

Frames of Reference: Gender Socialization Across Eras of Children's Animation

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ABSTRACT

In an era of growing dominance of visual media, it is increasingly important to critically examine themes and imagery presented on-screen. As children are primarily socialized through media consumption, animated content plays a significant role in helping them understand social norms and identities. Within the medium of animation, visual and narrative elements are often embedded with cultural norms, enabling the communication of characteristics such as gender to young audiences. As culture shifts, these representational strategies must do so as well for films to be relevant and profitable. This study adopts a quantitative and comparative methodology to trace the evolution of film techniques and gender messaging in children's animation, particularly its effect on internalized gender ideology across generations. Drawing on ideas from feminist film theory, this research analyzes a selection of classic and contemporary films, alongside audience reception data from Common Sense Media across age groups. The findings indicate a discernible shift from traditional to more nuanced portrayals of gender, reflecting broader cultural changes while actively shaping audience's internalization of gender norms.

INTRODUCTION

Before children can read, they can watch. Though they cannot yet access written information on their own, they are able to absorb behavioral patterns by observing others. This is how children learn the unspoken rules of human interaction and behavior.

A crucial aspect of this form of socialization is visual media, especially cinema. Films remain a large facet of pop culture, influencing popular trends or acting as conversational icebreakers as a given common interest. As our day-to-day behavior in life reflects our cinema, the cinema reflects everyday human life and behavior as well. Films are more successful when the audience can identify with the characters or story they view on screen, making realistic and believable portrayals essential to their creation. This typically involves integrating elements of dominant cultural norms and values, whose prevalence allows for a broader audience. Whether consciously or not, children draw on the details they see. From superheroes to everyday children, they mirror the behavior they view to be successful in the story arc to succeed themselves. This is especially relevant to animation, which has long dominated the children's film genre with their medium well-befitting the creative and imaginative worlds loved by

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children. Its reach is substantial, extending outside of the cinema: from toy stores to lunchboxes, beloved animated characters appear, further subconsciously reinforcing values represented by the character.

Children's films are a powerful cultural force because they are typically seen as culturally timeless and formative. Existing research has explored gender representation through portrayal of character traits like autonomy and agency, rarely examining the impact on internalized beliefs and the temporal aspect of gender in films. These aspects are particularly important because they measure the weight of stereotypical representations—whether they have sparked a response from viewers that drives change. By examining both classic and contemporary animated films, this research helps us see how narrative-crafting and character design techniques have evolved, as well as which specific techniques survive. Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to a better understanding of how portrayals of gender on-screen have changed, and how that may have impacted the internalized beliefs of different generations of audiences.

This study argues that representations of gender expression in children's animated films have evolved not only in content but also in form, technique, and narrative intent. Moving from overtly traditional portrayals rooted in archetypes to more nuanced and varied depictions in recent decades, these films reflect broader cultural changes whilst actively shaping how young audiences internalize gender roles. Examining the evolution of gender expression in children's animated films through these lenses offers insight into how cinematic narratives reflect and shape societal norms, as well as the role that media plays in the gendered socialization of young audiences across generations. To contextualize this study within established research, the following section reviews key literature on the influence of media, gender socialization, and representation in children's cinema.

LITERATURE REVIEW

With the increasing influence of Hollywood and its cinema, researchers have begun examining how media consumption affects internalized gender ideology in children, a key period for socialization and identity formation. Scholars have proposed several frameworks to understand this relationship and have conducted many empirical studies on representation of gender identity and expression to illuminate the ubiquity of gendered messaging in the media.

While direct impacts of media consumption on gender ideology are difficult to establish empirically, many studies have documented consistent patterns in gender representation in children's media. Multiple analyses of G-rated, family and Disney films have found that the number of male characters is double that of female characters. Regarding behavioral representation, multiple studies have also shown that female characters in television are centered more around their appearances and sexualized more often. Furthermore, disparity in gender representation has been shown to be most prominent when it comes to occupation: women are most often depicted in the home and men at work, and even when in the workplace, women's roles often align with gender stereotypes. This largely reflects personality stereotypes, where female characters are often depicted as polite and romantic, and male characters aggressive and domineering. These findings illustrate the prevalence

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of stereotypical representations of gender in children's media, as well as the disparity in complex portrayals across genders.

Supporting these observations, studies have also validated the relationship between media consumption and ideology, specifically through the "effects model" posed by the theorist Kevin Durkin—finding a correlation between the quantity of media consumed and attitudes regarding gender stereotyping.

In a more focused lens, Disney has been a focal point in many studies analyzing the relationship between children's media and gender socialization as the dominant conglomerate of family cinema. At the founding of Walt Disney Animated Studios, the goal was to capitalize on "lighthearted" theater, highlighting themes and messages in films via ordinary and obvious language to minimize interpretive complexity for viewers. Moreover, an analysis by Arnold et al. comparing classic and contemporary Disney characters found that the studio continues to rely on established gender tropes by reusing old narrative formulas, softening or removing particularly outdated gendered messaging.

