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Investigating the Gendered Behaviours Displayed by Influential Disney, Marvel and Star Wars Protagonists and Examining the Link Between Children's Engagement with these Franchises and their Play Behaviour

Lucy Louise Clarke

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of The University of West London for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

January 2023

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Clarke, L. (2022). An examination of the portrayal of gender in Marvel and Star Wars media targeted towards children. *Presentation given at the British Psychological Society Developmental Psychology Section Annual Conference. September 14-16, 2022, Sheffield, UK.*

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Abstract

This thesis reports a programme of research that explored the gendered messages within influential Disney feature length animations, a Star Wars animated television series, and a Marvel animated television series. It also examined extent to which engagement with these franchises statistically predicted children's gendered behaviour and weapon play. The first study of this thesis was a quantitative content analysis of thirty-nine Disney protagonists. The results showed that some of the 'earliest' female Disney protagonists were the most feminine analysed, although almost all were more feminine than masculine. The male Disney protagonists seemed to adhere to less stereotypes, and were, generally, more feminine than masculine overall. Study two investigated how gender was portrayed in Marvel's *Avengers Assemble* and Star Wars *Star Wars Rebels* animated television series, utilising Thematic Analysis. This was important as the Walt Disney Corporation recently acquired these franchises. The results revealed that stereotypical masculinity was portrayed by the male protagonists within each series, however, the female protagonists in *Star Wars Rebels* seemed more genuinely valued than the female superhero in Marvel's *Avengers Assemble*. The third study of this thesis utilised parent report methodology to investigate whether engagement with the Disney, Marvel and Star Wars franchises statistically predicted children's level of gendered behaviour and weapon play, as well as whether parental mediation and exposure to television violence moderated any established relationships. The results indicted that although each franchise did predict gender stereotypical behaviour and weapon play, there were some unexpected gender differences in the relationships. It was concluded that the producers of Disney, Star Wars and Marvel media should be made aware of the relationship between the gendered messages within their content and children's behaviour. Additionally, parents and children should be educated on this topic, with the aim to reduce the relationships that were found. Chapter seven summarises the results of each study and considers the implications of the current findings.

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Lastly, I would like this project to be reminder to myself that even during some of my most turbulent years I have managed to achieve something to be proud of, even when it felt impossible.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my Nanny Mulholland, Grampy Clarke, cousin Grace and Aunty Elaine whom I will forever miss and hope I have made proud.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Why Study This?

The representation of gender in the media has been researched for decades and consistently finds that men and women are presented in accordance with the expectations of their respective gender roles (Gill, 2007a; Collins., 2011; Matthes et al., 2016). Film and television are popular forms of mass media and create a version of reality to be consumed by the spectator. This is especially true of animation as animated media are, in a sense, wholly constructed and are not limited to the constraints of the 'real world' (Wells, 2002; Husbands & Ruddell, 2019). Some animated media are targeted towards, and age rated as appropriate for children and so the portrayal of men and women therein is likely to reach many generations because children often view these texts alongside other family members. Research finds that animated films and cartoons targeted towards children largely emulate stereotypical representations of men and women (Sternglanz & Serbin, 1974; Levinson, 1975; Signorellii, 1990; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995; Smith et al., 2010).

Feature length animation is remarkably popular, and the Walt Disney Studios have dominated the animated feature film market since their first production, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (Cottrell et al., 1937) which set the standard for such films. The Walt Disney Studio's productions are still breaking records with their release of *Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee, 2019) being their most profitable animation to date (Whitten, 2020). Their older feature length films are also still very much in circulation, particularly aided by the Disney princess franchise which ties together some of the most popular female protagonists through Disney's history for marketing purposes. Academics have found that the Disney princess films largely portray princesses with highly feminine behaviours (England et al., 2011) although there is evidence that the

more modern princesses also portray high levels of masculine behaviours (Hine et al., 2018a). Because research has focused on the princess franchise, the research conducted on the male Disney protagonists is largely in relation to Disney prince characters. The Disney princes seem to have developed less chronologically when compared to the princesses although there is evidence to suggest that the more recent princes are more feminine than masculine (Hine et al., 2018a). Some caution needs to be taken before assuming that this a progressive change as the more feminine princes are often mocked and used for comedic purposes (Macaluso, 2018). The implications of ‘stronger’ princesses being portrayed against incompetent men are unknown. With the research focused largely on the representation of gender in the Disney princess franchise, non-prince Disney protagonists’ portrayal of gender is largely unknown.

As well as the Walt Disney Corporation being influential due to the animated content they produce, the company is also powerful because it has acquired other influential franchises. For example, the Disney corporation has now acquired the Marvel and Star Wars franchises and therefore owns their media back catalogues. The Marvel and Star Wars franchises are perceived to be targeted towards or particularly attractive to young boys and men (Koushik & Reed, 2018; Wu, 2021). Although the portrayal of gender in these franchises is not particularly widely researched, previous studies have found that superhero media portray a masculinity associated with strength, aggression, and power (Baker & Raney, 2007; Miller et al., 2016). However, the portrayal of gender in the Marvel and Star Wars franchises has been analysed to a much lesser extent. This becomes particularly apparent when you consider the content of these franchises within the context of the Walt Disney

Corporation. Therefore, there is a gap in knowledge regarding how male and female protagonists are portrayed within these franchises.

Media may influence children's conceptualisations of gender. Therefore, the portrayal of influential male Disney protagonists, and protagonists from the Marvel and Star Wars franchises needs to be addressed. Social cognitive theory of gender development (Bussey and Bandura, 1999) and gender schema theory (Bem, 1981) both describe how children seek information regarding gender appropriate behaviour they should emulate from their environment including from media they consume. Research has found that Disney princess media engagement is associated with displays of more feminine behaviour for boys and girls, and increased body esteem and prosocial behaviour in boys only (Coyne et al., 2016). Play centred around Disney princesses encourages girls to focus on their appearance and exclude boys (Golden & Jacoby, 2018). Such research suggests that there is a link between Disney princess media and children's gendered behaviour, but whether such a link exists between the gendered portrayals of male Disney protagonists, as well as Marvel and Star Wars characters remains unknown. However, engagement with superhero media seems to predict higher masculine behaviour in boys but not girls, (Coyne et al., 2014), and lower egalitarian attitudes towards men and women in both boys and girls (Coyne et al., 2022). Further, superhero media engagement predicted higher rates of children utilising toy weapons such as guns and swords in their play, or utilising objects as weapons, a concept referred to as weapon play (Coyne et al., 2014). This provides evidence that superhero narratives that feature aggression encourage the emulation behaviour that may become problematic as exposure to media violence has been seen to predict aggression in both the short (Gentile et al., 2011) and long-term (Huesmann et al., 2003; Huesmann et al., 2021). However,

there is also evidence that weapon play seems to correlate minimally with criminality later in life (Smith et al., 2018). Therefore, the extent to which children's engagement with Marvel and Star Wars media is associated with weapon play requires further research in order to understand the relationship between violence in such media and the behaviour of children consuming it, especially as boys who are dressed in Marvel superhero costumes show more stereotypical toy preferences as well as less prosocial behaviour (Coyne et al., 2021b).

Taken together, the research considered above suggests there is reason to believe that there are relationships between the gendered messages within the Marvel (and perhaps Star Wars) franchises and children's conceptualisations of gender, and their gendered behaviours. Building on such research, this thesis aims to broaden the understanding of the gendered behaviour displayed by Disney protagonists, as well as protagonists within the Marvel and Star Wars franchises. Additionally, it aims to examine the extent to which engagement with such protagonists predicts children's gendered behaviours, and their weapon play.

1.2 Structure of this Thesis

Chapter two considers the literature relevant to the current thesis. It begins by outlining the media effects discipline to provide important background to the studies conducted. It then defines the concepts of masculinity and femininity that underpin the exploration of gender throughout this thesis before moving on to consider how gender is portrayed in media more generally, and how this has been influenced by the women's movement. It then considers some important debates around how film is defined, how genres are utilised by the industry, and the differences between cinematic animation and television animation. A discussion of animation as a form of media then ensues, including a consideration of how gender has been portrayed in

such content. Most extensively, it then discusses how gender has been portrayed within Disney feature length animation. This leads into a discussion of how gender is portrayed within the Marvel and Star Wars franchises that Disney have recently acquired. This then develops into a consideration of key theories that posit that the portrayal of gender in media influences children's conceptualisations of gender and their gendered traits. Specifically, social cognitive theory of gender development (Bussey & Bandura, 1999), gender schema theory (Bem, 1981), as well as Kohlberg's theory of gender development are drawn upon. Lastly, the review discusses previous research that considers the relationships between engagement with Disney and superhero media on children's gendered traits. The review closes by outlining the aims of this thesis. The first aim of the thesis is to investigate the gendered behaviour displayed in some of Disney's most popular and recently released animated feature length films, including non-princess films, with an updated and expanded coding framework. This aim is fulfilled by chapter four. The second aim of this thesis is to conduct a thematic analysis of Marvel and Star Wars animated television media targeted towards children, to understand the portrayal of gender therein. The results from this study can be found in chapter five. The third aim of this thesis is to examine the link between engagement with the Disney, Marvel, and Star Wars franchises and children's gendered behaviour in a UK sample, which, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, has yet to be examined. The results can be found in chapter six.

Chapter three is a review of methodology that has been utilised in previous research that investigates the portrayal of gender in media (and especially Disney animated content), as well as research that examines how such messages relate to children's play behaviour. The chapter opens by considering some of the ontological

and epistemological underpinnings of quantitative and qualitative research, and the current researcher's beliefs are identified within those paradigms. The first half of the methodology chapter then considers different approaches that have been utilised in analyses of Disney's media to justify the approaches taken in chapters four and five. The second half of the chapter draws on methodologies that have been adopted in research examining the relationships between engagement with Disney and superhero media and children's behaviour to justify the utilisation of parent report in chapter six of this thesis.

Chapter four reports study one which aimed to answer the research question: How is gender portrayed in influential Disney feature length films? Disney feature length animations with a leading human adult male protagonist were analysed. The study was a quantitative content analysis that built upon previous work conducted by England et al., (2011) and Hine et al., (2018a) by expanding the protagonists analysed beyond the Disney princess franchise, as well as adapting the framework of behaviours to include more complete depictions of stereotypical masculinity and femininity and gender-neutral traits. The results suggest that although female Disney protagonists are more masculine in the 'middle' and 'modern' animations when compared to the 'early' animations, they are still consistently portrayed as more feminine than masculine across time-points. The Disney men however seem to be more feminine than masculine across time-points. This suggests that Disney stereotypes its female protagonists more persistently than its male protagonists. Perhaps Disney acquired the Marvel and Star Wars franchises to obtain characters that are more masculine and attractive to a young male audience.

Chapter five reports study two which aimed to answer the research questions: How is gender portrayed within a Marvel animated television series? How is gender

portrayed within a Star Wars animated television series? The thematic analysis allowed for a detailed consideration. The results indicated that there were many aspects of stereotypical masculinity displayed in Marvel's *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) and much of this also extended to Black Widow, the only female member of the Avengers team. The concepts of masculinity also extended to some of the characters' flaws. Additionally, *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) displayed masculinity that was more multifaceted and complex alongside its depiction of strong female figures. However, the cooperation within the team was gendered. The results were largely aligned with previous studies that found that masculinity is portrayed by both male and female superheroes (Baker & Raney, Miller et al., 2016), as well as work that found that many Marvel protagonists displayed vulnerabilities when in their human rather than superhero forms (Shawcroft & Coyne, 2022), suggesting that such vulnerabilities are not compatible with being 'super'. The study was one of the first to consider the portrayal of men and women within the Star Wars franchise.

Chapter six reports study three which aimed to answer the research question: Does engagement with the Disney, Marvel and Star Wars franchises predict children's gendered behaviour and weapon play? Study three, which built upon the work of Coyne et al., (2014), investigated this within a sample of children aged between four and eleven years. The study also considered whether parental mediation and exposure to general television violence moderated the established relationships. The results indicated that when the data set was split by gender of the child, girls' gendered behaviour was predicted by Marvel engagement only, while boys' gendered behaviour was predicted by Star Wars only. These effects were also in the same pattern for weapon play. There was no moderation effect of parental

mediation in these relationships. The results of this study conflicted with previous research that had found that girls' gendered behaviours were predicted by Disney princess engagement (Coyne et al., 2016), but not superhero media engagement (Coyne et al., 2014). The results of study three in some ways also conflicted with social cognitive theory of gender development (Bussey and Bandura, 1999) and gender schema theory (Bem, 1981). However, it had recently been established that girls' endorsement of hegemonic masculinity seemed to be predicted by their levels of superhero media engagement, suggesting that such media is related to young girls' conceptualisations of gender (Coyne et al., 2022). Further, it was unclear as to why Marvel media did not predict boys' gendered behaviours despite masculinity being widely depicted in such narratives (as established by chapter 5). A further discussion of the results of this study can be found in chapter six.

Chapter seven presents a general discussion of the research conducted in this thesis. It opens by reiterating the research aims and questions that guided each empirical chapter, the findings of which are summarised in turn. Then the chapter considers the theoretical and practical implications of the current research. In particular, this considered how theories such as gender schema theory and social cognitive theory of gender development may overstate or over emphasise the importance of same sex models in children's media. The practical considerations include suggestions of how media producers can more precisely label their content to reflect the levels of violence and gender stereotypical messages that are influencing children as suggested by the results of study three of this thesis and other research. Additionally, the chapter discusses how the results of this thesis should be incorporated into an educational programme that enables children to become more critical viewers of the media they consume and how this programme

may be extended to parents. Chapter seven also considers the broad limitations of the thesis. These include sampling and methodological issues, some of which were a result of conducting the current research in the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter then closes by discussing the overall conclusions of the thesis.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Media and Their Influence (Media Effects)

The mass media affords communication to large audiences, and popular forms include radio, television, newspapers, magazines, the internet, and film. The internet has enabled the producers of media and their audiences to be connected (via social media for example, where audiences can share their opinions on the content they engage with) and influence each other (Valkenburg et al., 2016, p. 327). The internet also enables participants to produce and share content with smaller communities (such as their social media followers). Alternatively, mass media may reach many people and can influence their audiences, according to much theory associated with the media effects discipline (Valkenburg et al., 2016; Borah, 2015; Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Shrum, 2009). The way mass media are consumed is continuously changing alongside technological developments associated with the internet, such as smartphone applications for TV channels, and film and music streaming services (such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney +, Spotify and Apple Music), meaning they are easily accessible to audiences in high volumes and in various locations. Because media are now so easily accessible, the messages within them are potentially more influential and powerful than ever. The media effects discipline is concerned with theorising and researching the influence of mass media on their audiences.

Generally, the media effects discipline considers how, and the extent to which "the mass media influence the attitudes and perceptions of audience members" (Borah, 2015, p. 1). More specifically, media effects research and theory may consider "the deliberate and nondeliberate short and long-term within-person changes in cognitions (including beliefs), emotions, attitudes, and behavior that

result from media use" (Valkenburg, et al., 2016, p. 316). When considering the history of media effects, many researchers track what Neuman and Guggenheim (2011) refer to as the minimal/significant effects polarity. The polarity will be considered in this section, as well as some significant theoretical standpoints within the discipline to allow it to be more fully understood (as suggested by Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011).

From approximately the 1920's to approximately the 1950's, generally considered the first phase of media effects (Borah, 2015; Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011), media were deemed to have a significant effect on their audiences. During the World Wars, there was a huge concern about the influence of propaganda being spread through media and it was "believed that mass media, especially electronic media such as film and radio, had incredible powers to influence their audiences" (Bryant et al., 2012, p. 37). Metaphors such as the magic bullet theory (Borah, 2015, p. 1; Neuman & Guggenheim, p. 171; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 10) suggested that messages were sent from media directly to audiences implying that media and political communication had "persuasive effects, [that] would be immediate and evident" (Neuman & Guggenheim p. 171; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). This phase of media effects considered media to be incredibly powerful (Borah, 2015; Bryant et al., 2012), and seemed to consider their audiences to be almost completely passive in the uptake of their messages.

The second phase, which initially overlapped with the first and continued to develop into the 1960's, considered that media effects were not as direct or prominent as originally theorised (Borah, 2015). This was conceptualised in relation to political campaigns during which "only a tiny fraction of voters actually changed their vote intentions" (Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011, p. 172). During this phase of

media effects scholars such as Kalpper (1960, as cited by Bryant et al., 2012) emphasised the need to understand “the particular factors that limited effects of mass media messages on individuals” (Bryant et al., 2012, p. 40). Therefore, a more holistic approach to audiences was adopted and attention was paid to environmental and some psychological factors that may influence media effects (Bryant et al*.,* 2012, p. 40). It was more widely considered that “media effects… depended heavily on people’s homogenous networks and their selective informational diets, which reinforced existing attitudes rather than changed them” (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 10).

The third phase of media effects, which coincided with the emergence of television, called for a return to a significant effect phase, and was focused on investigating the long-term effects of media exposure (Borah, 2015). As Borah (2015) states, “[t]hese researchers criticized the older, psychology-oriented methods, and instead favored methods that took long-term media effects into account, also referred to as cumulative effects” (Borah, 2015, p. 2). Borah (2015) proposed that a fourth phase began in 1990’s, although the author states it is often ignored in media effects history. Borah’s (2015) fourth phase can be defined by a more constructivist approach that “argues that much of what the media do involves the construction of reality, with the public deciding whether or not to adopt the media’s world view” (Borah, 2015, p. 2). It was also considered that although “mass media had potentially strong attitudinal effects… these effects also depended heavily on predispositions, schema, and other characteristics of the audience that influenced how they processed messages in the mass media” (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11), deepening the emphasis on individualistic factors that may relate to media effects.

Neuman and Guggenheim (2011) argue that basing the narrative of media

effects history solely on a minimal/significant effect polarity limits the understanding of the foundational origins of theory as well as hindering

> "the design and interpretation of media effects research and the evolution of an accumulative agreed-upon set of findings about the conditions that impede and facilitate those effects at the individual and aggregate level" (Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011, p. 173).

Rather, the authors suggest that tracing media effects through significant theoretical standpoints allows the discipline to be more fully understood (Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011). The researchers go on to identify six stages of theoretical development in the media effects discipline: 1) persuasion theories; 2) active audience theories where "motivations and psychological orientations of audience members" (Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011, p. 177) are considered; 3) social context theories that consider "situated social contexts and how individuals perceive messages to be influencing others in their social sphere" (Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011, p. 177); 4) societal and media theories which as the label implies, "draws attention to the societal level (hegemony and public sphere theory) and accumulative individual level effects over longer periods of time" (Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011, p. 178); 5) interpretive media effects theories in which "scholars examine how exposure may influence salience of, interpretation of, and cognitive organization of information and opinions to which individuals are exposed" (Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011, p. 178) and lastly; 6) new media theories which speak to new and emerging interactive properties of media. It could be argued that one of the key developments in media effects research is the discipline's perspective of the audience.

More recent media effects theory considers the psychological factors that relate to the effect that mass media messaging may have on audiences. Alternatively, the earliest and most simplistic media effects theory considered audiences to be passively absorbing strong, powerful, and persuasive media

messaging, by which they were manipulated (Bryant et al., 2012 p. 40). However, Shrum (2009) highlighted that one of the largest critiques of media effects is that there is a “lack of a cognitive process explanation” (Shrum, 2009, p. 51). To attempt to rectify this, the author draws on social cognitive principles of accessibility to explain how media may influence judgments, because “[t]he information that is most accessible is most likely to be used to construct a judgment” (Shrum, 2009, p. 54). For example, heavy television viewers may be more likely to activate constructs that they have frequently and most recently seen in the media, as these are easily accessible (Shrum, 2009). Because heavy television viewers are engaging with TV regularly, the concepts of the recency and frequency principles are likely to be relevant to such viewers. Vividness of the construct and relations of constructs are other principles that may also be influential in media effects (Shrum, 2009).

The media effects discipline is home to a range of theories (see Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011 for a summary) about the extent to which, and how, media influence their audiences. The vast number of theories that fit the discipline proves the complexity of these issues. However, as Neuman and Guggenheim (2011) suggest, the focus on effect sizes in media effects research limits the complexity of the discipline, because even small effect sizes can represent a significant influence. For the purpose of this thesis, it should be acknowledged that the representation of gender in mass media was becoming more heavily researched (and will be discussed below) alongside media effects. Further, the insight provided by media effects theory in terms of the influence messages within mass media can have on their audiences, will be an important lens through which to consider the following sections of this review which will discuss how gender is represented in such media. First, it is important to consider the concepts of masculinity and femininity.

2.2 Masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity refers to a masculinity that is dominant over women, and other, less powerful masculinities (including masculinity associated with homosexual men) meaning it is inherently relational (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Donaldson, 1993; Messerschmidt, 2019). It is perhaps the power associated with domination that makes “heroism… so tightly bound into the construct of hegemonic masculinity” (Connell, 2005, p. 234), which means that it may be an important concept in understanding the portrayal of gender in superhero narratives within this thesis as such narratives are largely focused on superheroes protecting less powerful characters (Kort-Bulter, 2013).

Connell (2005) purposefully avoids describing how hegemonic masculinity may manifest within a behavioural profile. However, because the patriarchal structure in which men dominate women is prevalent across cultures and research investigating masculinity has been increasing since the 1970’s (Connell, 2005), the concept of hegemonic masculinity has been associated with both undesirable traits, for example, being “unemotional, independent, non-nurturing, aggressive, and dispassionate —which are seen as the causes of criminal behavior” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 840), as well as some more positive ones, such as “bringing home a wage, sustaining a sexual relationship, and being a father” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 840). Further, in contexts in which the masculinity portrayed in sport is hegemonic, traits such as “toughness, competitiveness, violence, and confrontation” (Kessler et al., 1982, p. 5 as cited by Yang et al., 2020 p. 325) may be encouraged. Additionally, leadership, violence, and independence, concepts that have been considered hegemonic above, are considered masculine in investigations of the portrayal of men and women in Disney feature length

animations (England et al. 2011, Hine et al. 2018a; Towbin et al. 2004; Streiff & Dundes, 2017a; Streiff & Dundes, 2017b). This therefore suggests that such traits can be conceptualised as stereotypical masculinity in this work.

Perhaps because masculinity is tied to social power and the patriarchal gender order (Connell, 2005), 'manhood' is seen as a status that must be achieved and proven socially and in the public sphere (Vandello & Bosson, 2012). Vandello and Bosson (2012) state

> "men (more so than women) must struggle against obstacles and shortcomings in order to achieve and demonstrate a "necessary and sufficient" level of gender-typicality in their personality and behaviors" (Vandello & Bosson, 2012, p. 102).

Perhaps because manhood is seen as hard to achieve and maintain, men are likely to be physically aggressive, and perceive aggression as justified if 'manhood' is being questioned (Vandello & Bosson, 2012; Vandello et al., 2008). Therefore, "manhood is seen as more of a social accomplishment that can be lost and therefore must be defended with active demonstrations of manliness" (Vandello et al. 2008 p. 1335). This could suggest that outward portrayals of masculinity could be explained by the pressure and desire of men to constantly 'prove' their manhood.

2.3 Femininity

Because hegemonic masculinity is a relational concept, it is also relevant to the concept of femininity. Important to this is the

> "historical dynamic that led to… ideology of 'separate spheres'. This defined a domestic sphere of action for women, contrasted with a sphere of economic and political action for men. The division was supported by an ideology of natural difference between men and women, which was not only promoted by male ideologists… but was widely accepted to nineteenth-century feminism as well. The women's sphere was, in ordinary practice, subordinate to men's" (Connell, 2005, p. 195).

Because hegemonic masculinity has been associated with economic and 'public' work, femininity is largely associated with domestic spaces. This led to masculinity

that was inherently linked to “wage-earning capacity… [and] domestic patriarchy” (Connell 2005, p. 196) and a femininity that was associated with largely devalued domestic and “reproductive work” (Kriemer, 2004, p. 22; Connell, 2005; Elgarte, 2008). This was justified by the “natural difference between men and women” (Connell, 2005, p. 195) referred to above, including in the ‘gendered’ distinction between rationality (masculine) and emotionality (feminine).

Further, because the concepts of masculinity and femininity are inter-related, they can be defined as inversions of each other (Connell, 2005). Therefore, femininity may be defined as weakness, passivity, nurturing and emotional tendencies, the opposite of the traits identified as masculine above. This is further supported in content analyses that utilise traits such as nurturing, passive, physically weak, affectionate, and domestic and feminine concepts (England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018a; Baker & Raney, 2007). Therefore, such traits will be considered stereotypically feminine throughout this work.

2.4 Gender and the Media

Constructionists argue that the media produces gender rather than simply reflects the reality of masculinity and femininity (Gill, 2007a). By assuming that the media produces a version of reality to be consumed by its audience, the media can be thought of as powerful both in terms of its ability to create, as well as to reach and potentially influence (according to the media effects discipline, discussed above). Research considering the gendered messages salient in the media increased in prevalence from the late 1960’s due to the change in media consumption because

> “[u]nlike their mothers and grandmothers, second-wave feminists were bombarded daily with representations of womanhood and gender relations in news and magazines, on radio and TV, in film and on billboards. Not surprisingly then, the media became a major focus of feminist research, critique and intervention” (Gill, 2007a, p. 17).

It should be noted that because the pursuit of research investigating the portrayal of gender in media was often from a feminist perspective, the portrayal of femininity was largely the focus.

Some of the emerging research regarding the portrayal of gender in media focused on the number of female characters in TV shows, films and advertising, which although simplistic in its analysis of gender, is telling because there seemed to be a substantial and relatively persistent lack of female characters which cannot be justified as a mere reflection of reality. However, whether media aim or should aim to reflect reality is perhaps a contentious issue that will be drawn upon in later sections of this literature review, particularly in relation to film theory and animation studies. Analysing the roles that women hold when they are present and the extent to which their portrayals are consistent with gender stereotypes are other common approaches for this kind of research (Gill, 2007a).

Collins (2011) reviewed articles within special issues of the *Sex Role* journal that focused on the representation of women in media. The author found that the ratio of men to women was uneven in favour of men and concludes that this ratio was more representative of 1950's society (where women were less prevalent in the workforce for example), than 2010, the year the studies were published (Collins, 2011). It seemed that when women were present, they were consistently sexualised by being shown to wear revealing clothing in videogames and music videos and tended to have unattainable body proportions (Collins, 2011). Further, although there were some improvements over time, males (used as voice-overs, product users and main characters) continued to outnumber females in children's advertising over a timespan from the 1970's to the year 2000 (Maker & Childs, 2003). The research

considered here implies that there is a persistent lack of female characters in media that does not reflect the development of women's social roles.

It is possible that this may reflect that media represents the stereotypically gendered nature of the public and private spheres as

> "[w]omen and men are — of course — present in both public–work and private–home spaces… [however] in both discursive and practical terms the domestic has historically been a key site of feminine activity, while masculinities have historically been heavily associated with paid labour and public life (Brandth and Kvande, 1998; Lupton and Barclay, 1997; McDowell, 2003)" (Halford, 2006, p. 385).

This is supported by research considering the portrayal of gender in television advertising around the globe conducted by Matthes et al. (2016). The researchers found that although there was an almost equal prevalence of men and women as main characters and they were depicted in the home in equal numbers, men were more likely to be portrayed at work than women (Matthes et al., 2016). In the same research, women were also more likely in all but one country to feature in advertising of cleaning and beauty products than men (Matthes et al., 2016) suggesting a stereotypical depiction of gender overall and a particularly narrow depiction of women, who seem to be more frequently represented in the private/domestic sphere than the public one. Therefore, media representations of public and/or working life may minimise the roles of women because historically, the public sphere has been deemed a masculine site. This would suggest that media has been reliant upon out-dated gender stereotypes in its depiction of gendered spaces.

2.4.1 The Influence of Feminism on the Portrayal of Gender in the Media

The limited portrayal of men and especially women in media found above justifies a consideration of the relationship between feminism and the media. Susan Faludi's (1993) work considers the influence of repeated cycles of anti-feminist backlash on the portrayal of men and women in media that surfaces when women

make gains in the fight for equality. She finds for example, after women were granted the Equal Rights Amendment in America in 1972, there was an almost instant response in which 'New Right' groups were formed that argued "women's equality is responsible for women's unhappiness" (Faludi, 1993, p. 260). The 1980's saw women being ridiculed for pursuing careers, claiming (with support from largely fabricated data) that feminism was causing increased rates of depression in women, higher levels of divorce and fewer children (Faludi, 1993). The backlash blamed feminism for women's alleged unhappiness by overemphasising that women who had families and careers felt torn and struggled to establish a work life balance, that career women were unable to hold down successful relationships as a result of their employment, and that such women were left feeling unfulfilled. Essentially, backlash politics stated that feminism had simply gone too far, needed to be rejected or reversed and had caused unhappiness in women, men, and families and encouraged women to turn against their own cause (Mendes, 2011; Faludi, 1993). Such political messaging was prevalent in many forms of media and Faludi (1993) suggests that many of the films of the late 1980's "simply propose[d] that women had a better deal when they stay[ed] at home" (Faludi, 1993, p. 156), or in order to have a successful career and relationship women must "play the daffy and dependent girl" (Faludi, 1993, p. 158).

Although different in its foundations, postfeminism is also an important concept when considering representations of gender in media. Postfeminism often has both feminist and antifeminist sentiment as it usually finds that gender equality has largely been achieved (Gill, 2007b, Frasl, 2018). It both celebrates and overstates the accomplishment of the woman's movement and assumes that its current pursuit is needless. It tends to "simultaneously reject feminist activism in favor of feminine

consumption and celebrates the success of feminism while declaring its irrelevance" (Butler, 2013, p. 44 as cited by Frasl, 2018, p. 349). Where backlash aims to frame feminism as bad for women, their families, and their relationships (or lack thereof) (Faludi, 1993), postfeminism endorses the idea that the political goals of second-wave feminism have been achieved because women can be financially autonomous, can pursue careers and enjoy sexual liberation (Gorton, 2007; Gill 2007b). This is problematic as it ignores still existing gender inequalities in the very same domains. Because second-wave feminism is framed as being politically driven and accomplished, the feminism existing after, whether referred to as third-wave or postfeminism, terms which according to Spencer (2007) are often used interchangeably, is portrayed as more fragmented and confused in its goals (Gorton 2004; Bronstein, 2005). This arguably persists into the concept of postfeminist masculinity. Postfeminist men are often referred to as being in crisis due to conceptualisations of masculinity expanding to include feminist values (Rumens, 2017) and so "postfeminist masculinities are necessarily understood as sets of discursive performances that may be enacted by men (and women) and will vary across time and context" (Rumens, 2017, p. 249).

A significant feature of postfeminism in media includes the intense focus on and often scrutiny of women's bodies that can be seen "in today's media, [as the] possession of a 'sexy body' is presented as women's key (if not sole) source of femininity" (Gill, 2007b, p. 149). Further, Gill (2007b) points out that women are often simultaneously sexualised in postfeminist media while presented as autonomous, in control, and often sexually liberated rather than passive. The contradiction within postfeminism is the combination of both feminist and anti-feminist ideologies, for example, although female protagonists may be more active in postfeminist media,

they “seem compelled to use their empowered postfeminist position to make choices that would be regarded by many feminists as problematic, located as they are in normative notions of femininity” (Gill, 2007b, p. 162). This therefore seems to present women as *choosing* to be traditionally feminine as autonomous subjects without investigating whether this is in fact a choice, and if so, why traditional femininity that is assumed to be desirable to men, is largely a standardised image (Gill, 2007b).

The concepts of anti-feminist backlash and postfeminism could therefore explain the persistence in the stereotypically gendered portrayal of femininity that is largely supported in the research discussed in the previous section. Postfeminism finds that when women are portrayed as active rather than passive, their outcomes (romantic unions, being fulfilled by motherhood and/or domestic work), are largely the same but are shown to be chosen. The concepts of anti-feminist backlash and postfeminism can be useful in understanding the representation of men and women in media, and for the purpose of this research, in film in particular, and will be referred to in later sections.

2.5 What is film?

Film has been a popular medium since its technological inception at the very end of the 19th century, and its purpose and aim have been debated by theorists from the start of the 20th century. Such theorists sought to consider what film was, whether it should be deemed an art, and if so, what aspects of the form made it an art. In these debates, formalists and realists had different perspectives. Formalists rejected the notion that it was film’s purpose to record ‘reality’ and instead, Sergei Eisenstein in particular, made the case that the editing and manipulation of film made it an art form (Eisenstein, 1986). Realists on the contrary, considered that it was photography’s (and subsequently film’s) ability to capture reality that made it

unique from other art forms (Bazin, 1960). As technology developed throughout the 20th century and synchronised sound and colour were being incorporated into film, formalists and realists debated their usefulness and, especially, their relationship to the nature of the medium.

Film and photography, because of their use of technology to capture reality, were by many theorists considered to be fundamentally different to many other art forms such as painting and sculpting (Bazin, 1960). Bazin, a realist, argued that painting had left a deep need within the spectator for representation beyond an approximation, and this was fulfilled by photography (Bazin, 1960, p. 8). Photography and film were unique from painting in that they were objective art forms because

> "for the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a non-living agent. For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man" (Bazin, 1960, p. 7).

Importantly then, realism has a psychological element in that

> "[w]e view cinema as we view reality not because of the way it looks (it may look unreal) but because it was recorded mechanically. This inhuman portrait of the world intrigues us and makes of cinema and photography not the media of man but the media of nature… realism has to do not with the accuracy of the reproduction but the spectator's belief about the origin of the reproduction" (Andrew, 1976, p. 138).

The quotation above regarding Bazin's perspective suggests that he considered realism in film to relate to the way that spectators perceived the production process. The spectator's beliefs about how film is recorded means that realism has a psychological facet. Film's representation of reality was important to Bazin's concept of what film was or should be, and how it was distinct from other forms of art. According to Andrew (1976) he argued that

> "[c]inema depends first upon a visual and spatial reality, the real world and the physicist. Thus cinema's core realism is "not certainly the realism of subject

> matter or realism of expression, but that realism of space without which moving pictures do not constitute cinema" (*What Is Cinema?*, p. 112)" (Andrew, 1976, p. 137).

Arnheim (1957) who was a formalist, seemed to oppose Bazin's (1960) position and suggested that by reducing photography and filmmaking to a mere mechanical reproduction, the nuanced decisions of the filmmaker/artist are wrongly disregarded. He stated that

> "people who contemptuously refer to the camera as an automatic recording machine must be made to realize that even in the simplest photographic reproduction of a perfectly simple object, a feeling for its nature is required which is quite beyond any mechanical operation" (Arnheim, 1957, p. 11).

Thus, Arnheim (1957) seems to contest film being reduced to its mere mechanical recording as it oversimplifies, or perhaps completely disregards, the influence of the necessary artistic element provided by the filmmaker. By rejecting the concept of an "automatic recording machine" (Arnheim, 1957, p. 11) he implies that a shot is not merely recorded by such a device but is created by the filmmaker/artist also. In the first part of his essay *Film and Reality,* Arnheim (1957) considers how the version of reality that is captured by the camera (and is then presented to the spectator) is inherently different to the reality experienced and perceived in the 'real world', and suggested that in this sense, film cannot be considered a direct reproduction of reality as realists suggests.

Arnheim (1957) discussed the lack of colour and synchronised sound in black and white and silent films respectively as the obvious examples of how film does not represent the reality of the profilmic world. He stated that the lack of sound in silent films was not an "unpleasant violation [which proved that] … in order to get a full impression it is not necessary for it to be complete in a naturalistic sense" (Arnheim, 1957, p. 33). He also discussed concepts of depth and shape consistency, and the

lack of a realistic space-time continuum, as further instances of how film is not a reflection of mere reality (Arnheim, 1957). For Arnheim representing reality should not be an artistic filmmaker's aim as for him, purely recording a pro-filmic event as it would naturally be perceived, is not true film art:

> "Not until film began to become an art was the interest moved from mere subject matter to aspects of form. *What had hitherto been merely the urge to record certain actual events, now became the aim to represent objects by special means exclusive to film*. These means obtrude themselves, show themselves able to do more than simply reproduce the required object; they sharpen it, impose style upon it, point out special features, make it vivid and decorative. *Art begins where mechanical reproduction leaves off, where the conditions of representation serve in some way to mold the object*. And the spectator shows himself to be lacking in proper understanding when he is satisfied to notice merely the content… he must be prepared to turn his attention to the form" (Arnheim, 1957, pp. 57-58, emphasis added).

