

Portrayals of Love, Romance & Sexuality in Animated Films for Children A Content Analysis of Animated Films Released in 2018

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Abstract

The media has replaced the peer group and family as a socializing agent in the modern age. The impact of media especially cartoons and animated movies are powerful on the developing minds of young children. Researches have been done on these animated movies analyzing its content for various themes and how these affect the minds of children. These movies prove to be a strong socializing agent for the children forming normative and cultural role expectations in their minds. This study is focused on a content analysis of the animated movies released during the year 2018. Sixteen movies were released during the year, which were full-length animated feature films. The movies were analyzed for the themes of intimacy, gender and sexuality. The ratio of character by their genders, their roles in the storyline, the expressions of intimacy and seduction through verbal and nonverbal symbols, and instances of women objectification will be highlighted. Stereotypes revolving around gender and other social roles will also be analyzed. The discussion suggests the impacts such content has on the minds of children and prescribes what guardians can do to protect children from harmful effects if there are any.

Key Words: Socialization, animated movies, media, childhood, gender, stereotypes, intimacy.

Introduction

Sociologists believe that the media has the power to dictate how we learn about what is going on in the world, as well as how to appropriately interact with one another. It was estimated in 1995 that most of the American children before the age of eighteen must have spent their 15000 hours in front of television and this was about 4000 hours more than they would have spent in their schools and far more than the time they would have spent with their parents, teachers and peers combined (Minnow & LaMay, 1995, p.5). This estimation was made before the boost of fiber cables and wireless internet. Today the estimated hours children spend before the television, computer or other gadgets' screens must be, even if not doubled, increased incredibly (Livingstone et al. 2011; Johnson, 2010c; Findhal, 2009; Feller, 2005). Even infants average about an hour and a half of television viewing a day between the time they are born and age 2 (Wright et al., 2001). Most 8 to 18-year-old children devote an average of seven and a half hours to media in a typical day, according to a 2009 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, and more than half of that content contains sexual images or references (Ross, 2012).

Literature Review

The children today are being brought up in a 'media-saturated environment' (Roberts et al., 1999). One cannot deny the fact that these media have strong traces on the minds of children during their socialization (Andreson et al., 2003; Singer & Singer, 2001). Several researches have studied this impact of mass media on the socialization. As late as 1966, Gerson reported that nearly all of the research that had been conducted on mass media had been only indirectly concerned with socialization (Gerson, 1966).

Socialization can be defined as the type of social learning that occurs when a person interacts with other individuals. Social learning theory has been found to be especially helpful in understanding socialization and the most appropriate ways to guide a person through the process (Baymur, 1972). The socialization process enables one to develop a sense of self and how to relate to society at large. Socialization plays a major role in identity formation and social functioning. Through it, people learn the behaviors appropriate to their cultures as well as how to interact with other people within their cultures.

This could be better understood through the ecological systems theory presented by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), according to which the surrounding environment influences a child's growth

and development by placing the child within a system of relationships. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1986), the processes in the meso system, i.e. different settings around the child, are not independent of one another and operate in both directions (from home to pre-school and vice versa); therefore, they affect children's lives. In today's society, this also means new media-related environments and connections between people (Vinter, 2012).

After the technological boom and the internet revolution, the socialization and ecological systems theory were updated viz analyzing the socialization through technology. Johnson and Pupilampu (2010) presented the ecological techno-subsystem theory. According to them, 'The ecological techno-subsystem includes child interaction with both living (e.g., peers) and nonliving (e.g., hardware) elements of communication, information, and recreation technologies in immediate or direct environments' (Johnson, 2010).

Gerson (1966) mentions that the focus of the researches on mass media went more than how individual identity was socialized to how the interpersonal environment was affected by the exposure of media.

Of course, parents can control the time their children spend watching television, but many don't. They can monitor the selection of programs, but some allow their children to watch whatever happens to be on (Gonzalez-Mena, 2010). Sociologists have argued that uncritical media consumption can socialize children into a personality containing "sexist and racist stereotypes, sexuality, violence, and commercialism" (Hadley & Nenga, 2004). Some researches show positive effects of media usage but they emerge with the adult as well as competent peer or sibling intervention (Clements & Sarama, 2003; Plowman & Stephen, 2003; Grieshaber, 2010).

Most researches largely consist of content analyses and effect studies and these analyses show that the content that target children induce sexist and racist stereotypes, aggression and adult knowledge about sex (Robinson, 2008; England et al., 2011; Leaper et al., 2002). Although children by the time they are in elementary schools get a clear view of heteronormative sexual divide (Best 1983; Renold 2002, 2005; Thorne 1993) and mothers' conversations with young children normalize heterosexuality (Martin, 2009), yet parents do not normally discuss the topic of romantic love, marriage or sexuality younger than adolescence (Roberts, Kline & Gagnon, 1978).

Children, those not overexposed to mass media, often make use of popular stories, myths, and fairy tales to make sense of

themselves and their surroundings regarding sexual awareness (Corsaro, 1997; Wolf & Heath, 1992), however, these children try to find alternative ways to for this making of schemas, which, according to research, include television (Gunter and McAleer, 1997).

Animated children's films are seen by millions of children and adults, and many are some of the most popular movies ever made (Goldstein et al., 1999). Made by Disney and other animated features are often termed masterpiece classics and re-released in theaters and televisions and on internet, making almost all animated films available to children on a continuing basis. Scientists agree that many animated films influence the children who watch them (Goldstein et al., 1999). Children watch them again and again, memorize dialogues, songs and characters.