Together, these theories and findings underscore the necessity to examine children's media critically. The consistent underrepresentation and little change in representation suggest that despite shifts in societal attitudes, traditional gender norms are still deeply embedded in children's media—highlighting the importance of critical engagement and accountability in gender representation in films.

THEORETICAL APPLICATION

The analysis of films in this study will apply a framework rooted in ideas in feminist film theory. The first is the idea of gender performativity from Judith Butler, which posits that gender is not a stable identity, rather an "identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts"; a subject is an actor, performing these acts that, over time, construct a gender identity through gendered expression. This theory is rooted in Merleau-Ponty's idea that a body is a historical idea and a set of possibilities, that outward appearance is not determined by some interior essence and expression is the embodying of specific sets of "historical possibilities." At the most fundamental level, that is how gender is understood in many animated films, especially when characters are non-human. Behavioral and physical traits of the character clue the audience into the gender identity of the character without explicitly stating it. Thus, traits included in a character's design—intentional decisions—reflect dominant stereotypes about gender.

Second is Raewyn Connell's hegemonic masculinity, which argues the existence of a dominant and culturally revered form of masculinity that often serves to justify the subordination of women and marginalized men. This concept is important in comparing how masculinity differs among characters in a film and interpreting why a difference is present. According to Connell: "hegemony is likely to be established only if there is some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power, collective if not individual." Hegemonic masculinity allows a certain amount of power and control to be had, which historically translated to the active ability to move the story arc in films. Connell also notes that the

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culturally dominant form of masculinity is flexible, reflective of cultural changes, which is relevant in this analysis of the evolution of gender expression in children's animated films.

Third is the idea of visual pleasure from Laura Mulvey. This theory argues that cinema plays on and exploits the visual pleasure of its audience through a relationship of scopophilia, the pleasure from "looking" from an objectifying lens that subjects others to control. Thus, this relationship is often used as a tool to reinforce domination and a patriarchal system. Mulvey uses this to introduce a more specific lens, that of the "male gaze," a framework of depicting female figures centered narratively around male figures in film, specifically in a romantic or sexual sense. Mulvey also addresses the presence of scopophilia in the "mirror phase" of development, where a child begins to be able to recognize itself as a being and formulates an ego, allowing them to view characters on the screen as projections of themselves, as inspirations because their "physical ambition outstrips [their] motor capacity." In the context of children's media, this shows how children often idolize figures on screen, stressing the importance of the ideas and behaviors these characters inhabit as they are easily adopted by the impressionable audience.

Last is bell hooks' concept of the oppositional gaze, a lens of critique and contest inhabited when viewing cinema. Hollywood has consistently highlighted white stories, sidelining people of color into supporting and stereotyped roles, and reinforcing messages of hegemony and homogeneity for POC audiences. Thus, to this audience, visual pleasure often includes confrontation of the stereotypical themes depicted as a way to regain control over identity. The application of this framework allows this study to examine moments where characters reinforce narrow gender norms and consider how young viewers may interpret or reject these messages. It also draws attention to the possibility of critical engagement from even young audiences and allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural power of animated films.

METHODS

This study adopts a comparative and qualitative approach to examine how gender expression is portrayed in classic and contemporary children's animated films, inferring what impact these portrayals may have had on the internalization of gender norms by young viewers across generations. The analysis is grounded in concepts from feminist film theory, whilst incorporating both visual and narrative analysis techniques.

Film Selection

Six animated films were selected and categorized into two groups: classic (1950-1970) and contemporary (1980-present). The selected classic films include: *Cinderella* (1950), *Peter Pan* (1953), *The Jungle Book* (1967); the selected contemporary films include: *Aladdin* (1992), *Lilo & Stitch* (2002), *Wreck-it Ralph* (2012). These films were chosen on the basis of their popularity and elements of gender messaging. Additionally, as Disney movies, they held significant influence due to the historical power of the Disney brand in the animated film industry as well as adolescent culture. Their target audiences were also kept in mind to maintain a range of ideological perspectives directed toward different genders.

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Analysis Framework

Key scenes to the narrative arc of each film featuring gender-coded moments and interactions were examined closely. The analysis of films is rooted in elements of *mise en scène*, noting how the design of characters and their interactions, cinematography, and music work to highlight gendered themes. Particular attention is paid to how gender is visually and narratively performed by characters, identifying traits coded masculine or feminine and the alignment or resistance to traditional gender norms.

