

Gender Inequality in Animated Films

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the gender inequality in animated films from 1990-2023 in the 150 top grossing animated films. In my paper, I focused on underrepresentation of females through many different tests. The study that I conducted found that females are underrepresented in speaking roles, if they pass the Bechdel test, jobs inside and outside of the home, unrealistic body types, and sexy/revealing clothing. The underrepresentation of women in children's animated films can play a major role in society, how they view other females, and how they view other children's animated films.

INTRODUCTION

Growing up, my favorite movies were typically the princess movies. Not because I was a girly girl who liked princesses, but because of the role they played in the movie. Looking back at movies I watched in my childhood now, most of them are male led. A little girl should not have to look that far into the movie to see how the female characters are not favored in the movies. For example, the movie *Mulan* is named after a female character but 77% of the lines are read by males.

An article titled *The Common Sense Census: Media Used by Tweens and Teens* (Rideout & Robbb, 2019) talks about media consumption of tweens and teens. In the article, one study shows, “On average, 8- to 12-year-olds in this country use just under five hours’ worth of entertainment screen media per day (4:44), and teens use an average of just under seven and a half hours’ worth (7:22)—not including time spent using screens for school or homework.” (Rideout & Robbb, 2019). Tweens and teens consuming this much screen time during the day means they are watching/looking at all different types of scenes on their devices. Whether it be watching a movie or doing homework, teens are spending almost their entire school day on their screens. Boys and girls are very different when it comes to how they use their screen time. Boys tend to spend their screen time for video games: mobile, computer, and console video games. Video gaming is most preferred for boys but among girls, it is one of the least preferred. When talking about gaming, 70% of boys aged 8 to 18 express a high percentage of enjoyment for playing video games, while only 33% of girls share the same level of interest. In addition, 41% of boys play video games daily, compared to just 9% of girls. On average, boys spend around one hour and nineteen minutes playing video games each day, while girls only spend approximately fourteen minutes.

The Social Cognitive Theory was introduced by Alberto Bandura in his article *Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication*. This theory states, “Social cognitive theory provides an agentic conceptual framework within which to analyze the determinants and psychosocial mechanisms through which symbolic communication influences human thought, affect and action.” (Bandura 2001). When talking about this theory, we are mostly looking at the human effect in a psychosocial sense. Human behavior has been explained multiple times by this theory and how it affects our view of certain points. Using my research as to how films favor the male characters more than female, seeing this as a young child and even now, I can reflect how I see certain people in different scenarios: job sites, classroom settings, work environments, and more.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The stereotypes of gender can be found anywhere, especially in places we don’t even realize. One of the most “hidden” gender stereotypes is in children’s films. In an article by Judith Hoffman, *Alpha-Males, Underdogs and New Men: Masculinity in Animated Films*, she quotes,

“While most of the time it is the female characters that get a lot of the (academic) attention—especially in times of crisis, when audiences seem to enjoy focusing on the image of a pure, innocent princess—the portrayal of male characters has also influenced the public



perception of masculinity to a great extent” (2018, n.p). In part of the article, she talks about the film *Monsters University*. She talks about how the film is stereotyping Mike as the “nerdy”

monster with braces and the film stereotypes Sully as the “jock” monster who doesn’t seem to care too much about school.

Mulan, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Pocahontas* are all named after female characters, however, the males in the films have the most speaking roles. “But male characters spoke 68 percent of the time in 1989’s *The Little Mermaid*, 71 percent in 1991’s *Beauty and the Beast*, 90 percent in 1992’s *Aladdin*, and 77 percent in 1998’s *Mulan*.” (Bacle 2016, n.p.). This brings me to my first two hypotheses:

H1: Lead characters are mainly males.

H2: Male characters have more speaking roles than female characters.

A way to test to see the male to female conversation in a movie would be the Bechdel test. In the Intermediate Sociological Writing Class, the definition of the Bechdel test we went off of was, “This is a reference to a cartoon where the woman won’t go to see any movies that don’t have at least two female characters, who have at least one conversation between themselves that involves a topic other than males. To be considered a conversation, the two or more women must have at least 1.5 back and forths. That is, the first female says something, the second one responds to that comment and the first one speaks again” (Hare). For example, in the film *Puss In Boots: The Last Wish*, there were five female conversations and three of them focused on male characters.