Like Arnheim (1957) Eisenstein also believed that for film to be an art form it needed to do more than represent reality – it needed to be edited. Eisenstein emphasised that the notion of montage, the placing of individual shots in succession to create meaning, was important to the process of artistic filmmaking throughout his career (Andrew, 1977). Although other formalists including Arnheim had considered the concept of montage, Eisentein's theory was arguably more developed and sophisticated. The juxtaposition of shots in montage creates an inference which is not shown to the spectator and "[a] work of art, understood dynamically, is just this process of arranging images in the feelings and mind of the spectator" (Eisenstein, 1986, p. 24). To illustrate this point, Eisenstein (1986) articulated an example of an image of a woman wearing black crying at a graveside leading the spectator to assume she is a widow before it is revealed that the woman is mourning her lover in *Fantastic Fables*, 'The Inconsolable Widow' (Eisenstein, 1986, p. 14). The filmmaker has manipulated the sequence with montage to imply that the woman is a widow in the mind of the spectator, so that that the assumption can be violated, and a

psychological response can be created. Montage then relies on the “tendency to bring together into unity two or more independent objects or qualities [which] is very strong, even in the case of separate words, characterising different aspects of some single phenomenon” (Eisenstein, 1986, p. 15). A filmmaker must choose the juxtaposition of shots to lead the spectator to form the image of a particular theme that they are aiming to depict. Montage was key to Eisenstein’s film theory and film productions, and it seemed to oppose the notion of realism.

As the technology of filmmaking developed, and colour and synchronised sound were added to film, there was inevitably more of a shift towards realism in the industry. Although sound had been a part of cinema for the duration of its existence in that films were often projected alongside sound with orchestras or musicians playing during cinema screenings (Beck, 2011), synchronised sound began to be added to film in the 1920’s. Similarly, colour was added to film “[f]rom the turn of the last [19th] century through the end of the 1920’s, [via] applied colour processes ([such as] hand-colouring, stencil, tinting and toning)” (Tomadjoglou, 2009, p. 3). However, the ‘natural’ recording of colour in a scene came later (Belton, 2000a, p. 339) and colour took much longer to take hold of the industry than sound had (Belton, 2000b). As Belton states

> “[i]t was not until 1955 that productions in colour outnumbered those in black and white; and it was not until the late 1960s – and the widespread diffusion of colour television – that colour would finally supplant black and white, as colour productions rose from 54 per cent in 1966 to 94 per cent in 1970” (Belton, 2000b, p. 344).

Arnheim (1957) was particularly critical of technological developments such as colour and synchronised sound in film. He emphasised that engineers who developed film technology

> “are not artists. They therefore do not direct their efforts toward providing the

> artist with a more effective medium, but toward increasing naturalness of film pictures… His ideal is exactly to imitate real life" (Arnheim, 1957, p. 65).

Rather pessimistically, he suggested that the film industry's desire to move towards producing films with colour and synchronised sound was financially rather than artistically motivated given that spectators also desired realistic films meaning that they would presumably visit cinemas in larger numbers to see them (Arnheim, 1957, p. 65). Eisenstein was less critical of synchronised sound in film and deemed it "not unacceptable, as long as synchronization was not of the naturalistic kind" (Thompson, 1980, p. 118). He deemed that sound needed to be a part of montage in that it needed to juxtapose the image for it to be a progressive addition to film rather than a hinderance (Eisenstein, 1977). In *A Statement*, it was said that "ONLY A CONTRAPUNTAL USE of sound in relation to the visual montage piece will afford a new potentiality of montage development and perfection" (Eisenstein, 1977, p. 258, capitalisation in original). Thus, although there was some caution in his discussion of sound, Eisenstein considered that it was possible for it to be utilised by filmmakers in an artistically meaningful way. While Eisenstein (1977) and Arnheim (1957) were cautious and dismissive when it came to synchronised sound in film respectively, for Bazin (1960), the desire for both colour and sound within the industry, and by spectators, showed that realism was the desire of its original creators and, hence, its inescapable destiny.

This section has discussed the debate around whether film should solely represent the reality of a profilmic event that was prevalent in the early-mid 20th Century. The concept of realism suggests that that the desire to view a representation of the world that is consistent with the world in which we live is met by film (Bazin, 1960). Alternatively, it is the manipulation of images that makes film a

true art form for formalists such as Eisenstein. Therefore, film can present a realistic world visually and narratively, or the very opposite. The use of colour and synchronised sound in film are important concepts in these debates as they made the reality depicted by the medium more aligned with that of the ‘real world’. The concepts considered through this section are also important for the discussion of animation, the film form that is the focus of this thesis. Whether animation as a film form should represent the real world even though it does not capture a profilmic event in the same way live-action does, is debated in the arena of film and animation studies. However, before animation as a film form is considered, discussion of the notion of genre in film theory is necessary in order to understand an important part of how spectators derive pleasure from film, and the extent to which the film industry utilises genre’s prescriptive categories.

2.6 Genre in Film

Although notions of genre are associated with literary theory, an understanding of film in terms of genre theory became more established in the 1960’s. Genre is important in many ways in each stage of the film “production-distribution-consumption” (Altman, 1999, p. 15) process. Steve Neale (2000) notes that even among genre theorists with different perspectives, what seems to remain the

> “common ground... [is that] all agree that genre is a multi-dimensional phenomenon and that its dimensions centrally include systems of expectation, categories, labels and names, discourses, texts and corpuses of texts, and the conventions that govern them all” (Neale, 2000, p. 23).

How the film industry uses the notion of genre has been considered by theorists. According to Altman (1999), Hollywood avoids explicitly identifying individual films with single generic labels. Rather, he states, films tend to be implicitly associated with multiple genres that are likely to appeal to audiences from different

demographic groups (Altman, 1999). “Hollywood regularly eschews genre logic for production and publicity decisions, in favour of series, cycles, remakes and sequels” (Altman, 1999, p. 115) in that, by utilising resources available only to them, such as a specific actor who is under contract, a studio can establish an audience for its next film by utilising those same features (Altman, 1999, p. 115). This process also allows studios to differentiate the films they are producing from films of the same genre that are being produced by other studios. Genre then can have many economic functions as it allows films to be produced that have similarities, and of course, differences, with others within a genre that have enjoyed success (Neale, 2000). Genres then

> “enable the industry to meet the obligations of variety and difference inherent in its product. But they also enable it to manufacture its product in a cost-effective manner, and to regulate demand and the nature of its output in such a way to minimize the risks inherent in difference and to maximize the possibility of profit on its overall investment” (Neale, 2000, pp. 218-219).

Therefore, Hollywood’s perceived avoidance of generically labelling their films singularly (as described by Altman, 1999) alongside their adherence to some genre conventions allows some of the risks that come from producing films that appeal to narrow demographic groups to be mitigated.

The role of the audience is key to film genre as for a genre to exist it must be recognised by the spectator (Altman, 1999). Spectators utilise genres to form understandings which means that genres “consist also of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema and which interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process” (Neale, 2000, p. 27). Further, the way that spectators/audiences use genre to gain pleasure is important as

> “genres don’t provide the energy necessary to generic experiences; that must instead come from viewers, who, being different, can be expected to invest their energy in extremely diverse modes. What genres are adept at, however,

> is funnelling towards a homogeneous experience those viewers who invest in a similar type of generic pleasure… the ability to choose one's genre pleasures lies at the very heart of generic operations" (Altman, 1999, p. 151).

In his chapter *What Roles do Genres Play in the Viewing Process?* Altman (1999) considers that when engaging with a genre film, the spectator regularly comes to a "generic crossroads" (Altman, 1999, p. 145) in which what is culturally acceptable, and what is generically necessary and pleasurable in the viewing experience are negotiated. However,

> "any given generic crossroads will be experienced as a genre versus culture opposition only by a certain percentage of viewers, those with an investment in this particular kind of generic pleasure… those who delight in a particular genre are always affected by crossroad experiences involving that genre, simply because their continued pleasure depends on 'proper' negotiation of those crossroads" (Altman, 1999, p. 145).

When the spectator chooses the generic road rather than the cultural road, they derive pleasure from doing so. The crossroads become incrementally less acceptable in culture (and therefore the actions of the actor may become 'more extreme') meaning that pleasure is increased (Altman, 1999). Ultimately though, the genre film will come to a culturally acceptable end, in that the protagonists needs and/or desires will be fulfilled, and the villain will be punished, which means that the violations of cultural acceptability are restored and therefore justified (Altman, 1999).

Additionally to a consideration of some of the ways that genres are utilised by film studios and audiences, a discussion of specific genres can highlight the ways in which film genres are established. In this vein Maltby (1995, as cited by Neale, 2000) indicated that "[t]he Western, the comedy, the musical, and the war movie are four uncontested categories" (Maltby, 1995, as cited by Neale, 2000, p. 45) of major film genres, although Neale (2000) identifies several more in his work. Altman (1999) states that film genres are often perceived to be "simply borrowed from already

existing genres in another medium" (Altman, 1999, p. 30) and although there is some evidence that this is the case, for example, when considering the musical which had existed in theatre before it became a film genre,

> "[t]he early history of the musical reveals that film genres are not always borrowed intact from non-film sources. The musical has far too many sources for all of them to be unproblematically extended in a single filmic form" (Altman, 1999, p. 33).

Instead, it seems that film genres are formed by an amalgamation of several genres. However, Altman (1999) also argues that even when genres pre-exist in non-film media, they must be recreated which can mean that a film genre with the same name can be inherently different. Genres, for Altman (1999) are not stable but are constantly interbreeding with other genres.

In the same vein, Neale (2000) states that

> "[t]he musical has always been a mongrel genre. In varying measures and combinations, music, song and dance have been its only essential ingredients. In consequence its history, both on stage and on screen, has been marked by numerous traditions, forms and styles. These in turn have been marked by numerous terms – 'operetta', 'revue', 'musical comedy', 'musical drama', 'the backstage musical', 'the rock musical', 'the integrated musical', and so on" (Neale, 2000, p. 97).

Both authors acknowledge that the musical genre predates cinema and is complex and multifaceted in its filmic form. Altman (1999) states that some of the films that are today referred to as musicals, were not so when they were produced and released, which provides evidence that the generic classifications of films and the genres themselves, are not stable or unchanging.

Similarly, comedy has

> "a range of forms, sites and genres (from jokes to intricately plotted narratives, from slapstick to farce, from satire to parody, from shorts and cartoons to features), comedy can also entail an array of defining conventions (from generation of laughter to the presence of happy endings to the representation of everyday life)" (Neale 2000, p. 59).

Both the musical and the comedy prove that genres can cross over with many forms of media which can make definitions of them complex are varied. As a result,

> "it is likely that, as is the case with most genres, comedy's ideological significance and impact varies from film to film, cycle to cycle, and audience to audience, and is probably best assessed at specific and local levels rather than at the level of universal generalizations" (Neale, 2000, pp. 64- 65).

This section has described the ways that genres are utilised by spectators and Hollywood studios which has allowed some of the key notions within film theory to be understood. It has also considered, through the musical and comedy, that film genres often pre-exist as genres in other forms of media and must be changed in order become established within the film industry (Altman, 1999). Film genres can have different conventions within them and are not stable over time but continue to change (Altman, 1999; Neale, 2000). Consideration of these concepts was necessary before proceeding to discussion film form, particularly animation, which is the form focused upon in this thesis.

2.7 What is Animation?

Animation is notoriously hard to define because of its many forms and related techniques (Torre, 2017; Wells, 2002). At perhaps the most simplistic level, it has been defined by Paul Wells as "the art of making films frame-by-frame" (Wells, 2002, p. 5) rather than filming events in real time as is the case in live-action film (Husbands & Ruddell, 2019). Although objects such as clay, models, and puppets can be moved and photographed incrementally and shown at speed to provide the illusion of movement in stop motion animated films, hand-drawn animation is often referred to as traditional animation (such as by Bordwell et al., 2017). Hand-drawn animation was dominant throughout the 'Golden Age' of animation, that is, "from the late 1920's to the mid 1940's" (Wells, 2006, p. 50) and computer-generated imagery (CGI) is currently "the dominant aesthetic in Hollywood feature animation" (Wells,

2006, p. 126). These two types of animated film are the most relevant to this thesis and will be the focus of the following section. A consideration of the key principles in animation can provide further insight into the form.

Animation is often defined in relation to live-action films. “[A]nimation is entirely *constructed* whereas live-action has a ‘profilmic world’ that exists in front of the camera” (Husbands & Ruddell, 2019, p. 6, emphasis in original). Thus, although its constructed nature may imply that animation cannot align with the ‘realism’ that film theory describes (and has been discussed above), it is possible to achieve realistic animated content both visually and narratively. As Prince (1996) describes (referring to the computer-generated images in *Jurassic Park,* 1993):

> “[b]ecause the computer-generated images have been rendered with such attention to 3D spatial information, they acquire a very powerful perceptual realism, despite the obvious ontological problems in calling them "realistic." These are falsified correspondences, yet because the perceptual information they contain is valid, the dinosaurs acquire a remarkable degree of photographic realism” (Prince 1996, p. 34).

Animated images then can be constructed to mimic the way in which the world or pro-filmic event in a live-action film would look by adhering to spatial cues that are necessary for the spectator to perceive them as accurate and realistic. Therefore, “the resulting image is *perceptually realistic but referentially unreal*, a paradox that present film theory has a hard time accounting for” (Prince, 1996 p. 34, emphasis added).

Although realism can be achieved in animated film, animation is also able to challenge the boundaries of live-action films by presenting impossible situations and sequences. Animated images

> “can be made to look like almost anything – from the most abstract graphical image to the most photo-realistic. It can look exactly like live action; alternately, it can also move so slowly (or in such a limited manner) that at first glance it appears to be motionless” (Torre, 2017, p. 4).

The use of concepts such as anthropomorphism - giving the illusion of life, personality and human characteristics to animals and non-human objects, is one way in which animation pushes the boundaries of what was possible in live-action films which are more limited to ‘real world’ constraints (Wells, 2002). Although some consider ‘the illusion of life’ a key principle of animation, Husbands and Ruddell (2019) point out that although this is true of some character animation, this is not necessary for all forms of animation, for example, the animation of abstract shapes. Animation’s ability to transcend the physical laws of the world in which the spectator resides in a comprehensive way means it has the capacity to both challenge and comfort its audience (Husbands & Ruddell 2019; Wells, 2002).

Paul Wells discusses animation’s relationship with Modernity stating that the development of animation coincided with the Modern era in which technology and the machine age were advancing societies. Although animation had the potential to recreate a reality, in the arena of film studies, it was often dismissed as children’s entertainment that lacked both social importance and the aesthetic value of other forms of art (Wells, 2002; Giroux & Pollock, 2010). However, Wells (2002) states that such a reading of animation ignores its ability to reconstruct, comment upon and critique the real by recreating it. He states that

> “[t]he breaking of boundaries was easily facilitated in animation; so much so that its conditions have not been properly acknowledged as the engine of truly ‘Modern’ thought in its effacement of orthodoxy and its substitution of the ‘new’. What occurred, and has in many ways prevailed, was an understanding of animation which is based on the naturalisation of impossible events, and thereafter, a ‘taken-for-granted’ acceptance of the magical and comical language in animation, not its aesthetic openness” (Wells 2002, p. 28).

The modernist power of animation had the ability to replace the orthodox with something alternative and had many aesthetic possibilities. Animation studios had different approaches based on different beliefs about the extent to which animation

should experiment or conform to the standards of established film practices.

Winsor McCay was one of the first animated filmmakers who used hand-drawn animation and has been referred to as “the first American cartoon filmmaker of commercial significance” (Callahan, 1988, p. 223). His animated shorts including *Little Nemo* (1911) and *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1913) “were not crudely moving doodles, but recognizably human or animal forms with believable weight, dimension and motion, not to mention personality and life” (Ball et al., 2004, p. 15). *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1913) has been deemed “the first American masterpiece of animated cartoons” (Nathan & Crafton, 2013, p. 23), and part of the spectacle was that the animator had ‘brought to life’ an extinct creature that it was impossible to observe moving in the ‘real world’ or in a live-action film which was exaggerated when McCay performed alongside the projection of the animation to provide the illusion that Gertie was responding to him, much like a trained animal might (Nathan & Crafton, 2013). In their analysis of the film Nathan and Crafton (2013) found that

> “McCay used extensive tracing of parts of foreground objects from one frame to another in order to maintain the continuity of Gertie’s proportions and movements within each sequence. In some sequences when Gertie’s head moves, her stationary body has been retraced to a surprising level of detail, including the wrinkles on her knee” (Nathan & Crafton, 2013, p. 29).

The technique adopted by McCay was considered impractical and time-consuming (Ball et al., 2004, p. 16) which led to developments such as the use of celluloids in animation (more frequently referred to as cels according to Bordwell et al., 2017) starting from the 1910’s and continuing throughout the 1990’s. Cels provided animators with more ease in the production of animated films than the technique McCay had used to animate *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1913) (Callahan, 1988). The use of cels meant that different parts of the animated image could be drawn onto different layers of celluloid, and they would be layered and photographed

together. The process saved animators time and money as an entire image no longer had to be redrawn to capture the illusion of movement in one object or character in the frame (Callahan, 1988). When the image was drawn, colour was applied to the backside by applying ink (Johnston, 2002). Multiple animators could be responsible for separate features in the image such as backgrounds and main character poses (Callahan, 1988). The benefits of using cels meant that their use quickly became endorsed by various animation studios. The technique was adopted by Disney from its first animated feature length film (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, Cottrell et al., 1937) up to *The Little Mermaid* (Clements & Musker, 1989). The multi-plane camera, invented by Ub Iwerks at the Walt Disney Studios, enabled animators to add depth to their animations and facilitated realism in the sense of creating an illusion of spatial depth as with regular human vision at the same time as it explored magical and fantastical themes.

The result of Walt Disney's desire for realism in his animations can be seen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (Cottrell et al., 1937, referred to as Snow White hereafter) the first popular full-length animated feature film (Allan, 1988). The emergence of a classical animation that was more aligned with 19th century art (which featured developed and accurate backgrounds) simultaneously progressed animation to be considered a 'more serious' art form but also reverted it away from a principally Modern form in which the boundaries of real life could be broken rather than adhered to (Wells, 2002). Until the success of *Snow White* (1937) it was unclear whether an animated feature length film would attract audiences. Before the film's release cinematic animated shorts were played as part of a programme centred on the 'feature' film (and this continued until around the 1950's, Barrier, 2004, p. ix) and so were designed to appeal to a wide range of audiences (Ratelle, 2019, p. 193).

Snow White (1937) was critically successful and popular (Allan, 1988) meaning that other animation studios had to situate themselves against, or react to, Disney's approach to animation.

This necessary differentiation required, as Barrier states, "figuring out what they [Disney] were *not* doing" (Barrier, 2003, p. 4). As a result, competing animation studios produced comic cartoons and manipulated space in ways that the realistic Disney animations did not (Wood, 2019). This can be seen by the style of animation adopted by Warner Brothers in films such as *Duck Amuck* (1953) where "the film is creating comedy by frankly acknowledging various techniques of animation: painted backgrounds, sound effects, framing and so on" (Bordwell, 2017, p. 393). The main character in *Duck Amuck* (1953) is puzzled as he is tormented by the animator with scenery being removed around him by a visible eraser for example. The approach that Disney took in endorsing realism in their animations is one that did not match the idea of animation being a Modern form, and other studios such as Warner Bros. focused on creating a unique and boundary-contesting form of animation in contrast.

A large part of creating realism in animated characters such as those in *Snow White* (1937), was achieved by using rotoscoping. The rotoscope had been "patented by Max Fleischer in 1917" (Mihailova, 2019, p. 47). Although differentiating between live-action and animation can be useful in understanding animation as stated above, the two become intertwined in this technique which makes it a controversial one. Rotoscoping brings together live-action performance and animation as an actor's performance is filmed and the frame-by-frame images are traced by animators to provide their characters with more fluid and life-like movements (Ward, 2019; Mihailov, 2019; Roe, 2019). Disney animators would use rotoscoping to trace movements and/or as inspiration for injecting personality into

their characters by mimicking traits that could be caricatured (Thomas & Johnson, 1981, p. 321). Because rotoscoping utilises live-action performance the technique has been described as “not really animation at all” (Barrier, 2004, p. 22), as it relies on recording a profilmic event, rather than solely creating new possibilities, as had been conventionally associated with Modernism. Animators quickly realised that the rotoscoped images alone could not provide the desired effect. Characters whose movements had been directly rotoscoped would look ghost like, hyper-realistic, or eerie and would seem out of place in animated scenes (Ward, 2004; Ward, 2019; Roe, 2019; Thomas & Johnson, 1981). The role of the animator building the character around the movements provided by the actor was essential in creating an aesthetic that matched the animated scene. This necessary step suggests that the animator’s role was as vital as the actors as the desired effect could not be achieved by tracing the live-action movements alone. Despite its popularity, rotoscoping was still being

> “damned for being *too* real, and not real *enough*, for being cheating (with the connotation that it is cutting corners) and being too much work to be bothered with… rotoscoping demands to be seen as a challenging and very important form of animation, both from the aesthetic and production points of view” (Ward, 2004, emphasis in original).

Performance ownership of rotoscoped characters was debated (Roe, 2019). Although the actors were responsible for providing the actions, the animator brings those movements into the animated world in an appealing way, that did not look *too* realistic, as stated above. However, the actor’s performance allows the animator to provide their characters with smooth movements and thus the animator is not necessarily producing something entirely new. Importantly though, “animators have considered themselves as performing by proxy through their drawing” (Hosea, 2010, p. 365) and so the animator’s performance as well as the actors are ultimately

embodied and captured within a rotoscoped animated character (Roe, 2019). The debates around rotoscoping are centred around the amalgamation of live-action and animation into the production of films. Rotoscoping also brought into question whether realism and animation could be synonymous (a debate that existed beyond the consideration of the technique too) because the use of actors made the realism in animated characters possible.

More recently with computer technology developing particularly quickly in the 21st century, computer generated animation has become popular. Producers can utilise “digital implementation of rotoscoping” (Hetherington & McRae, 2017 p. 157), or alternatively, characters can be “created using 3D computer-generated imagery (CGI) and animation techniques including motion or performance capture (mocap)” (Hetherington & McRae, 2017 p. 157). Both techniques aim to achieve a realistic depiction of a character and utilise an actor’s performance as a reference point on which to build. The fact that spectators’ experiences of CGI characters range “from an inability to distinguish CGI-Human characters from real humans, observations of characters fleetingly exhibiting realism before returning to their artifice, and cases of characters being viewed as eerie” (Hetherington & McRae, 2017, p. 168), highlights the complexity of using actors’ performances to create computer animated characters. Further, the presence of CGI techniques within live-action films creates more tension in differentiating between animated and live-action content as the line between what exists in the profilmic world and what is created virtually is increasingly blurred.

2.7.1 Cinematic Animation and Television Animation

When the use of animated shorts began to decline in cinemas simultaneously with televisions entering houses, animation studios, like other short film makers,

started to sell their back catalogue to broadcasters (Ratelle, 2019). This was profitable for the animation studios as they did not need to spend resources producing new work. Because televisions were becoming increasingly present in homes in the

> "late 1950's and 1960's… animation in general was becoming targeted to the child audience, increasingly focused on mass entertainment, and broadcast on channels that were increasingly in need of advertising revenue to cover their production costs" (Ratelle, 2019, p. 195).

This meant that "[b]y the late 1960's, television animation had lost any cachet it might once have had, through its subsequent association with the child audience" (Ratelle, 2019, p. 196). Saturday morning cartoons in the 1960's were considered the downfall of animation by many in the industry with animations circulating that were deemed low-quality (Mittell, 2004, p. 66). Products and merchandise that related to the animations were being created which meant that animation was increasingly influencing and influenced by consumer culture (Rattelle, 2019). For Kapur (1999), it was Disney's television series *Mickey Mouse Club* in the 1950's "that brought children's commercial television into its own" (Kapur, 1999, p. 127) as it "initiated the development of a brand… year-round selling of toys, and the creation of fantastic stories around the toy" (Kappur, 1999, p. 127). Toys were created around television series' and vice versa (Ratelle, 2019; Kappur, 1999).

The toy and television industries seemed to merge particularly in the 1980's. Another early example of this according to Ratelle (2019) was the *Strawberry Shortcake* television series in the 1980's in which the doll was already in circulation before the animated series was released (and both the doll and the animation were successful). This was also true of Disney's feature length animations as merchandise featuring Pocahontas was available before the film was released meaning that "Disney's films provide free advertising for its licensed goods as well as

its entertainment parks. These commodities, in turn, provide free publicity for the films" (Kapur, 1999, p. 127). Animations were considered a vehicle to create consumers out of children and families (Kapur, 1999) and in more recent years, online games have been created based on characters from children's television networks (Grimes, 2008) suggesting this may be continuing. While the Saturday morning cartoons were deemed low quality (Mittell, 2004), animated feature films have arguably been increasing in quality and have maintained their popularity.

This section has discussed some important debates in animation studies such as the extent to which the form can break boundaries that live-action films cannot (Wells, 2002). Considering some of the techniques that are utilised in animation (such as cels, rotoscope, and more recently CGI) highlights the ways in which much animation (including that created by Disney) intends to represent "perceptually realistic" (Prince, 1996, p. 34) but fantastical worlds, characters and themes. Further, understanding the shift from animated shorts being shown predominantly in cinemas to being shown on televisions helps explain some of the ways that animations and children's cartoons became so heavily interwoven with consumerism (Ratelle, 2019; Kapur, 1999) and thus began to be influential beyond the screens on which they existed. An exploration of how gender is depicted in animated cartoons and films is thus important.

2.7.2 The Portrayal of Gender in Animation

The representation of male and female characters in animation started to become widely researched as televisions were becoming more prevalent in homes and children were consuming television programmes at higher rates. Such research is still prevalent today and when considered together, it seems that there is a

consistent lack of female characters in animation, much like that found in other mass media considered in previous sections of this review.

For example, Levinson (1975) found that women were significantly outnumbered in children's cartoons with adult males outnumbering adult females 4:1, and when considering all age categories (children, teenagers, adults and elderly characters) the ratio only minimally improved to 3:1. Similarly, a disproportionate number of males to females was found in a selection of children's television shows (Sternglanz & Serbin, 1974) - despite the researchers excluding a number of shows that had no female characters whatsoever, only 33% of characters were female (Sternglanz & Serbin, 1974). More modern research finds a similar gender disparity. 33% of characters in cartoons broadcast on Cartoon Network were female with only one of the most popular animations on the channel being female focused (Ahmed & Wahab, 2014). Further, there were approximately twice as many male characters in television shows targeted towards pre-school aged children, many of which were animations (Walsh & Leaper, 2019; Martin, 2017). This imbalance also seems to extend to children's films given that in an analysis of top-rated G rated movies released between 1990 to 2005 (including animations and live-action), only 28% of characters were female (Smith et al., 2010). Additionally, of the top grossing animated films released between 1980 and 2016,

> "[t]here was no significant change in the number of female-led films... In the 1980s, 88.9 percent of the films had male leads, compared with 80.0 percent in the 1990s, 87.3 percent in the 2000s, and 85.7 percent from 2010 through 2016" (Hare, 2017, p. 58).

Taken together, this research suggests that there has been little progress in the numbers of women being portrayed in animation over several decades. A remarkably consistent and clear difference in the prevalence of male and female characters in children's cartoons can be found (Levinson, 1995; Sternglanz & Serbin;

Ahmed & Wahab, 2014; Walsh & Leaper, 2019; Martin, 2017; Smith et al., 2010; Hare, 2017). To form a better understanding of the portrayal of gender within such content, the way that male and female animated characters are portrayed when they are present is also important.

Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that females are stereotyped in children's media and animations, as well as underrepresented. Levinson (1975) found that women were much more restricted in their occupations in children's cartoons than were male characters. The female characters were predominantly shown as housewives and/or mothers (Levinson, 1975). When the female characters did have other occupations, they were shown as performers, secretaries, witches, or nurses and were therefore highly stereotyped, whereas male characters had a much broader spectrum of occupations such as cowboy, king, inventor, lawyer and milkman, college professor and college student to name just a few (Levinson, 1975, p. 566). Although the male characters were shown in more varied jobs according to Levinson (1975), it is not stated how many of these would be considered 'masculine'. Similarly, in more recent research, females were significantly more likely to be parents or in serious romantic relationships than male characters in G-rated movies, thus providing evidence of a stereotypical depiction of women, although women had better motives and were more intelligent than male characters, which indicates some positive depictions also (Smith et al., 2010). Further, the male characters were more restricted in their employment than female characters with "only 2.3% of males… shown in counter-stereotypical occupations" (Smith et al., 2010, p. 748) versus 16% of female characters. It should be noted that this is still a small minority of women portrayed in non-stereotypical roles and taken with the finding that the female

characters were significantly more likely to be in romantic relationships, the results indicate that there was not an exclusively progressive portrayal of women.

Alongside occupied roles, common traits displayed by animated characters can be revealing of any differences between the portrayal of men and women also. In such research it has been found that male characters were more likely to rely on aggression as a means of communication (Signorielli, 1990; Sternglanz & Serbin, 1974; Thompson and Zerbinos, 1995). However, depictions of aggression seem to be more complex in more modern animated content as although both Ahmed and Wahab (2014) and Walsh and Leaper (2019) observed more aggression perpetrated by male characters, the difference in pre-school targeted cartoons was just below statistical significance in the latter study (Walsh & Leaper, 2019, p. 348). Additionally, male and female animated superhero characters were almost equal in their displays of aggression according to Baker and Raney (2007). Further, there may be some signs that male characters are more able to express a greater array of emotions in modern children's television, as males displayed higher levels of fear and sadness than females in animations analysed by Martin (2017). Therefore, although the evidence is mixed, it may be possible that male characters are becoming less aggressive over time and more able to express a greater spectrum of emotion which is a positive change and may lead to male characters in animation being more positive role models to young boys.

Beyond aggression, Thompson and Zerbinos (1995) found that there were some less stereotypical portrayals of females and males in cartoons after the 1980's when compared with those before 1980's. Females were less emotional, sensitive, and affectionate and gave more guidance and were in more leadership positions while males were more intelligent, and excitable than their earlier counterparts

(Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995). However, when considering the work of Smith et al., (2010) it seems that there is little difference in the portrayal of men and women over the fiteen years that their research was conducted (between 1990 and 2005), suggesting that although there may have been progress in depiction of gender in television cartoons between the 1970's and 1980's, there may be less found since. It should be noted however that the films analysed by Smith et al., (2010) were not exclusively animations.

There is substantial evidence of stereotypically gendered traits being displayed in animation in previous research. For example, female characters are more sexualised and passive while the male characters were stronger, more active, in both more recent research (Ahmed & Wahab, 2014, p. 52) and in an older study (Sternglanz & Serbin, 1974). Similarly, female superheroes were more likely to be focused on their appearance, be attractive, ask questions and males were more likely to express anger and be threatening which suggests a stereotypical portrayal of gender (Baker & Raney, 2007). Children not only perceive the gender stereotypes associated with superheroes and princesses (Dinella, et al., 2017) and thus, likely, other animated characters also, but according to much theory and research, may form gendered expectations and their own behavioural profiles in light of such representations (points that will be considered in detail in later sections of this literature review). Therefore, the stereotyped representations of male and female characters in animated content are likely to be influencing children, making further research in this area warranted and important.

The research considered in this section indicates that there is some significant stereotyping in animations and children's cartoons. There is a persistent under-representation of female characters in comparison to male characters (Levinson,

1975; Sternglanz & Serbin, 1974; Hare, 2017, p. 58; Ahmed & Wahab, 2014; Walsh & Leaper, 2019; Martin, 2017) and females tend to be more family or romantically orientated, sexualised and in stereotyped occupations (Levinson, 1975; Smith et al., 2010; Ahmed & Wahab, 2014). There is some evidence to suggest that although male animated characters tend to display more aggression than females (Signorielli, 1990; Sternglanz & Serbin, 1974; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995; Ahmed & Wahab, 2014), there is tentative evidence that this may be changing (Walsh & Leaper, 2019; Baker & Raney, 2007). Children's media more generally has a

> "presentation of gender roles on television [that] reveals a basically stable, traditional image that, in most cases, is very supportive of the status quo, especially in relation to physical appearance, marriage, and occupational roles" (Signorielli, 1990, p. 56).

Although some of the research considered above analysed animations and live-action films (such as Signorielli, 1990 and Smith et al., 2010), it is particularly frustrating that stereotypical representations of gender persist in animation. Wells (2002) suggests that animation has the potential to contest and challenge the boundaries of social reality in a way that other art forms and filmmaking techniques do not, and yet this review has found that its portrayal of gender is largely stereotypical and restrictive, with albeit, some improvement over time (Thompson & Zembardo, 1995). Because the animated world is solely constructed (Husbands & Ruddell, 2019 p. 6), it seems counterintuitive that "animated films are not challenging our society's perception that females are less valuable than males; they are perpetuating it" (Hare, 2017, p. 61). It could be argued that television and live-action film also have the capacity to reflect an egalitarian view of gender and yet the literature considered up to this point of the review finds that this is not the gendered world that the mass media are presenting. Levinson (1975) stated that

> "[p]roducers [of television] cannot defend themselves by saying they simply must reflect "reality"- that women police and scientists do not exist. Because they are uncommon does not mean they could not be portrayed- at least as often as a witch or robot-maid. Programmers must realize that they not only *reflect* but *create* values, reinforce them and stand in the face of change" (Levinson 1975, p. 569, emphasis added).

Thus far, this literature review has found substantial evidence that depictions of gender in mass media as well as animated media are informed by and adhere to limiting stereotypes. Children are likely to be consuming animation more than any other age group and they build understandings of the world partly based on the media they consume (a more detailed discussion of the impact of media on children's understanding on gender will follow). Therefore, the portrayal of men and women in animation (as well as its depictions of race and non-western cultures which although incredibly important, a discussion is beyond the scope of this thesis) needs to be more fully understood.

2.8 Gender in Disney

2.8.1 Disney's 'Innocence'

Animation has a sense of innocence because it is primarily created for and targeted towards children and families, and no other animation studio has situated itself so strongly in this way as Disney (Giroux & Pollock, 2010; Sammond, 2018; Wynns & Rosenfeld, 2003; Wells, 2002; Bell et al., 1995; Giroux, 1995; Wasko, 2001). Walt Disney was notorious for proclaiming that his animations were not politically motivated and were always intended to be entertainment rather than propaganda (Wells, 2002). Disney's transformation of often violent or gruesome fairy tales into family-friendly, magical, and heart-warming feature films is one way that the studio's output has been perceived in terms of 'innocence'. However, critics argue that presenting idealistic versions of both fairy tales and historic events is dangerous and the latter may amount to a rewriting of history due to Disney's

influence and reach in popular culture (Giroux & Pollock, 2010; Towbin et al., 2004; Heatwole, 2016). Disney's animated feature length films have been considered wholesome entertainment for children (Bell et al., 1995, p. 4) for many years meaning that the content of such films can go critically unchallenged (Giroux & Pollock, 2010)**.**

Although Disney animation has largely maintained its innocent reputation in the domestic and familial sphere, its innocence has been questioned in the academic sphere (Giroux & Pollock, 2010; Sammond, 2018; Wynns & Rosenfeld, 2003; Wells, 2002; Bell et al., 1995; Giroux, 1995; Wasko, 2001). Problematic messages around race and gender have been consistently identified in Disney's animated feature films by academics, and their impact is becoming increasingly discussed. The feature length films produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios have been the focus of much research, while the consideration of gendered behaviours displayed by Disney protagonists has focused predominately on the Disney princess franchise

2.8.2 The Disney Princesses Franchise

The Disney princess franchise was created in 2001 to provide the opportunity for the films that contained princess characters released up to that point to be situated alongside any further releases that would also contain princess characters. By creating the franchise and continually producing films which fit within it, Disney has formed a distinct group of some of its most memorable female protagonists. The franchise contains characters that span Disney's history from Snow White (from *Snow White and the Severn Dwarves,* Cottrell et al., 1937), to Mulan (from *Mulan*, Bancroft & Cook, 1998), and Tiana (from *The Princess and the Frog,* Clements & Musker, 2009).

In Disney's annual reports regarding the year of, and year prior to the creation of the Disney princess franchise, the company stated that

> "[o]ptimizing the Disney brand is key to Walt Disney International's global expansion. For example, it is currently working with all Disney's business units to market on an international retail basis, a wide range of products based on Disney's highly popular Princess icons" (The Walt Disney Company, 2001, p. 44).

and that "a new merchandise strategy was introduced [in 2001], focusing on Disney Princesses… and a strengthened assortment of plush" (The Walt Disney Company, 2002, p. 45), plush, presumably a reference to the products it mentioned the year before. From their annual reports it seems that the princess franchise represents a merchandising opportunity for the company, and as a result, its development has been regarded as corporation's successful attempt to profit from the celebration of femininity (Heatwole, 2016; Johnson, 2014).

The Disney princess line is heavily marketed, and one can now purchase merchandise such as dressing-up outfits and hair pieces, stationary, luggage and beach towels, making it easier than ever for these characters to be a part of our lives. The Disney website promotes their princess products based on "a traditional view of masculinity associated with physicality and a traditional view of femininity associated with nurturing and domestic qualities as well as concern with physical attractiveness" (Auster & Mansbach, 2012, p. 384), which, as later sections of this review will address, reflects the messages within the animations on which the products are based. It was found that

> "princess products... sold a watered-down notion of Girl Power that traded on the perceived pleasures of embodied femininity. In the construction of "Princess Culture" as we know and experience it today, Disney was very much in dialogue with postfeminist discourse" (Heatwole, 2016, p. 6).