Theoretical Lens

The analysis is informed by four core concepts in feminist film theory: Judith Butler's gender performativity, Raewyn Connell's hegemonic masculinity, Laura Mulvey's male gaze and visual pleasure, and bell hooks' oppositional gaze. These theories are applied to not only how gender is depicted, but also to how audiences may be positioned to the characters on screen.

Though direct interviews were not conducted with young viewers, viewer reception is briefly gauged through parent and child reviews from Common Sense Media. Their responses serve as qualitative representations of the understanding and level of acceptance of the gender messaging from the films across generations.

COMPARATIVE FILM ANALYSIS

Cinderella (1950)

A Disney classic adapted from the renowned folk tale, *Cinderella* has remained culturally popular, inspiring many interpretations and modern reimaginations. However, the original film follows Cinderella, who is burdened with exhaustive chores under the care of her stepmother Lady Tremaine and her two stepsisters. With the help of her fairy godmother, she attends the King's ball where she catches the eye of the prince, who searches the kingdom for her hand in marriage with the glass slipper she leaves behind at the ball after leaving in a hurry. The film presents a gendered framework in which idealized femininity is rewarded with love and upward mobility, while deviations from that ideal are met with ridicule or rejection.

Much of this messaging is conveyed through the physical and behavioral designs of the characters. Cinderella embodies delicacy: her face is smooth and pale, her eyes soft and blue, framed with bold eyelashes. She dresses in light pastels, typically a pale blue or white that further softens her image. This stands as a stark contrast to the other women in the film who feature less stereotypically feminine traits, particularly her stepmother and stepsisters who are designed with exaggerated features that deviate from

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traditional femininity. Lady Tremaine, the stepmother, wears a long, angular face with a pointed chin, spotted with deep wrinkles and a crooked nose. The stepsisters Anastasia and Druzella also have wrinkled features, despite being similar in age to Cinderella, and feature prominent, pointed noses. Additionally, they often wear bright greens and purples that create a jarring visual presence against the softer blue background. Unlike Cinderella's kind and composed demeanor, they are loud and dramatic, frequently shown with furrowed eyebrows and scrunched noses as they run to their mother at each minor inconvenience.

The stepfamily functions as the story's antagonists, obstructing Cinderella's path and competing for the prince's attention. This dynamic both features and reinforces a visual dichotomy between "good" and "bad" femininity, rooted in longstanding beliefs around womanhood. Cinderella, embodying traits historically associated with femininity and beauty, is the one who wins the prince and social power—which she does using those traits. When the two meet at the ball, there are few words exchanged and little attempt made in understanding each person; the prince is immediately captivated by her beauty, whisking her off in a dance as the music sings how "this is love."

The dichotomy in character design in this film is structured around Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity. Physical attributes historically associated with femininity are used in Cinderella's design, while the opposites are tied to the villainous characters like the stepfamily. The inclusion of these traits places the characterization in the audience's mind, showing how Cinderella's beauty and kindness are inherent while reinforcing the relationship between these traits and their sign of femininity. Ultimately, the film models traditional femininity as aspirational because it is rewarded, emphasizing these virtues of beauty and softness as necessary tools for achieving love and status.

Peter Pan (1953)

Peter Pan follows the story of Wendy Darling and her brothers John and Michael, who are whisked off to Neverland one night by Peter Pan and Tinker Bell. There, they befriend the Lost Boys and face off against the notorious pirate Captain Hook—who, after capturing them in a bid to find the boys' hideout, is ultimately defeated by Peter Pan, who flies the children home. From start to finish, the film presents a gendered worldview in which masculinity is equated with heroism and adventure, while femininity is tied to caregiving and emotional dependence.

Peter Pan and Captain Hook's relationship parallels that of Cinderella and her stepsisters, specifically in the way they embody contrasting examples of their gender. Peter is depicted as a confident and fearless leader, and as the "boy who never grew up" he is spirited and mischievous. On the other hand, Hook is more emotionally reactive and less brave, often exaggeratively expressive and flamboyant, and fleeing to his sidekick Smee in the presence of danger. While Peter features more stereotypically masculine traits, Hook is coded with traits historically associated with queerness and effeminacy, with his theatrical demeanor and stylized appearance setting him apart. Because these characteristics are tied to the villain, they may be understood as undesirable or negative traits, especially in the context of masculinity. The film utilizes gender performativity to differentiate characters to the audience, upholding historical

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associations of gender to separate the hero from the villain while further perpetuating those same stereotypes to the audience.