H3: The films on the top 150 list, are more likely to pass the Bechdel test of having a female conversation and didn’t focus on males.

In animated films most of the female characters either have no jobs or they are the caretakers of the family/house. For example, Cinderella was a servant for her step-mother and step-sisters. Her job was to ensure the house was clean and to make sure they had everything they needed. Once Cinderella found her prince charming, the job of a princess is to care for the house and the children, so she will always be the “servant.” Another example of this would be *Ariel*. Unlike Cinderella, she doesn’t have the job of cleaning and cooking but she does have the job of being the wife and caring for her husband. “These stereotypes can be found in many Disney films, where the female character is portrayed as the weaker sex. Disney has gotten better about breaking the gender stereotypes in their movies; However, when looking at the careers performed by these female characters they tend to be domestic or have no career at all.” (Haas 2017, n.p.).

H4: Female characters are less likely to have jobs outside of the home.

In most animated films, mostly princess films, the princess looks like the picture below. They have thin waists, narrow wrists, long, slim necks, small hands, and big eyes. Nobody is

perfect and “made this way”, so when a child is watching this, they will think that they aren’t “perfect” because they don’t look like the princess.

“Most likely unintentionally, Disney has objectified and devalued women and body types



since their first film in 1937. Through a statistical analysis of the movies, this criticism is quite evident. 94% of the fairy tale and princess movies mention physical appearance. Within each movie, this discussion occurs on average 13.6 times, with a range from 0 to 114 times for female physical appearance and a range from 0 to 35 times for male physical appearance.” (Hatheway, n.p.).

H5: Female characters are more likely to have unrealistic body types than male characters.

Similar to unrealistic body types with females, they are more likely to wear sexy/revealing clothing. Most of the princesses have tiny waists, but they also are wearing revealing clothing. In the picture in the hypothesis above, Bell’s dress is off her shoulder which is considered immodest. Disney princess Jasmine from the movie *Aladdin* (1992) is a perfect example of revealing clothing. Half of her torso is showing and her shirt is off the shoulder. “Differences in the hypersexualization of male and female characters were explored. Females (30.2 percent) were far more likely than males (9.7 percent) to be shown in sexualized attire (i.e., tight or revealing clothing). Females (29.5 percent) were more likely than males to be shown with partial or full nudity (11.7 percent). It was also the case that females were more likely than males to be referenced as physically attractive (13.2 percent vs. 2.4 percent).” (Smith, Stacy L., et al. 2017).



H6: Female characters have a high percentage of wearing sexy/revealing clothing.

Most Disney films consist of a princess, and the whole purpose of a Disney princess movie is for the princess to find her true love at the end of the film. In the movie *Enchanted*, it starts off as an animated movie, then the evil stepmother turns the movie into a “real-life” movie. Giselle’s whole purpose in the movie is to find her one true love and to find her prince so they can live happily ever after, no matter what world she is living in. “Romances in early Disney movies didn’t have much substance aside from some physical attraction, nice dresses, and “True Love’s Kiss.” No amount of pixie dust or sea creatures singing “Kiss the Girl” can make these smitten princes and princesses understand each other beyond a pretty face or a glass slipper.” (Rayne 2019).

H7: Female lead characters are more likely than male lead characters to have a romantic link.

When looking at the top 150 films, the mean of male directors to female producers was 94.96% to 5.03%, that is 134 male directors and 2 female directors. Male producers to female producers is 62.92% to 37.07%, that is 22 male to 12 female producers. Male writers to female writers is 90.5% and 9.4%, that is 94 male to 4 female writers. “In fact, 83% of the 250 top grossing films last year had no women directors and 94% had no women cinematographers. While 75% of the top grossing films employed 10 or more men as directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and cinematographers, just 4% employed 10 or more women.” (Lauzen 2023).