The notion of 'girl power' was brought into mainstream popular culture by the British girl-band Spice Girls in the mid 1990's (Bae, 2011; Hains, 2009). Hains (2009) states

that “girl power is most often represented as the idea that girls can do anything they choose” (Hains, 2009, p. 98). It also encourages girls to embrace femininity via consumerism within the fashion and makeup industries which are seen as important sites of female agency, therefore, “the popular cultural version of girl power has redirected the representation of girlhood from a strong, proactive, smart heroine to a worshipper of feminine beauty and heterosexuality” (Bae, 2011, p. 28). In line with Heatwole (2016), Johnson (2014) finds that

> “the over-determined pink femininity of the Disney Princess—not just as a product, but a lifestyle—fits squarely into postfeminist discursive sensibilities that emphasize *the choice of heteronormative gender scripts as empowerment*” (Johnson, 2014, p. 898, emphasis added).

The success of the Disney princess franchise is undeniable as “[w]ithin a few short years, the Disney Princess concept became a multi-billion dollar brand… making girls’ culture synonymous with princess culture” (Johnson, 2014, p. 897). Likely as a result, much research that has examined the gendered messages in Disney’s feature length animations has focused on the princess animations as they have become culturally prevalent.

2.8.3 How has Gender in Disney Animations Been Analysed?

Quantitative content analyses have provided a substantial insight into the portrayal of Disney prince and princesses by measuring the behaviour that is displayed by some of the most prevalent Disney protagonists (England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018a). Quantitative analysis of behaviour is important because it allows for comparisons between the leading male and female characters to be statistically measured. The results from such studies have indicated that the behaviour displayed by Disney princes is complex and varied with much less chronological development identifiable compared to the princesses who seem to be becoming more

androgynous (high in masculine and feminine behaviour) over time (England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018a).

However, it should be noted that the framework of behaviours utilised by England et al. (2011) and Hine et al., (2018a) had some limitations. Because Hine et al., (2018a) aimed to expand upon the previous study conducted by England et al., (2011), the same framework of behaviours was applied to the modern animations that had been released since the previous publication. This therefore means that the framework has not been evaluated for some time. Perhaps as a result Hine et al., (2018a) found that some of the behavioural codes that were adequate for analysing the earlier animations, were not so appropriate for the modern ones. To give a specific example of a problematic behavioural code, Hine et al., (2018a) suggested that applying just one emotion-based code to modern male protagonists who seemed to display a spectrum of emotion, was challenging. Although the framework of behaviours utilised to analyse the gendered behaviours displayed by prince and princess characters had some limitations (which will be addressed in more detail in chapter four of this thesis), the findings of the quantitative content analyses conducted by England et al., (2011) and Hine et al., (2018a) are insightful because the results reveal the statistical differences in the portrayals of prince and princesses, and how the portrayals have changed over time.

Additionally, many qualitative analyses of the portrayal of gender in Disney animated feature length animations have also been conducted and tend to provide more detailed and nuanced discussions of the portrayal of gender in individual films (such as within Dundes, 2001; Dundes & Streiff, 2016; Primo, 2018; Rudloff, 2016; Streiff & Dundes, 2017a; Streiff & Dundes, 2017b). Further, there are also a small number of qualitative analyses that discuss the gendered portrayals across multiple

Disney animated feature length animations such as Davis (2007), Davis (2013), and Towbin et al. (2004). Qualitative analyses of this nature are important because they provide more depth and detailed interpretation than that available through quantitative analysis. Both the quantitative and qualitative analyses of the gendered messages in Disney's feature length animations provide much insight and will be drawn upon in the following sections.

2.8.4 The Representation of Disney Princesses

2.8.4.1 The 'Early' Disney Princesses. England et al., (2011), considers *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (Cottrell et al., 1937), *Cinderella* (Geronimi et al., 1950) and *Sleeping Beauty* (Geronimi et al., 1959) as the 'early' Disney princess feature films and finds these three animated features have a very limited representation of women who are passive, waiting to find *true* love (England et al., 2011) and are fulfilled by completing domestic work (Heatwole, 2016). The latter is prominently shown by Snow White who, after being forced to work as a maid by her wicked stepmother, volunteers to cook and clean, which she does incredibly happily for the seven dwarves in exchange for a place to stay (Heatwole, 2016). She is

> "a passive victim of the evil queen's machinations… and has internalized the subordinate function of her feminine role to the extent that she offers herself in an equivalent position within the patriarchal order of the dwarves' house" (Whitley, 2013, p. 79).

The 'early' princesses also tend to fall in love very quickly, usually within the duration of one song. Both Cinderella and Snow White are passive, patient, and their primary aim is to find love. 86% of the behaviours displayed by the early princesses are feminine meaning that the vast majority of behaviour displayed by the characters are stereotypical. The 'early' princess films have a seemingly restrictive representation of women.

2.8.4.2 The 'Middle' Disney Princesses. The 'middle' princess films including *The Little Mermaid* (Clements & Musker, 1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (Trousdale, & Wise, 1991), *Aladdin* (Clements & Musker, 1992), *Pocahontas* (Gabriel & Goldberg, 1995) and *Mulan* (Bancroft & Cook, 1998) have princesses who are more varied in their portrayal of gendered behaviour than the earliest princesses, partially consistent with the second wave of feminism. The gendered behaviours and the relation between men and women in these films are more complex. The princesses in this era displayed feminine qualities in 58% of their behaviour (England et al., 2011) and were more strong-willed, and less willing to accept the life set out for them than the females in the 'early' princess films. Davis (2007) found that the "independence demonstrated by these heroines grew exponentially with each film" (Davis, 2007, p. 278) in this era.

Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* (Clements & Musker, 1989) paved the way for more feminist-inflected characters who would be positive role models for young children, although *The Little Mermaid* (Clements & Musker, 1989) has been subjected to feminist criticism (Wasko, 2001; Frasl, 2018; Giroux & Pollock, 2010). Ariel is fascinated by the human world and sees it as associated with freedom. In a problematic scene from the film in which Ursula sings 'Poor Unfortunate Souls' Ariel sacrifices her voice to be transformed into a human in order to pursue Eric for whom she has fallen in love. Ariel's need for a physical transformation in the film presents the body as a site of power for women and her shift in focus from freedom to romance may be read as a sign of postfeminist discourse in the film (Frasl, 2018). Ariel's sacrifice of her voice is also unintentionally realistic for Sells (1995) who identified the underlying message of the scene as being one in which women must be silent to gain a place in the cultured/public world. Ursula informs Ariel that men

prefer quiet women and that appearance and ‘body language’ are all she will need to make Eric fall in love with her, again placing her worth on her body. However, Eric does not fall in love with the voiceless Ariel, it is her voice that he has become infatuated with, a contradictory message common in Disney animations (Giroux & Pollock, 2010).

Although there are some positive representations of women in the ‘middle’ princess films, many of the female characters (Ariel, Jasmine, Mulan, Pocahontas) are fighting against oppression imposed by their fathers, representatives of patriarchy (Wynns & Rosenfeld, 2003). The princesses do ultimately succeed in getting what they have been fighting for which is usually the freedom to make their own choices in life, however, they are granted their wishes by their fathers. The freedom ultimately winds up with the princesses marrying the person they truly love despite their initial rejection of marriage, meaning they exist always in relation to men (Giroux & Pollock, 2010). Artz (2004) notes that “once their individual needs are met, all [Disney] heroes and heroines come to accept the wisdom of established authority and norms” (Artz, 2004, p. 133), that is, those imposed by their royal or powerful predecessors, rather than challenge the hierarchical order or implement change (Artz, 2004). The fathers in *The Little Mermaid* (Clements & Musker, 1989) and *Aladdin* (Clements & Musker, 1992) hold substantial power over their daughters as well as their kingdoms. Although the fathers are concerned with their daughter’s welfare, they are also authoritative and the father-daughter relationship is often defined by the daughter’s necessary obedience to her father’s wishes while the mother, or lack thereof, is presented as unimportant (Holcomb et al., 2015, p. 1967). For Giroux and Pollock (2010) the controlling but caring father trope is utilised to conceal the patriarchal nature of the films.

Further, all the female characters in this category fall in love despite their initial goals being unrelated to romance. Belle (*Beauty and the Beast,* Trousdale, & Wise, 1991), rejects the notion of becoming a housewife, Jasmine also despises the idea of marrying someone chosen for her, Mulan wants to fight in the place of her father and is initially troublesome and incompetent while doing so (England et al., 2011), until she is eventually able to save her country *and* find a romantic partner. Pocahontas and Ariel both seek adventure and perform rescues, for example, Pocahontas asserts herself to her father and steps in front of a potentially fatal bullet to save the man she loves. Although this move is heroic, Pocahontas' heroism is motivated by her love for John Smith which has become her focus (Dundes, 2001, p. 356). Moreover, she ultimately sacrifices her love and chance for exploration in a new world to be with her tribespeople because she is needed. This could be a potentially empowering message as she is likely to be a leader of her tribe in the future. Alternatively, that she sacrifices her opportunity to explore and be with the man she has fallen in love with out of duty rather than her own desire to do so means that she conforms to stereotypically feminine traits such as selflessness and altruism (Dundes, 2001) and does not get her 'happily ever after'.

Although these female characters are certainly less passive and less frequently shown completing domestic duties than the 'early' princesses, they are still ultimately fulfilled by finding romantic partners (apart from Pocahontas). In a content analysis of the non-realistic romantic ideals and more realistic romantic challenges in Disney princess films from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (Cottrell et al., 1937) to *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013), the princess films of this 'middle' era "contained half of all the ideals expressed in all the films combined" (Hefner et al., 2017, p. 527) suggesting a highly unrealistic portrayal of love. This is particularly

problematic as it is the romantic tropes that are central to the plot development of the princess films in this era (Martin & Kazyak, 2009).

The research regarding the portrayal of female characters in the ‘middle’ era of Disney princess animations finds that although the women are less stereotyped than their earlier counterparts, some problematic depictions remain. Therefore the ‘middle’ Disney princess films are said to have mixed messages for women (England et al., 2011).

2.8.4.3 The ‘Modern’ Disney Princesses. *The Princess and the Frog* (Clements & Musker, 2009), *Tangled* (Greno & Howard, 2010), *Brave* (Andrews et al., 2012) *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013), and *Moana* (Musker, et al., 2016) are referred to as the ‘modern’ Disney princess films (England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018a) (with the necessary addition of *Frozen 2,* Buck & Lee, 2019 and *Raya and The Last Dragon*, Estrada & Hall, 2021 which have since been released, the last of which, although not an official princess film yet, may become one).

Generally, these films present female protagonists who are androgynous (high in both feminine and masculine traits) which, overall is a far more progressive message for women than the earlier princess films (Hine et al., 2018a; England et al., 2011). However, most of the female characters are still romantically linked to male characters at the end of the films which has led critics to state that these plotlines have contradictory, rather than simply progressive gendered messages (Rudloff, 2016; Hine et al., 2018a; England et al., 2011). Tiana, the first Black Disney princess, is also the first princess in the franchise shown to work after becoming royal. Although she achieves her dream of owning a restaurant in which she works after marrying Prince Naveen, it could be argued that the mundane and far from magical ‘happily ever after’ ending could be a reflection of a race hierarchy (Dundes

& Streiff, 2016). Further that Disney portrays their first Black princess existing against a flawed white one (Charlotte, another central female protagonist regarded as an honorary princess in this reading) suggests that the negative portrayal of a white princess was necessary to give way to, and lead the audience to accept, the first Black princess, who, also problematically, spends most of her time as a frog with green skin rather than a human with Black skin (Moffitt, 2019, p. 482).

Although Elsa from *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013) remains single, Anna, her sister, develops a (short-lived) romantic relationship with Hans, followed by a more developed (and genuine) relationship with Kristoff. Although it is the sisterly bond between Elsa and Anna that ultimately enables the kingdom of Arendelle to recover from the eternal winter, Anna and Kristoff's developing romance is a significant feature of the film, providing a mixed message regarding the importance of heterosexual unions for womens' happiness and fulfilment (Rudloff, 2016). Elsa, unlike her sister, remains single and being a Queen with magical and potentially dangerous powers, the message that a woman cannot be both powerful and romantically successful has been identified (Streiff & Dundes, 2017a). Moana (*Moana,* Musker et al., 2016) also remains single and is the first Disney princess film to have no romantic storyline at all (excluding *Brave* Andrews et al., 2012, which is the only Disney/Pixar princess production - Pixar has been a subsidiary of the Walt Disney company since 2006 and all the other princess films in the Disney princess franchise have been released solely by Disney). Moana and Maui develop a friendship based on mutual respect. There are, however, some salient gender stereotypes in *Moana* (Musker et al., 2016). Although Moana 'saves the day' by restoring the heart to Te Fiti which has been her goal all along, she approaches the rageful Te Ka and easily soothes her by encouraging her to be her true self, a

feminine climax to the film. Although Moana undoubtfully performs an act of bravery, the reconciliation does not require a violent final fight scene as in many Disney princess films. By having her heart restored, Te Fiti can create life again (much akin to fertility) which is presented as a fundamental part of her nature, and Maui regains his rather phallic fishhook, symbolic of his masculinity (Streiff & Dundes 2017b).

> "[A]s a result, there is now order in the world because each sex regains what is arguably their sole driving and sustaining force. These themes connote an unspoken gender yin and yang that suggest a sense of resolution consistent with long-standing gender norms" (Streiff & Dundes 2017b, p. 9).

The princesses in the 'modern' films are perhaps the most balanced in some ways, as they display athleticism and assertiveness, traditionally masculine traits, as well as fearfulness, a stereotypically feminine trait (Hine et al., 2018a, p. 10). However, many of them need male heroes to achieve their goals (Rapunzel, Anna, Moana) and the plots are largely centred around heterosexual romance which is perhaps contrary to progression in the traits they displayed. The portrayal of romance in these films shows that

> "although ideal expressions have slowed… the ideals are still rewarded [by positive reactions from the characters] and that could have important implications for what young viewers absorb with exposure to these films" (Hefner et al., 2017, p. 530).

Frozen 2 (Buck & Lee, 2019) and *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Estrada & Hall, 2021), two of the most recent Disney releases have yet to be quantitatively content coded. However, for Dundes (2020) it is notable that in *Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee, 2019) Elsa gives her position of power over Arendelle to her sister. The author states that

> "[a] progressive addition to the Disney princess realm would *not* have necessitated a woman inexplicably sharing power with her sister (that occurred after Anna reinforced the value of hegemonic heteronormative coupledom)" (Dundes, 2020, p. 7).

Further, Elsa continues to be portrayed as romantically uninvolved with another person, while her (less powerful and non-magically gifted) sister enjoys a proposal of marriage (Dundes, 2020) which is largely a continuation of the postfeminist messages within the original film (Streiff & Dundes, 2017a).

Much like *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013) and *Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee, 2019), *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Estrada & Hall, 2021) has two leading female protagonists. These two female characters are presented as enemies for much of the film, but their reconciliation enables the land of Kumandra to be saved from the Druun. There are no love interests or romantic tropes in the film (much like *Moana,* Musker et al., 2016), and no musical numbers which could reflect the film's "slightly more mature tone" (Grierson, 2021, p. 3). Raya is "strong, independent and… intrepid" (Debruge, 2021, p. 1) and Numaari has perhaps the most "genderless" (Debruge, 2021, p. 1) appearance of all female Disney protagonists in the Disney canon so far. Much like *Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee, 2019), the gendered behaviours displayed by the protagonists in this film have yet to be analysed and warrant quantitative research.

Overall, the representation of women in Disney princess films has changed significantly from the earliest films being a representation of passive, powerless women (England et al., 2011), the 'middle' films representing a greater sense of females who rebel against oppression much in line with goals of the women's movement, to the 'modern' films in which the most common behaviours displayed by princesses were a mix of masculine and feminine (Hine et al., 2018a). The representation of women in the Disney princess franchise provides one example however how messages (whether explicit or more subtle) within Disney animated features cannot be considered apolitical (Giroux & Pollock, 2010).

2.8.5 The Representation of Disney Princes

Although the representation of women in the Disney princess franchise can be seen to progress chronologically, the representation of male characters is less linear (England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018a). The male characters have also been given less academic attention, perhaps because, by creating the Disney princess franchise, Disney created and marketed a clear set of female characters and no equivalent yet exists for the male (non-prince) characters. However, with romance being a consistent trope in Disney princess films, the prince characters have been content coded, although non-princes have not been to the same extent.

2.8.5.1 The Princes in the 'Early' Princess Films. The 'early' princes lacked screen time yet had important narrative functions in delivering the conclusions of the films where they saved the princess from something dangerous or adverse. The princes in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (Cottrell et al., 1937) and *Cinderella* (Geronimi et al., 1950) are good depictions of what have been criticised as being cardboard characters who lack personality and character development (Davis, 2013). The prince in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (Cottrell et al., 1937) for example, is considered "the only real failure [of the film]" (Finch, 2011, p. 142). He is present in the first scene, in which the two characters fall instantly in love, a common theme for the early Disney animations (Garlen & Sandlin, 2017), and then returns to give her 'true love's kiss' to break the curse of a death-like state inflicted on her. Similarly, Prince Charming in *Cinderella* (Geronimi et al., 1950) is also largely absent. He is perhaps more passive than the previous prince.

Prince Charming meets and instantly falls in love with Cinderella. When the clock strikes midnight and she runs away, it is the King who decides she must be found. Prince Charming is next seen marrying Cinderella at the end of the film. He does not initiate or take part in the search to find her. We see him in only two

scenes, one where the two characters fall in love, and again after they are married. Prince Charming is the only prince in this category who displayed more feminine than masculine behaviour, however only seven codes could be attributed to the character (England et al*.,* 2011, p. 558).

Prince Phillip in *Sleeping Beauty* (Geronimi et al., 1959) is more active than the other princes in this era and is present in much of the film. As a result, he has the most behavioural codes attributed when compared with the other princes in this era (England et al., 2011) and is a more developed character and has more personality (Davis, 2013). He is willing to fight for his right to marry the woman he has chosen. All the princes in this category are required to save the princess and in content coding analyses, were only slightly more masculine than feminine with the 51% of the behaviour displayed by the princes in this grouping being masculine (England et al., 2011). Because of their lack of screen-time, only a few behaviours were codable so the significance of such a finding is limited (England et al., 2011). That the prince characters are only slightly more masculine than feminine is particularly significant when compared with the princesses in the films who were some of the most feminine in the franchise (England et al., 2011). The stereotypical and restrictive representation of women (often attributed to be a sign of the era that the films were produced) is inconsistent with the representation of the male characters who are relatively androgynous.

2.8.5.2 The Princes in the ‘Middle’ Disney films.

2.8.5.2.1 The Little Mermaid (1989). The prince characters in the ‘middle’ princess films tended to display mainly masculine traits (England et al., 2011). *The Little Mermaid* (Clements & Musker, 1989) was the first Disney princess film to be produced after Walt Disney’s death in 1966 and in some ways, the characters in this

film are far removed from the characters in the films that came before it. Prince Eric's role in *The Little Mermaid* (Clements & Musker, 1989) has been given less attention by academics than Ariel's as the film has been subjected to feminist criticism as described above. Eric is different from the male protagonists that have come before him. He works on ships, is popular with his shipmates and is grounded and humble. He is more active (we see him doing much more 'work' and other activities) than the 'early' princes and seems more relatable. England et al., (2011) indicates that Eric shows mainly masculine traits although his three most frequently displayed behaviours were all feminine.

Although Eric is saved from drowning in the first few scenes of the movie, he rescues Ariel in a particularly dramatic and theatrical scene near the end of the film. Eric gouges Ursula the evil sea witch to save Ariel, and it is King Triton (Ariel's father who rules over all sea creatures) who ultimately grants Ariel legs and a life on land enabling her to marry the man she loves. Although Ariel saves Eric when he is helpless, the first rescue executed by a princess up to this point, the men ultimately wield power and shape Ariel's fate even though she was the most adventurous and independent princess to this date. It is this argument that leads scholars to the conclusion that *The Little Mermaid* (Clements & Musker, 1989) represents the patriarchal world (Wasko, 2001, p. 136).

2.8.5.2.2 Beauty and The Beast (1991). Interestingly, much like the two earliest princes, The Beast in *Beauty and The Beast* (1991) remains nameless yet has a prominent role throughout the film, with it even being argued that the plot becomes centred around him rather than Belle (Jeffords, 1995). The film begins with the audience learning that the Beast has been cursed as a punishment for being judgemental, selfish, and vain. Jeffords (1995) states that the introduction to The

Beast's curse, is important. The author quotes The Beast's introduction and discusses it in the following way:

> ""He was selfish, spoiled, and unkind. Yet because he was a prince, no one dared say no to him. No one dared teach him a lesson" …The anonymous "no one"s who failed to teach him any differently seem finally to be more at fault for his behavior than does the prince himself" (Jeffords, 1995, p. 168).

Diminishing The Beast's responsibility for his own flaws may lead the audience to become more fully invested in his pursuit to break the curse (Jeffords, 1995). To do so, he must learn to love and be loved in return. This plot has been said to imply that although men are flawed, they can be changed by being nurtured and this will uncover their goodness (Jeffords, 1995, p. 171). In this way then, Belle "becomes another woman whose life is valued for how she can patiently solve a man's problems – and withstand emotional and physical abuse along the way" (Giroux and Pollock, 2010, p. 106). This is a potentially damaging message based on men deserving love even when they are aggressive and inspire fear, traits that the Beast displays abundantly (England et al., 2011). The Beast holds Belle captive and refuses to let her eat when she rejects his offer to dine with him. Despite the Beast's controlling and dominating traits, his once human servants who have been turned into household objects by the curse, encourage Belle (and thus the audience) to see beneath his aggressive behaviour, and believe he can be changed. Such messages can have serious repercussions for the acceptance of domestic violence and controlling and coercive behaviour as it suggests that is a female's responsibility to nurture aggressive men into better romantic partners (Giroux & Pollock, 2010; England et al., 2011). In fact, the first two examples of coercive behaviour provided on the Women's Aid website are "isolating you from friends and family" and

“depriving you of basic needs, such as food” (Women’s Aid, 2020) and The Beast does both to Belle.

2.8.5.2.3 Aladdin (1992). Aladdin is the first official Disney princess film to be named after the male protagonist. The film is centred around Aladdin's love interest with Jasmine. He must pretend to be a prince and conceal his identity as the incredibly poor ‘street rat’. He is the only prince in the ‘middle’ era to have more feminine than masculine behaviours (England et al., 2011). He is in touch with his emotions and arguably has strong morals because he only steals what he needs to survive and even then, is seen to give food to starving children who need it more than him. Aladdin is generally a selfless character which is reflected at the end of the film when he uses his last wish to free the genie who has been let down by his previous masters who have promised to do this many times before. Although Aladdin is initially selfless, when he gains power, first with the attainment of the magic lamp and then when he marries princess Jasmine, he

> “never questions or challenges the feudal order: Aladdin does not use the magic lamp to feed the children, aid the poor, or disarm the sultan’s army. No, this “diamond in the rough” only strives to win the princess and defeat Jafar, the arch-villain” (Artz, 2004, p. 128).

This suggests that Aladdin seems less concerned with improving the lives of people who have come from underprivileged backgrounds such as himself and more concerned about improving his own life, something that is unexpected considering the opening scenes of the film. The film has also been criticised for the way that Aladdin (who seems to be more American than Arab), is essentially a representation of the Western culture and his presence signifies the dominance and replacement of a local culture with American values (Artz, 2004; Addison, 1993). He questions Jasmine’s arranged marriage and essentially the film undermines traditional Arabic

values (Addison, 1993). The film also portrays the culture as dangerous, more barbaric and oppressive compared to the Western way of life and thus represents American culture as superior (Addison, 1993; Giroux and Pollock, 2010) explicitly highlighted in the lyric of the song ‘Arabian nights’ at the introduction of the film that states, “it’s barbaric but hey, it’s home!”.

2.8.5.2.4 Pocahontas (1995) and Mulan (1998). Little research has considered the representation of the male protagonists in *Mulan* (Bancroft & Cook, 1998) and *Pocahontas* (Gabriel & Goldberg, 1995) and so they will be considered here together. John Smith (*Pocahontas,* Gabriel & Goldberg, 1995) has the second highest number of feminine characteristics of the princes in the ‘middle’ category, second only to Aladdin, however, he is still higher in masculine than feminine traits overall. Both John Smith and Li Shang were “unemotionally stoic, physically strong, assertive, athletic, and were shown as leaders” (England et al., 2011, p. 564). Li Shang, the male protagonist in *Mulan* (Bancroft & Cook, 1998) displays masculine behaviours in his three most frequent traits and has the lowest number of feminine codes of the princes in the middle princes’ category (England et al., 2011). He has an almost invisible emotional response to the death of his father. He is physically strong and efficiently leads his men into their battles. He displayed the lowest frequency of feminine behaviours of the men in this chronological grouping, with strong, assertive, and athletic being his most frequent behaviours (England et al., 2011, p. 562). Despite his highly masculine behaviour, the character has been praised for being an LGBTQ+ icon in the press as he seems to start falling in love Mulan when he believes she is a man (Tsjeng, 2018; Truffaut-Wong, 2020). When Mulan reveals she is a woman, after being cold and telling her to leave, he does then pursue her romantically.

2.8.6 The Portrayal of 'Middle' Male (Non-Prince) Protagonists

The Hunchback of Notre Dame (Trousdale & Wise, 1996), *Hercules* (Clements & Musker, 1997) and *Tarzan* (Buck & Lima, 1999) could contain some of the most influential 1990's male protagonists in the Disney franchise for young boys as the films have grossed over $200 million worldwide, a figure utilised by Hine et al., (2018a) to identify successful Disney princess animations. Further, the three films have central human adult male protagonists. Boys are more likely to disengage with media or toys that are targeted towards girls, therefore the Disney male protagonists in the princess films could be less influential than those in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Trousdale & Wise, 1996), *Hercules* (Clements & Musker, 1997) and *Tarzan* (Buck & Lima, 1999). Hercules, Tarzan, Quasimodo and Phoebus (the latter two characters from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Trousdale & Wise, 1996) have not been included in previous content coding analyses conducted by England et al., (2011) and Hine et al., (2018a) meaning their portrayal of masculine and feminine traits is yet to be considered beyond qualitative analysis. Even fewer studies have considered the portrayal of the female protagonists in these three films, although Davis (2007) considers Meg from *Hercules* (Clements & Musker, 1997) and Esmeralda from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Trousdale & Wise, 1996) as streetwise "tough gals" (Davis, 2007, p. 206). This has left a gap in the knowledge of the portrayal of gender despite them being successful and widely seen. For Davis (2013) the male protagonists' "shared sense of justice and their being motivated to be their best possible selves by the love they feel for a woman" (Davis, 2013, p. 145) is what ties these characters together into a 'non-prince hero' category.

Several similarities between Hercules and Tarzan as characters can be found (Davis, 2013). They are both raised by non-parents (which is a widely popular hero

trope beyond Disney media also) in worlds where they have not come from or do not belong, they develop into muscular heroes (and therefore physically hypermasculine) to prove their worth, and their falling in love changes their fate and goals overall (Davis, 2013 p. 71), the latter, a trope more akin to the sacrifices made by the princesses up until this point. Both Tarzan and Hercules ultimately choose love over the worlds in which they have been raised. Primo (2018) contemplates whether Hercules lacked its expected commercial success compared to other Disney animations (and compared to Tarzan) because the character diverges too far from the stereotypical male hero to which Disney audiences had become so accustomed. Primo (2018) states that no other male Disney hero has had to sacrifice power or a title for the woman they love in the way Hercules does, as such a sacrifice is more associated with the princesses. Thus, the message here is

> “A man engages in a sort of selflessness that creates a happier outcome for both himself and the woman he loves. Hercules does not want to be superior in status to Meg, but rather merely wishes to be an equal. This is radical compared to male characters in the Disney animated films prior to Hercules, as male protagonists have tended to be the heroic love interest, exuding masculinity, rather than characters that engage in self-sacrifice (England et al., 2011). The ending of Hercules arguably promotes gender equality in that a male was willing to sacrifice stature for the sake of woman, in fact, for a woman without power or position" (Primo, 2018, p. 9).

By contrast, although Tarzan (much like Mowgli from *The Jungle Book*, Reitherman, 1967) leaves the apes whom he sincerely loves and have raised him, he is returning to his ‘natural’ habitat in the human world which seems inevitable. Tarzan does not sacrifice power or status and may gain it, symbolised by the scene in which he emerges from the tree house wearing a suit and shoes rather than his loincloth and bare feet. Hercules was the first male character to make an unprecedented sacrifice for love, which may explain why Tarzan was more commercially successful than Hercules. Quasimodo experiences unrequited love for

the female protagonist Esmeralda and comes together with Phoebus, her love interest, to save her life. Phoebus is likely more stereotypically masculine because he is able-bodied brave, and heroic, whereas Quasimodo is physically strong but sensitive and disfigured, one of the only Disney protagonists to be so. Having two male protagonists largely pitted against one another before they eventually become friends, makes the films' portrayal of them particularly interesting and worthy of research.

2.8.7 The key Messages from the 'Middle' Films (Men and Women) and the Relation to Anti-Feminist Backlash.

The Disney princes in the 'middle' era are among the most physically masculine of the characters studied in content coding analyses of the princess films (England et al., 2011). They tended to be physically strong, unemotional, and heroic (England et al., 2011; Towbin et al*.,* 2004) and the films take place in worlds focused on maintaining social order (Artz, 2004). Tarzan, Hercules, and Phoebus, although not prince characters, also have muscular bodies yet Quasimodo and Aladdin do not. Hercules, although heroic and physically strong at the end of the film, is ostracised for being clumsy and incompetent and is motivated to develop a godlike physique and works hard to achieve his strength, whereas the other 'middle' prince characters seem to be naturally strong (Towbin et al., 2004). The muscular body ideal prevalent in 1990's media, and much of the 'middle' Disney animations, is associated with male dominance which in itself is problematic, but this could have particularly worrying implications for young boys who may aim to achieve these hard-to-attain and unrealistic bodies (Spitzer et al., 1999).

The portrayal of the princesses in situations that they wish to escape, and the influence of dominating father figures are relatively consistent themes in the 'middle'

princess films. Although the female protagonists tended to be strong willed and seek independence, they ultimately fall in love sometimes at the detriment of their initial dreams or goals (England et al., 2011). The notion that women will be ultimately fulfilled by their romantic unions is fundamentally an anti-feminist backlash message intended to refocus women's attention on marriage and the home (Faludi, 1993). The masculinity of the male characters with whom the princesses in this era unite is also consistent with backlash politics that relies on reinforcing and exaggerating the difference between men and women to justify their different social roles (Faludi, 1993; Tasker, 1993). That the 'middle' Disney princess films seem to be influenced by backlash politics provides evidence for the entanglement with 'innocent' Disney animations and problematic gendered messages.

2.8.5.3 The Princes in the 'Modern' Princess Films

The princes in the 'modern' chronological grouping tended to display more feminine than masculine traits, a more progressive gender message that mirrors the development of androgynous princesses who display a more equal divide of masculine and feminine behaviours (Hine et al., 2018a; England et al., 2011). However, it is unclear as to whether the more feminine princes should be celebrated because they are often displayed as immature and offer comic relief (Macaluso, 2018).

***2.8.5.3.1 The Princess and the Frog* (2009).** Naveen is a fearful prince whose reactions are often used to provide light-hearted comedy, while Tiana is seen to be brave and more level-headed (Macaluso, 2018). Just 32% of Naveen's behaviour was coded as masculine, with him being one of the most feminine princes of this time grouping (Hine et al*.,* 2018a, p. 15; England et al., 2011, p. 562). Naveen is the first prince character in the franchise who, despite being born a prince, has no

financial stability because he has been disowned by his royal parents. To regain financial security Naveen believes he simply needs to marry a princess. Naveen is taught by Tiana, a hardworking and ambitious working-class girl who is working multiple jobs to pursue her dream of owning a restaurant, that happiness does not come with money. Naveen then, is a good example of a prince who learns to become a better person from the female protagonist. This fits in with the message that although men in Disney require improvement, princesses tend to be almost perfect and are not allowed flaws (Stone, 1975). The story ends with the romantic union of Naveen (who has realised that he would not be happy marrying for money) and Tiana, who is able to purchase her restaurant and live her dream, while having found her prince. The happily ever after is unorthodox compared to previous Disney princess animations, as Tiana is the only princess to be seen ‘working’ at the end of the film.

Naveen’s character has been criticised for being racially ambiguous because he is voiced by a Brazilian actor but looks European, yet Tiana is African American (Barker, 2010; Gehlawat, 2010; Lester, 2010). Naveen’s racial ambiguity is significant because *The Princess and the Frog* (Clements & Musker, 2009), as previously stated, was the first Disney princess film to have central Black characters (Barker, 2010; Gehlawat, 2010; Lester, 2010). It is also notable that the main characters spend most of their films as frogs and thus with green skin rather than human Black skin, which makes Disney’s attempt to diversify the princess franchise a feeble one (Gehlawat, 2010; Lester, 2010; Moffitt, 2019). For Lester (2010) this could reveal that Disney do not believe a Black African American male character is worthy of being a prince. Alternatively, having the first Black central characters depicted as animals for much of the film could be Disney’s way of being cautious, as

inevitably, it attracted much attention and there was no knowing how their audiences would react. However, beyond the representation of the most central protagonists,

> "that Tiana's African American father dies so early in the film, that the other black males are either physically challenged, illiterate and old, or engaged in criminal voodoo activity raises serious questions about Disney's construction of African American maleness" (Lester, 2010, p. 301).

For the reasons discussed here, Disney's representation of their first central black protagonists has been widely criticised.

***2.8.5.3.2 Tangled* (2010).** At the beginning of *Tangled* (Greno & Howard, 2010) Flynn Ryder is a thief who is running from the palace guards after having stolen a crown. He is perhaps the most like Aladdin of all the Disney prince characters, although the motivation for his criminal activity is to become rich rather than to survive, so his moral motivation is more questionable. After accidently discovering Rapunzel and reluctantly agreeing to help her with her dream (to see the floating lanterns) the two characters fall in love. Flynn attempts to rescue Rapunzel from Mother Gothel who is keeping her trapped to utilise the magic healing qualities of her hair, by cutting it and thus breaking its magical powers, meaning that the life-threatening injury he has incurred during the rescue, cannot be healed. As a result, Flynn seems to become more selfless after falling in love. However, unknown to the characters and the audience, Rapunzel's tears also have the magic healing quality and after thinking her partner has died, she cries, and Flynn is healed. This means that Flynn's risk taking is ultimately rewarded. Flynn has 42% masculine characteristics (Hine et al., 2018a, p. 15).

***2.8.5.3.3 Frozen* (2013).** *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013) is the first film that presents a prince character as a villain, whom at first the audience are led to believe is a protagonist. Hans seems to be a typical prince/Disney hero, striving to do the

right thing. He looks after the kingdom of Arendelle while Anna leaves to find Elsa and is shown to be caring and attentive to the people of the kingdom while the sisters are away. He also attempts to rescue Anna when she is thought to be in trouble. However, in an unexpected twist, when Anna returns and asks him to kiss her as an act of true love that will save her life, he reveals that he was never truly in love with her and only intended to marry her to have access to the throne, and he had planned to kill Elsa (who had just been made Queen) to do so. Hans therefore represents a male character who is preoccupied with power and dominance and is manipulative (Rudloff, 2016). He is ultimately stopped before his plot to take over Arendelle is achieved. Although this prince villain combination is a first for Disney, Kristoff, who becomes Anna's genuine and long-lasting romantic partner, is presented in some more stereotypical ways.

Kristoff is essential to Anna's pursuit to find her sister when she realises she cannot do it alone (Rudloff, 2016). He also believes that Anna is incompetent and does not trust her when they are faced with danger although she does help him fight off a pack of wolves and is more competent than Kristoff perceives (Rudloff, 2016; Hine et al., 2018a). Kristoff is frequently presented as strong in comparison to Anna, which reinforces their difference in capabilities (Rudloff, 2016). He does however show a less masculine side and is seen to be sensitive and affectionate (Hine et al., 2018a). Kristoff is embarrassed by his lack of romantic experience which is revealed when he takes Anna to visit the 'love experts'. This character trait is even more exaggerated in *Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee, 2019) when Kristoff becomes increasingly nervous about proposing to Anna and fails multiple times. Kristoff, in *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013), displays 43% masculine characteristics, which despite meaning he is

more feminine than masculine overall, still makes him one of the most masculine princes in the ‘modern’ prince category (Hine et al*.,* 2018a, p. 15)

***2.8.5.3.4 Moana* (2016)** Maui’s behaviour has not been coded in previous content analyses likely because although he is a central male protagonist, he is a demi-god rather than a prince, much like Hercules. He is physically masculine although his size has been controversial with Polynesian natives who state that Maui’s physique in the legend (on which *Moana*, Musker et al., 2016 is based) is more like that of a developing teenage boy than the Disney portrayal, yet it has also been suggested that Maui’s size may best represent his incredible strength in the film (Roy, 2016). The controversy surrounding the physical portrayal of Maui continued when Disney released a costume consisting of dark tattooed skin and a grass skirt which was accused of ‘brownface’ and was pulled from stores (Rika, 2016). It seems that despite their best efforts - Disney producers enabled Pacific Islanders to inform them of their traditions to avoid misrepresenting their culture (Robinson, 2016) - Maui’s character was the focus of much criticism.