The other notable male character is the chief of the indigenous tribe, yet his characterization stands apart from the dynamic between Peter and Hook. The depiction of the indigenous characters in the film draws heavily on caricature and racialized stereotypes, visually and behaviorally separating them from the other human figures. Despite this, the chief and his tribe honor Peter and the Lost Boys for rescuing Tiger Lily. This moment draws on hegemonic masculinity: the difference in characterization supports the narrative that Peter and the boys are rewarded with authority and admiration, even over a group representing an entirely different cultural order. The hierarchy presents an inherent racial difference in masculinity, where though Peter and the chief share similar authoritative traits, the chief's characterization is distinctly inferior, highlighting the weight of race in masculinity. Their claim to power is not earned through wisdom or leadership but through heroics and dominance, suggesting a normative and white ideal of masculinity as the dominant form.

Shifting focus to Wendy, she is the thematic catalyst for the film's narrative arc who is adamant in her refusal to grow up. Her journey to Neverland is meant to preserve the imagination she was not ready to lose, yet it does the opposite by convincing her that she is ready to grow up—a realization she makes through being cast in a maternal role. Peter formally introduces her to the boys by saying that he has “brought [them] a mother to tell stories,” and it is when she embraces this role in her lullaby, “Your Mother and Mine,” that she begins yearning for home. Her narrative arc is structured entirely around her relationship to Peter and the Lost Boys, and the same is true of the other female characters in the film who pose as sources of jealousy and competition for Peter's interest. Tinker Bell is driven by jealousy over Peter's affection for Wendy and ends up betraying them because of it, the mermaids flirt with Peter and attempt to drown Wendy out of spite, and even Wendy herself becomes envious when she sees Peter dancing with Tiger Lily. This recurring theme of female characters being depicted in relation to the male protagonist renders romance and jealousy central to their identities, reinforcing the idea that femininity is defined by emotional attachment and desirability. The inclusion of the “male gaze” allows the film to revolve narratively around a nuclear group at the expense of character depth in the female characters, representing the lower significance of these characters in narrative design.

Though framed as a whimsical adventure, the film subtly models to its audience the roles boys and girls are expected to grow into, reinforcing familiar norms.

The Jungle Book (1967)

The film follows Mowgli, an orphaned boy, who is raised by a pack of wolves in the jungle until the return of the feared tiger Shere Khan prompts the panther Bagheera to escort him to the safety of a human village; in strong resistance to this journey, Mowgli encounters a host of jungle creatures, including the carefree bear Baloo, before ultimately defeating Shere Khan and choosing to leave the jungle after being charmed by a village girl. At its core, the film operates as a coming-of-age story, tracing Mowgli's

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reluctant passage from carefree childhood into the responsibilities and expectations of adolescence. The film presents a gendered framework for understanding maturity, embedding ideas of masculinity, knowledge, and romantic attraction into the path toward adulthood.

The film's cast is overwhelmingly male, centering the story around the male experience, though masculinity is portrayed in a range of forms. Bagheera the panther acts as the rational and wise mentor, while Baloo serves as the opposite: carefree and indulgent, he represents a "manchild," domineering on the surface but immature and resistant to responsibility on the inside. While Bagheera presents a model of masculinity rooted in reason, Baloo presents one grounded in impulsive pleasure and a rejection of structure. Mowgli also encounters the militaristic elephant patrol, who march in strict order under the command of their colonel. They model the value of discipline and authority, but not blind obedience, again underlining the idea that knowledge and awareness grant legitimacy to power.

The character King Louie further underscores the power of knowledge. An orangutan who wants to be human, or rather more "man," he asks Mowgli to teach him to make fire, believing the knowledge would grant him power. Although Mowgli does not yet possess this skill, the encounter frames intellectual knowledge as a key component of hegemonic masculinity, contrasting the

physical prowess traditionally emphasized in male figures. This is further reinforced in the film's climax, where Mowgli defeats Shere Khan—a symbol of physical dominance—with cleverness and strategic thinking, suggesting that power comes not from aggression but from insight. The use of this framing presents a hierarchy of characters to the audience, amplifying Mowgli's role as the hero and protagonist while enforcing a social scale of traits regarding masculinity.

This more expansive model of masculinity is undermined by the film's conclusion. After the defeat of Shere Khan, Mowgli is inclined to stay in the jungle with Baloo, indicating his continued attachment to a life free of rules and responsibility. Then, his attention is suddenly captured by a girl from the man-village, who sings a lullaby-like song outlining the gendered order of village life— "Father's hunting in the forest, Mother's cooking in the home, I must go to fetch the water, till the day that I am grown." This moment is informed by the idea of "male gaze" from visual pleasure, further centering Mowgli as the protagonist while flattening the character of the village girl. Though still very innocent, the girl is framed visually and narratively as an object of attraction, swaying gently, letting down her hair, and glancing coyly at Mowgli. Her femininity is not explored beyond how it entices him, and her brief appearance becomes a narrative device that signals Mowgli's entrance into adolescence. In this way, the film implies that "becoming a man" is less about internal growth, as in mastering knowledge or choosing values, and more about attraction and fulfilling traditional romantic roles, and presents a path to adulthood that privileges male development and reinforces a limited vision of what it means to grow up.