H8: There is a higher percentage of male directors, producers, and writers than females.

METHODS

Sample. The sample consists of a dataset of the top 150 animated films from the years 1990 through 2022. The list of films is ranked by the lifetime North American Theater gross of each movie. There were all different types of films on this list: rating of G, PG, PG-13, princess films (*Brave*), villain films (*Despicable Me 3*), animal-based films (*Finding Dory*), films based on famous literature (*Gnomeo and Juliet*), and many others. See Appendix A for the full list of films.

Coding. In the Intermediate Sociological Writing class at Indiana University Southeast, each student coded two different films over the course of four weeks. Each student had the same film list and codebook to look off of. Together in class, we coded and recorded the data for, *Puss In Boots: The Last Wish* (2022). We watched the film over a span of two weeks and coded it together. We then added our information to the SPSS Dataset for 2014.

In order to code the films, we looked at the speaking roles of each female and male character. If they had a speaking role, we then looked at what type of species they were: human, non-human, or transformer. Out of the films that I had picked out and coded from the list, none of the characters were a transformer.

We then looked at if the character had unrealistically sexy body shape, sexy/revealing clothing (i.e. cleavage or skin tight clothing), if they had a job outside of the home, or a job period. Next, we looked at whether the movie passed the Bechdel test. If the female characters had a 1.5 (back and forth and back) conversation, we looked at if the conversation was about males or not. The movie we coded together in class, *Puss In Boots: The Last Wish* (2022), passed the Bechdel test and has several 1.5 conversations in the film.

Next we looked at the main gang. For this, we looked at the sex of the character, if the character has a romantic link, if the character has a family link, and if the character has a parent. Still a part of the main gang, we looked at if the lead character has a romantic link with a person of a higher social class, if the title and narrator refers to: male, female, both, or neither. We then looked at the parents' roles: no parents, mom only, dad only, equal parents, mother more active but present father, or father more active but present mother. We looked at if the movie was part of a franchise, if the character had a princess role, if there was a princess: was the princess as a central character, if the lead character is a princess, and if the princess has a happily ever after ending.

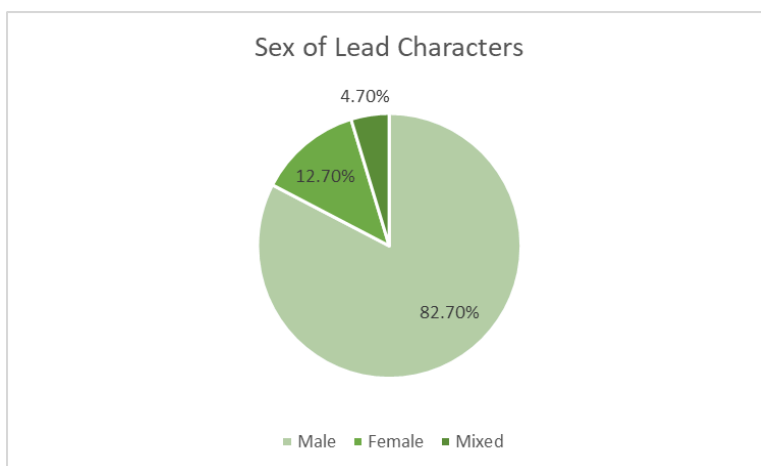
Finally, we looked at the rescue scenes in the film. We looked at the scenario of the rescue: sex of the rescuer, sex of the rescued victims, if there was a romantic link between the rescuers and rescuee, and if there was a family link between rescuer and rescuee.

RESULTS

This study shows the top 150 animated films released from 1990-2022 (refer to Appendix A for the full list of films). The average release year for the films in the top 150 was 2006; *Beauty and the Beast* being one of the oldest and *Puss in Boots: The Last Wish* being one of the newest films. The top-grossing films of the 150 were: *Incredibles 2* (2018), *Shrek 2* (2004), *The Lion King* (1994), *Finding Dory* (2016), and *Toy Story 3* (2010). The films were categorized as G, PG, and PG-13. R rated films were excluded from this list of films due to it not being appropriate for children. From the list of rates for the films, 27.3% of the films were rated G, 70.7% of the films were rated PG, and only 2% of the films were rated PG-13. Of the three

categories, some examples of each rating would be *Frozen* (2013) was rated G, *The Croods* (2013) was rated PG, and *Beowulf* (2007) was rated PG-13.