While these featured length animated movies are without a doubt beloved by many around the world as symbolizing "wholesome, family entertainment," studies (such as Junn, 1997) reinforce the fact that the media, including the film industry, also represents a social and cultural institution that ultimately creates, produces, and disseminates ideological constructs in the form of a commercial mass product (Levy, 1990). Feature-length movies likely foster a greater sense of familiarity and identification with the characters, thereby creating a situation in which the happenings, emotions, and potential lessons in a movie may have a greater impact on children than any other medium (Fouts et al., 2006). Moreover, most parents take their children to cinemas to watch full length animated movies or watch along with them at home which creates a sense of endorsement by the parents in the minds of children.

Method

Full-featured length animated movies that were released in 2018 were selected. Previous researches done on animated films usually targeted the films released by Disney only. However, now other production companies like 20th Century Fox, Universal and Columbia have got lead in the children's entertainment industries. Animated movies released in China, Korea, Arab countries and the movies originally released in other languages than English were not included because they, firstly, do not target international population and secondly, they do not reach international box office. 16 animated films were

released in 2018 which were famed internationally. The rating was correlated from the IMDb and Rotten Tomatoes movie review websites.

Films were categorized as romantic or nonromantic based on the description given on IMDb. All 16 films were analyzed and coded. A total of 13 variables were coded for all the movies. Movies were also divided into human or nonhuman characters. Movies were examined for the gender of the leading character, gender of the character with most screen time, depiction or any reference to marriage, kids and family, any expression of love, intimate body touch and kiss, the gender of the initiator of love, immodesty in clothing and women objectification.

Results

Out of 16 movies that were analyzed, only 12.5% had completely non-human characters while 37.5% of movies consisted of both human and non-human characters. 75% of the movies had males as their leading characters. This difference is even more significant when the movies are categorized as romantic or nonromantic. Only one nonromantic movie had female leading character and in the total contrast, only one romantic movie had male leading character.

Movies having any reference to the marriage were 62.5% of the total, while family life was portrayed in 68.75% movies. Parents having kids was shown in 56.25% movies. Although marriage was shown in romantic movies, however couples having kids were not shown in any of the romantic movies.

75% of the movies had some kind of love expression, either verbal or nonverbal. Intimate body touch to the loved one was depicted in 68.75% movies Kissing scenes was shown in 62.5% of the movies.

Immodest clothing was counted for those clothing that revealed the private parts of any of the sexes or were sexually seductive. 68.75% of the movies had immodest clothing in them. Further, 75% of the movies objectified women sexually.

Romantic	25% of movies were romantic
Leading Character's Gender	75% of the movies' leading characters were males
Reference to Marriage	62.5% contained references to marriage
Reference to having kids	56.25% had references for parents having kids
Reference to family	68.75% of movies had some idea of familial life

Love expression	75% of movies contained love expressions
Kiss	62.5% of movies had kissing scenes
Intimate body touch	68.75% of movies showed intimate body touches
Clothes immodesty	68.75% of movies had scenes with immodest clothing
Women objectification	75% of movies objectified women
Human/Non-human	12.5% of movies were based completely on non-human characters
	37.5% of movies had both human and non-human characters

Discussion

This study specifically examined the portrayal of love, marriage, and sexual themes in full length animated family feature films released in 2018. These results are entirely consistent with other researches showing that, in general, females are underrepresented in the media and more likely to be cast in a leading role when the central plot includes themes of romance, family, or sexuality, and more likely to be married or attached to a significant other by the end of the film (Gerbner, 1972; Levy, 1990; McGhee & Frueh, 1980; Signorielli, 1989). This study also validates the claims of previous studies that women are more often depicted as objects of sexual advances (Baxter, et al., 1985; Sommers-Flanagan, Sommers-Flanagan, & Davis, 1993).

Efforts are made to abstinence and delay sexual initiation in adolescents, but they are initiating sexual activities earlier than ever before (Christine Campo, n.d.). Exposure to sexuality prior to adolescence might be linked to teen's increased risk for negative outcomes associated with sex, like unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. Other researches also show that exposure to explicit sexual content in adolescence may lead to sexual harassment, engaging in sexual intercourse, oral sex and other activities while in high school (Strasburger, 2010). A study of 932 sexual addicts reports early

interaction with sexual content on media (Ross, 2012).

This high ratio of sex and love related content in the children's media is alarming. Wright and Huston (1983) proposed that powerful auditory-visual and auditory representations as of media can induce active cognitive processing, especially in young children. It can be predicted that children will adapt to most of the sexual themes depicted in the movies and this early exposure to these themes can bring fore mentioned problems.

Parents and teachers must learn to become critical consumers in the selection of material they make available to their children and develop effective means of discussing these issues with their children (e.g., Giroux, 1995). The goal isn't to avoid the issue, but to approach it head-on so that your children learn about sex and relationships from their most trusted source: you.

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Appendix

Name of Movies	Production Company
Teen Titans Go! To the Movies	Warner Bros. DC
Suicide Squad: Hell to Pay	Warner Bros. DC
Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse	Sony Pictures
Smallfoot	Warner Animation
Sgt. Stubby: An American Hero	Mikros Image
Scooby-Doo! & Batman: The Brave and the Bold	Warner Bros. DC, Hanna Barbera
Ralph Breaks the Internet	Walt Disney
Marvel Rising: Secret Warriors	Marvel
Incredibles 2	Pixar
Hotel Transylvania 3: Summer Vacation	Sony Pictures
Duck Duck Goose	Original Force
The Grinch	Illumination Entertainment
DC Super Hero Girls: Legends of Atlantis	Warner Bros. DC
The Death of Superman	Warner Bros. DC
Cinderella and the Secret Prince	Gold Valley Films
Batman: Gotham by Gaslight	Warner Bros. DC