Aladdin (1992)

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This film follows the street thief Aladdin, who discovers a magic lamp containing a wish granting Genie; with his new friend's help, Aladdin tries to win the heart of the princess Jasmine while facing the evil royal advisor, Jafar, who covets the lamp's powers for himself.

Jasmine marks progress when it comes to portrayal of female characters in Disney animated films. Unlike many previous figures, her personal dreams are not centered around romance or marriage, instead she seeks freedom and self-determination. Despite this, the narrative ultimately steers her back towards the arc of romance as her main purpose. Though she voices her frustration with being treated as a “prize to be won,” she is still situated within a plot that revolves around male characters vying for her affection and control over her future. This tension illustrates the constraints of the narrative framework itself: while Jasmine expresses resistance, the world she inhabits does not permit her full autonomy. Her arc is framed by the idea of “male gaze,” where her role is still positioned as a desirable object for male figures, recentering the narrative around them. Jasmine briefly subverts this positioning in the film's climax, weaponizing this aspect of desire to draw Jafar's attention to help Aladdin. However, the gesture only further reinforces that her power lies in her sexuality and does little in shifting the plot. This compounds on the exoticism presented in the film: as it is received by a Western audience, the sensualized costume design of background women and the amalgamation of South-Asian and Middle Eastern influences into a single culture results in a flattened representation of culture, if not reducing this display of power further to exoticism. This ultimately conveys that femininity is most legible when expressed through the lens of romance or seduction, making Jasmine's acts of resistance feel partial and conditional.

The Genie, meanwhile, serves as comedic relief, playing with gender norms in both a seemingly progressive and reductive way. Throughout the film, the Genie shapeshifts into various personas across genders, adopting exaggerated features to communicate these shifts to the audience. The most notable moment of this is during the song “Prince Ali,” when Aladdin reenters Agrabah as a newly transformed prince. The Genie flits through the crowd, shapeshifting into different audiences and adopting exaggerated feminine or masculine traits: he fawns over Aladdin with the other women, donning eyelashes, red lipstick, and a prominent bust; with the men he praises Aladdin's physical feats, acting more aggressive, enlarging his physique and wearing a long beard. The shifts the Genie make are immediately readable to the audience because they rely on recognizable gender cues. The humor arises not from the content of the impersonations themselves, but from the ease with which the Genie switches between these exaggerated gendered signifiers, creating visually striking and unexpected appearances that draw laughter. This utilizes the idea of gender performativity, where historical signifiers of gender are used to demonstrate gender identity to the audience. The character further affirms traditional roles through contrast and humor, reinforcing the idea that blending gender boundaries is inherently comedic or unnatural.

The film does not completely dismantle stereotypes in gender expression, rather repackaging them—offering moments of resistance and fluidity but ultimately reaffirming familiar binaries and expectations.

Lilo & Stitch (2002)

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On the Hawaiian island of Kauai, Lilo is raised by her older sister Nani after the death of their parents; when Lilo adopts Stitch—an alien experiment posing as a dog—their lives are thrown into further chaos, but despite Stitch's destructive nature and the sisters' often volatile dynamic, their bond, along with the love and support of their community, teaches Stitch the meaning of family and belonging. A film that explores loss, connection, and resilience, *Lilo & Stitch* also subtly resists gender expectations in its portrayals of gender expression.

Lilo's character stands out because she is allowed to exist as a child first, particularly coded traits she inhabits are not definitive of her character and identity, especially relative to gender. Lilo is stubborn and a little destructive: she holds steadfast in her belief that the fish Pudge controls the weather, throwing punches at her classmate Mertle when she calls her “crazy.” These traits are not traditionally associated with femininity, but the film does not present her behavior as a resistance to established gender norms. Instead, they are demonstrated as expressions of her grief, emotional complexity, and vivid imagination—reminders that she is, above all, a child navigating loss.

It is through Lilo that the application of gender performativity begins to expand. Her characterization illustrates that gendered traits are not innate, but also that these behaviors can simply reflect personal experience and emotional state. While identity may be understood through the recognition of historical signifiers of gender, coded traits are simply repeated behaviors that have come to a historic and scientific belief. As Butler writes regarding gender performativity, “Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis. The tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of its own production.” This subtly destabilizes the gendered categorization of traits, allowing qualities like assertiveness or emotional intensity to exist untethered to a gender. Instead of relying on stereotypical physical and behavioral attributes to communicate gender, the film integrates it into the narrative through references to sisters.

Nani also presents an alternative model of femininity. Though forced into a maternal role out of necessity, she resists the trope of the domestic, nurturing women defined by dependency and romance. Nani is also portrayed as emotionally volatile and reactive, frustrated when Lilo disobeys her or acts out. This quality demonstrates a similar complexity in gender expression and performativity as Lilo's character, exemplifying the instability of gendered traits.