First, I looked at the sex of the lead characters. When coding, we looked if they were female, male, or both; 82.7% of the films are male-led, 12.7% of the films female-led, and 4.7% are led by both male and female. An example of a male led film would be *Shrek 2* (2004), a female led film would be *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), and both female and male would be *Storks* (2016).

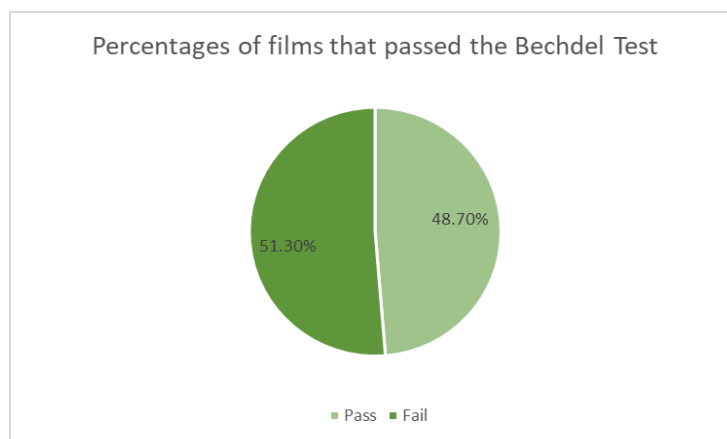


Secondly, I looked at the female conversations and how many less there are than male conversations. The average percent of conversations between females is 4.13%. Out of the 150 films produced on the list, 36.7% of those films do not have any female conversation at all. The highest number of female conversations is the movie *Inside Out* (2015) with 40 conversations. Now looking at female conversation about males, this number is a lot higher. Although female characters do not talk a lot, most conversations discuss males. The percentage for female conversation about males is 41.7%. An example of a male conversation heavy movie would be *Bolt* (2008).

Thirdly, I looked at the Bechdel test. I looked at if the film passed the Bechdel test of having a female conversation and did not focus on males. The percent of conversations that did not focus on males was 48.7%, meaning the percent of conversations that did focus on males was 51.3%. An example of a film where the conversation did not focus on males was *The Lion King*

(1994), and an example of a film where the conversation did focus on males was *Puss In Boots: The Last Wish* (2022).

Next, I looked at the number of males and females with speaking roles who have jobs. Of the top 150 film list, on average 17.27% of males with speaking roles have jobs and 4.91% of



females with speaking roles have jobs. An example of a film with a male who has a speaking role and has a job is *Chicken Run* (2000). An example of a film with a female who has a speaking role and also has a job is *Brave* (2012).

Next, I looked at the percent of speaking roles with male and female characters per film with very sexy bodies. Of the top 150 film list, on average 4.49% of male characters are sexualized and 5.36% of females are characterized in a racy or sensual way. An example of a film with male characters exemplifying this is *The Road to El Dorado* (2000), as 54.54% of the males in the movie are portrayed this way.. An example of a film with female characters whose bodies are sexualized is *Aladdin* (1992), as 50% of the females in the movie were shown in a scandalous way.

When looking at the percent of female speaking characters who wear racy clothes per film, on average 6.8637% of the female characters do. An example of a film with a female speaking character who wears scandalous clothing is *The Croods* (2013). In this film, 50% of the female speaking characters have provocative outfits.

Looking at romantic links to the lead characters, the percentage of male lead characters with romantic links is 50.8% and the percentage of female characters with romantic links is 61.1%. Examples of films with male and female characters with a romantic link would be *The Lion King* (1994) for male and *Tangled* (2010) for female.