Maui is a powerful and confident male protagonist thanks to his magical fishhook. The fishhook allows him to shapeshift and could symbolise the phallus according to Streiff and Dundes (2017a) or at least his sense of pride and achievement. When he loses his fishhook, he reveals his abandonment anxiety and his desire to be adored by humans as result. He also states that he feels as though he is worthless without his hook and becomes both physically and emotionally vulnerable when it is damaged. Thus, although Maui may be physically masculine, his masculinity seems to depend on his fishhook rather than his sense of self, making an analysis of his behaviour all the more important, especially as Maui was

left in a seeming non-category by Macaluso (2018) who found that he did not fit within the categories of boy, hero/prince, post-feminist hero or villain.

***2.8.5.3.5 Frozen 2* (2019) and *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021).** Because both *Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee, 2019) and *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Estrada & Hall, 2021) have been recently released there is little research into the gendered behaviours displayed by their characters, especially the males. This is likely to reflect that in *Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee, 2019), Kristoff is much less present and influential in the storyline in this film than in the first and *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Estrada & Hall, 2021) is notable for its lack of romantic storyline, and lack of influential male characters. In *Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee, 2019), Kristoff is shown to be agonising about the best way to propose to Anna and is seen to be concerned that emotional distance is forming between them. Therefore, his main contribution to the plot is the romantic storyline. Similarly, there are very few adult males represented in *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Estrada & Hall, 2021). However, Raya's father Chief Benja has been regarded as an entirely different Disney father figure who is more supportive and encourages his daughter to learn important life skills (Carlo, 2021). Therefore, Disney seem to have moved away from representing over-powering and dominant father figures with the introduction of Chief Benja who is more empathetic and utilises a more mentoring parenting style (Carlo, 2021).

2.8.5.3.6 Postfeminism in Disney. Postfeminism in Disney has been identified in the portrayal of masculinity. The postfeminist Disney man is often presented as immature, inept, and generally provides comedic content as the butt of the joke in contrast to their stronger female equivalent (Macaluso, 2018). Female characters in children's films seem to be more intelligent whereas men seem to be stronger and funnier (Smith et al., 2010) and men in postfeminist films are likely to be

underachievers in financial trouble (Gill, 2014). These traits are particularly present within *The Princess and the Frog* (Clements & Musker, 2009) as Naveen holds many of these qualities. Other modern princes such as Flynn Rider and Kristoff also fit into this new masculine archetype (Macaluso, 2018; Macaluso, 2016). Although this can lead to the conclusion that Disney films with such a gender dynamic could be empowering because the female characters are stronger and more competent than the male characters, this is a sign of postfeminist content because

> "there seems to be a message that men must be weak in order for women to thrive. This message is dangerous to both sexes, as it subtly suggests that women and men cannot successfully coexist as strong, independent individuals together" (Macaluso, 2018, p. 8).

Further, by representing princesses who need the help of men to achieve their goals and maintaining a focus on female characters' appearances (best exemplified by 'Let it Go' in *Frozen,* Buck & Lee, 2013), "one of the strongest features of post-feminism [is endorsed]: a contradictory articulation of progressive and regressive elements of gendered identities and identifications" (Rudloff, 2016, p. 17).

Contradictory gender messages have been prevalent throughout Disney's history, but the 'modern' princess films endorse postfeminist messages by portraying strong(er) female characters alongside "weak or foolish male character[s]" (Macaluso, 2018, p. 7). These messages are also prevalent in non-princess Disney animated feature films, particularly *Hercules* (Clements & Musker, 1997). The implications of presenting women as strong only against weak, less masculine (Gillam & Wooden, 2008) and largely mocked male characters are unclear.

2.8.5.4 Summary of the Gendered Messages in the Disney Princess Films Overall

Highlighting the relation between the gendered messages in Disney films and the women's movement provides evidence that such messages reflect, impact upon,

and/or are impacted by, the political climate in which they exist (Giroux & Pollock, 2010). This is perhaps most discussed by academics in relation to the portrayal of the princesses, the first of which were passive, domestic, and submissive, then became more strong-willed, assertive and insistent upon fighting for their right to choose their own paths in the 1980's and 1990's (England et al., 2011), while the later princesses seem to be the most androgynous of all (Hine et al., 2018a). Importantly, the 'middle' princesses exist within and wish to break free from patriarchal societies in which they are overruled by their fathers (*The Little Mermaid,* Clements & Musker, 1989; *Aladdin,* Clements & Musker, 1992; *Pocahontas,* Gabriel & Goldberg, 1995; *Mulan*, Bancroft & Cook, 1998) or male captors (*Beauty and The Beast,* 1991) (Wasko, 2001; Wynns & Rosenfeld, 2003; Giroux & Pollock, 2010), yet they almost all marry (and those who do not marry still fall in love) meaning that they conform to the expectation that women should prioritise relationships (Faludi, 1993). Further, heterosexual romantic love is central to the plotlines of the 'middle' films and such love is depicted as being powerful, transformative, and thus hugely important (Martin & Kazyak, 2009). Such a message echoes the familiar messages of feminist backlash which aimed to encourage women to be within the home and have families, rather than in the public space (Faludi, 1993). The exception to this is Pocahontas who sacrifices her relationship with John Smith to stay where she 'belongs', with her tribe and father. Some of, but notably a minority of the 'modern' princesses do not marry, for example Elsa and Anna in *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013) and Moana, although Anna does get engaged in *Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee, 2019). These princesses are fighting for a bigger cause (like Moana, whose goal is to save her people from famine), a potentially empowering message for women.

Disney's reliance on heterosexual romantic plotlines in the Disney princess

franchise means that most of the research considering male characters focuses on the prince characters. Such research finds that the princes in the ‘early’ and ‘middle’ films seemed to be slightly higher in masculine than feminine behaviours, with the exception of Prince Charming from *Cinderella*, (Geronimi et al., 1950) and Aladdin (England et al., 2011), and the ‘modern’ male characters were more feminine than masculine (England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018a) but may be mocked for being so. The feminine ‘modern’ male characters have been argued to be represented as incompetent meaning that there may be some resonances with postfeminist discourse (Rudloff, 2016). Presenting incompetent men against competent women is, one could contend, a limited source of female empowerment (Rudloff, 2016).

Given the long-term global success of Disney that continues today, the gendered messages present in the franchise have been, and are likely to continue to be, influential on many generations of boys and girls, warranting further and more expansive research. More specifically, research should be conducted into the portrayal of male and female characters that may be influential and have not been content coded previously (such as those within *The Hunchback of Notre Dame,* Trousdale & Wise, 1996, *Hercules*, Clements & Musker, 1997, and *Tarzan*, Buck & Lima, 1999) as well as those within some of the most recent releases (*Frozen 2,* Buck & Lee, 2019 and *Raya and the Last Dragon,* 2021). Such research should also review the coding framework applied by England et al., (2011) and Hine et al., (2018a) as it would benefit from being updated given it had some limitations (Hine et al., 2018a).

2.9 The Representation of Gender in the Marvel and Star Wars Franchises

Disney acquired the Marvel franchise in 2009 and the Star Wars franchise in 2012. It appears the representation of gender within both the Marvel and Star Wars

franchises has been given much less scholarly attention than the gendered portrayals in Disney's animated feature length films. There seems to be no research regarding the portrayal of gender within the Marvel franchise. As a result, this section will draw upon the small pool of existing research that has considered the representation of Rey, a new central female protagonist in the Star Wars franchise, and the (lack of) merchandise associated with her.

Disney's acquisition of Star Wars from Lucasfilm has been associated with more central female protagonists being present in the films since, which could reflect a more feminist agenda within the Disney corporation (Bruin-Mole, 2017, p. 225). Both *The Force Awakens* (2015) and *The Last Jedi* (2017) feature Rey who has been celebrated for having "technical skills [that] engineer her through the heroic narrative; she is not fated or tragic" (Larabee, 2016, p. 8). Alternatively, other readings have found that compared to Han Solo, a male character, Rey tended to be "spoken to by more important characters [rather than speaking to them, as was found with Han Solo, which] implies a more apprentice like role" (Jones et al., 2020, p. 29). As the researchers suggest, this could lead to a problematic gendered reading of the film (Jones et al., 2020, p. 29). Further, Koushik and Reed (2018) suggest that Rey's narrative has similarities with Luke Skywalker's which reflects that Disney's investment into more central, powerful, and influential female characters is not a genuine feminist pursuit. Referring to *The Last Jedi* (2017) and the live-action remake of *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) which were released by Disney the same year, the researchers state that it seems that

> "there is not a willingness… to search for new narratives outside of what it has tried and succeeded with before. Not only are both of these films either reboots or sequels, but they both reimagine traditional characters in a way that the audience is supposed to read as "feminist" when they are not truly more progressive than originally conceived" (Koushik & Reed, 2018, p. 16).

There seem to be conflicting readings about Rey as a central female character within the Star Wars films in which she features, and whether her presence should be celebrated. Additionally, the franchise has also been criticised for the lack of representation of Rey within its merchandise. Fans coined the hashtag #wheresray in which

> "two primary lines of critique [can be identified]: one predicated on the text (e.g., Rey is the film's protagonist, which isn't sufficiently reflected in the merchandise), the other on Star Wars fan culture (focusing on the franchise's erasure and devaluation of female fans)" (Scott, 2017, p. 143).

This lack of representation of female protagonists in Star Wars merchandise did not begin with Rey - fans had made similar observations about the lack of Princess Leia merchandise for many years before (Bruin-Mole, 2017, p. 235). It seems that historically, the "marketing of the Star Wars franchise has relied upon logics of gender difference that suggest unequal industry interest in reaching boys versus girls, and men versus women" (Johnson, 2014, p. 899) in that "iterative franchised production and marketing has cast Star Wars as *almost always* for boys yet *sometimes* for girls" (Johnson, 2014, p. 900, emphasis in original).

It is perhaps not a coincidence that Disney has acquired a franchise of films which "in the popular imagination, has always been a boy's story" (Koushik & Reed, 2018, p. 6). The company does not have a franchise of its own media that is marketed towards or associated strongly with boys. It is likely that Disney's acquisition of the Star Wars and Marvel franchises was an attempt for the company to reach male audiences and consumers in the same way that their own Disney princess franchise has been doing with female audiences for two decades. Given that there is little research into the portrayal of gender within Disney's newly acquired Star Wars and Marvel franchises, further investigation is warranted. Also, researching the impact of Marvel and Star Wars media on children is essential given

that they are now distributed by Disney, and Disney's reputation as a corporation that can be trusted to make wholesome and innocent entertainment (Giroux and Pollock, 2010; Sammond, 2018; Wynns & Rosenfeld, 2003; Wells, 2002; Bell et al., 1995; Giroux, 1995; Wasko, 2001) may extend to those franchises.

2.10 The Influence of Media on Children's Understanding of Gender

Various perspectives of gender development assume that children actively seek information about the appropriate roles, behaviours, activities and appearances of boys and girls and men and women (Martin & Ruble, 2004). Society continues to place gender as an important social category beyond its biological or physical manifestation (in genitalia and hormone levels for example) meaning that children are motivated to learn about differences between their own, and the opposite gender, and are likely to adhere to learned norms (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Gendered information is learnt from many sources and in various ways, including through the media, meaning that there are significant implications for the salient gender messages in the media discussed up to this point of the literature review. Cultivation theory posits that

> "watching a great deal of television will be associated with a tendency to hold specific and distinct conceptions of reality, conceptions that are congruent with the most consistent and pervasive images and values of the medium" (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999, p. 3)

which supports the notion that the persistent messaging in the media will influence societies. For Gerber (1998) it seems to be the ritualistic manner in which television is consumed for several hours each day by most households, and that it is easily accessible within the home, that differentiates it from cinema and film within cultivation theory (Mosharafa, 2015). However, television and film are now consumed via streaming services by more than half of adults in the UK (Ofcom, 2018) suggesting that both can (and likely are being) consumed in ritualistic and

continuous ways, yet this seems to not yet be acknowledged by cultivation theory. However, many other theories that describe how media effects children's understanding of gender can be applied to film.

2.10.1 Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development

The impact of the media on children's understanding of the appropriate roles for men and women is discussed by social cognitive theory of gender development (Bussey & Bandura, 1999) which describes the ways in which children learn about gender differentiation from their environment. The theory suggests that children observe, attend to, and replicate behaviour of same-sex models more frequently because they identify them as like themselves in a process referred to as modelling. Further, "models who are rewarded for their behavior and who are attractive role models should be particularly influential" (Coyne et al., 2016, p. 1911). This is particularly true of boys who pay more attention to same gender models than do girls. Children learn gendered information through models in their direct environment such as their parents, siblings, and peers as well as through the media.

A child must be motivated to replicate behaviour according to Bussey and Bandura (1999) and children should not be viewed as passive in the acquisition of gendered information. A child is not likely to be motivated to replicate behaviour they have associated with an adverse outcome (for example if it is chastised) and are more likely to reproduce a behaviour if they have an incentive to do so (for example, they might get praised). Because children are more likely to be praised for behaving in accordance with their gender role stereotype, they are more motivated to replicate this behaviour. Similarly, if a character in a film is shown to be displaying a gender a-typical behaviour and is laughed at and embarrassed, the child will not be motivated to carry out this behaviour. During this process, the developing child learns to

> "regulate their own conduct by the reactions they expected from others, pursuing same-gender activities but shunning activities linked to the other gender. Neither children's gender identity, stability, constancy nor gender classificatory knowledge predicted gender linked conduct" (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 698).

Further, children can also learn gendered information through tuition, whereby they are directly taught what is expected of them based on their gender. The impact of tuition is minimised when what is taught is contradictory to what is modelled, so if a mother tells her daughter anyone can be a scientist, but she watches many films in which women do domestic work and men are scientists, the latter (i.e., the behaviour observed) is more likely to be consolidated by the learning child.

According to the theory, children's media including books, television programmes, films and videogames are all factors involved in gender socialisation which can be problematic because gender roles can be more restrictive, and gender differences are often more exaggerated in media than in 'real life' (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). This is supported by the research presented in this review, particularly when considering the lack of women shown in the media when compared to men and in the occupational roles (or lack thereof) that women occupy. This is further reflected by research showing that children with high exposure to media have more stereotyped gender attitudes and behaviours themselves, whereas non stereotypical media can have the opposite effect (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 701). The media can be an important source of gendered information for children who are motivated to learn and replicate modelled behaviour in their environment.

2.10.2 Gender Schema Theory

A schema is a cognitive structure that organises information that is gained from the social environment. Gender schema theory (Bem, 1981) describes the process by which children learn, organise, and perceive their knowledge of

appropriate roles and attributes for men and women. Children are motivated to learn about gender roles because of the importance placed upon the gender binary to which they are exposed from birth. The child's gender schema will incorporate information about masculinity and femininity, as well as their own gender identity based on their understanding of such concepts. The child will evaluate themselves depending on their adherence to the information assimilated into the gender schema. Children who are sex-typed (who recognise themselves as either masculine or feminine and thus have assimilated gendered information regarding these concepts) are more likely to remember pictures that are consistent with the stereotypes of their culture (Bem, 1981, p. 351). The theory is critical of such gendering and states that "human behaviours and personality attributes should cease to have gender, and society should stop projecting gender into situations irrelevant to genitalia" (Bem, 1981, p. 363). Gender schema theory seems to recognise the potentially negative consequences of continually exposing children to gendered messages in their daily lives and within media.

2.10.3 Kohlberg's Theory of Gender Development

Kohlberg's theory is a stage-based one that states that children's cognitions are self-driven rather than reactionary as social cognitive theory suggests - that is, children are internally motivated to learn gendered information rather than motivated by the prospect of being rewarded. The way in which cognitions are framed is an important distinction between the two theories, although both emphasise the importance of cognition on learning gendered information and behaviour (Blakemore et al., 2012, p. 204).

The first developmental stage of Kohlberg's theory represents perhaps the most basic of gender processing - gender labelling – which refers to the developed

capacity for a child to label their own sex accurately. Children have usually mastered gender labelling between the ages of two and three years, and when they have done so, are motivated to do things based on their gender categorisation according to the theory. The process of labelling their own gender precedes the child's self-driven cognitions and motivation to learn gender-based information which develops as the child progresses through the stages of gender development. The gender stability stage then follows where children learn that gender is permanent and does not change over time. When children have developed gender stability (usually around four to five years of age), they will recognise that if they are a girl they will develop into a woman and not a man. During the third and final stage of Kohlberg's theory, children develop the understanding that gender stays the same across various situations despite superficial changes (such as appearance). This stage is referred to as both gender consistency and gender constancy and occurs around six or seven years of age. Children will understand that if they are a girl, they would still be a girl if they were to have their hair shaved for example.

How the stages in Kohlberg's theory relate to children's behaviour is unclear. Some believe that gender consistency can explain children's less rigid adherence to gender stereotypical behaviours as they are aware that superficial changes in clothing or changes in the toys they play with do not change their gender, therefore the importance of rigidly adopting gender stereotypes may be diminished (Huston, 1983, as cited by Ruble, et al., 2007). In other words, the understanding of gender as something that remains consistent means that gender non-stereotypical behaviour is accepted as this does not challenge a child's gender identity. At this stage, children are more aware that if a girl wears trousers, she is still a girl (Halim, 2016). Alternatively, children may be more motivated to abide by the norms that they have

amalgamated over time when they have learned that their gender will be consistent throughout their lives. Research has found that the former may be true with children aged between three and five years showing strong gender rigidity (Halim et al*.,* 2013, p. 1278)

This section finds that social cognitive theory of gender development (Bussey & Bandura, 1999) and gender schema theory (Bem, 1981) acknowledge the importance of the media in the socialisation of gender. Such theories suggest that children are motivated to make sense of the gendered world because of their continuous exposure to the gender dichotomy. Both theories state that children will learn gender norms partly from the media they consume. That is, within the context of this research, the gendered messages that are present in Disney feature length animations are likely to relate to how children understand gender. Children who are exposed to the Disney films described above are likely to identify with the characters that are similar to them and incorporate their behaviour into their schema to develop a wider understanding of the behaviours that are acceptable for them to reproduce. It should be noted that the theories considered here do not speculate how gender identities outside of the male female binary develop.

2.11 The Link Between the Gendered Messages within Disney and Superhero Media and Children's Behaviour

The gendered messages in Disney feature length animations that have been discussed extensively above are likely to be affecting children's understanding of the appropriate behaviour for men and women according to the aforementioned theories of gender development. It has been highlighted that Disney have acquired the Marvel and Star Wars franchises, which is likely to reflect their need (and/or desire) to obtain media popular with boys and men. Therefore, the relationship between

engagement with Disney media, and media from Disney owned franchises, and children's gendered behaviour will be considered in this section.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, when considering the gendered messages within Disney princess animations and the theories outlined above, it seems that there is an association between exposure to Disney princess characters and children's displays of stereotypically feminine behaviour (Golden & Jacoby 2018; Coyne et al., 2016). Coyne et al., (2016) found that high levels of engagement with Disney princess media was associated with more stereotypically feminine behaviour in both boys and girls and the effect was still significant one year later. The researchers also assessed whether Disney princess engagement was associated with body esteem and found that there was no effect for girls. This is perhaps surprising considering an analysis of the Disney animated feature length films found that the appearances of female protagonists are strongly valued (Towbin et al., 2004). Further, boys who had higher levels of Disney princess engagement displayed more prosocial behaviour when parents reported engaging in conversations with them regarding the themes/messages being perpetrated in mass media they consume (known as parental mediation; Collier et al., 2016; Valkenburg et al., 1999). However, this was not the case for girls. The researchers conclude that the study provides some positive, and some more troubling results:

> "engagement with Disney Princesses can be limiting, as young girls especially are more likely to embrace traditional female stereotypes both concurrently and longitudinally. However, there were also some potential positive benefits for boys, including better body esteem and higher levels of prosocial behavior when parents discussed the media with their children" (Coyne et al., 2016, p. 1923).

Similarly, when provided with Disney princess outfits, girls reproduced highly feminine behaviour such as twirling and focusing on their physical appearances

(Golden & Jacoby, 2018). Girls in the study also excluded boys from their princess play (Golden & Jacoby, 2018). Girls around four years of age from a variety of cultures showed greater gender appearance rigidity than boys (Halim et al., 2014) which could explain why girls actively excluded boys from dressing-up in the Disney princess outfits. It is also possible that the feminine behaviour displayed by Disney princesses (England et al., 2011) led boys to resist the princess dressing-up outfits, as stereotyped media can influence children's toy preferences (Spinner et al*.,* 2018), and children tend to rate princesses as appropriate for girls but not for boys (Dinella et al., 2017).

Although by reviewing the research above it seems that Disney princess media are associated with more feminine behaviour and gender segregated play, Wohlwend (2012) found that Disney princess doll play provided opportunities for children to challenge gender norms. When boys played as female characters in play scenarios in which they utilised Disney and non-Disney dolls, they were continuously mis-gendered (Wohlwend, 2012). Thus, although the boys were not excluded from doll play as they were in more direct princess play (Golden & Jacoby, 2018), the more inclusionary, less gender segregated play, came with challenges for children. Wohlwend (2012) suggested that

> "[t]he number of corrections in this play episode reveal how gender performances intertwined with doll play… enforced an expectation that boys could animate dolls but should not animate female characters" (Wohlwend 2012, p. 15).

It seems that children simply did not expect boys to be part of princess play.

The research considered in this section thus far suggests that there is a link between children's engagement with Disney media and their behaviour. Further, some research has considered how children perceive princesses (Hine et al., 2018b) as well as princes, and superheroes (Dinella et al., 2017). Such research finds that

both younger and older children rated princesses as more feminine than masculine (Dinella et al., 2017) which seems to be generally in line with the findings of England et al., (2011). Further, Hine et al., (2018b) found that children aged between eight and nine years rated Aurora (from *Sleeping Beauty,* Geronimi et al., 1959) as more feminine than Moana (who they identified as high in both masculine and feminine traits) which provides evidence that children also identify gendered behavioural profiles of specific Disney princess characters. Additionally, children's ratings are in line with academic assessments of the specific princess characters (Hine et al., 2018a). However, it seemed that children's conceptualisations of princesses remained stereotyped (even though they perceived Moana to be androgynous) as children rated princesses in general as more feminine than masculine (Hine et al., 2018b). These findings are consistent with Dinella et al., (2017) and suggest that children's conceptualisations of princesses as feminine may be unaffected by the more androgynous profiles being displayed by modern leading ladies (as found by Hine et al., 2018a). This may explain the relationship between engagement with Disney princesses and stereotypically feminine behaviour found above (Golden & Jacoby, 2018; Coyne et al., 2016).

Additionally, Dinella et al., (2017) assessed how children perceive princes and superheroes in comparison to princesses. The researchers found that princesses were rated as more feminine than both princes and superheroes, and children reported princesses 'as being for girls' (Dinella et al., 2017). That princesses were deemed as appropriate for girls and not boys may explain why children exclude boys from princess play (Golden & Jacoby, 2017) and struggle to attribute the correct gender labels to princesses played by boys (Wohlwend, 2012). Princes were rated as more feminine than masculine and children expressed little interest in these

characters (Dinella et al., 2017). Although superheroes were rated as more masculine than feminine (Dinella et al., 2017), they were rated as appropriate for both boys and girls, which the researchers suggest may reflect that there are both male and female superhero characters (although the latter are outnumbered). However, “[b]oys reported personal interest in superheroes (who were rated as highly masculine) and girls reported personal interest in princesses (who were rated as highly feminine)” (Dinella et al., 2017, p. 275). This research suggests that children’s conceptualisations of princesses and superheroes are that they are for girls and boys respectively. The impact of Disney princesses on children’s behaviour has been highlighted above. Research considering the impact of superheroes, particularly on young boys, also needs to be addressed.

In recent research conducted by Coyne et al., (2021b), the association between Disney princess (feminine-typed), Marvel (masculine-typed) and gender-neutral dressing-up outfits on children’s performance on various behavioural tasks was examined. The tasks included measurements of prosocial behaviour, perseverance, and toy preferences. It was found that there was no relationship between the outfit worn and toy preferences for girls. However, when boys wore the gender-neutral costume, they were more likely to show a preference for feminine-typed toys than when they were in the superhero outfit (Coyne et al., 2021b). This could suggest that boys are unwilling to challenge gender role expectations (at least relating to toy choice) when they are fulfilling masculine character roles such as superheroes associated with Marvel. However, when dressed in gender-neutral outfits, they are less restricted in their play-based decisions and preferences.

Further, boys in the Disney princess outfit condition were more prosocial than the boys wearing the superhero outfits, whereas there was no relationship with the

costume worn on the level of prosocial behaviour displayed in girls (Coyne at al., 2021b). Additionally, there was no association between the outfit worn and performance on the perseverance task for either girls or boys (Coyne et al., 2021b). These results together, suggest that boys who wear superhero costumes associated with the Marvel franchise were less likely to express stereotypically feminine behaviour such as being prosocial, and were less likely to have varied toy preferences. This is perhaps a result of superhero characters being rated as highly masculine (Dinella et al., 2017) and may reflect boys' attempt to replicate that within their own behaviours. For boys, dressing-up outfits seemed to impact their gendered behaviours (Coyne et al, 2021b). To the best of the current recent researcher's knowledge, Coyne et al., (2021b) is the only study that has directly researched the effect of Marvel media on behavioural tasks. Based on the findings, further investigation into the impact of Marvel and Disney media and merchandise is warranted.

Although not directly relating to the Marvel franchise, Coyne et al., (2014) found that superhero media predicts masculine behaviour in pre-school aged boys in the US, but not girls. Further, superhero media engagement was also predictive of higher levels of weapon play for both boys and girls (Coyne et al., 2014). These findings suggest that although girls may not replicate the masculine behaviour of superheroes in the same way that boys do, both boys and girls may be more likely to play with weapons as a result of such media. This is potentially concerning, as weapon play may be associated with levels of aggression displayed by children (Watson and Peng 1992, as cited by Coyne et al., 2014, p. 426).

The research examined in this sub-section finds that there is evidence of both Disney princesses and superheroes (such as those featured in the Marvel franchise)

influencing children's gendered behaviour (Coyne et al., 2014; Coyne et al., 2016; Golden & Jacoby 2018). However, research specifically addressing the relationship between engagement with the franchises recently acquired by the Disney corporation, namely Marvel and Star Wars, and children's gendered behaviour, is lacking. This is particularly true of the Star Wars franchise. Therefore, the extent to which engagement with the Marvel and Star Wars franchises statistically predicts children's play behaviour warrants further study, especially within a UK sample.

2.12 Aims of The Thesis

This literature review has discussed the gendered messages within media, and how this relates to concepts of anti-feminist backlash (Faludi, 1993) and postfeminism (Gill 2007b), the portrayal of men and women in animation and cartoons, and most extensively, the representations of men and women in Disney feature length animations. This chapter has highlighted that there are gaps within the existing literature regarding the gendered messages within Disney feature length animations. For example, the previous quantitative content analyses conducted by England et al., (2011) and Hine et al., (2018a) have exclusively focused on the gendered behaviours portrayed by Disney prince and princess characters and utilised a framework that may benefit from being reviewed, particularly when being applied to 'modern' Disney characters (Hine et al., 2018a). Also, inevitably, some of the protagonists from the most recent Disney releases need to be subjected to content analysis to ensure that such research is current. As a result, the first aim of the current thesis is to investigate the gendered behaviour displayed in some of Disney's most popular and recently released animated feature length films, including non-princess films, with an updated and expanded coding framework. The results can be found in chapter four.

Secondly, although the portrayal of gender in Disney feature length animations has been widely researched, this literature review articulated that much less research has considered the portrayal of male and female protagonists within both the Marvel and Star Wars franchises that the Disney corporation now own. Therefore, the second aim of this thesis is to conduct a thematic analysis of Marvel and Star Wars television media targeted towards children, to understand the portrayal of gender therein.

Further, theories of gender development posit that the gendered messages in children's media are likely to be influencing their understanding and replication of gender appropriate behaviour (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Bem, 1981). Now Disney has acquired the Star Wars and Marvel franchises which may reflect the corporation's incentive to more successfully target boys and men, understanding the relationships between engagement with those franchises and children's gendered behaviour is essential, and relatively under-researched. Therefore, the third aim of this thesis is to examine the relationships between children's engagement with the Disney, Marvel, and Star Wars franchises and their gendered behaviour in a UK sample, which, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, has yet to be examined. The following chapter (chapter two) will describe and evaluate the methods that have been taken in previous research on these topics and outline the methods that have been applied in this thesis.

Chapter Three: The Methodology Utilised in Previous Research and Those Adopted in The Thesis

3.1 Introduction

The literature review provided in chapter two presented a significant body of evidence which has sought to analyse the gendered information presented in mass media forms, including Disney animated works. Such research finds that there is much evidence of gender stereotyping of female protagonists in the Disney princess franchise (England et al., 2011), although there are signs that this is changing over time (Hine et al. 2018a). Conversely, the gendered behavioural profiles of prince characters are identified as more complex and less linear in their progression (England et al., 2011; Hine et al. 2018a). However, it was highlighted that, whilst this research has been important in informing our understanding, significant methodological limitations (e.g., outdated coding frameworks, limited focus on Disney princess releases and protagonists, and subsequent films being released since) mean that further investigation of this phenomenon is warranted.

Secondly, the literature review highlighted that relationships exist between children's engagement with Disney (Coyne et al., 2016; Golden & Jacoby, 2018; Coyne et al., 2021a), and superhero media (Coyne et al., 2014; Coyne et al., 2021b) and their gendered behaviours. However, these relationships have been investigated less extensively than the gendered messages found within the Disney animated feature length films. It is possible that the innocent reputation that surrounds the Disney corporation (Giroux & Pollock, 2010; Sammond, 2018; Wynns, 2003; Wells, 2002; Bell et al., 1995; Giroux, 1995; Wasko, 2001) may now extend to the Marvel and Star Wars franchises, meaning that further investigation into the relationship they have with children's behaviour is warranted, particularly within a UK sample.

Such research is also necessary considering that to the best of the researcher's knowledge, only one study has directly investigated the link between engagement with the Marvel franchise and children's gendered behaviour (Coyne et al., 2021b), and none have studied this in relation to the Star Wars franchise.

The purpose of the present chapter is to outline and justify the methodological approaches taken in the current research programme. It will firstly outline the ontological and epistemological assumptions that relate to quantitative and qualitative research, and then discuss the philosophical approach that has informed research design within this thesis. The methods adopted in previous research investigating the gendered messaging in Disney animated feature length animations will then be discussed, and the approach that was taken in study one and two of this thesis will be outlined. The second half of this chapter will open with a discussion of the substantial and unprecedented impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the methods adopted in study three of this thesis. This will facilitate the discussion of the methods adopted in the previous research that has investigated the impact of Disney and superhero media on children's perceptions and gendered behaviour. Lastly, the method that was utilised in the third study of this thesis, which aimed to investigate the link between engagement with the Marvel, Disney and Star Wars franchises on gendered behaviour displayed by children will be described.

3.2 Ontology and Epistemology - Quantitative and Qualitative Research

Both ontological assumptions regarding the nature and view of reality (Tuli, 2010, p. 101) and epistemological assumptions relating to beliefs about what can be known and how knowledge can be gained (Tuli, 2010, p. 99) underpin researchers' methodological decisions (Yilmaz, 2013). More broadly, ontology relates to the assumptions or beliefs as to 'what' there is in the world in terms of reality and truth

while epistemology refers to what is perceived as knowledge and “what it is possible to know” (Braun & Clarke, p. 29). Thus, both ontology and epistemology inform research design including the methods and analysis adopted. A brief discussion of how ontology and epistemology relate to quantitative and qualitative research will be the focus of the following subsection.

A positivist ontological positioning is based upon the assumption that there is one reality and one universal truth of a phenomenon or experience that exists independent and external to the researcher or observer (Tuli, 2010; Braun & Clarke, 2013). The positivist paradigm relates to empiricism (Braun & Clarke, 2013) (which assumes that “the only reality is the facts experienced by sensory organs” Hwang, 2019, p. 127) and realist epistemology. Realist epistemology suggests that it possible to directly obtain the truth through empirical research and observation of measurable (and usually quantifiable) variables. This approach dominates most scientific disciplines, and historically, has also dominated in social sciences, including psychology (Banister, 2011; Braun & Clarke, 2013; Darlaston-Jones, 2007). As Eagly and Riger (2014) describe, positivists have “assumed that there is an external reality that is independent of human thinking and that science has the goal of correctly understanding this reality” (Eagly & Riger, 2014, p. 686). Such assumptions are conducive to quantitative research, that is, research that explains phenomena or tests theory with variables that consist of numerical data and analyses such data with statistical tests (Yilmaz, 2013). Positivists also assume that the researcher is objective and does not influence the research process. In this sense, a researcher aligned with positivist ontology and/or realist epistemology is likely to adopt scientific, systematic, perhaps experimental research that is designed to capture the ‘one objective truth’ that they believe to exist.

Opposing the positivist paradigm, the relativist epistemological standpoint is more fitting with qualitative research practices and suggests that “knowledge is always perspectival and therefore a singular, absolute truth is impossible” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 29; Yilmaz, 2013). Aligned with relativism, the constructivist research paradigm assumes that reality is socially constructed, dynamic, and cannot be separated from the context in which it is found (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Yilmaz, 2013; Darlaston-Jones 2007; Tuli, 2010). Thus, in psychology,

> “qualitative methodology is underpinned by interpretivist epistemology and constructionalist [sic] ontology. This assumes that meaning is embedded in the participants’ experiences and that this meaning is mediated through the researcher’s own perceptions” (Merriman, 1998 as cited by Tuli, 2010, p. 102).

Fundamentally, in order to gain an understanding of a reality

> “qualitative methodologies provide the means to seek a deeper understanding and to explore the nuances of experiences not available through quantification. By utilising these methodologies we are able to expand on the ‘what’ questions of human existence asked by positivism to include the ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions asked by constructionism” (Darlaston-Jones, 2007, p. 25).

Further, qualitative researchers assume that they are connected to the subjects of their research (Braun & Clarke 2013). Therefore, it is important for such researchers to maintain an awareness of how their own biases influence the research they conduct through reflexivity (Yilmaz, 2013). Such an assumption is another way in which qualitative inquiry is opposed to quantitative research underpinned by the positivist and empiricist paradigms.

With the rise of behaviourism in psychology in the 20th century, and following that, the cognitive focus within the discipline, quantitative experimental research with positivist foundations dominated (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Although qualitative research provides a depth of understanding usually within smaller samples than those used in quantitative research, it has long been considered a less scientific and

more subjective approach (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Darlaston-Jones, 2007). Yilmaz (2013) suggests that this may have stemmed partly from measures of research quality such as reliability (which refers to the consistency of the results of a study) and validity (which refers to the accuracy of data) that relate to quantitative research being applied to qualitative research. In reality, concepts such as "*credibility, trustworthiness*, and *authenticity"* (Yilmaz, 2013, p. 319, emphasis in original) are more applicable to the latter. Braun and Clarke (2013) describe that qualitative research methods found a resurgence around the 1980's when "[t]hey were seen as crucial for identifying and theorising different constructed versions of reality, and for the ways people are both constructed by, and constructs of reality" (Braun & Clarke 2013, p. 8). Although qualitative and quantitative research stem from differing ontological and epistemological positionings, applying systematic techniques to data collection and analysis is essential in both types of research, and when applied rigorously, they are both insightful.

While qualitative research found a resurgence in 1980's, positivism and quantitative methods began to be called into question during the second half of the 20th century (Eagly & Riger, 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2013) and postpositivism began to emerge. Eagly and Riger (2014) state that although postpositivism maintained some key beliefs from its precursor, such as "the idea of an external reality that is independent of human perception and that scientists strive to correctly understand [it]" (Eagly & Riger, 2014, p. 686), as well as "hypothesis testing and quantification" (Eagly & Riger, 2014, p. 686) being important in research, it also has fundamental differences. Most notably,

> "postpositivists maintain that all theory and observations are subject to error and bias, *making it impossible to fully realize the goal of objective description*. Methods have error, and theories are error prone and revisable…. Given

> flawed methods, improving science's mapping of reality is best achieved by deploying multiple methods" (Eagly & Riger, 2014, p. 686, emphasis added).

Further, Panhwar et al., (2017) suggests that the

> "Post-positivistic paradigm promotes the triangulation of qualitative and quantitative methods that explores the diversity of facts researchable through various kinds of investigations but respecting and valuing all findings as the essential components for the development of knowledge (Clark, 1998 and Fischer, 1998a)" (Panhwar et al., 2017, p. 254).

This suggests that postpositivism can relate to both quantitative and mixed methods research. Importantly, when postpositivist quantitative research is conducted, it is acknowledged that research cannot be completely free of bias and error and so objectivity can never be fully founded, which differentiates it from pure positivism (Eagly & Riger, 2014, p. 686).