Although the parental role was thrust upon her, Nani embraces the position out of deep love for her sister, fighting relentlessly to retain custody. Though in a caregiving role, Nani is not centered around her romantic relationships (though present in her relationship with the surfer David), or her relationships with any male figure. This characterization subverts the use of the “male gaze,” reframing a historically male-imposed female role (the maternal role) as meaningful because of the strength of a female bond, rather than in relation to male-centered ones. Though Stitch is the one who performs the ultimate heroic act of saving Lilo, it is Nani who makes the moment possible. This reinforces that her narrative strength stems from her emotional depth and resilience.

The film explores the complexity of gender more explicitly through the character of Pleakley, an alien who cross-dresses as a woman as his disguise on Earth. Similar to the Genie in *Aladdin*, Pleakley is also a point of humor: his use of traditionally feminine traits (long wigs, heavy eye lashes, red lipstick, and women's clothing) creates a striking visual that draws attention. However, unlike the Genie whose gendered impersonations serve as quick gags, Pleakley's gender presentation is more integrated into the narrative. It is not treated as something shocking or explicitly commented on by other characters, and while it does not fully deconstruct gender binaries, it opens space for fluidity in gender expression.

Altogether, the film embraces complexity, with characters both challenging and aligned with established gender norms, allowing the opportunity for reflection and reconsideration of how gender is performed and perceived for the audience.

Wreck-it Ralph (2012)

This film follows *Wreck-it Ralph*: tired of being the villain in his arcade game, Ralph sets out to prove he can be a hero by game-hopping across the arcade, eventually landing in the candy racing game *Sugar Rush*, where he meets the glitchy outcast Vanellope von Schweetz; as they form an unlikely friendship, Ralph uncovers a sinister plot that threatens the game and his new friend, and finally embraces who he is to save them from destruction. The film offers commentary on gender identity and expression, using Ralph and Vanellope's journeys to challenge the rigidity of socially assigned roles.

Ralph has been conscripted into the title of the villain in his game, a role that defines how others treat him and how he views himself. Despite doing his job well—wrecking the building for the hero *Fix-It Felix* to repair—he is denied recognition and community from his game characters. Ralph becomes disillusioned with the rigid expectations attached to his role: he is seen only as destructive and aggressive. While traits associated with villainy, they also echo stereotypes tied to hegemonic masculinity: physical strength and dominant power without introspection. Ralph then seeks social acceptance through hypermasculinity, using violence and domination in the game *Hero's Duty* to achieve a medal he thinks will finally earn him recognition. This message is further emphasized through the masculine-coded world of the game, with dark colors and neon greens, as well as towering science-fictional insects covering the environment. His resort to this path exemplifies the deeply rooted beliefs around gender expectations, reflecting the idea that repeated actions create the illusion of fixed gender identities from Judith Butler's gender performativity.

It is not until Ralph enters the world of *Sugar Rush*, a colorful candy racing game, that the film begins disrupting traditional gendered messaging. This game's environment is a stark contrast to *Hero's Duty*: bathed in bright pinks and candy-themed decorations, the game builds a world centered around feminine-coded patterns. Though he initially remains motivated by personal ambition and the desire for external validation, Ralph gradually takes on a more nurturing and supportive role in his relationship with Vanellope. He helps her build a racing kart, teaches her how to drive, and encourages her to pursue her dream of racing. Over time, Ralph learns to act from a place of care and empathy, ultimately risking his life to destroy the invading insects and save Vanellope and her world. He learns to reframe his

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destructiveness as a power, not his nature, a shift motivated by his new understanding of a strength rooted in protection.

The film uses the framework of gender performativity to present a conflicting image of identity, designing its characters in alignment with established traits and attributes while defying those norms narratively. Ralph remains the "bad guy" in his game, but he no longer enacts that title through destruction alone; he repurposes his strength for good, welcoming displaced characters into his world role. Similarly, though Vanellope is revealed as a princess, she still maintains her stereotypically non-feminine coding, including her "glitchy" and energetic nature, love for racing, and crude sense of humor and speech. The film disrupts conventional messaging around gender expression, modeling that identity is not confined to rigid binaries or predetermined scripts.