Lastly, it's important to observe the sex of the directors, producers, and writers of each film. Of the directors listed on the codebook provided in class, 134 (or 94.94%) were male, while only two (or 5.037%) were female. Twenty-two producers (or 62.92%) were male, and twelve (37.07%) were female. Finally, 94 writers (or 90.5%) were male, and only 4 (9.4%) were female. An example of a film with a female director is *Kung Fu Panda 2* (2011). A film with a female producer is *Toy Story 2* (1999), and a film with a female writer is *The Boss Baby* (2017).

Hypothesis 1: I predicted that lead characters of the films were mostly male. In my findings, I found that out of 150 films, 124 of the lead characters of the films were male, and only 19 lead characters were female. The chi-square results were highly significant ($\chi^2=77.095$, $df=1$, $p<.001$). After looking at my results on my chi-square test, my hypothesis was correct and supported that lead characters of the films are mostly male. Examples of male lead films are: *Dr. Seuss' The Lorax* (2012), *The Peanuts Movie* (2015), and *The Lion King* (1994). Examples of female led films are: *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Pocahontas* (1995), and *Beauty and the Beast* (1991).

Hypothesis 2: I predicted that male characters have more speaking roles than female characters. In my findings, I found that, on average, films had 11.9 female characters and 31.56 male characters. The t-test results were highly significant ($t=10.212$, $df=149$, $p<.001$). After looking at my results on my t-test, my hypothesis was correct and supported that the male characters have more speaking roles than the female characters. Examples of films with female

characters with speaking roles are: *Brave* (2012), with 32 speaking roles, *Coraline* (2009), with 35, and *Inside Out* (2015), with 40.

Hypothesis 3: I predicted that the films of the top 150 list are more likely to fail the Bechdel test. In my findings, I found that 77 of the 150 films passed the Bechdel Test while 73 of the 150 films did not pass the test. The chi-square test results had no significance ($\chi^2=.107$, $df=1$, $p=.744$). After looking at my results on my chi-square test, my hypothesis was incorrect. While the end result was very close, more of the films pass the Bechdel Test than fail. Examples of films that failed the Bechdel test are: *Puss in Boots* (2011), *Curious George* (2006), and *Cars 3* (2017).

Hypothesis 4: I predicted that female characters are less likely to have jobs outside of the home than males. In my findings, I found that on average 52.7678% of males with speaking roles have jobs outside of the home and 39.7508% of females with speaking roles. The t-test results were highly significant ($t=-6.906$, $df=149$, $p<.001$). After looking at my results on my t-test, my hypothesis was correct and supported that female characters are less likely to have jobs. Examples of films where females have a job are: *Trolls* (2016), *Space Jam* (1996), and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). Examples of films where males have a job are: *Frozen* (2013), *Hotel Transylvania 3: Summer Vacation* (2018), and *Monsters University* (2013).

Hypothesis 5: I predicted that female characters are more likely to have unrealistic body types than male characters. In my findings, I found that on average 4.49% of male characters are portrayed with unrealistic bodies and 5.36% of female characters are portrayed with unrealistic bodies. The t-test results had no significant difference ($t=1.099$, $df=149$, $p<.274$). After looking at my results on my t-test, my hypothesis was correct and supported that female characters are more likely to have unrealistic body types. Examples of films with unrealistic female body types

are: *How to Train Your Dragon 2* (2014), *Minions* (2015), and *Incredibles 2* (2018). Examples of unrealistic male body types: *Hercules* (1997), *Ferdinand* (2017), and *Bee Movie* (2007).

Hypothesis 6: I predicted that female characters have a high percentage of wearing sexy/revealing clothing. In my findings, I found that on average 6.8637% of the females wear revealing or scandalous clothing. The t-test results were highly significant ($t=6.687$, $df=149$, $p<.001$). After looking at my results on my t-test results, my hypothesis was correct and supported that there is a high number of female characters wearing sexy or revealing clothing. Examples of films with female characters wearing sexy/revealing clothing are: *Lilo & Stitch* (2002), *Coco* (2017), and *Meet the Robinsons* (2007).

