender identity development. Future work in this area should examine how children might interpret biased gender role representations when viewing animated movie posters

and how this might influence what they think is “proper” behavior for individuals of different genders to do or express.

Practice Implications

Because children are still learning how to discriminate between observed behaviors which should be ignored and observed behaviors to which they should attend, store, and replicate (Barr and Hayne 1999), childhood is a time-period of particular susceptibility to outside influences in the gender-identity development process (Leaper and Farkas 2015). Media are one of many socializing factors contributing to this influence (Signorielli 2012). In order to understand the socio-emotional and psychological effects of repeated exposure to gender role stereotype portrayals in media content on young viewers’ gender identity development, we contend that it is necessary to determine what stereotypes media portray in the first place. The present content analysis attempted to provide this determination for an arena of messaging that has been overlooked in research investigating media messages’ influence. As such, we see the present research as helping to provide a foundation for future investigations of media’s role in shaping young viewers’ gender identities.

In addition to providing a foundation for researchers, the present study’s results can also offer insight for content creators and practitioners who make decisions about what genders to include in mediated content. Importantly, the skewed representation of gender that our study and others have found suggests the need for content creators to focus on featuring a variety of gender role depictions in media, particularly with regard to media targeted at children. Practically speaking, exposure to content that adheres to gender role stereotypes may prevent young female viewers from reaching toward what they believe to be unattainable goals. The same exposure also may put pressure on male viewers to strive for unattainable standards.

Although content creators should attempt to feature a more balanced representation of genders and their associated roles in society, we acknowledge that this balance is perhaps an unattainable ideal. Even if writers and producers attempted to work toward displaying a more equal representation of gender across the media landscape, stereotypical gender role portrayals would still be as prevalent as ever in classic content that remains popular across time (e.g., classic fairytales, Disney films, etc.). With this in mind, we reason that our findings should have the greatest implications for parents and practitioners, who are tasked with teaching children skills related to critical thinking and media literacy. Acting as mediators between their child and the media they consume, parents can discuss how media depictions are not always a true reflection of society, opening up a conversation to the diversity of gender expression.

Conclusion

We began our study with an attempt to investigate the gender role stereotypes present in the movie posters of popular animated children’s films. Our investigation revealed two central findings about popular film posters: (a) they feature an over-representation of male main characters compared to female main characters and (b) male characters are shown as more powerful.

These findings add to a growing, yet substantial, body of research illustrating the prevalence of stereotypical gender role portrayals across virtually every popular medium with which children come into contact (Baker and Raney 2007; Behm-Morawitz and Mastro 2009; Hamilton et al. 2006; Matthes et al. 2016). What’s more is that even 40 years later, the current findings largely replicate the results of Goffman’s (1979) initial investigation into the gendered power dynamics featured in advertisements. Taken together, these separate studies suggest that the skewed depiction of gender role stereotypes is largely consistent across medium, content, target-age, and even the year in which the content was created.

Despite a growing scientific consensus on the biased portrayal of gender roles in popular media content (Kortenhaus and Demarest 1993; Scharrer and Blackburn 2018; Sink and Mastro 2017; Wietzman et al. 1972), questions remain regarding the extent to which repeated exposure to this material influences young viewers’ gender identities and role expectations in the long-term. Coupled with previous content analyses in this area, the current research on a largely understudied medium helps to solidify the foundation upon which future researchers can endeavor to answer these questions.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest. No funding was provided for this project. Additionally, for this type of study formal consent is not required.

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