Film	Year	Dominant Gender Messaging	Key Representation	Theoretical Lens
<i>Cinderella</i>	1950	Love and power are only rewarded to those aligning with traditional Western femininity	Contrasting representations of femininity: traditional beauty (protagonist), deviation from traditional femininity (antagonists)	<i>Gender performativity</i> : traditional feminine-coded traits and behaviors are rewarded
<i>Peter Pan</i>	1953	Masculinity is expressed through physical dominance and self-reliance, femininity through domesticity and romance	Contrasting representations of masculinity: physically strong and powerful (protagonist), expressive and reactive (antagonist); Female characters romantically revolve around male protagonist, and hold traditional domestic values of femininity	<i>Hegemonic masculinity</i> : physical dominance is presented as superior to emotional expression <i>Male gaze</i> : female figures are presented in relation to male characters
<i>The Jungle Book</i>	1967	Knowledge and virtue are greater signifiers of masculinity than physical strength; romantic desire is necessary for maturity	Various values represented in masculinity: knowledge and wit (protagonists), physical dominance (antagonist); Female character romantically revolves around male protagonist	<i>Hegemonic masculinity</i> : physical dominance as superior masculinity is subverted in place of knowledge <i>Male gaze</i> : female figure is a device for male growth
<i>Aladdin</i>	199	Femininity can exist outside of	Female protagonist defies	<i>Gender</i>

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	2	romance, though female power exists in sexuality; gender is manifested in external traits, and gender fluidity is only viable as a source of humor	traditional feminine “duties” of romance, but revolves narratively around male characters; Supporting male figure plays with gender fluidity comedically	<i>performativity</i> : coded traits are how gender identity is perceived <i>Male gaze</i> : femininity is defined in relation to men
<i>Lilo & Stitch</i>	2002	Gender expands beyond coded traits; maternal femininity is redefined by emotional depth and resilience, rather than duty; gender fluidity can exist as an identity marker	Female characters embody converse gender coded-traits without impacting identity; In a “domestic” role, female figure does not revolve around male relationships	<i>Gender performativity</i> : coded traits are not definitive of identity <i>Male gaze</i> : family and domesticity are not tied to male presence
<i>Wreck-it Ralph</i>	2012	Coded-traits do not define gender identity; resistance of gender norms does not require complete departure from traditional traits	Male character holds physical strength and violent power, but uses it towards nurturing; Female character is a princess, but is energetic with a crude sense of humor	<i>Gender performativity</i> : illustrates how behaviors and traits are how gender is perceived but not defined

IMPACT AND INTERPRETATION

During Disney’s classical animation era, the studio heavily relied on adapting preexisting folk tales and literary texts, adopting a markedly “lighthearted” tone that often obscured the darker, more complex themes present in the original narratives. While this shift in tone made the films more palatable for audiences, it also diluted the allegorical and moral depth of the source material, simplifying and literalizing once-symbolic narratives. This flattening of thematic complexity is particularly evident in *The Jungle Book* and *Peter Pan*, where characters or arcs that may have once served as layered metaphors are instead presented without nuance, unintentionally amplifying the gendered messages embedded in the narratives. It is important to note, however, that not all obsolete elements stem from symbolic simplification; some, such as the overt racism in *Peter Pan*, are more accurately understood as reflections of the sociocultural attitudes of the time rather than remnants of metaphors.

Character construction in these films is likewise constrained by conventional archetypes, reinforcing narrow understandings of gender. Protagonists are typically aligned with dominant gender norms: Cinderella upholds an idealized form of passive femininity, Peter and Wendy embody respective traditional gender roles, and Mowgli follows a desire-driven arc of masculinity. Figures that deviate from these norms are often cast as antagonistic, such as Cinderella’s stepfamily or Captain Hook. In this way,

the films present a model of gender expression in which conformity is rewarded and deviation is punished, reinforcing established ideological norms in gender.

While modern audiences generally recognize these outdated portrayals, reactions to them differ across age groups. Review platforms like Common Sense Media show that many adults defend the continued viewing of these films, often citing their value as cultural classics. Contrastingly, younger viewers tend to engage with the films more critically or with greater indifference. In the case of *Cinderella*, adult reviewers tend to highlight the film's broader themes of kindness and quiet perseverance, often pushing back against critiques of its gender politics as being overly reactive or dismissive of historical context; teen viewers occasionally echo these sentiments, but younger children more frequently label the film as simplistic, outdated, or overly gendered. For *Peter Pan*, audiences across generations typically agree that its depictions of race and gender are problematic, though older viewers are more likely to advocate for contextualization rather than complete rejection of the film. A similar pattern emerges with *The Jungle Book*, particularly regarding the film's conclusion in which the introduction of the young village girl is seen by many as a reductive and overly suggestive narrative resolution. Despite this, many adult reviewers continue to uphold the film's nostalgic value, whereas younger audiences express more critical or disengaged responses.

In comparison, contemporary films begin to distance themselves from the "lighthearted" nature of Disney's classical era, opting instead to develop original narratives rather than rely primarily on adaptations of preexisting texts. This shift has allowed for greater complexity in portrayals of gender in the studio's animated films; moving beyond traditional, reductive archetypes, characters begin to express their gender in ways that both align and subvert established norms.