Hypothesis 7: I predicted that female lead characters are more likely than male lead characters to have a romantic link. In my findings, I found that 61.1% of the female leads and 51.2% of the male leads had a romantic link. The chi-square test shows there is not a significant difference between the two. ($\chi^2=.616$, $df=1$, $p=.433$) After looking at my results on my chi-square test, my hypothesis was incorrect and supported that female lead characters are more likely than male lead characters to have a romantic link. Examples of films with female lead characters with a romantic link are: *Dinosaur* (2000), *Ice Age: Continental Drift* (2012), and *The Lion King* (1994). Examples of films without female lead characters with a romantic link: *Happy Feet Two* (2011), *Over the Hedge* (2006), and *Open Season* (2006).

Hypothesis 8: I predicted that there is a higher percentage of male directors, producers, and writers than females. In my findings, I found that on average there are 9.86 male directors, producers and writers and 2.27 female directors, producers, and writers. The t-test results were highly significant ($t=17.559$, $df=149$, $p<.001$). After looking at my results on my t-test, my hypothesis was correct and supported that there are more male directors, producers, and writers.

Examples of movies with male directors, producers, and writers are: *The Bad Guys* (2022), *Sing 2* (2021), and *Mr. Peabody and Sherman* (2014). Examples of movies with female directors, producers, and writers are: *Moana* (2016), *Zootopia* (2016), and *Monster House* (2006).

DISCUSSION

Throughout the course of the study, we looked at the 150 top-grossing films between the years of 1990 and 2022 to study the underrepresentation of female characters in the films. In the study, we found numerous ways in how female characters are underrepresented compared to male characters.

The first study that was looked at was the lead characters of the films and who had the most speaking roles. In my study I explained how male characters of films are more likely to be the lead character and more likely to have more speaking roles than female characters. In Ariana Bacle's article, she talked about how even in films with female character names, the male characters are more likely to have the lead character and more speaking roles, and that confirmed my hypothesis was correct.

The second study I looked at was if the film was more likely to pass the Bechdel test of having a female conversation and didn't focus on males. In my study I explained that most female conversation in films, primarily focuses on male characters. The study that I conducted with chi-squares, proves films are more likely to pass the Bechdel test of having a female conversation.

The third study I looked at was if the female characters would have a job outside of the home. In my study I explained how females are more likely to have a job inside of the home (for example, cook and clean), than outside of the home and if they had a job outside of the home it

was something very small and not as important as the male characters. In the article by Haas, she talked about how the female characters in the films are portrayed as the weaker sex.

The fourth study I looked at was if female characters are more likely to have unrealistic body types. In my study I explained how while some male characters have unrealistic body types, females are more likely to. In an article by Hatheway, she explained how 94% of films talk about the physical appearance of female characters in films.

The fifth study I looked at was if females were more likely to wear sexy clothing. In my study I explained how the female characters that have unrealistic body types, were more likely to wear sexy clothing. For example, Jasmine from *Aladdin* has a tiny waist, she also wears clothes that show her entire torso and her shoulders.

In my sixth study I looked at if the female character was more likely to have a romantic link. In my study I explained how the whole purpose of most princess films is for the princess to find their “one true love” and have their “true love's first kiss”. An article by Rayne, she talked about how the female characters never cared about looks or anything, they just wanted their “one true love”.

In the seventh study I looked at whether the creative staff was mostly males or females. In my study I found that males are way more likely to fill the creative staff than females. I also found that in some movies, there is zero percent women creative staff, and the more women creative staff, the more money the films make.

SUMMARY

In the course of the study, I presented multiple hypotheses, read multiple articles, and did countless research and my hypothesis of the underrepresentation and inequalities of women compared to men was largely supported. Knowing that children are the majority of the

population consuming the animated films studied, the inequalities need to be fixed. If the children only consume these films and they spend years watching them, they will start to realize the inequalities and may start acting upon them. For example, women are more likely to have jobs inside the home. They may look at that and think about the women in their life and how they have jobs outside the home. More representation of female characters will clear up a lot of frustration and maybe confusion in the future. In order to raise awareness to this problem, a study like the one conducted, is necessary.

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