The current researcher aligns most closely with the postpositivist research paradigm and as a result, the current thesis utilised both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. However, due to the coronavirus pandemic, the research programme and methods adopted required extensive revision. Therefore, the qualitative element of this thesis was adopted in the second study which investigated the portrayal of gender in Star Wars and Marvel media, rather than in the third study where the relationships between those messages and children's behaviour was considered. However, the research programme was still underpinned by postpositivism.

3.2.1 Ontological and Epistemological Approaches in the Thesis

The current research programme represents the researcher's epistemological belief that both quantitative and qualitative research is insightful. However, the research conducted (beyond study one) was substantially adapted due to the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic. Study one aimed to quantitatively investigate the portrayal of male and female protagonists in influential animations released by Walt Disney Animation Studios. Utilising quantitative methods meant that statistical

evidence of the potential changes in the representation of gender in Disney animations across three timepoints could be presented. The quantitative approach also facilitated the statistical comparison of male and female protagonists. The second study of this thesis utilised qualitative methods to examine how male and female protagonists are portrayed in animated Marvel and Star Wars content targeted towards children. The qualitative approach of the second study meant that a detailed and focused appraisal of the portrayal of gender within specific television series associated with each franchise was obtained, which is important because there has been a lack of research in this area. For the third study of this thesis, the relationship between engagement with the Disney, Marvel and Star Wars franchises and children's gendered behaviours was originally to be analysed predominately qualitatively through focus groups and play observations which reflected the researcher's belief that nuances of participants experiences can be better explored with qualitative methods and important depth can be captured (Darlaston-Jones, 2007; Braun & Clarke 2013). However, such research practices were not viable in the pandemic, and quantitative research was adopted for the third study of this thesis.

Aligned with postpositivism, the researcher believes that empirical research utilising quantitative analysis can provide valuable information, therefore, there are advantages to the quantitative approach taken in study three of this thesis. Study three examined the extent to which engagement with the Disney, Marvel and Star Wars franchises statistically predicted the gendered behaviour displayed by children. Thus, the quantitative inquiry of study three had the potential to be more impactful as it could be utilised to inform parents and caregivers about any statistical influences that may be found between engagement with the Disney, Marvel and Star Wars

franchises and gendered behaviours, as well as any moderating factors within these relationships. However, the researcher acknowledges that the reality represented in empirical research cannot be purely objective because it will be prone to some bias and error (Eagly & Riger, 2014). It will therefore be important for the researcher to reflect upon the potential biases that may influence the research processes adopted in this thesis.

The purpose of these subsections has been to outline the research paradigms associated with qualitative and quantitative research methods and highlight the researcher's positioning within those paradigms. The remainder of this chapter will outline the approaches that have previously been taken in research investigating the representation of gender in Disney animated feature length films, as well as the impact of such messages on children engaging with them, to justify the methods adopted within this thesis.

3.3 The Quantitative Method Utilised to Analyse Disney Media in Previous Research, and the Thesis

3.3.1 Introducing Content Analysis

Content analysis is a flexible research method that can be used to systematically analyse the messages found within text (text refers to the media being analysed which is not limited to the written word). Due to its flexibility, content analysis is utilised across many disciplines, from psychology to communication studies (White & Marsh, 2006; Wilson, 2016, Collins, 2011; Rudy et al., 2010; Krippendorff, 2018). Content analysis has been widely used to investigate the representation of gender in television, film, and advertising (Neuendorf, 2011; Collins, 2011; Rudy et al., 2010; Gerding, & Signorielli, 2014, Daalmans et al., 2017; Matthes et al., 2016). Media effects research is increasingly popular with gender

scholars and content analysis can examine the prevalent gendered messages in media which can provide a theoretical underpinning for such research (Rudy et al., 2010, p. 707).

For Krippendorff (2018), several assumptions are important when defining content analysis such as the acknowledgement that meaning is brought to a text by the observer (or the analyst), that text does not have one correct meaning (much like textual analysis), that the perceived meanings of texts do not need to be shared, and the acceptance that content analysis is essentially inferential. Such assumptions seem to sit within the postpositivist paradigm outlined above that the current researcher aligns with. Although content analysis can be qualitative or quantitative in nature (Krippendorff 2018; White and Marsh, 2006), it is frequently used to gain quantitative data from qualitative sources (such as TV, film, and advertising) that is then subjected to statistical analysis. However, Krippendorff, (2018) argues that distinguishing between qualitative and quantitative content analyses is essentially unnecessary because “[u]ltimately, all reading of texts is qualitative, even when certain characteristics of a text are later converted into numbers” (Krippendorff, 2018, p. 21).

Further, some researchers encourage readers to view ‘qualitative’ content analysis as a mixed methods approach, such as Selvi (2020). Similarly, Eagly and Riger (2014) refer to content analyses as “quantified qualitative methods” (Eagly & Riger, 2014, p. 695) and Braun and Clarke (2013) dismiss the need to discuss content analysis in their book regarding qualitative research, by stating that they will focus on *purely* qualitative research, implying that content analysis is not. Various researchers therefore emphasise content analysis’ complex and arguably dualistic rooting in quantitative and qualitative research paradigms. More broadly, this may

also speak to a perhaps outdated notion that quantitative and qualitative research are in direct opposition with each other. To provide clarity to this section however, quantifying data from qualitative text and running statistical analysis on the results will be referred to as quantitative content analysis, and qualitative content analysis will refer to studies that have developed descriptive themes that emerge from text and have not run statistical analysis.

3.3.2 Quantitative Content Analysis

Quantitative content analysis has been regarded as anchored within the positivist research paradigm (Graneheim et al., 2017) as it aims to test hypotheses (White & Marsh, 2006) and utilises reductionism to do so; that is, the analyst breaks down complex phenomena into small units of analysis (Aliyu et al., 2014). For Neuendorf (2011) a

> "quantitative analysis of messages… relies on the scientific method, including attention to objectivity/intersubjectivity, a priori design, reliability, validity, generalizability, replicability, and hypothesis testing. It is not limited as to the types of messages that may be analyzed, nor as to the types of variables that might be measured" (Neuendorf 2002, p. 10 as cited by Neuendorf, 2011 p. 277).

Many descriptions, such as the one above, distinguish content analysis as a quantitative and scientific method. A focus on the scientific and verifiable results extracted from the manifest content, that is, "content close to the text" (Graneheim & Lundmanm, p. 111), is common in quantitative content analysis that often "describes the visible, obvious components" (Graneheim & Lundmanm, 2004, p. 106; Selvi, 2020) of a text. When applied at the quantitative level, content analysis allows "statistical comparisons [to be drawn between] male and female characters or performers in mass media content" (Neuendorf, 2011, p. 27) whereas qualitative analysis can only explore such comparisons. The assumptions of quantitative content analysis described in this section as well as those discussed by Krippendorff

(2018) in the previous section, particularly that multiple interpretations of a text exist, suggest that the method also has postpositivist elements. In this vein, quantitative content analysis aligns with the current researcher's epistemological beliefs, making it an appropriate method to utilise within this thesis.

3.3.3 The Coding Scheme and Level of Data Measured in Quantitative Content Analysis

To conduct a useful quantitative content analysis that is scientific, research aims and hypotheses should be established as well as the sample of text to be analysed. Random sampling whereby each unit within a population has an equal chance of being selected as a unit of analysis in the study can be utilised to ensure the sample is representative of that population (White & Marsh, 2006, p. 31). Alternatively, parameters can be set to narrow the sample. In this process, text that meets specific criteria that will enable the researcher to best answer their hypotheses is analysed (such as in England et al., 2011 and Hine et al, 2018a).

The variables/units that will be quantified or measured are developed before data collection commences (White & Marsh, 2006, p. 31). These units/variables, taken together, form what is referred to as a coding scheme or framework. A coding scheme should have clear descriptions of each unit/variable and may have examples to facilitate its consistent and reliable application to the content being studied (White & Marsh, 2006). Developing a coding scheme or framework is an important part of content analysis research because it allows researchers creativity in designing variables/codes that suit the research aims of the study, although much research applies pre-existing coding schemes to previously unstudied data (White & Marsh, 2006). In the current research, the coding scheme was developed by building upon previous work conducted by England et al., (2011) and Hine et al., (2018b) to

mitigate some of the limitations within it. A detailed and specific consideration of those limitations, and the improvements made for the purpose of study one, will be discussed in chapter four.

A good coding scheme should capture “all relevant aspects of the construct… [that] are measured at the highest possible scale of measurement based on the four scales of measurement (nominal, ordinal, interval, and ratio)” (White & Marsh, 2006, p. 32). Quantitative content analysis can use nominal (also known as categorical) variables whereby coders are required to classify content into mutually exclusive categories, or a yes/no binary. However, analysing the representation of gender within mass media content utilising nominal categories may be problematic as it provides limited information. For example, a character who displays a gendered behaviour for a minute may be coded the same way as a character who displays a gendered behaviour for a whole scene, episode, or film. This may lead to results that do not reflect the most prominent and therefore influential gendered behaviours. For example, Leaper et al. (2002) noted whether certain behaviours such as “talking, fear, negative (i.e., showing anger or verbal aggression), physical aggression, victim (i.e., being a victim of physical aggression)” (Leaper et al., 2002, pp. 1656) were shown in children’s TV shows within five second periods utilising a time-sampling method. The first eight minutes of designated cartoon episodes were coded. The use of nominal variables meant that the frequency each behaviour was displayed within the five second period was not captured. Therefore, a fight scene lasting the entire five seconds would presumably have been coded the same as a single act of aggression (a single kick for example), meaning that the prevalence of aggression would seem more alike in the data than it truly appeared in the text. Presumably, the most prominent gendered behaviours i.e., those that are displayed in media content

in the greatest frequency, are likely to be most influential to the audience engaging with it which is not considered in such research.

Content coding with nominal variables (i.e., Leaper et al., 2002; Daalmans et al., 2017) also tends to be focused on a single or a small number of specific gendered phenomenon rather than aiming to capture overarching behavioural profiles. An example of such research conducted by Daalmans et al., (2017) measured whether there were differences in how men and women were portrayed in television shows targeted towards male and female audiences by measuring characters', age, occupational status, and parental status (all of which had categories in which to place characters) as well as caregiving (which required a yes/no answer). Although this is indeed informative of those phenomena, the overall portrayal of gender is not considered, and such research does not consider how each of those characters behaves or is perceived within the roles they occupy. This could represent a broader issue with content analyses that focus on the manifest content overall – because it focuses on what can be explicitly observed the meaning and value given to the depictions may not be addressed. However, it could be argued that by utilising higher levels of measurement when content coding complex phenomena such as gendered messages in mass media and ensuring that all constructs of it are covered within the coding scheme, (as suggested by White & Marsh, 2006), more nuanced gender portrayals are likely to captured.

Such an approach was adopted by Thompson and Zerbinos (1995) who provided an extensive content coding analysis of children's television that has remained influential due to the extent of the gender phenomena studied. The researchers aimed to assess whether the portrayal of gender had improved in children's cartoons (i.e., had become less gender stereotyped) between the 1970's

and 1990's. Male and female characters behaviours were coded utilising variables with various levels of data. For example, data was obtained from a) nominal variables that accounted for demographic information such as marital status and occupations of characters b) some ordinal variables in which relative character traits such as warm to cold were measured on a 5-point scale, and c) some ratio variables in which frequencies were counted for communicative variables, such as frequency of verbal aggression and the number of communicative acts performed overall (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995). Further, both England et al., (2011), and Hine et al., (2018a) utilised ratio variables to measure the level of gendered behaviour displayed by Disney prince and princess characters which consisted of counting the frequency at which gendered behaviours displayed in the coding scheme were shown. Such an approach allowed the researchers to capture the frequency that stereotypically masculine and feminine behaviours were displayed by each character overall. Capturing frequency allows the extent to which a phenomenon is present in a text to be considered.

However, there are some broad limitations of applying ratio variables to characters' behaviour. Because behaviour displayed by characters within a text such as a film are complex and varied, designing a coding scheme that captures the variety of portrayals that may constitute each individual behaviour or variable is likely to be challenging. One incidence of a behaviour may be more extreme, and others may be more subtle, for example, a character may slightly push another character and be coded as physically aggressive, and may hit another character later, and be coded physically aggressive again. Both are individual acts of physical aggression but with varying degrees of severity. Arguably, a researcher will never be able to account for all the possible ways in which a behaviour will be displayed in a text

within their coding framework which may leave some room for coder interpretation, even when coding manifest content. In this sense, complete objectivity may never be truly possible. This means that inter-rater reliability measures are essential, and how reliability should be gained will be discussed in later sections of this chapter. Further, applying many variables to behavioural profiles in mass media content (rather than focusing on a select few, i.e., Leaper et al., 2002 and Daalmans et al., 2017) means that data collection is time-consuming and relies on high levels of concentration of coders who may experience coding fatigue in such designs (Krippendorff, 2018).

This section has considered some of the issues relating to the level of measurement utilised in previous quantitative content analysis coding. In so doing, it has highlighted that counting the frequency of behaviours displayed by characters allows researchers to comment upon the extent to which phenomena analysed are present (rather than merely whether they are present or not) within a text. After considering these issues, ratio data was obtained in study one to allow for the salience of masculine and feminine behaviours portrayed by male and female protagonists to be analysed. Using frequency-based data also supports the notion that the highest level of measurement should be utilised to analyse complex phenomena in content analysis methods (White & Marsh 2006).

3.3.4 Coding Procedures

Reflecting on the same examples as above, some considerations of the practicalities involved in content coding will be provided. For example, Thompson and Zerbinos (1995) had thirty-one coders who were asked to tape and code two hours' worth of content from an assigned cartoon which equated to a total of 175 episodes. Each coder was required to watch each of the episodes they were responsible for coding four times to code each type of variable described above. In

contrast, some researchers (such as Leaper et al., 2002) code only the opening minutes of a text which, whilst carrying substantial benefits for minimising the time spent on coding, may not represent the nature of gendered portrayals in the cartoons in their entirety. Others may limit their coding in terms of the characters that are subjected to coding. For example, coding only the most prevalent characters in terms of the amount they speak or are present on screen (such as in Daalmans et al., 2017). Focusing on the characters with the main speaking roles may be problematic when studying Disney films, as the 'early' prince characters in particular are influential to the plot, therefore have narrative power, and may be spoken of frequently (particularly by their love interest) but have a very limited amount of screen time (Davis, 2007; England et al., 2011). By coding the characters who have the most narrative power, presumably, the characters that are most influential to spectators are captured. Therefore, England et al., (2011), and Hine et al., (2018a) have focused on coding protagonists that are the most influential to the plot rather than those who have the highest amount of screen time.

Although each of these approaches has its limitations, it is necessary to set parameters on content coding research to answer the research questions. By considering the characters that are most central to the plot development (such as in research conducted by England et al., 2011, and Hine et al., 2018a), content analysis is more likely to capture the behaviour of the most narratively significant and pivotal characters, and as a result, the most influential characters to the audiences engaging with them.

3.3.5 Reliability and Training

Reliability in content analysis is essential so that the results can be deemed trustworthy (Krippendorff, 2018, p. 278). Content analysis is often utilised without a

consideration of intercoder or inter-rater reliability (Neuendorf, 2011) that is, the level of agreement between coders (of which there should be at least two) (Lombard et al., 2002). Coders (who will be responsible for data collection) must, therefore, be trained on how to apply the coding scheme/framework accurately and reliably to the content being analysed in order for the patterns in the content or significant relationships among the concepts being studied to be successfully described (Riffe et al., 2019, p. 3). According to Neuendorf, (2011, p. 283) coder training should allow coders to become familiar with the coding scheme, have the opportunity to discuss any concerns they may have with applying it to content, and practice applying it (to content similar to the target data). During the training process, the coding scheme may then be edited. Throughout the coder training, coders should become synchronized with each other, with this then reflected in reliability analysis that should be run when practice coding has been completed (Neuendorf, 2011).

An appropriate measure of reliability between coders should be considered before coder training and data collection commences. However, there is a lack of clarity about how inter-rater reliability should be measured in content analysis. Some researchers use intraclass correlation coefficients (such as Shrout & Fleiss 1979), others use Crombach's Alpha and Cohens Kappa (such as Graham et al., 2018). Hayes and Krippendorff (2007) aimed to create a measure of inter-rater reliability that was superior to previous measures and designed Krippendorff's Alpha (Kalpha hereafter) for this purpose. Kalpha can be used on all levels of measurement, can cope with missing data, and statistically examines the likelihood that similarities between multiple coders results are due to chance. It has been used widely in content coding studies such as by Gerding and Signorielli (2014), Aley and Hahn (2020) and Hine et al., (2018a). It remains relatively unclear as to what constitutes

an acceptable inter-rater reliability score, however. Krippendorff (2018) suggests that although .67 may be an appropriate minimum, lower scores may be accepted for purely exploratory research which may reflect that Krippendorff's Alpha is considered a conservative measurement (Lombard et al., 2002, p. 600). This may explain why Gerding and Signorielli (2014) accept a Kalpha of .65 for one of their variables which is lower than the initially suggested .67 (Krippendorff, 2018).

Krippendorff (2018) advises how reliability should be gained and reported. The researcher states that content analysts often gain reliability by discussing discrepancies in coding results and reaching conclusions by negotiating or compromising on the coding "which [can be problematic because it] is nearly impossible to communicate to other researchers and replicate elsewhere" (Krippendorff, 2018, p. 284). Further, they state, "it is not uncommon for researchers to ask observers to work separately but to consult each other whenever unanticipated problems arise" (Krippendorff, 2018, p. 284). Instead of this, Krippendorff (2018) suggests that "majority judgements or average scores" (Krippendorff, 2018, p. 285) may be applied to reconcile coding issues and even then "the only publishable reliability is the one measured before reconciliation of disagreements. The reliability of the data after this reconciliation effort is merely arguable" (Krippendorff, 2018, p. 285).

However, Aley and Hahn (2020) state that they utilised the majority rule method to resolve coding discrepancies and report their Krippendorff Alpha scores without clarifying whether the calculations were measured prior to such resolutions or before. Reconciling coding issues after measuring reliability has limited benefits because if data meet reliability criteria, reconciliation would not be necessary. Although ideally, as Krippendorff (2018) states "[t]he data before such reconciliation

efforts [should] result in proper reliability data and do yield publishable reliability coefficients" (Krippendorff, 2018, p. 285), it seems that resolution of coding discrepancies can be necessary. Although discussive approaches may provide reliability that only represents the results obtained within a specific research team (Krippendorff, 2018), when coding complicated nuances in qualitative text, it is perhaps inevitable that this will be the case no matter how reliability is obtained. Furter, utilising a majority judgement may not be possible if there are only two coders in the project. Therefore, although it does not come without its limitations, a discussion-based approach to resolving coder conflict may be beneficial and was implemented in study one. This approach was also adopted based on the advice of the research team who have conducted previous quantitative content analysis, namely Dr Dawn England and Dr Ben Hine. Additionally, two coders coded the entirety of the behaviour displayed by each of the Disney protagonists to ensure that inter-rater reliability could be calculated across all the content analysed, and to ensure that coders were motivated to code the entirety of each character's behavioural profile reliably. Because of its benefits (which have been outlined above) and because it has been utilised in the study on which the current research will build (Hine et al., 2018a), inter-rater reliability was reported using Krippendorff's Alpha.

3.3.6 The Approach Taken in The Current Research (Study One)

The researcher aligns with the postpositivist research paradigm and holds the belief that although following a scientific approach to research in which hypotheses are tested, and research methods are applied transparently and objectively is important, research cannot be conducted without the influence of some bias and error (Eagly & Riger, 2014). This perspective fits within the assumptions of quantitative content analysis outlined by Krippendorff (2018), that one interpretation

of a text is not necessarily truer than another, but that applying scientific rigour to the method adopted is a necessity. After a consideration of the qualitative and quantitative approaches applied within previous research investigating the portrayal of gender in Disney animated feature length films, a quantitative content analysis was pursued for the first study of this thesis. This examined the gendered behavioural profiles of influential male and female Disney protagonists utilising an extensive coding scheme with ratio variables (for the reasons outlined above). Although quantitative content analysis has been criticised for merely counting representations of manifest content, such an approach aligned with the research aims – to assess the potential changes in the gendered behaviour displayed by Disney protagonists over time statistically (rather than more exploratorily) as well as to draw statistical comparisons between the male and female protagonists. Two coders coded each protagonist's behaviour, and reliability was calculated for each protagonist after discrepancies were discussed. Further detail of the method utilised in study one can be found in chapter four.

3.4 Qualitative Methods Used to Analyse Disney Media in Previous Research

As the literature review highlighted, although much quantitative (as previously discussed) and qualitative (which will be discussed in this section) research has investigated the portrayal of gender within Disney feature length animations, less research has done so with Marvel and Star Wars media. Therefore, qualitative studies investigating the portrayal of male and female protagonists in Disney media were drawn upon to inform the methodological approach adopted in study two. There are several qualitative methodological approaches adopted in previous literature analysing the depiction of gender in mass media content and Disney animated films more specifically. Some research that investigates the portrayal of gender within

Disney feature length animations does not specify the analytical or methodological approach taken, but rather uses feminist or gendered ideologies through which to analyse the media, for example, how the representation of certain Disney characters can relate to notions of postfeminism (Macaluso, 2018; Frasl, 2018). Other researchers are more explicit in their methodological and analytical approaches. Two particularly widely used qualitative methodological approaches will be described and evaluated in the following section, namely, textual analysis and qualitative content analysis. The following sections will take a blended approach in which the principles of each method will be considered, and how they have been applied to Disney animated feature length films will be explored.

3.4.1 Textual Analysis

Some previous research investigating the portrayal of men and women in Disney animations has utilised textual analysis. Textual analysis has been defined as "generally a type of qualitative analysis that, beyond the manifest content of media, focuses on the underlying ideological and cultural assumptions of the text" (Fürsich, 2009, p. 240). It should be noted that the content analysed is referred to as text, but the method is not restricted to the written word. Textual analysis is often utilised when latent content, meaning, the "underlying meaning" (Graneheim et al., 2017, p. 30) of a text is considered more important than quantifying and categorising its explicit (referred to as manifest) content. This "allows the researcher to discern latent meaning, but also implicit patterns, assumptions and omissions of a text" (Fürsich, 2009, p. 241). Textual analysts acknowledge that there is not one true interpretation of a text and establishing whether a text reflects reality is not possible as "[e]very version of 'reality' that we might measure our text against is always – inescapably – another representation, another text" (McKee 2001, p. 142).

Amy Davis has authored two books that provide detailed analyses into the representation of male (Davis, 2013) and female Disney characters (Davis, 2007). The author describes the approach taken in the first book as a

> "textual analysis within a historical context, [that] falls within a tradition in film history and film studies of opening up new areas of scholarly enquiry through in-depth analysis both of individual films and of the genre to which they belong" (Davis, 2007, p. 5).

In the second book the author (perhaps, more vaguely) states

> "I have found it more useful to explore the male characters by focusing on particular character types (i.e., princes, heroes, boys, villains), and then considering their chronological development (contextualized by a relevant theoretical framework) within that thematic analysis" (Davis, 2013, p. 15).

Textual analysis focuses on the content being analysed in relation to culture and society, and in Davis' (2007) research, other films within the same genre. Rudloff (2016) also utilised a "textual analytical approach" (Rudloff, 2016, p. 5) to investigate the gendered messages in *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013). The researcher drew upon feminist and postfeminist perspectives in media studies to argue that the so-called feminist narrative and empowering representation of its leading female characters is overstated (Rudloff, 2016). Although a textual approach can be helpful when studying gender representations in mass media because this is inevitably related to the societal expectations placed on men and women. In a review of Davis (2007), the approach was criticised for being overly descriptive of the gendered messages in Disney animations, rather than analytical (Zipes, 2008).

More generally, "a central mistake that textual critics can make is to ignore the context and polysemy of the text by narrowly arguing for one specific reading of the text" (Fürsich 2009, p. 249). Creeber (2006) states that

> "[a] textual analyst may give their reading intellectual credibility through the application of a dense theoretical discourse (like semiotics or psychoanalysis), *but it is still only one interpretation among many.* If they offer this interpretation as conclusive and definitive, they are also in danger of falling into the trap of prescribing a 'universal reader': i.e., implying that readers,

> regardless of age, gender, social class and race, will read a text in exactly the same way" (Creeber, 2006, p. 82, emphasis added).

To mitigate this, Creeber (2006) suggests that textual analysis "must continue to self-reflexively examine the procedures and methods by which its own judgements are made… Perhaps part of the problem with some textual analysis has been a reluctance to examine its methods and practices too closely" (Creeber, 2006, p. 85). Arguably, it is self-reflection that is missing from some of the research utilising this method to analyse the gendered messages in Disney animated feature length films such as Rudloff (2016) and Davis (2007; 2013).

Although there is agreement that a textual analysis will provide one possible reading of a text while several exist, there seems to be less agreement about whether the interpretation offered by a textual analysis should align with audience's interpretation of the text. For example, Fürsich (2009), states that

> "the measure of a well-executed textual interpretation then cannot be to explain how closely the text represent the producers' intentions nor does it mean how close does the textual analyst come to the actually prevalent audience interpretation of the text. Instead, the textual analyst needs to establish the *ideological potential* of the text between production and consumption" (Fürsich, 2009, p. 249, emphasis in original).

Therefore, Fürsich (2009) suggests that a textual analysis does not need to represent audiences' interpretation of a text, however, when referring to an analysis of a Teletubbies character McKee (2001), states that

> "[the researcher] identifies elements of texts and suggests possible interpretations… [b]ut to the majority of the audience, such an interpretation would most likely seem ridiculous – or, to the preschoolers at whom the show is aimed, incomprehensible. *This is what we must try to avoid doing when we use textual analysis in our study of culture*" (McKee, 2001, p. 146, emphasis added).

Much like the media that McKee (2001) refers to above, Disney media are targeted towards children and families. Therefore, applying "dense theoretical discourse" (Creeber, 2006, p. 82) to such media is likely to create readings that do

not reflect the way that the intended audience perceives them, thus producing a disparity in the academic interpretations and those of the non-academic spectators. However, the opposing views of McKee (2001) and Fürsich (2009), suggest that the extent to which an interpretation found in a textual analysis should resonate with the text's intended audience is unclear. Arguably though, interpretations that are far from the audience's interpretations of that text may have value within the academic sphere, but less so beyond it.

3.4.2 Qualitative Content Analysis

The history of qualitative content analysis "was mostly overshadowed by the history of QnCA [quantitative content analysis]" (Prasad 2019, p. 4). Selvi (2020) suggests that this may be the case because there is

> "much confusion how QCA [qualitative content analysis] is performed. In order to develop valid and reliable inferences and interpretations, it is imperative for researchers to follow a set of systematic and transparent phases and steps in performing content analytic inquiries while keeping in mind that it is a continuous, reflective, reiterative and flexible process" (Selvi, 2020, p. 443).

Qualitative content analysis assumes that meaning can be derived from both manifest and latent content (Prasad, 2019; Selvi, 2020, p. 442; Marsh & White, 2006, p. 23). Because analysing latent content requires interpretation of potential underlying meaning in a text, qualitative content analysis has historically been regarded less precise, scientific, replicable, and reliable than quantitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018; Prasad, 2019). However, it examines "meanings, themes and patterns... rather than [relying] on counting the physical characteristics of the text" (Prasad, 2019, p. 7) as when analysing manifest content, which is a strength. Qualitative content analysis is similar in approach to textual analysis, which means that many of the strengths and drawbacks discussed in the previous section are also relevant here.

3.4.3 Qualitative Content Analysis in Gender and Disney Research

Many studies examining the gendered messaging in Disney films have conducted variations of qualitative content analysis. Primo (2018) analysed *Hercules* (Clements & Musker, 1997) through content analysis with no specific ideological underpinning, whereas other approaches include "critical content analysis" (Streiff & Dundes, 2017a, p. 1), "a mythopoetic analysis… [involving] content analysis with an unconventional emphasis on the symbolic and lexicographic manifestations of masculinity and effeminacy" (Dundes et al., 2018, p. 3) and "content analysis to illustrate patterns of gender hegemony using a psychoanalytic perspective" (Streiff & Dundes, 2017b, p. 2). Analysing Disney animated films through narrow and specific academic lenses such as in the research referred to here can be insightful as such research tends to explore themes within the film(s) on which they focus in a detailed manner, often commenting on their latent and subliminal meanings.

Much like with textual analysis, it is widely accepted that no one reading of a text is necessarily truer than another in qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018). Streiff and Dundes (2017b) acknowledge that their approach to analysing *Moana* (Musker et al., 2016) limited other interpretations of the text, and that the presence of themes they drew upon are likely to be unintentionally presented by the film's producers. For example, the researchers state that

> "[t]he application of Freudian thought provides one possible reading of the gender patterns' that are repeatedly employed in Disney movies, probably unconsciously, but in accordance with patriarchal hierarchy and hypermasculinity, as explored in the authors' prior analyses of Disney movies (e.g., Dundes and Streiff 2016; Streiff and Dundes 2017)" (Streiff & Dundes, 2017b, p. 2).

However, this is not explicitly acknowledged within the other qualitative content analyses conducted by Streiff & Dundes, (2017a), Primo (2018) and Dundes et al., (2018) which could suggest that they do not engage in methodological self-reflection

(Creeber, 2006, p. 85), perhaps a limitation. However, it is also likely that this is not explicitly acknowledged by the researchers as this is an underpinning assumption of such work.

Additionally, the publications considered above (Streiff & Dundes, 2017a; Primo, 2018; Dundes et al., 2018) do not describe the “systematic and transparent phases and steps” (Selvi, 2020, p. 443) followed in their content analyses. This is not to say that such steps were not followed, however, it seems to go against the call for transparency made by Slevi (2020) who stated that “[r]egardless of the type of QCA [qualitative content analysis] employed, researchers must rigorously develop, adhere to and delineate a coding frame in order to achieve trustworthiness” (Slevi, 2020, pp. 449 – 450). Similarly, it seems to align with Krippendorff’s (2018, p. 94) argument that although qualitative content analysis is valuable and should be conducted because of its ability to provide a depth of insight into the messages within a text that quantitative content analysis may not, it tends to be less transparent and explicit in the procedures followed. These observations seem to be applicable to some research utilising qualitative content analysis to examine the gendered messaged within Disney animated feature films (such as Streiff & Dundes, 2017a; Primo, 2018; Dundes et al., 2018). However, such work provides evidence of the broad range of approaches and techniques that can be applied under the term ‘content analysis’ all of which provide substantial and unique insight into the texts they focus upon.

A perhaps more traditional approach to qualitative content analysis applied to Disney animations is provided by Griffin et al., (2017). The authors analysed working roles portrayed by Disney characters and several steps were taken throughout two phases of analysis. In the first phase, the researchers created detailed notes regarding all the animated films included in their sample. Secondly, “important work-

related events, narratives, occurrences and quotes were observed and recorded" (Griffin et al., 2017 p. 875). The incidences of work were coded based on predefined categories describing the type of work portrayed i.e., "Professional worker (doctor, lawyer etc) [or] Sales/shopkeeper/vendor/seller of goods" (Griffin et al., p. 893), and the gender of the worker was also recorded. The second phase required an in-depth analysis of the work-related content and entailed producing codes that further described the approach to work displayed. These codes, along with the notes produced in the first phase, were utilised to establish repeating patterns and themes present across the sample (Griffin et al., 2017). The researchers found that although "in the contemporary animations… females are expected to be active and agentive occupants of the public space of organization" (Griffin et al., 2017, p. 884) this was not the case for the older animations.

Similarly, Towbin et al., (2004) investigated the portrayal of race, gender, and sexuality in Disney animated films. Although they refer to using thematic analysis which is not dissimilar to qualitative content analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2013) their application of predefined codes aligns it with qualitative content analysis also. Like the approach taken in Griffin et al., (2016), Towbin et al., (2018) analysed a sample of Disney animations in two phases. Firstly, relevant codes/questions were applied to the films to identify smaller chunks of material (including interactions and song lyrics) that were relevant to those codes. Secondly an inductive analysis was conducted to uncover the themes that derived from each of those units of analysis and provided an understanding of the themes that existed within the codes. Some of the codes included questions such as "How are boys/men portrayed? How are girls/women portrayed? How are members of marginalized cultures portrayed?" (Towbin et al*.,* 2004, pp. 25-26). The approach in the first part of the analysis is

comparable to the approach taken by qualitative content analysts in narrowing down the data by identifying the most relevant units, before starting to code (Selvi, 2020).

Overall, qualitative content analysis has been applied to Disney animated feature length films in a variety of ways and through various ideological lenses. The advantage of this is that when reviewing the literature, the representation of gender in Disney films can be understood through several nuanced perspectives. This is a substantial benefit given that the gendered messages within Disney animations (and mass media more broadly) are complex and varied. However, a drawback of qualitative content analyses conducted by Streiff & Dundes (2017a), Streiff & Dundes (2017b) and Primo (2018) is that they do not report the methodological steps taken to gain their interpretations which leaves them vulnerable to criticism by content analysts (such as Krippendorff, 2018 and Selvi, 2020). Perhaps more structured methodological approaches have been taken by Griffin et al., (2017) and Towbin et al., (2004) which may better reflect qualitative content analysis as described by Krippendorff (2018) and Selvi (2020). Perhaps then, in the future, more qualitative content analyses of the representation of gender within Disney animations should more explicitly report the procedures followed to ensure their methodological credibility.

3.4.4 The Approach Taken in The Current Research (Study Two)

Study two aimed to qualitatively examine the portrayal of male and female characters within Marvel and Star Wars animated content targeted towards children. Little research had been conducted on this topic, therefore, the qualitative approaches to analysing the representations of gender in Disney feature length animations have been drawn upon in the previous sub-section. It has been found that Towbin et al., (2004) provided a transparent and systematic methodological

description of utilising thematic analysis, arguably with elements of qualitative content analysis, to provide a detailed and rigorous examination of the portrayal of male and female protagonists across a sample of Disney feature length animations. This approach was adopted in study two, whereby Marvel and Star Wars media were viewed, relevant units of analysis were recorded, and themes were established. This allowed for a transparent approach in data collection and analysis that is sometimes lacking in qualitative analyses of Disney feature length animations, as discussed above. Further detail of the method utilised in study two can be found in chapter five.

3.5 The Methods Utilised to Measure the Link Between Engagement with Disney, Marvel and Star Wars Franchises and Children's Gendered Behaviour in Previous Research

Whilst numerous studies have assessed the content of Disney animated films themselves, fewer studies have investigated the link between the gender stereotyped content in Disney media and children's behaviour. However, some experimental studies have been conducted to investigate the extent to which children recognise the gendered messaging in Disney media (Hine et al., 2018b; Baker-Sperry, 2007), and the extent to which wearing Disney dressing-up outfits is related to performance on gendered behavioural tasks (Coyne et al., 2021b). Additionally, some observational studies have examined the link between the presence of Disney merchandise and children's behaviour more broadly (Golden & Jacoby, 2017; Wohlwend, 2012). Although insightful, such research tends to assess the relationship between the gendered messaging in Disney animations and children's behaviour somewhat indirectly as they rely on merchandise associated with Disney films, which is potentially a limitation.

Studies that do investigate the relationship between gendered messages within Disney films and children's behaviour more directly tend to utilise self or other reports. For example, Coyne et al., (2014) and Coyne et al., (2016) asked parents to report how frequently their children engage with stereotyped media content (superhero media and Disney princess media respectively) and report their level of gender stereotypical behaviour. The authors then statistically analysed whether higher exposure to stereotyped content predicts higher levels of gender stereotyped behaviour in children (Coyne et al., 2014; Coyne et al., 2016). Such an approach is one of the few ways that the impact of Disney media on children can be studied without priming participants which will be discussed in the upcoming section. The methodological approaches (observational research, experimental research, and self and other reports) utilised in previous research in this area will be discussed as well as the benefits and weaknesses of each. Throughout these sections, the substantial methodological changes this thesis underwent due to the coronavirus pandemic will be discussed.

3.5.1. Observational Research

Observational research can "contrast between… [being] conducted under experimental conditions and that which is more naturalistic" (Breakwell, 2012, p. 376). Further, "observational research with the goal of describing behaviour can be divided into two broad categories, depending on the degree of experimenter involvement with participants in the study" (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2018, p. 292); naturalistic observation and participant observation. In naturalistic observations the researcher may be hidden from the participants, or not present at all if the settings are recorded (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2018). This will minimise the effect of the researcher's presence on participant behaviour (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2018, p. 293).

Alternatively, in participant observation, researchers attempt to become a member of the group they are observing which means that “the researcher [obtains] first-hand insights that remain hidden to a more remote observer” (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2018, p. 294). This is based on the assumption that “[b]uilding a partnership with study participants can lead to deeper insight into the context under study, adding richness and depth to the data” (Tuli, 2010, p. 100).

Observational research can take place in settings that are less controlled by the researcher and more familiar to the participants such as in schools or nurseries/pre-schools for child observation studies (Goodwin & Goodwin 2018). The benefit of collecting data from observations within such settings is that the findings are more generalisable as the behaviour displayed by the participants is more likely to reflect their everyday behaviour (Breakwell, 2012). However, a drawback is that the researcher has less control than in observational research conducted in more experimental conditions (Breakwell, 2012), therefore before conducting observation studies, researchers should consider the extent to which generalisability is important to their study.