In the case of *Aladdin*, reviews reveal a generational divide similar to that of previous films, though notable shifts begin to arise. Viewers across age groups acknowledge the presence of racial stereotypes and the oversexualization of female characters—particularly Jasmine, who is often portrayed with a sultry demeanor; however, while many adult reviews suggest that such representations are unlikely to register with younger children, reviews from younger audiences often demonstrate awareness of these gendered portrayals. This difference indicates an increasing attunement to underlying messaging in younger viewers.

This evolving pattern of reception is further pronounced in the reception of *Lilo & Stitch*. Adult reviews frequently express concern about the film's depiction of violence and its emotionally intense themes, viewing them as potentially inappropriate for younger audiences; contrastingly, young viewers cite these elements—particularly the complexity and more mature themes—as the reason for their appreciation of the story, with many describing being deeply moved by this exploration. This suggests a more perceptive engagement from younger audiences than adults may anticipate.

Similarly, in the case of *Wreck-It Ralph*, while adult reviews often highlight concerns about its use of crude humor, instances of violence, and the film's moral ambiguity, many child reviews express little to no discomfort with these elements; instead, they emphasize their enjoyment of the film's core message

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about self-acceptance and the redefinition of assigned roles, paying minimal attention to the aspects flagged by adults. Collectively, these patterns illustrate how younger viewers are increasingly capable of engaging critically with gendered and moral content, even as adult audiences remain cautious about such exposure.

Just as films are often a product of their time, so are people. Ideology from a viewer's respective generation is more likely to resonate with them than that of a different era. In fact, several modern polls have shown a correlation between a viewer's age and their favorite Disney animated princess. This generational divergence in reception underscores the evolving relationship between audiences and media, revealing not only how animated films reflect the sociocultural ideologies of their time, but also how viewers bring their own temporal frameworks in their interpretation.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the selected films and audience reviews reveal a shift from normative portrayals of gender toward more fluid and nuanced expressions, mirrored by a generational divide in audience reception where younger viewers increasingly question traditional roles while older audiences often respond with nostalgia or contextual justification. The evolution in narratives and audience reception suggests that animated media serves as both a reflection and a participant in gender politics in culture, with the differing receptions representing a change in understanding of gender norms across generations. In portraying characters who either challenge or embody alternative forms of gender identity, contemporary Disney films help expand the range of what is visible and imaginable in mainstream children's media, modeling diverse forms of expression to impressionable audiences.

However, it is important to acknowledge limitations and potential biases in this analysis. Interpretations of film content, particularly regarding gender, are inherently subjective and shaped by personal experience. Additionally, the data drawn from Common Sense Media reviews present certain methodological constraints: these reviews are crowd-sourced and voluntary, often skewed toward adult perspectives—especially for older films, which have fewer child reviews available. Furthermore, the reviews are not exclusively focused on gender, often addressing broader themes such as violence, humor, or moral lessons. Future research might include direct surveys or interviews with viewers across age groups about their interpretation and reception of specific gendered themes in these films, allowing a more precise evaluation of the impact of these films on perception of gender identity expression.

This study also takes place within an era of increasing media presence. In a time defined by the creation of digital narratives that expand outside cinemas into everyday social media platforms, understanding the influence of gender messaging in children's media becomes increasingly urgent. These films no longer operate as isolated cultural texts. The ideologies they portray are reproduced and reinterpreted across platforms, shaping and being shaped by the conversations that follow them. Thus, examining gender in children's animation is not just a matter of analyzing artistic content, but of tracing how cultural and social norms are circulated, contested, and internalized across audiences.

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Despite progress in the recent decades, gaps remain. Many contemporary animated films still rely on traditionally gender-coded traits in character design and implicit binaries in character dynamics. Even when characters subvert gender expectations, they are often only exceptions and not normalized. Broader systemic changes are needed in both the stories that are told and the structures of production that shape them—including greater diversity among film creators, intentional engagement with intersectional identities, and sustained efforts to challenge rather than merely revise dominant narratives. Continued attention to representation is essential if children's media is to truly support more expansive and reflective understandings of gender.

CONCLUSION

Representations of gender expression in children's animated films have evolved in the content of these depictions, as well as in form and narrative intent. While classic films utilize traditional gender expectations to communicate and reinforce character archetypes, contemporary films have begun to introduce complexity and nuance in resistance to superficial stereotypes. This shift is also reflected in the audience perception of these films, with younger viewers increasingly expressing resistance to stereotypical portrayals while older audiences often respond with nostalgia or seek to contextualize outdated representations. This changing dynamic between film and audience reveals not only the potential of media to reflect cultural change, but also its capacity to shape how future generations understand identity, difference, and possibility. As children's media continues to evolve, it holds the potential not only to mirror but to also reshape the cultural scripts of gender that future generations will grow up with.

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