A limitation of utilising observational methods for data collection is that it can be time consuming, particularly when compared to questionnaire research. Observational methods often require the researcher to be present for several hours across multiple observation settings to ensure that depth can be gained through the chosen (usually qualitative) analysis. Further, if participant observation is being utilised, researchers will also need to take time to become familiar with and to the participants they observe (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2018). It is particularly important to consider the implication of the time involved in observational research methods when they are taking place within external organisations such as in schools or nurseries.

To conduct ethical research in schools or similar settings, it is the researcher's moral and ethical obligation to do so in the most efficient way possible to minimise the time that children spend away from their curriculum. Further, in a practical sense, schools and other organisations are unlikely to facilitate such time-consuming research which can have implications for participant recruitment.

An example of in-depth observational research was conducted by Wohlwend (2012) who utilised a case study approach – that is "the intensive study of a single case or small number of cases which draws on observational data and promises to shed light on a larger population of cases" (Gerring, 2017, p. 28). The purpose of the research was to provide rich detailed analysis from just two cases of Disney princess doll play in which two boys were involved (Wohlwend, 2012). The case study approach allowed the researcher to delve into the nuanced details of the two cases of Disney princess play that included a small number of participants (5 in total). This allowed for a thorough analysis of speech utilised in such a setting, including its patterns, tone, and potential intention (Wohlwend, 2012). This approach led the researcher to develop a detailed understanding of the Disney princess play that the participants engaged in, as well as how it related to their usual interactions which provided valuable insight. On a practical level however, the case study approach is perhaps the most time-consuming observational research which is a considerable drawback of such a method. For example, Wohlwend (2012) was very familiar with the participants observed as they made weekly visits to the kindergarten in which the research was based over a period of one year which is unlikely to be practical for most researchers.

Golden and Jacoby (2018) conducted observational research with a different analytical approach to Wohlwend's (2012). The researchers aimed to observe the

impact of Disney princess dressing-up outfits on children's behaviour (Golden & Jacoby, 2018). Participants were observed before and after they had been given Disney princess outfits (and also participated in short interviews, and their parents completed a questionnaire reporting their child's behaviour). To obtain data for analysis from the observations, the researchers utilised a technique where

> "every 7 min, the researchers filled out a snapshot observation form, which took between 3 and 4 min to complete. The snapshot observation technique served to monitor the percentage of time participants played with the costumes and to track their locations within the classroom" (Golden & Jacoby, 2018, p. 303).

Additionally, the researchers obtained

> "thick qualitative descriptions about the participants' behaviors. These notes addressed the types of roles that the participants chose to enact as well as their actions while dressing in the costumes, when costumes were available" (Golden & Jacoby, 2018, p. 303)

Thematic analysis was then applied to the data gained from the observations, as well as the interviews conducted several days afterwards. In the technique described by Golden and Jacoby (2018) above, there is a risk that a significant amount of behaviour will not be recorded or accounted for, or that detail was missed. This is a wider issue in observational research of behaviour – inevitably, despite the researchers/observers' efforts, it is likely that some behaviour will be missed, especially if data is being recorded in real time rather than from video recordings.

Overall, observational research has benefits in that, when analysed qualitatively, the data can provide rich accounts of the behaviour displayed by participants. This is particularly well highlighted by Wohlwend (2012) as their research focused on a small number of participants but was insightful because of the depth of the accounts that was gained. Further, Golden and Jacoby (2018) were able to provide evidence of gendered behaviour being displayed in young girls interacting with Disney princess outfits by utilising a snapshot technique which may have been

more practical than applying the case-study approach adopted by Wohlwend (2012). However, the research conducted by Golden and Jacoby (2018) could have been improved if the play settings were recorded rather than analysed live, as much behaviour may have been missed meaning that the data may have been less accurate.

Originally, this thesis intended to replicate Golden and Jacoby (2018) by investigating whether engaging with male Disney character dressing-up outfits influenced children's play behaviour. Participants would have been recruited from and the research would have been conducted within schools. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic took hold six months into this research programme which was one month after the original research proposal was accepted. Due to school closures and social distancing measures, it was not possible to rely on being able to conduct research within school settings, or more broadly, utilise methods that would require direct contact with participants. Although at the time of writing schools are open in the UK, individual institutions are having to respond to COVID-19 outbreaks among staff and pupils by shutting with little notice. Additionally, because schools and teaching staff are under substantial pressure to ensure that children's academic progress has not been affected by school closures, taking children away from their curriculum to participate in this study was not appropriate.

3.5.2 Experimental Research

In some ways opposed to observational studies, experimental research in psychology consists of manipulating at least one variable (the independent variable) to investigate the effect it has on another variable (dependent variable) (Breakwell, 2012). More specifically an experiment is "a systematic research study in which the investigator directly varies some factor (or factors), holds all other factors constant,

and observes the results of the variation" (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2018, p. 130). Experiments usually take place in a setting where the researcher has a high level of control. This minimises the effect of variables that are not the independent variable affecting the results (known as extraneous variables) (Breakwell, 2012; Goodwin & Goodwin, 2018). To limit the effect of extraneous variables that exist within the participant sample (such as personality traits), participants are randomly assigned to groups or conditions and "experiments in which randomization is not possible are called *quasi-experiments"* (Breakwell, 2012, p. 65, emphasis in original). The high level of control obtained in experimental designs is something that cannot be obtained in naturalistic settings such as those used in observational research. Although this can be considered a strength of experimental research, it has implications for the generalisability of the results as it is unclear whether participants would behave or react the same way in a more natural setting, or in their everyday lives (Breakwell, 2012, pp. 72-73). Thus, as with all methods, experimental design may only be useful in certain scenarios.

A recent experimental study conducted by Coyne et al., (2021b) investigated the relationship between children wearing gender stereotypical, gender neutral and counter-stereotypical dressing-up outfits and their performance in toy preference, prosocial behaviour, and perseverance tasks. The stereotypical outfits were Disney princess outfits for girls and superhero character outfits for boys. The research was based on the assumption that firstly, the media (i.e., films) associated with the Disney princesses and superheroes were stereotypically gendered (and that children would recognise the characters as such), and secondly, that wearing the outfits would heighten the child's adherence to gender stereotypes. Although this experiment provided insight into how children behave in dressing-up outfits

associated with films and television shows high in stereotyped messages, which is important as such merchandise is hugely popular, it did not directly assess the link between the gendered messages within the the media content themselves and children's behaviour. It could be suggested that by providing the children with dressing-up outfits, the researchers also primed the participants to behave in a way that they may not usually which may mean that the findings do not relate to or reflect the children's everyday behaviour.

In a perhaps a more direct investigation of children's perceptions of Disney's gendered content (rather than its merchandise), Baker-Sperry (2007) read participants the book of Disney's *Cinderella* (Geronimi et al., 1950) and recorded their reactions to the story. Such research enabled children's responses to highly gender stereotyped Disney narratives (England et al., 2011) to be observed. However, the researcher did not comment on how the recordings were analysed, with the results within the publication seemingly being narrative and descriptive. The research conducted by Baker-Sperry (2007) provides a methodological example of research examining how children understand the gendered messages within Disney narratives.

Further experimental studies have investigated the link between Disney media engagement and adherence to more general stereotypes (rather than gender stereotypes specifically). Bazzini et al., (2010) investigated whether children who watched *Cinderella* (Geronimi et al., 1950; a film with high attractive-goodness stereotyping) or *Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Trousdale & Wise, 1996; a film with low attractive-goodness stereotyping) rated photos of children with varying degrees of attractiveness differently. The results showed that the participants were more likely to rate the photographs of attractive children as good although viewing one of the

two films did not influence children's ratings of the photographs (Bazzini et al., 2010). This study, although not a direct assessment of the effects of *gender* stereotypes in Disney media, provides insight into designing experimental research measuring how Disney films may affect children's perceptions.

Much like Bazzini et al., (2010), Hine et al., (2018b) conducted an experiment whereby participants were required to watch one of two Disney films and the way in which they rated the characters within them, was measured. More specifically, Hine et al., (2018b) investigated how children who had watched *Sleeping Beauty* (Geronimi et al., 1959) and children who had watched *Moana* (Musker et al., 2016) rated the main female characters in terms of the extent to which they displayed some stereotypically masculine and feminine traits. This research therefore aimed to assess the extent to which children perceived the trend towards 'modern' Disney princesses being more androgynous (high in masculine and feminine traits) than their 'earlier' counterparts (Hine et al., 2018a; England et al., 2011), as discussed in the previous chapter. The participants were also asked whether they perceived certain Disney characters to be princesses, including the target characters. Before the participants watched one of the two films, they completed a measure designed to assess their level of engagement with Disney, as well as a measure designed to assess how they would attribute a selection of masculine and feminine characteristics to princesses in general. This experimental research was the first to assess whether children perceive the gendered messages within Disney princess animations and showed that although the children perceived Moana to be more androgynous than Aurora, they still reported that princesses were feminine overall (Hine et al., 2018b). However, it is possible that one viewing of Moana was not

adequate to change children's conceptualisations of princesses, which the researchers acknowledge was a limitation of the approach taken (Hine et al., 2018b).

Originally, the second study of this thesis would have examined the extent to which children recognised the feminine and masculine behaviours displayed by male Disney protagonists in an experimental study that would have replicated Hine et al., (2018b). However, because this would have been conducted within schools, the researcher would have been unable to be present for data collection due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Non-school staff were not allowed access to school buildings during the time the study would have been conducted. By the researcher not being present, there would have been a greater possibility of extraneous variables interfering with the data obtained. For example, it would have been important for the participants to complete the questionnaires directly after having seen one of the two films so that any potential effects of the gendered messages within them would have been at their strongest. With the researcher unlikely to be present (as well as the aforementioned issue relating to schools being under pressure to ensure that children's academic progress has not been affected by school closures) experimental research was not practical to conduct.

Overall, this section has discussed that experimental research has been insightful in investigating children's perceptions of, and reactions to, Disney princess films (Hine et al., 2018b) and books (Baker-Sperry, 2007) as well as the impact of stereotypes within Disney films more broadly (Bazzini, et al., 2010). However, although experimental research usually provides the researcher with more control, when researching children, it is likely that experimental studies will take place in settings known to the participants, such as schools (as was the case for Hine et al., 2018b, Baker-Sperry, 2007, Bazzini et al., 2010 and Coyne, 2021b), due to the

ethical issues related to studying child participants. This may mean that the control that is usually gained (and deemed a benefit) in experimental research designs may not be obtained in such research with children which may make it less advantageous.

This section has also suggested that it may be challenging to design experimental research to investigate the relationship between the gendered messages in Disney animated films and children's behaviour. When merchandise such as dressing-up outfits are utilised as an independent variable (Coyne et al., 2021b), the researcher is not directly assessing the impact of the messages within the mass media content itself. Such designs could be priming participants to act in a way that does not reflect their everyday behaviour. To mitigate for priming, self or other reports regarding the amount of gender stereotyped media consumed by the child could be utilised rather than, or perhaps, as well as an experimental method. Research utilising self and other reports will be considered in the following section.

3.6 The Methods Utilised to Measure the Link Between Engagement with Disney, Marvel and Star Wars Franchises and Children's Gendered Behaviour in This Thesis

3.6.1 Self-reports/Other Reports

Questionnaires may ask the participant completing them about themselves (self-report) or about another person (other report) and require quantitative and/or qualitative responses. Qualitative questionnaire items may provide the participants with the opportunity to freely write a response to a question or statement and the researcher will analyse these responses for themes or patterns non-statistically. Alternatively, questionnaires may have items that require participants to report the extent to which they agree with a statement (from strongly agree to strongly disagree

for example) or how frequently they do or observe something (from very rarely to very often for example). This is referred to as a Likert scale (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2018). Likert scales are common in questionnaire research and gather quantitative data that can be used to conduct statistical analysis. There are two main considerations for researchers utilising quantitative self or other report questionnaires – using Likert scales and the possibility of social desirability bias impacting the results obtained (Goodwin & Goodwin 2018). These will be considered in this section.

Although there is some evidence to suggest that Likert scales with ten response points have higher levels of construct validity – that is, they measure what they intend to – when results are analysed through parametric tests, generally, shorter Likert scales seem to be preferred by researchers (Awang et al., 2016). Likert scales with between five and seven response points enable "respondents to express their opinions sufficiently, especially when respondents are under time pressure" (Chyung, et al., 2017, p. 20). Goodwin and Goodwin (2018) state that "[t]here is no clear advantage to either a 5- or a 7- (or more) point scale" (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2018, p. 261). Further, a Likert scale with three responses has been previously utilised to measure the extent to which children notice the gendered behaviour displayed by Disney princesses (in the research conducted by Hine et al., 2018b) which provides evidence that shorter Likert scales can be adequate. In line with this, the scales utilised for the current research will replicate those utilised by Coyne et al., (2014) and will have between four and seven item responses.

A second consideration when utilising Likert scales is the impact of social desirability bias. This speaks to the notion that participants may report their own or another person's behaviour or attitudes in a way they deem to be favourable or

expected, rather than accurate (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2018). In a review of self-report surveys published between 2004 and 2005 it was found that over half of the studies did not consider social desirability bias, and approximately half that did consider it, found that it had influenced the results drawn from the research (Mortel, 2008).

It is possible that when parents are asked to report their child's behaviour or attitudes, social desirability bias will have an impact. Results of parent and child reports of the same phenomena with small correlations suggests that there are relatively large inconsistencies in the reports of each party. Indeed, Gentile et al., (2012) found relatively small correlations between parent and child reports of parental media monitoring, with parents reporting higher levels than their children. The inconsistencies could be accounted for because parents may be aware that it is 'desirable' for them to be involved in their children's media viewing which could lead them to exaggerate their involvement due to social desirability bias. It is, arguably, more likely that participants will report bias results when parents are asked to respond to questionnaires that ask them about their involvement in their child's lives, especially on topics that are widely contested and documented in the public domain. The negative effects of media engagement on children are widely reported in media, although in more recent years the focus has been on social media rather than film or television (such as in "Ask children about social media use, psychiatrists urged", 2019).

Questionnaires have been previously utilised to measure the relationship between viewing stereotyped media and children's gendered behaviour in research conducted by Coyne et al., (2014), and Coyne et al., (2016). Coyne et al., (2014) utilised parental reports to investigate whether exposure to superhero media, which

tends to have male and female protagonists high in stereotypically masculine traits (Barker & Raney, 2007), longitudinally predicts masculine behaviour in pre-school aged children. Parents were asked to report the frequency at which their child watches superhero media and their gendered behaviour and weapon play, the perceived level of violence within the media their child consumes, and the extent to which they engage in conversations with their child about the media they consume, all at two time points. This approach has the substantial benefit of identifying the long-term implications of engagement with superhero media on children's behaviour. However, it is possible that the results were impacted by social desirability bias. Regardless of this, Coyne et al., (2014) found evidence of the predictive relationship between exposure to children's media high in gendered content and their gendered behaviour.

One way to mitigate for social desirability bias is through a process of data triangulation whereby data related to the research topic is collected from multiple sources, using the same, or different research measurements to enhance validity (Breakwell, 2012, p. 396) For example, in research investigating the behaviour displayed by a child, a researcher may collect self-report data from the child themselves, as well as gathering data from their parent(s) and/or schoolteacher. This approach was taken by Coyne et al., (2016). In a similar study to the research referred to above, Coyne et al., (2016) investigated the impact of Disney princesses (rather than superheroes) largely utilising parental reports but also utilising a toy preference task with the children directly, as well as teacher reports. Such an approach mitigates for bias that has been discussed throughout this subsection, as well as providing a more holistic approach in understanding the relationship between viewing stereotyped media and children's gendered behaviour.

Although conducting a toy preference task with gender stereotypical and counter stereotypical toys (as in Coyne et al., 2016) provided more information than gathered from parental report alone (as in Coyne et al., 2014) it is also possible that if parents provide their child with gender stereotyped toys at home, they will be more likely to pick those toys in a preference task. Thus, a child's performance in a toy preference task (such as the one utilised by Coyne et al., 2016) may be influenced by the toys they are familiar with rather than the toys they prefer. Although conducting research utilising multiple research measurements and/or methods may protect against social desirability bias in research utilising self and other report measures, it is important to acknowledge that this is not necessarily guaranteed to increase reliability and validity.

3.6.2 The Approach Taken in The Current Research (Study Three)

The COVID-19 pandemic severely limited the methodological possibilities of this research programme, and it was important to (re)design research that would be unaffected should further national lockdowns be imposed in the UK. This meant that a study that did not rely on the researcher being granted access to schools or having face-to-face contact with participants such as with observations and experimental research needed to be designed. As a result, the third study of this thesis made use of parental reports (utilising Likert scale questionnaires) to investigate the influence of children's engagement with the Disney, Marvel and Star Wars franchises on their levels of gender stereotypical play behaviour in a replication of Coyne et al., (2014), a phenomenon on which little is known. Most of the research that has investigated the relationship between engagement with Disney animated feature length films and children's gendered behaviour has focused on Disney princesses (such as Golden & Jacoby, 2018; Wohlwend, 2012; Coyne et al., 2016) and only one has considered

this topic in relation to Marvel media (Coyne et al., 2021b). Adapting Coyne et al., (2014) to study the relationships between engagement with the Disney, Marvel and Star Wars franchises on gender stereotypical behaviour and weapon play was insightful, particularly in a UK sample which to the best of the researcher's knowledge had yet to be examined.

Overall, although parent reports are susceptible to social desirability bias as discussed above, they have proved to be effective in providing the necessary information in the study that was replicated in this thesis. Further, in line with the postpositivist research paradigm in which the current researcher is situated, it is deemed that bias is inevitable in quantitative research (Eagly & Riger, 2014), meaning that it is important for researchers to be reflexive. This will be essential when conducting this study. Additionally, it was essential that the current research was practical to conduct within the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Questionnaires could be distributed to and completed by parents through schools without direct face-to-face contact between the participants and the researcher being required which was a significant benefit. The questionnaires utilised were previously utilised by Coyne et al., (2014) and have high internal consistency and reliability. Further detail of the method utilised in the third study of this research programme can be found in chapter six of this thesis.

3.7 Summary

This chapter has aimed to justify the methodological decisions taken within the current research programme. By introducing the epistemological and ontological assumptions that underpin quantitative and qualitative research, the researcher's belief was identified within these paradigms. This aimed to shed light on the broader

methodological decisions that have been made. The methods utilised within each of the three studies of this thesis were then introduced.

Firstly, quantitative content analysis was discussed. The section articulated that the first study of this thesis aimed to build on the work of England et al., (2011) and Hine et al., (2018a) by assessing changes in the gendered behaviours displayed by Disney protagonists over time, and comparing male and females statistically, justifying the use of quantitative content analysis. Some of the specific methodological decisions that were made in the first study of this thesis, particularly in relation to the level of measurement that would be obtained from the analysed texts, as well as the approach taken to establish inter-rater reliability were described. A more detailed discussion of the overall method adopted in study one, including the changes to the coding framework applied (that was adapted from England et al. 2011 and Hine et al., 2018a) can be found in chapter four.

Secondly, some of the approaches taken in qualitative research investigating the gendered messages in Disney animations (namely textual analysis and qualitative content analysis) were described and evaluated. The section articulated that in order to conduct successful qualitative analyses, a series of identifiable methodological steps need to be taken and described (Selvi, 2020; Krippendorff, 2018), which many such studies (Streiff & Dundes, 2017a; Streiff & Dundes, 2017b, Primo, 2018) had not done. However, Towbin et al., (2004) provided a rigorous qualitative examination of male and female protagonists within a sample of Disney feature length animations, and this approach will be replicated in the second study of this thesis which will examine the portrayal of male and female protagonists in Marvel and Star Wars content.

Thirdly, methods that have been utilised in previous research investigating the link between children's engagement with Disney and superhero media and children's gendered behaviour, perceptions, and attitudes (observational, experimental and questionnaire research) were discussed. Throughout these sections, the practical constraints that impacted the methods utilised in study three of this thesis were described. Study three utilised parent reports in order to build upon the previous study conducted by Coyne et al., (2014), although with a particular focus on the relationships between children's engagement with the Disney, Marvel and Star Wars franchises and their gender stereotypical behaviour and weapon play, and whether the relationships are moderated by parental mediation or exposure to violence within the media consumed. Although there are limitations to this design, the results obtained were valuable, and insightful, particularly as such research has yet to be conducted within a UK sample. Importantly, all the methodological approaches adopted in this thesis were practical to conduct within the current pandemic.

Chapter Four: Investigating the Gendered Behaviours Displayed by Disney Protagonists (Study One)

4.1 Introduction

Chapter two presented evidence that there are numerous gender stereotypical messages present in Disney animated feature length films (England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018a; Towbin et al., 2004, Primo, 2018; Dundes, & Streiff, 2016; Giroux & Pollock, 2010; Streiff & Dundes, 2017a; Streiff & Dundes, 2017b). Several theoretical perspectives were also presented in support of arguments which suggest that such messages can affect children's understanding of gender, for example social cognitive theory of gender development (Bussey & Bandura, 1999), and gender schema theory (Bem, 1981). Moreover, that review made clear that the gendered behaviour displayed in Disney animations may be particularly influential because this corporation has been one of the most popular producers of children's animated content for over eight decades and so further research in this area is always warranted and beneficial.

Chapter three then highlighted how both qualitative and quantitative approaches have been applied to analysing gender in media, as well as to Disney feature length animations specifically. The methodology chapter also outlined the advantages of quantitatively examining the gendered messages in media, including enabling statistical comparisons between male and female characters, and across time points. However, the previous quantitative content analyses that have assessed the overall gender profiles of Disney protagonists, for example those conducted by England et al., (2011) and Hine et al., (2018a), utilised the same coding scheme; a framework which may benefit from review due to significant limitations (as outlined in

earlier chapters and discussed in greater detail within this chapter). Additionally, as previously noted, both England et al., (2011) and Hine et al., (2018a) focused exclusively on the Disney princess franchise. Such a focus means that there has been little quantitative investigation of the overall gendered profiles of other influential Disney protagonists.

For example, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Trousdale & Wise, 1996) and *Tarzan* (Buck & Lima, 1999) were both commercially successful Disney animated feature films, reflected in international grossing figures of over $300 million (Box Office Mojo, 1996) and over $400 million respectively (Box Office Mojo, 1999), and are therefore likely to contain influential protagonists. Neither of these films were included in previous research conducted by England et al., (2011) or Hine et al., (2018a) because they did not feature in the Disney princess franchise on which both publications focused. Indeed, there are also several other internationally successful Disney animations that are not categorised within the Disney princess franchise (such as the examples given above) that are likely to be influential on the children viewing them around the globe, and an updated and expanded appraisal is necessary in establishing the gendered messages found within them. Further, because previous studies have focused on the Disney princess franchise, male protagonists beyond the princes have been under-explored. Therefore, assessing films which lie outside the female targeted Disney princess franchise will also provide insight into the representation of gender in Disney protagonists that may appeal to young boys. Additionally, the current study will shed light on whether the chronological changes in the representation of men and women in Disney feature length animations identified by England et al., (2011) and Hine et al., (2018a) are maintained, when a broader selection of protagonists are analysed.

The current study aims to overcome some of the limitations identified within the previous quantitative content coding studies conducted by England et al., (2011) and Hine et al., 2018a). As a result, the current study aims to conduct a quantitative content analysis of the gendered behaviour displayed by the protagonists within Disney animated feature length films with a central adult human male protagonist, with an expanded coding scheme.

4.1.1 The Portrayal of Gender in Disney Animated Feature Length Films

Disney, as one of the largest and most influential creators of films and television series targeted towards children, has had its content widely analysed for the prevalence of gender stereotypes (England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018a; Towbin et al., 2004, Primo, 2018; Dundes, & Streiff, 2016; Giroux & Pollock, 2010; Streiff & Dundes, 2017a; Streiff & Dundes, 2017b). Such studies have subsequently criticised the Disney corporation for portraying stereotypical depictions of gender, particularly within its animated feature length films (Sammond, 2019; Wells, 2002; Whitley, 2013). Many of these studies either focus on or at least include films which belong to the Disney princess franchise, created in 2001 to enable Disney to successfully market (and thus profit from) the oldest and much-loved Disney princess animations (such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, 1937) alongside the more recent princess releases (such as *The Little Mermaid,* Clements & Musker, 1989). Largely considered a merchandising and marketing opportunity (Heatwole, 2016), by bringing Disney princess films together in this way, Disney ensured that even the earliest princess releases stayed relevant and continued to be consumed over fifty years after initial release.

It is perhaps for these reasons that two of the most recent quantitative content coding analyses of the gendered behaviours displayed in Disney animated feature

length films conducted by England et al., (2011) and Hine et al., (2018a) focused exclusively on the Disney princess animations. In these publications, the earliest princesses, those in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (Cottrell et al., 1937)*,* *Cinderella* (Geronimi et al., 1950) and *Sleeping Beauty* (Geronimi et al., 1959), were the most feminine of all the princesses in the franchise. They were identified as being highly submissive (England et al., 2011), passive and victimised (Towbin et al., 2004; Whitley, 2013) and domestic work was central to portrayals of femininity in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (Cottrell et al., 1937) and *Cinderella* (Geronimi et al., 1950) especially (Heatwole, 2016; Whitley, 2013). This is perhaps unsurprising considering the time at which the films were released, however, it is important to note that they are still likely to be among the most influential to young audiences who thus remain vulnerable to the stereotypical messages prevalent within them. Curiously, while the female protagonists in the earliest Disney princess animations were highly gender stereotypical, the prince characters within those films were high in both masculine and feminine behaviour (England et al., 2011). It is unclear as to why the female characters were highly stereotyped and the male characters were not, although the prince characters in this era of Disney animations lacked screen time (Davis, 2007) which left little behaviour to be considered for analysis (England et al., 2011).

Princess films released between 1989 and 1998 (*The Little Mermaid*, Clements & Musker, 1989; *Beauty and the Beast*, 1991; *Aladdin,* Clements & Musker, 1992; *Pocahontas,* Gabriel & Goldberg, 1995; and *Mulan*, Bancroft & Cook, 1998) referred to as the ‘middle’ princess animations by England et al., (2011) and Hine et al*.,* (2018a), included princesses who were regarded as more independent in comparison to ‘earlier’ princesses (Davis, 2007). Indeed, the princesses in this era

were statistically more masculine than the ‘earlier’ princesses (England et al., 2011). However, these films have been criticised for still taking place within patriarchal societies (Giroux & Pollock, 2010), many of which are ruled by the princesses overpowering (albeit caring) fathers (Holcomb et al., 2015), as well as for displaying princesses who are predominately focused on romances which are largely idealistic (and therefore unrealistic) and unhealthy (Hefner et al., 2017), much like their earlier counterparts. Indeed, almost all the ‘middle’ princess films end with the princess marrying or being romantically involved, highlighting Disney’s reliance on romance to provide ‘happy endings’. The prince characters in the ‘middle’ films were slightly more masculine than the ‘earliest’ princes although this difference was not statistically significant (England et al., 2011). Perhaps most significantly, ‘middle’ princes were much more muscular, and many were leaders (England et al., 2011) suggesting some more stereotypical portrayals of masculinity. The ‘middle’ animations are therefore considered to have mixed gendered messages (England et al., 2011).

So-called ‘modern’ Disney princess animations (*The Princess and the Frog,* Clements & Musker, 2009; *Tangled*, Greno & Howard, 2010; *Brave,* Andrews et al., 2012; *Frozen*, Buck & Lee, 2013*; Moana,* Musker et al., 2016) have the most androgynous female characters, that is, those high in both feminine and masculine behaviours. These androgynous princesses tended to be highly assertive and athletic (masculine traits) as well as fearful and tentative (feminine traits) (Hine et al., 2018a, p. 8). The authors suggested that this movement from highly stereotypical Disney princesses to those high in both masculine and feminine behaviour provides evidence that there is a wide range of female gender profiles shown in the franchise overall, and that this mainly relies on the fact that depictions have become more

progressive over time (Hine et al., 2018a). Both the ‘modern’ and ‘early’ princes seemed to be less stereotyped, that is, lower in masculine behaviour than the ‘middle’ princes, although it should be noted that only borderline significance was found in the change in masculine behaviour displayed by princes over time (Hine et al., 2018a*,* p. 8). This suggests that the development of male protagonist’s gender profiles is less linear and chronological than those of the princesses, as well as less prominent.

Frozen 2 (Buck & Lee, 2019) and *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Estrada & Hall, 2021) are among the most recent Disney releases and have yet to be content coded. Although the gendered behaviour displayed by Elsa and Anna in *Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee, 2019) has not been considered, for Dundes (2020) it is notable that the sisters wind up sharing the rule of Arendelle, suggesting that the power of such a role cannot fall to just one female. Further, Anna gets engaged to her love interest Kristoff, who is shown to be agonising about the right way to propose throughout much of the film. That Kristoff is so romantically focused in the sequel will make the analysis of his behaviour particularly interesting, as such traits are often deemed feminine. Much like *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013) and *Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee, 2019), *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Estrada & Hall, 2021) has two leading female protagonists, and although there are some supporting male protagonists, the film focuses on Raya and Numaari. There are no love interests or romantic tropes in the film (much like *Moana,* Musker et al., 2016). Raya is portrayed as adventurous and courageous (Debruge, 2021) and Numaari seems to be a capable leader. Much like *Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee, 2019), the gendered behaviours displayed by the protagonists in *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Estrada & Hall, 2021) have yet to be investigated and warrant quantitative analysis.

Overall, it appears that the depiction of the gendered behaviour displayed by prince characters have remained largely stable over time (England et al., 2011) albeit with some evidence that the ‘modern’ men were more feminine than their earlier counterparts. This trend warrants further research as a borderline significance was found (Hine et al., 2018a, p. 8). Disney princesses, however, seem to enjoy a more pronounced chronological progression from being highly stereotyped in the ‘early’ animations to more androgynous (high in masculine and feminine) traits over time. Notably, some non-princess and more recently released animations need to be content coded to provide a more detailed appraisal of these phenomena. Importantly though, because even the earliest Disney princess animations are heavily marketed and widely seen, they could still be having an impact on the gendered behaviour displayed by young children today. It should be noted that although there is nothing inherently wrong with females adhering to femininity (and males adhering to masculinity), and characters in mass media being portrayed to do so, androgyny for Bem (1975) “was equated with [gender role] flexibility, and flexibility was related to adaptive and positive mental health” (Bem, 1975, as cited by Martin et al., 2017, p. 593). Therefore, less stereotyped gender role profiles in Disney protagonists may be advantageous, especially if this is replicated by the children engaging with such media.

4.1.2 The Relationship Between Engagement with Disney Media and Children’s Behaviour

Gendered messages in mass media, such as the Disney feature length animations that have been described above, are likely to affect children’s understanding of the appropriate behaviour for men and women, as argued by theories such as social cognitive theory of gender development (Bussey & Bandura,

1999) and gender schema theory (Bem, 1981). However, although there is theoretical grounding to suggest that there will be a relationship between the gendered profiles displayed by Disney protagonists and children's gendered behaviour, less research examines this phenomenon than the messages within the Disney feature length animations themselves. In a study that examined whether children notice the gendered behavioural profiles of Disney princesses, Hine et al. (2018b) found that children between the ages of eight and nine years old rated Aurora (from *Sleeping Beauty*, (Geronimi et al., 1959) as more feminine than Moana. This provided evidence that children not only observed differences in the gendered behaviour of Disney protagonists, but they attributed the gendered traits to such characters in line with academic research and perspectives (Hine et al., 2018b). The participants also reported that princesses in general were more feminine than masculine (Hine et al., 2018b). This therefore raises the question as to how children's perception that some princesses are both feminine and masculine (Moana), but overall, princesses are more feminine, will impact their gendered behaviour.

In research investigating this, there seems to be an association between exposure to Disney princess characters and children's displays of stereotypically feminine behaviour (Coyne et al., 2016; Golden & Jacoby, 2018). For example, Coyne et al., (2016) found that high levels of engagement with Disney princess media was associated with more stereotypically feminine behaviour in both boys and girls and that the effect was longitudinal – it predicted the level of feminine behaviour displayed after twelve months. Similarly, when provided with Disney princess outfits, girls reproduced highly feminine behaviour such as focusing on their appearance and displaying highly feminised movements such as twirling (Golden & Jacoby,

2018). They also avidly excluded boys from their play which suggests that the participants marked princess play as appropriate for girls and not boys (Golden & Jacoby, 2018; Dinella et al., 2017). In more recent research, it was found that there was no relationship between children wearing dressing-up outfits, including Disney princess outfits, and performance on perseverance tasks (Coyne et al., 2021b). Additionally, boys who wore Disney princess outfits were more prosocial, and more likely to prefer a range of toys, whereas the same was not true for girls (Coyne et al., 2021b). This suggests that when young boys engage with Disney princess outfits, they may be less restricted by gender stereotypes. Similarly, Wohlwend (2012) also found evidence of play providing opportunities for children to challenge gender norms. When boys played as female characters in play scenarios with Disney and non-Disney dolls, they were continuously mis-gendered. Thus, although the boys were not excluded from doll play as they were in more direct princess play (Golden & Jacoby, 2018), the more inclusionary, less gender segregated play came with challenges for children.

Taken together, this research suggests that Disney princess narratives are associated with more femininity in the children engaging with them (Coyne et al., 2016; Golden & Jacoby, 2018; Wohlwend, 2021). Therefore, despite their recognition that a more ‘modern’ female protagonist is both feminine and masculine (Hine et al., 2018b), it seems to be children’s overall conceptualisations of princesses (Hine et al., 2018b; Dinella et al., 2017) that dominate when it comes to the behaviour they reproduce. More broadly, the research also implies that there is a relationship between the gendered portrayals within Disney media and the narratives children create in their play, as well as the behavioural profiles of both boys and girls (Coyne et al., 2016; Coyne et al., 2021a; Wohlwend, 2012). This highlights the importance of

studying the gendered messaging within such media. Further, much like content coding research conducted by England et al., (2011) and Hine et al., (2018a), the focus on the relationship between children's engagement with the gendered messages within Disney animations and their gendered behaviour has primarily focused on the princess franchise, and the female protagonists within that franchise. The relationship between the gendered portrayals of Disney prince characters, as well as non-prince male protagonists that exist outside the princess franchise and children's gendered behaviour is currently not known.

4.1.3 Limitations of Previous Work

Much of the research considering the gendered behaviour displayed by Disney protagonists focuses on the Disney princess franchise. This means that some potentially influential protagonists (defined in this research as those that feature in animations that have grossed over $200 million worldwide based on Hine et al., 2018a) have not been examined with the same rigour. Perhaps particularly significantly, this means that male non-prince characters have been excluded from much research. The male protagonists that do not feature within the Disney princess animations may be among the most influential to young boys, as boys are less likely to engage with media they associate as being 'for girls' (Dinella et al., 2017). In what could reflect the company aiming to draw in a young male audience because of this, Davis (2013, p. 88) identified that there was an increase in leading male protagonists in the Disney animations around the 1990's and the current study aims to examine the gendered profiles of some of these characters.

Qualitative appraisals of the protagonists within these 1990's Disney animations note that the male characters are strongly influenced by their romantic pursuits (Davis, 2013), such as in *Hercules* (Clements & Musker, 1997) and *Tarzan*

(Buck & Lima, 1999). Hercules decides to stay human to be with Meg and in doing so, gives up the opportunity to reunite with his family and become a God, in perhaps a feminising life choice (Primo, 2018). Tarzan does the opposite – he leaves his ape family who have raised him to live in the human world after falling in love. These two non-princess Disney animations have male characters that make sacrifices motivated by love which makes them quite unlike their prince counterparts. Primo (2018) suggests that this is particularly true of Hercules, as he turns down an opportunity to gain a significant amount of power. As a result of this, the extent to which their gendered profiles are in line with those of the prince characters may be interesting, given that some of their decisions and the narratives of their respective films are notably different from those in the Disney princess franchise. This makes the gendered behavioural profiles within *Hercules* (Clements & Musker, 1997) and *Tarzan* (Buck & Lima, 1999) worthy of quantitative study.

Although both characters make sacrifices, both Hercules and Tarzan are muscular and physically stereotypically masculine, as is Phoebus from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Trousdale & Wise, 1996). *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Trousdale & Wise, 1996) is one of the only Disney animations with two central male protagonists with a common goal and love interest. The characters are initially enemies until Phoebus saves Quasimodo's life and he can overcome his jealousy and broken heart (Davis, 2013, p. 139). *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Trousdale & Wise, 1996) represents two male characters working alongside one another which is rarely displayed in Disney animated feature length films. It is possible that different gendered behavioural profiles may be displayed by Quasimodo and Phoebus, but if these are similar (i.e., both men are highly masculine, or both are highly feminine) it could suggest a bias in Disney's

representation of men. Investigating the gendered profiles of male protagonists within *Hercules* (Clements & Musker, 1997), *Tarzan* (Buck & Lima, 1999) and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Trousdale & Wise, 1996) will therefore be insightful given that the narratives and plots of such films are different from those within the Disney princess franchise. More specifically, Tarzan and Hercules make sacrifices, largely unlike the prince characters, and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Trousdale & Wise, 1996) allows for two male behavioural profiles to be displayed alongside each other. The unique attributes of these films, as well as the male protagonists within them, suggest that they are worthy of further research.

Similarly, Both Meg (from *Hercules*, Clements & Musker, 1997) and Esmeralda (from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Trousdale & Wise, 1996) are two of the most discrepant female protagonists in Disney's canon. Davis (2007) suggests that they both "exhibit a kind of strength, brashness, and confidence not to be found elsewhere amongst most of Disney's animated heroines" (Davis, 2007, p. 207). Jane (from *Tarzan* Buck & Lima, 1999) is seen to be a representation of a perfect daughter archetype according to Davis (2007). The level of gender stereotypical behaviour shown by the male and female protagonists considered here is not known, and because the male protagonists are more central in the films, the gendered profiles of the female protagonists in particular have received little scholarly attention. Further, it is unclear whether the previously identified development in the portrayal of female and male protagonists in the princess animations over time (in the work conducted by England et al. 2011 and Hine et al., 2018) would persist if these non-royal protagonists were to be included in a quantitative content analysis. For these reasons, the protagonists in non-princess animations, as well as some of

the most recent Disney releases, warrant content coding for their gendered behaviours and traits.

In addition to the limitation of excluding non-princess animations, it is inevitable that as new Disney animated films are released additional content analyses are necessary to provide modernised assessments of gendered portrayals. *Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee, 2019), and *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Estrada & Hall, 2021) were not released when Hine et al., (2018a) conducted their research. *Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee, 2019), which although a sequel, (which in Disney history tend to be much less well known and commercially successful) generated more profit that its predecessor (McGuire, 2020) making it worthy of research. Although *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Estrada & Hall, 2021) is not part of the Disney princess franchise yet, there is much media speculation that the film will be added to the franchise (Dzurillay, 2021; Ramella, 2021). For many, Raya would be a welcome addition, given her Southeast Asian identity (which is not yet represented in the Disney princess franchise) and the film's move away from the princess-meets-prince narrative (Duzurillay, 2021; Ramella, 2021). The film notably lacks a romantic plot which may provide evidence that Disney is attempting to portray less stereotypical and archetypal narratives. Content coding of the leading characters in some of the most recent Disney releases, such as *Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee, 2019) and *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Estrada & Hall, 2021) is needed.

Further to the above limitations relating to character choice and availability for coding, the content analyses conducted by England et al., (2011) and Hine et al., (2018a) also had select methodological drawbacks particularly in relation to the coding scheme utilised. For example, Hine et al., (2018a) found that the *shows emotion* code was limiting. *Shows emotion* was defined as

> "the expression of both positive and negative representation of feeling. This was only coded for princes because initial piloting of the coding scheme indicated princesses consistently displayed emotion at each opportunity throughout and it was unreasonable to code" (England et al., 2011, p. 599).

Although the code was adequate in coding the early Disney princess films, it was not representative of the broader emotion displayed in the later films (Hine et al., 2018a, p. 17). This could partly reflect that the 'modern' Disney men have much more screen-time than the 'early' princes meaning that they are generally more developed characters (Davis, 2013). More broadly, it is possible that the progression from hand-drawn animation to the use of computer-generated imagery within the 'modern' era of Disney animated feature length films allows for emotion to be expressed by characters more clearly.

Further, the *shows emotion* code was applied exclusively to the behaviour of the princes (and was treated as a feminine trait) which meant that emotional displays of princesses, (beyond the extreme case of a princess collapsing while crying), were not coded because princesses showed emotion at high frequencies (England et al., 2011). However, because emotion is displayed at such high frequencies, coding emotion for only male protagonists could have potentially influenced the results of previous research. Further, the code did not differentiate between the emotions displayed meaning that presumably, an angry outburst could have been attributed to this code as well as a scene in which a prince cried, even though the former is arguably a more traditionally masculine emotional display than the latter. That the *shows emotion* code was the most frequently displayed by the prince characters in both the original (England et al., 2011, p. 560) and the modern extension of the work (Hine et al., 2018a, p. 8) likely reflects the variance of behaviour that could fit into the code and highlights the need for specific emotional behaviours to be recorded, and in a more general sense, a review of the coding scheme applied.

This section has highlighted that the previous quantitative content analyses conducted by England et al., (2011) and Hine et al., (2018a) have provided substantial insight into the behaviour of Disney prince and princess characters. However, there are three broad limitations to the research. Firstly, it has omitted non-princess animations and so the gendered behaviour of non-royal characters has not been statistically analysed. Secondly, although inevitable, such research becomes outdated quickly and as such, the gendered behaviour within some of the most recent releases also needs to be analysed. Thirdly, the coding framework applied within both studies had some limitations and could benefit from being reviewed.

4.1.4 Study One Aims

The current study aimed to content code thirty-nine Disney protagonists spanning films released from 1937 to 2021 for their levels of stereotypically masculine, feminine and gender-neutral behaviour. The study aimed to build on the work of England et al*.,* (2011) and Hine et al*.,* (2018a) in three ways, addressing each of the limitations referred to above. Firstly, it examined the gendered behaviour displayed by a greater number of influential Disney protagonists than previous content analyses, including characters from non-princess films. Secondly, it analysed the gendered portrayals within two of the Disney animations released since the prior work (Hine et al., 2018a) was conducted, namely *Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee, 2019) and *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Estrada & Hall, 2021). Thirdly, the current study utilised a more expansive framework of behaviours to overcome some of the drawbacks of the one utilised by England et al., (2011) and Hine et al., (2018a). Although Hine et al., (2018a) utilised the same framework of behaviours so that the gendered behaviours displayed by Disney characters released between 1937 and 2009 could be directly compared to those released between and 2009 and 2016, to further assess any

potential changes in gendered behavioural profiles over time, this was not necessary in the current study. The framework applied in the current study was revised by adding new behavioural codes and expanding the descriptions of others. This aimed to minimise some of the limitations with the previous behavioural codes, as well as take gender-neutral behaviour into consideration. If characters were only more masculine than feminine when their behaviour that did not fit within those parameters were discounted for example, this could have implications for the conclusions that were drawn in previous work.

4.1.5 Study One Research Question and Hypotheses

Study one aimed to answer the research question: How is gender portrayed in influential Disney feature length films?

The Gendered Profiles of Male and Female protagonists. Based on the previous research considered above, three hypotheses were made based on the gendered profiles of male and female protagonists:

> H1A: Female protagonists will be higher in feminine than masculine behaviour overall.
>
> H1B: Male protagonists will be higher in feminine than masculine behaviour overall.
>
> H1C: Based on the predictions above it is hypothesised that there will be no significant difference in the displays of masculine, feminine and gender-neutral behaviour displayed by male and female protagonists when the two gender groups are compared.

Changes Over Time. One further hypothesis was made relating to the expected change in gendered behaviour that may be prevalent across the three eras of Disney animated films analysed.

H2: Female protagonists gendered behaviour will have changed over time. Specifically, the ‘modern’ female protagonists will display higher levels of masculine behaviour when compared to their ‘early’ and ‘middle’ counterparts. Conversely, it is predicted that the gendered behaviour displayed by male protagonists will not change significantly over time.

4.2 Method

4.2.1 Inclusion Criteria

A total of thirty-nine protagonists from feature length films produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios were quantitatively content coded for their levels of stereotypically masculine, feminine and gender-neutral behaviour. Specifically, central protagonists within Disney animated feature length films that a) had a central human, adult male protagonist b) had grossed over $200 million worldwide and/or c) were associated with the Disney princess franchise were included in the study. The criteria aimed to capture the most influential Disney protagonists and the films therefore needed to be widely seen and popular. Although the influence of films cannot simply be measured by box-office results, the worldwide grossing was the most practical way of determining the films’ reach and popularity. In line with Hine et al., (2018a) the $200 million benchmark was deemed appropriate. Further, children are most likely to model behaviour from people or characters they deem to be like themselves (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Therefore, Disney animated feature length films centred around animal protagonists were excluded, as the gendered behavioural profiles of such characters are less likely to be influential to children.

4.2.2 Materials

The films that met the inclusion criteria and the names of each protagonist content coded are listed in Table 1. The protagonists that were not content coded by

England et al., (2011) or Hine et al., (2018a) - whether they were excluded, or their respective films had not yet been released - appear in bold. The Krippendorff's Alpha inter-rater reliability scores for each protagonist are also provided. A discussion of reliability will be provided in the procedure sub-section. The films were accessed via Disney+, Disney's streaming service.

4.2.3 The Coding Framework

The coding framework utilised in the current study (Appendix A) consisted of fifty-two codes and England et al.'s (2011) previously established framework (later used by Hine et al., 2018a) was evaluated and adapted. This section will describe and justify the adaptations made to the previous behavioural codes and discuss codes that were added for the current study.

Four behavioural code descriptions (*athletic, nurturing, collapses crying* and *ashamed/guilty*) remained the same in the current study as they appeared in the previous study. These code descriptions were clear and seemed applicable to the 'modern' animations and thus did not need adapting. Although the description of *ashamed/guilty* remained unchanged in the current work, the code name was changed from (*ashamed to ashamed/guilty*) to represent the description more accurately.

Six behavioural codes were created by dividing previous code descriptions into more than one behaviour in the current framework. Some of these represented nuanced differences in a behaviour that could change its meaning. For example, England et al., (2011) stated that although princesses expressed assertiveness frequently, they were rarely assertive to other adult protagonists and this portrayed "a fairly submissive and limited way of being assertive" (England et al., 2011, p. 562). Based on this, separate *assertive towards adults* and *assertive towards children*

and/or animals behavioural codes were incorporated into the current framework, the former as a masculine code and the latter as a feminine one. Similarly, the *physically aggressive* and *verbally aggressive* codes replaced the previous *inspires fear* code, as the description of inspires fear referred to a character portraying aggression. However, it did not differentiate between physical and verbal aggression, and the name of the code seemed to refer to the reaction to aggressive behaviour rather than the perpetrated behaviour itself. As a result, the *physically aggressive* and *verbally aggressive* codes were created and attempted to capture the behaviour being perpetrated more accurately and clearly.

Eighteen behavioural codes that featured in England et al., (2011) and Hine et al., (2018a) underwent relatively minor changes, mainly to ensure that the descriptions were more explicit about how a behaviour may appear within a target film, and in some cases, to make the behavioural code broader. Also, some adjustments to pre-existing codes reflected the need to ensure that the descriptions did not overlap due to the higher number of codes incorporated into the current framework (fitty-two as opposed to the previous twenty-seven). Some examples of minor adjustments included the addition of climbing to the *physically strong* code description and the addition of ‘doing something despite being advised not to’ into the *independent* code description. Some behavioural codes underwent more major adjustments for the purpose of the current study with their descriptions being partially or completely re-written. For example, the researcher felt that the *previous curious about the princess* code that had the description “exhibiting a studious, concerned expression when looking at the princess. This behaviour suggested that the female had a mystique that was captivating and romantically compelling” (England et al.,

2011, pp. 558- 559) could be subjective, particularly with the use of the terms ‘studious’ and ‘concerned expression’.

Table 1

The Films and Protagonists Content Coded, the era to Which They Belong and Each Protagonist’s Kalpha Reliability Score.

		Male Protagonist(s)		Female Protagonist(s)	
Film Era	Film Name		Kalpha		Kalpha
‘Early’	1. *Snow White and Seven Dwarves* (1937)	The Prince	.81	Snow White	.79
	2. *Cinderella* (1950)	Prince Charming	.81	Cinderella	.76
	3. *Sleeping Beauty* (1959)	Prince Philip	.73	Aurora	.77
‘Middle’	4. *The Little Mermaid* (1989)	Eric	.82	Ariel	.8
	5. *Beauty and the Beast* (1991)	The Beast	.73	Belle	.82
	6. *Aladdin (*1992)	Aladdin	.73	Jasmine	.70
	7. *Pocahontas* (1995)	John Smith	.70	Pocahontas	.71
	8. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996)	**Quasimodo** **Phoebus**	.71 .71	**Esmeralda**	.71
	9. *Hercules* (1997)	**Hercules**	**.**73	**Meg**	.74
	10. *Mulan* (1998)	Li Shang	.78	Mulan	.82
	11. *Tarzan* (1999)	**Tarzan**	**.75**	**Jane**	**.75**
‘Modern’	12. *The Princess and the Frog* (2009)	Naveen	.75	Tiana	.78
	13. *Tangled* (2010)	Flynn	.80	Rapunzel	.70
	14. *Frozen* (2013)	Kristoff Hans	.77 .74	Anna Elsa	.77 .77
	15. *Moana* (2016)	**Maui**	.75	Moana	.69
	16*. Frozen 2* (2019)	**Kristoff**	.73	**Anna** **Elsa**	.79 .78
	17*. Raya and the last Dragon* (2021)	**Benja**	.78	**Raya** **Numari**	.8 .69

The code name was changed to *shows romantic interest* and the description was re-written. The new description included examples such as, a character deliberately engaging in a conversation with the intention of getting to know another character in a way that suggested romantic interest, as well as when a character was unable to control themselves around a love interest (appearing glazed over or looking mesmerised by them). These changes were informed by notes that were taken on the gendered messages within Disney animated feature length films before data collection for this study had begun.

Twenty-three codes that did not appear in the previous framework were added to the current framework. The new codes included six emotion-based codes such as *expresses positive emotion, sad*, *angry/frustrated,* and *panic*, which were added due to the drawback of the *shows emotion* code in the previous framework (Hine et al., 2018a). Other new codes included *deceitful*, *honest,* and *charming*. These had not been included in previous work conducted by England et al., (2011) and Hine et al., (2018a) but were identified utilising a bottom-up approach during which Disney (target and non-target) films were viewed before the study was conducted and behaviours that were exhibited frequently across multiple films were noted. The number of new behavioural codes in the current study reflects that it aimed to code as much of the behaviour displayed by the protagonists as possible, so that it could comment upon more complete gender profiles.

In order to generate the new codes and create accurate code descriptions, the researcher and the undergraduate research assistant had several meetings where behaviour that was identified as recurring in several Disney animated films but did not appear in the previous coding framework were discussed, as well as how the behaviour appeared in the films. During the meetings, relevant scenes were watched

and rewatched to ensure that descriptions and code names generated would represent the behaviour as it appeared in the relevant text and that the examples provided would facilitate the application of that behavioural code. The relevant films were then rewatched by the primary researcher and any adaptions would be made to the code description and they would be discussed again with the undergraduate research assistant until the code appeared to be valid and clear. It should be noted that when all the changes had been made to the coding framework it was sent to the principal supervisor of this project for further approval.

Two codes that were present in the previous framework were removed and these decisions were also made via discussions and meetings between the researcher and the undergraduate research assistant as described above. The gives *advice code* was incorporated into the *helpful* code and one (rather than two) *described as physically attractive* code was included in the current study and was considered a feminine trait. It was not deemed necessary to have separate described as attractive codes for male and female protagonists as the principle of being described as attractive is the same regardless of gender. Further, previous research finds that female Disney characters' appearance is given more value than males' (Towbin et al., 2004) and therefore it seemed appropriate to deem this as a feminine trait.

It was important that all codes in the current study could be applied to both male and female protagonists. This omitted the possibility that some behaviour may be unaccounted for if a code was deemed as gender exclusive in the framework and was then displayed by a protagonist of the gender that was not named. Allowing each behavioural code to be applied to both male and female protagonists therefore ensured that coding would be accurate. The approach also aimed to limit bias in the

coding procedure. If the framework suggested a particular behaviour could only be displayed by a male protagonist, coders may have been expecting that behaviour to be portrayed by male protagonists frequently, which could have led to less accurate coding. The *shows romantic interest* code discussed above is an example of a code adapted so that it could be applied to male and female protagonists in the current study (and both male and females did display this behaviour).

The gendered split of the behaviours in the coding scheme was based on previous research (England et al., 2011; Thompson & Zembardo, 1995; Do Rozario, 2004; Walsh & Leaper, 2019) and is shown in Appendix B. Questionnaires that asked people to rate how frequently men and women displayed each behaviour in the framework were also utilised. This was particularly important to understand whether the gender-neutral behaviour, most of which had not been content coded in gendered content analyses previously, was perceived to be masculine or feminine, rather than gender-neutral. The questionnaire consisted of all fifty-two behavioural codes that appeared in the framework and was provided to ten friends and family members of each coder, with twenty completed in total. The questionnaire asked them to rate each behavioural code on a Likert scale from 1 to 5. 1 meant ‘associated mainly with men and rarely with women’ 5 meant ‘associated mainly with women and rarely with men’ while three represented neutrality (‘associated equally with men and women’). The means and frequencies of the ratings for the behaviours that had not appeared in previous gendered content analysis were considered in deciding whether they should appear on the gender-neutral list. For example, the mean rating for *deceitful* was 2.6. 2.6 is closer statistically to 3 (representative of gender-neutrality on the scale utilised) than it is 2 (representative of masculinity). Further, an inspection of the frequencies revealed that the majority of people, 12 out

of 20, reported it as neutral. Based on interpreting both the mean and the frequencies of the rating of this behaviour, it was decided that it would be better described as gender-neutral than masculine. In the same vein, the mean rating for *honest* was 3.3. This mean score is closest to gender-neutrality statistically than either masculinity or femininity. Further, fourteen people, again the majority, reported it as neutral. Both codes were therefore considered gender-neutral for the current study.

4.3 Procedure

4.3.1 Coding Procedure

The coding procedure replicated the procedure established by England et al., (2011) and Hine et al., (2018a). Coders were told that a protagonist should be attributed a code when they were seen to display a trait/behaviour in the framework, or they were mentioned to possess a trait. The same behaviour was coded again if the shot changed, and the behaviour was still being displayed. For example, if a protagonist was coded as being *unimpressed*, the scene changed (i.e., the camera panned, and the character was no longer visible) and the protagonist was still looking unimpressed when the camera returned to them, two *unimpressed* codes were recorded. However, if the same behaviour was displayed more than once within one shot it was only coded once. Multiple codes could be attributed to a behaviour and the codes did not need to be attributed exclusively. For example, if a character was angry while vocalising that they were not interested in another character romantically, both an *angry/frustrated* and an *uninterested in love* code could be recorded to accurately capture the behaviour displayed in that moment.

Each code was tallied meaning that a frequency could be calculated for each behavioural code when the coding of each protagonist was completed. Coders also

recorded timestamps. Timestamping entailed recording the precise time (the minute and second within the film) that a protagonist displayed a behaviour. Additionally, coders recorded the time at which the credits ended, for example the minute and second that 'Disney presents' was about to leave the screen so that the timestamps could be adjusted by the primary coder accordingly when necessary. This process ensured that the timestamps were accurate.

To add clarity to coding the behaviour of protagonists when they were singing or dancing, more specific coding procedures were provided. A character could be attributed one voluntarily or reluctant to sing/dance code per song they sang, and one voluntarily or reluctant to dance code per shot in which they danced. A code was attributed to record the overall message of a song where possible. The character's behaviour throughout the song was coded as described above, for example, if a character was shown doing domestic work within four scenes and kissing another character throughout the duration of a song, four *domestic* codes and one *shows affection* code was recorded.

4.3.2 Coder Training

The researcher (primary coder) and a second coder coded all the protagonists. The second coder was recruited from the University of West London and was a final year Psychology undergraduate who utilised some of the analysis for their dissertation. Both coders were females. It is generally considered best practice to have at least two effectively trained coders in content analysis to limit the potential for bias coding processes and to ensure inter-rater reliability. When the framework of behaviours had been designed, the two coders, the principal supervisor of this project and Dr Dawn England coded a non-target film. Having both Dr Dawn England and the principal supervisor code a non-target film was important because they could

provide advice on the coding procedure adopted in their previous content analyses. Training sessions were necessary to ensure that coders would be coding the target films reliably and consistently and had understood the procedure and framework provided. The first training session was based on the following description of content coding training:

> "Training should involve both a full discussion of the coding scheme and a series of group coding sessions, during which the coding team members become calibrated to one another. During the training process, the codebook may undergo changes. Ultimately, reliability checks and final coding should be conducted independently by the trained coders. The minimum number of coders is two, to allow for a reliability test, but more may be employed as needed" (Neuendorf, 2011, p. 283).

Brave (Andrews et al., 2012) was chosen for the first training session as it was a Disney princess film and so would have a similar narrative structure to many of the target films but did not meet the inclusion criteria because it was produced by Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios and did not have a central adult male protagonist. However, the female protagonist represented the princess archetype that would be common in the current research and so it seemed to be representative of (most) of the target films. The film was coded simultaneously by the principal supervisor, primary coder, and the second coder, using one screen. Each vocalised when a codable behaviour was detected and the film was paused so that the data could be recorded, and discussions were had if discrepancies or disagreement arose between coders. The practice coding of *Brave* (Andrews et al., 2012) took approximately six hours with only Merida, the princess/female protagonist's behaviour coded. From the practice training session, it was expected that each film would take approximately twelve hours to code, approximately six hours for each character. Some minor changes were made to the framework based on the practice coding session such as including 'showing intelligence' in the

knowledgeable/experienced code and adding a *panic* code as this behaviour did not fit into existing codes.

A second coder training session was conducted with the two coders separately coding the leading male (Milo) and female protagonist (Princess Kida) from *Atlantis: The Lost Empire,* (2001) which more accurately represented the way in which coding of the target films would be conducted. Reliability scores were high between the first and second coder with a result of .77 for Milo and .79 for Princess Kida after a discussion of discrepancies. The discussion took place via videocall after the behaviour of both Milo and Princess Kida had been coded. It was deemed important to discuss the coding discrepancies that occurred within this film so that they would be less likely to occur when the coding of the target films had started. There were some discrepancies in the coding of emotion such as within the *expresses positive emotions* and *sad* codes. When the instances of the behaviour had been reviewed (i.e., the coders looked back at the film content based on the timestamps recorded, together), it was decided whether the behaviour had been missed or had been mistakenly coded by one of the coders. When agreement could not be met, which was very rare, the coding was left unchanged. Most of the discrepancies that were resolved were due to the second coder having missed some emotion-based behaviour. This was partly expected as emotion is more subjective than explicit behaviour being shown (such as an act of assertion, for example). Although discussing the coding of emotion in the second coding session did provide clarity, it seemed possible that the coding of emotion may require discussion in the target films.

Inter-rater reliability was established using Krippendorff's Alpha (Kalpha hereafter), a common measure applied to content analyses to measure the level of

consistency of each coder on each item measured. After the benefits of Kalpha were considered (in the methodology chapter) it was deemed appropriate for the current study. Kalpha was designed by Hayes and Krippendorff (2007) to ensure that content coders had a valid measure of interrater reliability, and they state that Kalpha should be above .67 for tentative conclusions to be drawn. Additionally, Kalpha had been previously utilised by Hine et al., (2018a). Kalpha was calculated for each protagonist that was coded in the practice and target films which although unusual in the approach, was important for assessing reliability throughout the coding of the target films. If reliability was measured for each behavioural code in the framework for example, it was likely that the reliability would change as more films were coded, and more results were added into the analysis. This would mean that it would be more challenging to assess whether the behavioural profile of each protagonist was coded reliably *throughout* the process of data collection. Therefore, in order to monitor the reliability during data collection, reliability was calculated and reported for each protagonist's behavioural profile. This will be discussed further in the limitations section of the discussion in this chapter.

4.3.3 Coding of the Target Films

The first and second coders conducted the coding of the target films between November 2020 and June 2021. The 'early' films were coded first and took approximately ten hours each to code. The 'middle' and 'modern' films took longer to code for several reasons. Firstly, the male protagonists in the 'early' films were largely absent which meant that very little behaviour needed to be coded for those characters. This was not true of the 'middle' and 'modern' films where the amount of behaviour displayed by male and female protagonists was more equal. Secondly, the scene changed more frequently in 'middle' and 'modern' films compared to the 'early'

ones which reflected that the animation became more sophisticated over time. This was particularly true of the films produced from 2010 (*Tangled,* Greno & Howard, 2010 to *Raya and the Last Dragon,* Estrada & Hall, 2021) as these were computer generated animations rather than hand drawn animations. The more advanced animation meant that the coding was more complex to conduct as the behaviour and emotional displays could be more nuanced. Further, the narratives of the 'middle' and 'modern' films became much more action-based compared to the 'early' films, meaning that more behaviour was displayed by 'middle' and 'modern' protagonists because they were more active than their 'early' counterparts. All these reasons together meant that some of the 'middle' and 'modern' films each took several days to code.

Specifically, films such as *Beauty and the Beast* (1995), and *The Princess and the Frog* (Clements & Musker, 2009) were particularly time-consuming to code as the framework was designed to capture human behaviour. However, the Beast, Naveen and Tiana were animals for much of their films. Although films with animal protagonists were excluded in this study Naveen, Tiana and the Beast were included because it is clear from the outset of their respective films that they are human protagonists who have been transformed into animals. This is further highlighted to the audience when all three protagonists are transformed back to humans at the end of each film. Additionally, both films feature in the Disney princess franchise, which means that they are more heavily marketed and influential as a result. However, coding their behaviour when they were in animal form was challenging. Similarly, although Tarzan is a human adult, because he does not understand or conform to the expectations of 'civilised' behaviour (as he is raised by apes), his behaviour was

also challenging to code. These films were amongst those that took the most time to code.

Coding was completed by each coder separately. To extend the training sessions, the opening fifteen minutes of nine protagonists' behavioural profiles were initially coded and Krippendorff's Alpha inter-rater reliability tests were run on that data. Hine et al., (2018a) reported the Krippendorff's Alpha for the opening fifteen minutes of each film as it is advised that reliability should be obtained from a portion of the data set (Krippendorff, 2018), therefore obtaining reliability scores for the opening fifteen minutes of coding initially seemed appropriate. The two coders then discussed any discrepancies in the coding of the opening fifteen minutes and decided how to proceed with coding further incidences of that behaviour. Krippendorff's Alpha was then run again when the behavioural profiles had been fully coded (and are reported for each protagonist in table 1). For the remaining thirty protagonists, the entire behavioural profiles were coded, without the opening fifteen minutes being reviewed. Running Krippendorff's Alpha on the full behavioural profile was important because in some of the films, only one of the target protagonists appeared in the opening fifteen minutes and reliability needed to be checked for all target protagonists. Further, although calculating the reliability of the opening fifteen minutes of coding uncovered discrepancies and facilitated an additional training exercise on some of the target films, there were cases where the inter-rater reliability was acceptable for the opening fifteen minutes but lower when it was calculated utilising the coding for the entire film. Therefore, only calculating and reporting the Krippendorff's Alpha for the opening fifteen minutes of each film could have masked reliability issues, so the reliability for the full behavioural profile for each protagonist is reported. When the inter-rater reliability was assessed for each protagonist based

on the entirety of each film, discrepancies between the first and second coder were discussed and rectified.

The discussive approach to solving discrepancies has been covered in chapter three. Although it is not necessarily recommended because it may be hard to replicate (Krippendorff, 2018), it was advised by members of the research team who had conducted the previous content analyses (England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018a). After the discussions had taken place, the final data was accepted, and the final reliability score was then calculated. As previously stated, further discussion of the approach taken to assess reliability in the current study can be found in the discussion of this chapter.

4.4 Results

To conduct the analysis described below, the total number of the masculine, feminine and gender-neutral behaviours counted by each coder for each protagonist were averaged. The averages for masculine, feminine and gender-neutral behaviours were then converted into percentages of each protagonist's total behaviour to mitigate for variance in the total frequency of behavioural codes attributed for each protagonist. Such an approach was previously utilised by England et al., (2011) and Hine et al., (2018a) and was particularly important when comparing 'early' protagonists to 'middle' and 'modern' protagonists who tended to have more codable behaviour. The percentages of masculine, feminine and gender-neutral behaviours were calculated and entered into SPSS in order to run the required analysis. The films and protagonists coded (as well as the percentages of the gendered behaviour displayed by each) can be found in Table 2, with the characters that had not been previously content coded appearing in bold. The typology utilised

for categorising the films into eras is consistent with England et al., (2011) and Hine et al., (2018a).

4.4.1 The Gendered Profiles of Newly Included Protagonists

The gendered behaviours displayed by protagonists that had not been previously quantitatively content coded will be considered before the results of the study are discussed in relation to the hypotheses tested. The percentages of feminine and masculine behaviours will be drawn upon, as well as the most frequently shown masculine and feminine behaviours for each protagonist indicated by the highest frequencies for those behaviours. The latter approach can provide detail regarding the nuanced differences within protagonists' behavioural profiles that could otherwise seem similar if their percentages of masculine and feminine behaviour were almost equal for example. There were seven 'middle' Disney protagonists that were quantitatively content coded in the current study that had been excluded in previous work. These protagonists were: Phoebus, Quasimodo and Esmeralda from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Trousdale & Wise, 1996); Hercules, and Meg from *Hercules* (Clements & Musker, 1997); and Tarzan and Jane from *Tarzan* (Buck & Lima, 1999). Each will be discussed in turn.

The percentages of masculine, feminine and gender-neutral behaviour displayed by Phoebus and Quasimodo revealed that Phoebus was slightly higher in masculine and slightly lower in feminine and gender-neutral behaviour than Quasimodo. Although these differences were slight, the two men are likely to be compared by viewers because they are both leading protagonists in the film and they feature in many of the same scenes (which is not true of Hans and Kristoff in *Frozen,* Buck & Lee, 2013, which is the only other film analysed with two male protagonists), because they must work together to save Esmeralda and her community from the

villain of the film. Further, their behavioural profiles had differences when their most frequently displayed masculine and feminine behaviour was considered. In terms of the masculine behaviour that was displayed most frequently by each of these male protagonists, Phoebus was *assertive towards adults*, *funny/playful*, and *angry/frustrated*, whereas Quasimodo was *athletic, physically strong,* and *assertive towards adults.* It is perhaps surprising that Quasimodo was higher in the physical based masculine codes than Phoebus considering the former is disfigured and the latter is able-bodied. This representation of physically strong and athletic disfigured/disabled protagonist is perhaps something to be celebrated.

There were also differences in the most frequently displayed feminine behaviours portrayed by Phoebus and Quasimodo, despite their overall percentage of feminine behaviour being similar. Phoebus was highest in the *victimised/helpless*, *expresses positive emotion* and *showing affection* feminine codes, whereas Quasimodo seemed to be more expressive of feminised emotions. He was highest in *expresses positive emotions*, and *expresses sadness*, although *victimised/helpless* was his most frequently displayed feminine behaviour overall. Based on these results it could be argued that *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Trousdale & Wise, 1996) represents a range of varied male behavioural profiles.

Interestingly, Esmeralda displayed similar percentages of masculine, feminine and gender-neutral behaviour as the two male protagonists in the film and had similar behaviours in her most frequently displayed masculine and feminine traits. She was frequently *athletic* like Quasimodo, and *assertive towards adults* like both her male counterparts, although she was highly *physically aggressive* which did not feature in either male protagonist's most frequently displayed masculine codes. Her most frequently displayed feminine behaviours were the same as those displayed by

Table 2

The Percentages of Gendered Behaviour Displayed by Male and Female Protagonists

		Male Protagonist's Behaviour				Female Protagonist's Behaviour		
Film Name		Masculine %	Feminine %	Neutral %		Masculine %	Feminine %	Neutral %
1. *Snow White and Seven Dwarves* (1937)	The Prince	48.72	51.28	0	Snow White	12.84	79.51	7.65
2.*Cinderella* (1950)	Prince Charmi-ng	28.79	66.67	4.55	Cinderel-la	16.33	72.65	11.02
3. *Sleeping Beauty* (1959)	Prince Philip	42.86	48.21	8.93	Aurora	8.73	80.56	10.71
4. *The Little Mermaid* (1989)	Eric	27.47	56.63	15.90	Ariel	22.71	66.50	10.79
5. *Beauty and the Beast* (1991)	The Beast	43.14	48.26	8.59	Belle	32.66	54.31	13.03
6. *Aladdin* (1992)	Aladdin	29.46	56.53	14.01	Jasmine	37.56	48.08	14.36
7. *Pocahontas* (1995)	John Smith	36.01	55.13	8.79	Pocahon-tas	33.50	54.79	11.71
8. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996)	**Quasi-modo Phoebus**	**26.91 35.58**	**63.26 56.81**	**9.83 7.61**	**Esmeral da**	**30.49**	**61.33**	**8.19**
9. *Hercules* (1997)	**Hercules**	**38.14**	**49.13**	**12.73**	**Meg**	**39.35**	**50.69**	**9.96**
10. *Mulan* (1998)	Li Shang	59.04	29.26	11.70	Mulan	27.17	58.03	14.80
11. *Tarzan* (1999)	**Tarzan**	**43.67**	**48.23**	**8.10**	**Jane**	**22.76**	**68.56**	**8.68**
12. *The Princess and the Frog* (2009)	Naveen	28.20	61.49	10.31	Tiana	31.62	54.34	14.03
13. *Tangled* (2010)	Flynn	30.25	50.90	18.85	Rapunzel	28.11	60.63	11.26
14. *Frozen* (2013)	Kristoff Hans	31.66 30.44	56.68 51.06	11.66 18.50	Anna Elsa	27.32 35.71	62.42 56.39	10.26 7.90
15. *Moana* (2016)	**Maui**	**50.33**	**37.39**	**12.57**	Moana	32.58	51.05	16.37
16. *Frozen 2* (2019)	**Kristoff**	**22.57**	**60.62**	**16.81**	**Anna Elsa**	**25.77 34.47**	**60.69 55.90**	**13.54 9.62**
17. *Raya and the last Dragon* (2021)	**Father Benja**	**31.76**	**55.59**	**12.65**	**Raya Numari**	**30.85 46.89**	**55.03 40.98**	**14.12 13.13**

Phoebus - she was highly *victimised/helpless,* expressive of positive emotion and affectionate. The fact that the *shows affection* code features in both Esmeralda's and Phoebus' most frequently displayed feminine codes likely reflects
that they engage in a successful romantic relationship with each other, while Quasimodo's love for Esmeralda is unrequited.

Hercules and Meg also displayed similar percentages of masculine and feminine behaviours and they shared two of their highest feminine behaviours, *victimised/helpless* and *expresses positive emotions*. However, Hercules was frequently shown as *physically strong, athletic*, and *physically aggressive* (masculine traits) while Meg was low on such behaviours but frequently *assertive towards adults*, *playful/funny* (usually towards Hercules who she frequently referred to as 'Wonder boy' in a light-hearted yet mocking way) and *unimpressed* (portrayed as eye rolling and a rather nonchalant attitude). It is interesting to note that the masculine behaviours displayed by Hercules relate to physicality, which reflects that his physical strength and athleticism are focused on in the film. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Meg is not represented frequently as strong or athletic, which may highlight these traits in Hercules.

Tarzan and Jane were the most different in their gendered profiles than any of the non-princess male and female protagonist pairs. Tarzan, although slightly more feminine than masculine, had the second highest masculine behaviour of all the men in his category (and was the third most masculine overall). He was highly *athletic* and *physically strong* which was frequently represented in him swinging through the trees whilst simultaneously carrying Jane in his arms. Jane, who was more feminine than masculine, was displayed frequently as being *scared*, largely due to her being in the jungle which was not her 'natural' environment, *victimised/helpless* and

expressing positive emotion, which was often represented in rather ‘girlish’/overly feminised giggling while appearing to be embarrassed and awkward.

The ‘modern’ protagonists that were newly content coded in this work were most notably, Maui from *Moana* (Musker et al., 2016) and Raya, Numaari and Father Benja from the most recent Disney release, as well as Elsa, Anna and Kristoff who were coded based on *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013) and *Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee, 2019). Maui was the most masculine of the protagonists analysed which was shown in him being presented frequently as *physically strong* (which was in keeping with his physical appearance and size of his body*) athletic*, and *physically aggressive* as well as *confident*. In terms of his most frequent feminine behaviour, he was shown to express positive and be *victimised/helpless*, largely due to becoming hurt in battles with other characters such as Tamatoa (the villainous crab) and Te Fiti, and becoming powerless after losing his hook.

Elsa and Anna’s gendered behavioural profiles were largely unchanged from *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013) to *Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee, 2019). The highest frequencies for Elsa’s masculine behaviour in both films were *knowledgeable/experienced* (which was coded when she used her magic as this was perceived to be a skill that no other characters in the film possessed) *athletic*, and *assertive towards adults*. Her most frequently displayed feminine behaviours in *Frozen* (2013) were *expresses positive emotion*, *sad*, and being *scared*. Similarly, in *Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee, 2019) her most frequently displayed feminine behaviours were exp*resses positive emotion*, *excited/amazed* and *sad.* It is perhaps unsurprising that Elsa was more fearful in the first film given that her powers were considered something of a curse that should be hidden to prevent injury in the first film, and she is more liberated in this regard in the

sequel, which may also explain why expressing excitement/amazement features in her most frequently displayed behaviours in the second film and not the first.

Anna's most frequently displayed masculine behaviours in both *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013) and *Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee, 2019) remained the same across both films and were also similar to those displayed by Elsa. Anna was highly *athletic*, *assertive towards adults*, and *funny/playful*. Anna's most frequently displayed feminine behaviours were *victimised/helpless*, *expresses positive emotion*, and *excited/amazed* in *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013). In *Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee, 2019), the only change in her most frequently displayed feminine traits was that *excited/amazed* was no longer one of the three most frequently displayed traits, however, *shows affection* was. Anna was affectionate towards Kristoff, Olaf, Elsa as well as other less central characters. This was also a difference between Anna and Elsa's behavioural profiles, which may be partly due to Elsa's lack of romantic interest (which will be drawn upon in the discussion).

Kristoff's most frequently displayed masculine behaviours in *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013) *were assertive towards adults*, *athletic* and *unimpressed*. In *Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee, 2019) these were similar, with *assertive towards adults*, *brave* and *athletic* being his most frequently displayed masculine traits. His most frequently displayed feminine behaviours were *victimised/helpless*, *expresses positive emotion* and *helpful* in the first film and *expresses positive emotion*, *shows affection* and *victimised/helpless* in the second. In the sequel, Kristoff displays affection towards Sven (his reindeer companion) and Anna the most frequently. Interestingly, there were fewer behavioural codes for Kristoff in the sequel than there were in the first Frozen film, and he was much less central to the plot in the latter.

In *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Estrada & Hall, 2021) Father Benja and Raya displayed similar levels of gendered behaviours, although Numaari was more masculine than both. Numaari was shown to be frequently *physically aggressive*, as was Raya, although for Numaari, being a *leader* featured in her most displayed masculine codes – something that was rare for female protagonists, including Raya. For Raya's most frequently displayed masculine behaviour (as well as being shown as *physically aggressive*) she was shown as *athletic* and *funny/playful*, closely followed by *angry/frustrated*. Raya's most frequently shown feminine codes included *expresses positive emotions*, *victimised/helpless*, which also both featured in Numaari's most frequently shown feminine behaviour, however, *assertive towards children or animals* featured in Raya's list whereas expressing sadness featured in Numaari's.

4.4.2 Comparing the Gendered Profiles of Male and Female Protagonists

Before discussing the results from statistical analysis, it should be noted that according to the Shapiro-Wilk test, all data were normally distributed. For male protagonists, the percentage of masculine behaviour (p=.186), feminine behaviour (p=.085) and gender-neutral behaviour (p=.730) were normally distributed. Similarly, for female protagonists, the percentage of masculine behaviour (p=.215), feminine behaviour (p=.112) and gender-neutral behaviour (p=.532) were also normally distributed. The Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted as this is recommended with sample sizes lower than 50.

To answer hypotheses 1A and 1B, paired sample t-tests were conducted to reveal whether male and female protagonists were significantly higher in either masculine or feminine behaviour within themselves. This would show whether both female and male protagonists were significantly less masculine than feminine overall as hypothesised for example. Table 3 shows the mean scores for male and female protagonists on masculine, feminine and gender-neutral behaviour for clarity.

Indeed, the results revealed that both male t (18) = 4.11, $p < .001$ and female t (19) = 7.31, $p <. 001$, protagonists were significantly higher in feminine behaviour

than masculine behaviour overall. According to the means, 36.05% of male protagonists' behaviour was masculine and 52.80% was feminine. 28.82% of females' behaviour was masculine and 59.62% was feminine. Both Hypothesis 1A and 1B were therefore supported.

In answer to hypothesis 1C an independent t-test comparing the percentage of masculine behaviour displayed by male and female protagonists revealed that contrary to the prediction made, male protagonists were significantly higher in masculine traits (M = 36.05%) than female protagonists (M = 28.82%), t (37) = 2.44, $p < .05$. A second independent t-test comparing the percentage of feminine behaviour displayed by male and female protagonists revealed that there was also a

Table 3

The Mean Percentages of Gendered Behaviour Displayed by Male and Female Protagonists.

Gendered Behaviour	Female Protagonists	Male Protagonists
Masculine	28.82	36.05
Feminine	59.62	52.80
Gender-Neutral	11.56	11.16

significant difference between male and females, t (37) = 2.26 $p < .05$ with male protagonists being significantly lower in feminine traits (M = 52.80%) than females (M = 59.62%).

Although no hypotheses were made regarding the percentage of gender-neutral behaviour displayed by male and female protagonists because of a lack of research on the topic, analysis was also conducted on these results. Because both male and female characters were shown to be more feminine than masculine, the percentage of gender-neutral behaviour was compared to the masculine percentages for both male and female characters. This would determine whether masculine behaviour portrayals also differed significantly from the portrayal of

gender-neutral behaviour which, according to the means, was displayed the least frequently (lower than both feminine and masculine characteristics) by both male and female protagonists. It was revealed that both male t (18) = 8.87, p <.001 and female protagonists t (19) = 9.02, p < .001 showed higher percentages of masculine than gender-neutral behaviour. The means suggested that gender-neutral behaviour accounted for 11.16% of male protagonists' gender profiles, and 11.56% of females'. This confirmed that gender-neutral behaviour was the least portrayed for both male and female protagonists. Because almost the same level of gender-neutral behaviour was displayed by male and female protagonists, it can be inferred without running the appropriate test that there would be no significant difference in the percentage of gender-neutral behaviour displayed by male and female protagonists.

4.4.3 Changes Over Time

The current study aimed to uncover whether Disney protagonists' gendered behaviour was changing over time. To assess this One-Way Analysis of Variances (ANOVA's) were conducted. For each, the Disney era was used as the independent variable (with three levels 'early', 'middle' or 'modern'). Dependant variables were the percentage of masculine behaviour displayed by the female protagonists in the first ANOVA, the percentage of feminine behaviour for the second, and the percentage of neutral behaviour displayed by female protagonists in the third. The tests were then conducted in the same way using the percentages of masculine, feminine and neutral behaviour for the male protagonists. Table 4 shows the mean percentages of masculine, feminine and gender-neutral behaviour displayed by the protagonists in each era.

Hypothesis 2 was only partially upheld for female protagonists as the first ANOVA revealed that the percentage of masculine behaviour was significantly

different across the three eras', F (2, 17) = 13.50, $p < .001$, as predicted. However, Tukey post-hoc test revealed that the 'middle' (M=30.78) and 'modern' (M = 32.48%) female protagonists did not significantly differ in their levels of masculine behaviour ($p > .05$). The 'early' female protagonists (M = 12.63%) were however

Table 4

The Mean Percentages of Gendered Behaviour Displayed by Male and Female Protagonists in each era.

	Female Protagonists			Male Protagonists		
Era	Feminine	Masculine	Gender-Neutral	Feminine	Masculine	Gender-Neutral
Early	77.57	12.63	9.79	55.39	40.12	4.49
Middle	57.79	30.78	11.44	51.47	37.71	10.81
Modern	55.27	32.48	11.56	53.39	32.17	14.48

significantly less masculine than the 'middle' ($p < .001$) and 'modern' females ($p < .001$). A second ANOVA revealed that the percentage of feminine behaviour displayed by female protagonists also differed across the three eras F (2, 17) = 123.35, $p < .001$. The results of Tukey post-hoc tests for feminine behaviour across the eras mirrored those reported for the masculine behaviour in that the 'middle' (M = 57.79%) and 'modern' (M = 55.27%) females were not significantly different in their portrayal of feminine behaviours ($p > .05$), whereas the 'early' females were significantly more feminine (M = 77.57%) than both the 'middle' ($p < .01$) and 'modern' females ($p < .001$). Although no predictions were made for changes in gender-neutral behaviour over time, a third ANOVA revealed that there was no significant difference in the percentage of gender-neutral behaviour displayed by female protagonists across each era, F (2, 17) = 1.09, $p > .05$.

Although an inspection of the means suggested that the 'early' male protagonists were more masculine (M = 40.12% than the 'middle' (M = 37.71%) and

‘modern’ males (M = 32.17%) an ANOVA revealed that the percentage of masculine behaviour displayed by male protagonists was not significantly different across the three eras, F (2, 16) = .978, p > .05. Similarly, there was no significant difference in the percentage of feminine behaviour displayed by male protagonists across the three eras, F (2, 16) = .23, p > .05. These results taken together support the prediction made in hypothesis 2 regarding male protagonists’ gender behaviour remaining stable across the three eras. Again, although no predictions were made for changes in gender-neutral behaviour for male protagonists over time, an ANOVA revealed that the percentage of gender-neutral behaviour was significantly different across the three eras, F (2, 16) = 9.35, p < .01. Tukey post-hoc tests revealed the ‘early’ male protagonists were lower in gender-neutral behaviour (M = 4.49%) than the ‘middle’ (M = 10.81%, p < .05) and ‘modern’ male protagonists (M = 14.48%, p < .01). The ‘middle’ and ‘modern’ protagonists were not significantly different (p >. 05).

Paired t-tests comparing the percentage of masculine and feminine behaviour displayed by female protagonists at each time point were conducted to examine whether females were more feminine than masculine at each era studied. The results showed that the ‘early’ t (2) = 14.24, p < .01, ‘middle’ females t (7) = 5.73, p <.001 and ‘modern’ females t (8) = 5.61, p < .001 were higher in feminine than masculine traits.

Paired t-tests comparing the percentage of masculine and feminine behaviour displayed by male Disney protagonists at each time point were also conducted. These revealed that the

‘early’ male protagonists were not significantly different in their displays of masculine and feminine behaviour t (2) = 1.35, p > .05. The ‘middle’ male protagonists were not significantly different in their displays of masculine and feminine behaviour t (8) =

2.11, $p > .05$ when the two tailed significance is reported but were significantly more feminine than masculine when the one-tailed significance was reported $p < .05$. The ‘modern’ male protagonists were higher in feminine than masculine behaviours t (6) = 3.42, $p < .05$.

4.5 Discussion

Hypothesis 1A predicted that female protagonists would be more feminine than masculine. Despite coding more female protagonists than previous publications (England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018a), including those featured in the most recent Disney releases, this hypothesis was upheld. Female protagonists were higher in feminine than masculine behaviour overall. However, it was possible that this finding was due to the ‘early’ female protagonists being particularly high in feminine (and low in masculine and gender-neutral) behaviour. Therefore, assessing changes in the portrayal of female protagonists over time was also important. In this vein, hypothesis 2 predicted that female protagonists’ gendered behaviour would have changed over time, and more specifically, that the ‘modern’ female protagonists would be higher in their levels of masculine behaviour when compared to their ‘early’ and ‘middle’ counterparts. This was only partially upheld. It was found that the ‘early’ princesses were more feminine and less masculine than the ‘modern’ and ‘middle’ female protagonists. In other words, the ‘early’ princesses were indeed the most stereotyped out of all the female protagonists studied, however, there were no significant differences in the gendered behaviour displayed by the ‘middle’ (from animations released between 1989-1999) and ‘modern’ female protagonists (from animations released from 2009-2021). Additionally, it was found that female protagonists were significantly higher in feminine than masculine behaviour within

each time-point, suggesting some consistent stereotyping of female Disney protagonists.

Hypothesis 1B predicted that male protagonists as a group would be higher in feminine than masculine behaviour and this was supported. Male protagonists were significantly more feminine than they were masculine overall. It was further hypothesised that male protagonists' gendered behaviour would remain stable over the three eras of Disney films examined and this was also supported. Indeed, no significant differences were found in the percentage of masculine or feminine behaviour displayed across the 'early', 'middle', and 'modern' male protagonists. However, the 'early' male protagonists displayed less gender-neutral behaviour than those from the other two eras. Further, there was no significant difference in the portrayal of masculine and feminine behaviour displayed within the 'early' male protagonists' behavioural profiles. However, both the 'modern' and 'middle' male protagonists were significantly more feminine than they were masculine within each era (when the one-tailed significance is reported). Lastly, hypothesis 1C predicted that there would be no significant differences in the gendered behaviour displayed by male and female protagonists. This was not supported, as although both male and female characters were significantly more feminine than masculine overall, male protagonists were still higher in masculine behaviour and lower in feminine behaviour than the female protagonists. Thus, there were significant differences in the gendered behaviour displayed by male and female Disney protagonists.

The results of the current study suggest that although female Disney protagonists are consistently portrayed more stereotypically than male protagonists, there was a noticeable shift in the portrayal of female protagonists between the 'early' era (where they were very high in feminine behaviour) and the 'middle' era

(where they became significantly less feminine and more masculine), and this has been maintained into the ‘modern’ era. However, ‘modern’ female protagonists were still more feminine than masculine overall suggesting some continued stereotyping. Contrary to the current study, Hine et al., (2018a) found evidence for more balanced and androgynous behavioural profiles (i.e., those high in both masculine and feminine behaviours) in female protagonists in their research. This discrepancy likely reflects the updated coding scheme applied in the current research, particularly in relation to the newly added emotion-based codes. Emotion had not been coded by Hine et al., (2018a) or England et al., (2011) for princess characters and this was a significant proportion of the behaviour displayed by female protagonists in this work. Many of the emotion codes were deemed feminine (see Appendix B), as informed by previous research (Thompson & Zembardo, 1995; Do Rozario, 2004). This therefore provides evidence for the importance of including such codes for both male and female characters.

Unlike the female protagonists, the portrayal of male protagonists was found to be more opposed to gender-stereotypes (i.e., they were more feminine than they were masculine) both overall, and within two of the three time points in the current study. Further, no significant difference was found in the displays of masculine or feminine behaviour across the time points suggesting that the portrayal of men has remained relatively stable. This partially supports the results obtained by Hine et al., (2018a), where, although it appeared that the ‘modern’ and ‘early’ princes were lower in masculine behaviour than the ‘middle’ princes, only marginal significance was found. Further, England et al., (2011) found no significant difference in the portrayal of gender in male protagonists across the three eras, in line with the results of the current study. Additionally, the ‘modern’ Disney men analysed in the current study

were highest in gender-neutral behaviour than the men in the other eras which provides further evidence that such protagonists may be limited by less gender stereotypes. The representation of feminine male protagonists in Disney animations may be positive as masculinity is related to aggression in children (Fehr & Russ 2013, as cited in Coyne et al., 2014) and may be associated with poor mental health and higher suicide rates in adult men (Swami et al., 2008).

By portraying male protagonists as more feminine than masculine overall, Disney may be suggesting that men can and should deviate from their prescribed gender roles. Alternatively, it is possible that Disney ‘permits’ their male protagonists to be feminine in some domains i.e., in their emotional displays, only when their (albeit less frequent) masculine traits are more narratively powerful and influential, for example, when they rescue female protagonists, are seen as essential to a quest (of female protagonists), and ultimately wind up in powerful positions with status. Their femininity may be viewed as less overt than their masculinity. Further, it is unclear from the current study whether the less stereotyped Disney men are portrayed positively or negatively. If feminine men are mocked and belittled (as suggested by Macaluso, 2018) it is likely that such portrayals are still encouraging a more stereotyped (i.e., masculine) behavioural profile in young boys (Hine et al., 2018a), considering that the behaviour models gain from, and/or obtain praise for, are the most likely to be replicated by children (Bussey & Bandura, 1989). Thus, if feminine male protagonists are represented negatively, young boys would not be motivated to model feminine behaviour themselves. Based on this, the extent to which male protagonists’ feminine and masculine behaviours are celebrated warrants discussion.

Although not directly studied in this research in a quantitative manner, it is possible to observe and speculate the behaviour that may be the most celebrated in Disney men. It seems that particularly in films such as *Hercules* (Clements & Musker, 1997), male protagonists' masculine behaviour is the most celebrated. Hercules is adored by his fans for his strength and heroism (masculine traits) which he spends a significant amount of time in the film striving to achieve after being mocked and excluded for being clumsy and unintentionally troublesome (feminine traits). Further, he is motivated to develop these masculine traits in the hope that he will earn a place among the Gods, a substantial position of power (such powerful positions are also associated with masculinity). However, at the end of the film he sacrifices his opportunity to join the Gods to remain with Meg and thus ultimately chooses romance over status, which is unlike other male Disney protagonists (Primo, 2018). It is possible that the film was less successful than anticipated because by sacrificing his masculine characteristics and goals, Hercules' character was less appealing to audiences (Primo, 2018). It seems then that Hercules' masculine traits are portrayed as the most admirable in the film.

Further, Quasimodo saves Esmeralda at the end of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Trousdale & Wise, 1996), (yet importantly, he must then be saved from falling to his death by the more masculine protagonist, Phoebus, who is also able-bodied). In the final scene of the film Quasimodo is embraced and carried off by the people of Paris as a sign of their acceptance of him which may not have been the case had he not shown masculine attributes such as bravery and physical strength during the scene in which he rescues Esmeralda. Such narratives may suggest that although many male Disney protagonists are more feminine than masculine, they are ultimately accepted by their peers and audiences, only when they prove that they

can also conform to the expectations of their gender role. It could also be the case that Disney men are only able to portray feminine traits when they also portray masculine ones, such as bravery and strength.

Conversely, some Disney men seem to be rewarded for their stereotypically feminine behaviour. For example, Aladdin believes that by granting the Genie his freedom he is sacrificing being with the woman he loves (which has been his sole motivation throughout the entire film). He is rewarded soon after when his soon-to-be-father-in-law changes the law to make his marriage to Jasmine possible. Thus, unlike Hercules, Aladdin's selfless sacrifice (more aligned with femininity than masculinity) does not prevent him from achieving his dreams. Alternatively, Naveen and Flynn are both initially motivated by money and success, both rather masculine pursuits, however, in both films, these dreams are ridiculed. For example, in *Tangled* (Greno & Howard, 2010) Flynn's dream of making money and living in a castle is overtly scorned in an iconic scene where other physically hypermasculine men share their more effeminate dreams (such as of becoming interior designers and pianists), making the case that men with more feminine pursuits may be celebrated within the film. Both Flynn and Naveen realise throughout their respective films that love is more important than money and by doing so, Flynn marries Rapunzel, ironically becoming a prince and presumably achieving his dream in the process, despite it being previously ridiculed. Naveen, however, is shown to work in Tiana's restaurant at the end of *The Princess and the Frog* (Clements & Musker, 2009), a less glamorous end to his story. Thus, it seems that in Disney films, men shifting their focus from masculine to feminine endeavours is only sometimes rewarded. As a result, it is unclear as to whether young boys identifying with these male protagonists will deem their femininity as worthy of replication. Overall, future and perhaps

qualitative research should examine the value given to male Disney protagonists' masculine and feminine behaviour so that the significance of them being higher in feminine traits as a group, can be more fully understood.

Similarly, the 'middle' and 'modern' female Disney protagonists did not significantly differ in their portrayal of masculine or feminine behaviours, suggesting some stability in their overall gendered behavioural profiles from 1989 to 2021. Further, the female protagonists within each era were all higher in feminine than masculine behaviours overall. However, there are some noticeable differences in the narratives associated with the 'modern' female protagonists, when compared to their earlier counterparts that are not necessarily captured in the results of the current framework. Perhaps most noticeably, two 'modern' films have no romantic storylines whatsoever (*Moana*, Musker et al., 2016 and *Raya and the Last Dragon,* Estrada & Hall, 2021), whereas romance is key to the other films that were included in this study (Martin & Kazyak, 2009). Indeed, this has attracted media attention (such as Ramella, 2021) which suggests this warrants discussion.

For Ramella (2021) that some of the 'modern' princesses are more focused on self-discovery and serving their communities than they are on pursing romantic relationships means that "they represent a more accurate reflection of modern girls and women. These princesses teach young girls to be strong and independent on their own" (Ramella, 2021, p. x). Numaari, Raya (both from *Raya and the Last Dragon,* Estrada & Hall, 2021), Moana (from the film with the same name) and Elsa (from *Frozen,* Buck & Lee, 2013 and *Frozen 2,* Buck & Lee, 2019) are all 'modern' female protagonists that displayed no romantically focused behaviours in the current study (coded as *wants to find romantic love* or *shows romantic interest*). The plot of *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Estrada & Hall, 2021) focuses on complicated female

relationships, and ultimately, it is the two leading female protagonists' friendship that enables the peace to be restored throughout Kumandra, something that is rarely depicted in Disney animations or in film more broadly (Radulovic, 2021). Additionally, Anna is lower in the romantically focused codes in *Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee, 2019) than she was in *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013) whereas the opposite is true for Kristoff, suggesting that the portrayal of romance has changed between the first and second *Frozen* films. Much of the romantic plot in the latter is based around Kristoff agonising about the best way to propose to Anna, as well as him feeling insecure that they are growing apart (as Anna embarks on a mission to release the Northoldra people from the forest in which they are trapped and leaves him behind). The fact that romance seems to be becoming less prominent in 'modern' female protagonists' behavioural profiles could be a positive sign, especially for young girls who are likely to be influenced by them (Coyne et al., 2016; Golden & Jacoby, 2018).

However, although some of the 'modern' animations seem to be moving away from portraying female protagonists who are motivated by their romantic pursuits, the representation of such characters could still be a reason for concern. For example, *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013) has been criticised for portraying Elsa as both a leader of her people and single romantically (Streiff & Dundes, 2017a). Despite Elsa being physically attractive, no male character expresses romantic interest in her in either of the *Frozen* films, which could portray that women are simply unable to occupy powerful leadership positions whilst having successful romantic relationships, which is exemplified in Anna and Kristoff's romantic plot running alongside Elsa's non-romantic one (Streiff & Dundes, 2017a). Similarly, in *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Estrada & Hall, 2021), Numaari is frequently shown as a leader, and Raya is determined to save her people who have been turned to stone, thus the message

that Disney women who are powerful and/or shown to pursue adventures cannot also have romantic relationships (Streiff & Dundes, 2017a) seems to be supported in the most recent release. Although Anna may get close to challenging this norm as she takes over from Elsa as ruler of Arendelle and is engaged to Kristoff at the end of *Frozen 2* (2019), her leadership role given to her by her more powerful sibling which reduces its significance. Therefore, the

> "modern [Disney] heroine still follows certain rules that do not subvert male dominance: that is, her independence from men means that she should not threaten a man's status as the metaphorical person in the driver's seat of a relationship" (Dundes et al., 2018, pp. 22).

Although Disney seem to be moving away from presenting female protagonists whose sole focus is romance, there are some problematic elements to this, as powerful female characters have yet to be portrayed as romantically involved with a partner also, which aligns with postfeminist themes (Streiff & Dundes, 2017a, p. 3). Therefore, although there was no significant difference in the portrayal of gendered behaviour between the 'middle' and 'modern' female protagonists the depiction of the two groups of female characters has some unique limitations.

4.5.1 Implications

The current study utilised an updated and expanded coding framework to analyse the gendered behavioural profiles of influential Disney protagonists than the one previously applied by England et al., (2011) and Hine et al., (2018a). The framework included some gender-neutral behaviour which facilitated the coding of more full behavioural profiles, as presumably, less behaviour was unaccounted for in the current study compared to previous ones. This means that the percentage of feminine and masculine behaviours calculated and utilised for analysis in the current study better represents the proportion of such behaviour displayed by the

protagonists, thereby making the results more accurate and representative of the behaviour shown. Additionally, the current study analysed the portrayal of a larger number of Disney protagonists than the work conducted by England et al., (2011) and Hine et al., (2018a). Taken together, these points provide evidence that the current study was more expansive in two important ways.

The results suggest that when the ‘early’ female protagonists were compared with the ‘middle’ and ‘modern’ protagonists, there was evidence that the females from the latter eras were less feminine and more masculine than their earlier counterparts. However, female Disney protagonists may not be becoming more androgynous over time as previously suggested (Hine et al., 2018a). Rather, female Disney protagonists within each era seem to be consistently more stereotypically feminine than masculine when their emotion-based and gender-neutral behaviour is considered. Further, in line with previous research (England et al., 2011) male protagonists seemed to be more feminine than masculine overall, and their portrayals of masculine and feminine behaviour seemed stable across the three time points. However, when the levels of masculine and feminine behaviour displayed by males were compared within each era, only the ‘middle’ and ‘modern’ protagonists were higher in feminine than masculine traits. The proportion of masculine behaviour shown by male protagonists was smaller in the current study than in previous research conducted by England et al., (2011). Taken together, these results suggest that emotional displays and gender-neutral behaviour are important facets in analysing gendered portrayals in mass media in the future.

Considering that Disney princess animations are seen to be associated with the gendered behaviour displayed by children (Coyne et al., 2016; Golden & Jacoby 2018), it is likely that engagement with the gendered messages within the films

considered in the current study would also statistically predict children's gendered behaviour. Parents and educators could perhaps be trained how to utilise Disney media to minimise their potential negative influence and maximise their potential benefits. More specifically, although a greater investigation as to whether feminine males are celebrated within Disney films is needed, that the films represent male characters who are feminine (particularly within the 'middle' and 'modern' animations), means they could be used to facilitate important conversations with children. For example, because some of the most frequently displayed feminine behaviour by the male protagonists in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Trousdale & Wise, 1996) included showing affection, displaying positive emotion, and expressing sadness, there is tentative evidence to suggest that the film could be used as an educational tool to discuss the benefits of boys and men displaying such behaviours with children. This would provide the opportunity for the messages displayed by Disney men to be used as a force for good.

4.5.2 Limitations

Although this study had strengths in that it utilised an updated and more detailed framework of behaviours and included protagonists from non-princess films, there were several limitations. The work did not include Disney animated feature length films with leading child protagonists such as *Peter Pan* (Geronimi et al., 1953) and *The Jungle Book* (Reitherman, 1967) or leading animal protagonists such as *Lady and the Tramp* (Geronimi et al., 1950), *The Aristocats* (Reitherman, 1970) and *The Lion King* (Allers & Minkoff, 1994). Having not examined protagonists' gender profiles from such films, a complete narrative regarding the representation of gender within the Disney franchise is only partially achieved. However, the exclusion of such films was important. The current study prioritised coding the gender profiles of

protagonists that were the most likely to be influential to children and, as previously stated, it is unlikely that children are influenced by models that are unlike themselves (i.e., are animals) (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Social cognitive theory of gender development also states that people with power and status are most likely to be influential models to children (Bussey & Bandura, 1989) which child protagonists lack, suggesting that they would be less influential than adult protagonists. Further, films with child protagonists such as *Peter Pan* (Geronimi et al., 1953) and *The Jungle Book* (Reitherman, 1967) also did not meet the inclusion criteria of the current study because they made considerably less than the required $200 million worldwide which further warrants their exclusion. It was assumed that because they were less commercially successful than the films content coded in the current study, they were likely to be less widely seen and popular, and thus less influential as a result (however, perhaps future research should consider taking the year of release into consideration when assessing worldwide grossing figures as these will be substantially affected by inflation). Although the aim to examine influential protagonists motivated the designed inclusion criteria of the current study, future research could consider examining the central protagonists in films with child and animal Disney protagonists to obtain a more complete narrative of the representations of gender across the entire franchise.

Further, in terms of the coding framework, although every effort was made to have an equal number of masculine and feminine codes, there were more feminine than masculine behaviours which may have skewed the results as more behaviour could be coded as feminine than masculine. It was also not possible to have an equal number of gender-neutral codes, as the majority of behaviour analysed could be deemed as either masculine or feminine. However, this was also true of the

previous framework of behaviours utilised by England et al., (2011) and Hine et al., (2018a). This persisted in the current study because of the inclusion of newly incorporated emotion-based codes, of which there were no real opposites that could be deemed masculine. However, calculating and running analysis on the percentages of the feminine, masculine and gender-neutral behaviour at least partly mitigates for this issue. Nonetheless, future research could aim to have an exactly equal divide of masculine and feminine behaviour to investigate whether this influences the findings.

Moreover, a discussive approach to reliability was adopted in the current study as discussed in the methodology chapter, which is a limitation. According to Krippendorff (2018), inter-rater reliability should be established and maintained when coders separately code their content to ensure that the results are objective. However, the discussive approach taken was advised by members of the research team who were experienced in content coding research (namely, Dr Dawn England and the primary supervisor). Although having a more objective approach to reliability analysis may have been advantageous, when coders undergo training in content analysis research, objectivity is already lost as discussions are had during those sessions (Neuendorf, 2011). Arguably then, true objectivity is not possible in content analysis studies, and a discussive approach can lead to more insightful coding in which nuanced behaviours may be more accurately captured. Further, the framework had a high number of behavioural codes which made it more complex than some others utilised in previous studies which may further justify the approach taken in the current study.

The primary coder and researcher acted as the reviewer of the coding in which discrepancies were highlighted. When discrepancies were identified, the

primary coder discussed them with the second coder to resolve the incidences. If an agreement could be reached, the coding was amended, but if the coders fundamentally disagreed with each other on the interpretation of a behaviour, the coding was left as it was. This approach ensured that reliability was maintained for each protagonist while honouring each coders interpretation. It is possible that having the primary coder conducting those discussions could have created a bias in that they may have been more likely to perceive their own coding as accurate. As discussed above, it is also possible that objectivity was lost by utilising this approach. However, the discussions were deliberately collaborative, and it did not seem feasible to recruit an additional person on to the project who would be responsible for the reviewing process. A non-coding reviewer would have had to be fully trained as a coder, and due to the nature of the role, would have had to have invested much time to the project, over a sustained period. Considering the time constraints of this PhD, it did not seem feasible or necessary to rely on another person to fulfil this role. It is also possible that the primary coder leading discussions was advantageous as it meant that the discussions facilitated more critically aware coding procedures and ensured that the researcher was close to, and engaged with, the methodological approach that was followed at all stages of the research.

Additionally, reliability was calculated for each character rather than for each behavioural code. Previous research conducted by Hine et al., (2018a) calculated Kalpha scores for each behavioural code across all the protagonists rather than each protagonist individually. However, in the current study it was important for the researcher to monitor the inter-rater reliability as the coding was being conducted. Because the coding was being conducted and reviewed one protagonist at a time it seemed logical for each protagonist's reliability to be considered individually, as the

reliability of the individual behavioural codes would change as more protagonists were coded and added to analysis. Conducting reliability analysis in this way ensured that each protagonist was coded reliably. Although some protagonists had lower reliability than others, previous research has accepted Kalphas lower than .67 (such as Matthes et al., 2016) which was considered the minimum requirement for reliability in this study. It should also be noted that the reliability scores reported were calculated based on the entirety of the behaviour coded for each protagonist (rather than the opening fifteen minutes, as with Hine et al., 2018a) which although unusual, is a strength, as the entire data set was subjected to reliability tests and the coders were aware that all their data would be screened, providing a further incentive for them to code reliably. As well as being discussed here, the approach to calculating reliability has been discussed in chapter three.

2.5.3 Conclusions

The depiction of stereotypical female gender profiles throughout each era of Disney films studied in the current research is potentially troubling as such results counter the perhaps more optimistic ideology posited by Hine et al., (2018a) that Disney is portraying less limited and stereotyped female characters in their ‘modern’ animations (although they support much qualitative research such as Streiff & Dundes, 2017a; Streiff & Dundes, 2017b). It should be noted however, that this may be a result of the coding method employed, particularly when considering that more behavioural traits were deemed feminine than masculine or gender-neutral. Although there is nothing inherently wrong with females adhering to femininity and males adhering to masculinity, it is likely that doing so will limit the behaviours they display. Therefore, as Martin et al., (2017) states,

> “[b]ecause of these role restrictions, from Bem’s (1975) perspective, being gender traditional was equated with rigidity; being androgynous

> (nontraditional) was equated with flexibility, and flexibility was related to adaptive and positive mental health" (Martin et al., 2017, p. 593).

Therefore, presenting female protagonists who are displaying stereotypical behavioural profiles could encourage the young girls who are engaging with them to display predominantly feminine behaviours and thus limit the likelihood of them displaying masculine ones, which could have implications for their adaptability. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that this is the case (Coyne et al., 2016; Golden & Jacoby, 2018; Dinella, 2017). However, exposure to such behavioural profiles may be positive for young boys who seem to display more diverse toy preferences and behavioural profiles as a result (Coyne et al., 2021b).

The current research has helped establish that the portrayal of men in Disney is not stereotypical, which supports the previous quantitative content analyses (England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018a). In line with the argument made above, this may be beneficial to young boys as being presented with less limited male behavioural profiles may encourage them to be less restricted in their own behaviour (Martin et al., 2017). However, the data collected in the current study does not consider whether the non-stereotypical behaviour displayed by male Disney protagonists is presented as socially desirable or appropriate and thus worthy of replication by the young boys who identify with such characters. Future research should assess whether non stereotypically gendered men in Disney are shown to be celebrated. Further, research investigating the potential influence of male Disney protagonists with more feminine than masculine behavioural profiles on boys' behaviour is also warranted. Perhaps a replication of Hine et al., (2018b), examining whether children perceive the feminine traits displayed by male protagonists would be a good place to start.

Overall, there were mixed gendered messages within the behavioural profiles of Disney protagonists analysed in the current study which could reflect that

> "Disney is aware that it cannot be too radical with its depictions and themes: while controversial topics may be fine in some genres, they tend to be problematic in the family and children's film markets. It is not necessarily, as some would have it, that Disney "promotes" conservative ideas; rather, long experience has taught them to be careful with their level of experimentation. Go too far, and they lose the audience, lose money, and have to deal with a film which becomes a drain on the studio's resources" (Davis, 2013, p. 251).

As suggested above, perhaps it is Disney's commercial and monetary focus that comes before its desire to produce films with entirely progressive ideals that leaves Disney producing films that have some stereotypical and non-stereotypical gendered messaging. Indeed, it leaves the consumers of the films, and the academics committed to studying them for their gendered messages, wondering how future protagonists will be portrayed.

Appendix A- Coding Framework

Codes appearing in bold were new codes that had not been previously established by Hine et al., (2018b) and England et al., (2011).

1) Focuses on physical appearance- adjusting physical appearance for the purpose of making it look better or to draw attention to it. Also coded when a character comments on, is distracted by or admires their own appearance.

2) Described as physically attractive- either described as beautiful or handsome by other characters.

3) **Confident**- coded if a character explicitly says they are confident/competent in their abilities or comes across as cocky/overconfident. Also coded if a character suggests they can help in a problematic situation.

4) **Lacks confidence-** coded when a character doubts themselves or seems to think they are incapable or not worthy of something. Also coded if a character seems embarrassed or shy.

5) Seeks advice or approval- wanting, directly asking for, or accepting (without having asked for) emotional or mental support. Also coded if they wanted reassurance from another character.

6) Assertive towards adults- insistence upon a right or claim, the action of declaring or positively stating or making a demand of someone.

Assertiveness included polite assertiveness with a hint of aggression. Assertiveness was a strong, direct assertion of a position or idea.

7) Assertive towards children or animals- insistence upon a right or claim, the action of declaring or positively stating to children or animals only. Assertiveness included polite assertiveness with a hint of aggression. Assertiveness was a strong, direct assertion of a position or idea.

8) Submissive— yielding to power or authority, humble and ready obedience. This trait was usually in response to another character's assertiveness. Includes subservience- unquestioningly obeying orders even when they are unreasonable and being controlled.

9) Knowledgeable and experienced- showing that they have knowledge/intelligence or life experience lacked by others. For example, when a character tells a story to another for the purpose of teaching them or warning them based on their previous experiences or knowledge. Also coded when a character displays a specific skill with ease or outsmarts another character.

10) **Needs teaching-** coded when a character asks to be taught a physical skill or says they want to learn about something they have no experience of. Also coded if another seems surprised that the character does not know/has no experience of something or if a character is tricked or manipulated by another and is naïve.

11) Brave—courageous, daring, intrepid, heroic. Bravery often involved leadership in the face of danger. Can also be coded if a character performs a rescue or intervenes in a situation with the intent of protecting another from harm even when putting themselves in danger by doing so, or when vocalising they wish to protect another character.

12) Scared- frightened in a current situation (rather than being apprehensive about an upcoming event which would be coded as cautious) or is concerned about others. Can be coded when a character seems anxious.

13) Leader—one who leads, inspires a group of people or brings them together, acts as a commander. Leader was only coded if the character was leading a group of people, not animals and not just him or herself. It also was only used to describe physical leadership in which a person is seen in front of and directing people and involved giving orders.

14) Nurturing- to care for and encourage the growth or development of, to foster. Being nurturing required direct interaction and was often shown as mothering. It involved prolonged touching and attention in a soothing manner (different than a brief instance of affection) or lending care in a loving way to either animals or people.

15) Helpful- rendering or affording physical assistance when needed, requiring an action that gave another person or animal direct assistance in a harmless/non-

rescue situation. It was not used in a broader way to describe a character's role in a scene. Also coded if a character supports another by offering advice.

16) Victimised/helpless- a character needed assistance of another character to get out of a situation/needed to be rescued. Coded when someone suffers severely in body or property through cruel or oppressive treatment that they cannot escape. May suffer physical harm or suffer abuse. Can also be coded if a character is being manhandled.

17) Shows affection- towards a person or animal. A display of love such as a hug, a kiss, or an individual touch for the point of illustrating affection.

18) Physically strong- hitting or moving something, providing evidence that the character had a strong physical effect on the person or object. Also coded when a character climbs something that requires strength. This was different from a simple athletic display. There was a separate code for athletic, defined below, and the codes were mutually exclusive, as it was understood that displays of physical strength often incorporated some athleticism.

19) Physically weak—not being able to succeed in something that takes physical strength. It was often accompanied by needing help or else failing. Also coded when a character falls.

20) Athletic—a specific action such as a jump or kick that was large enough to require some athleticism. Running was also coded as athletic.

21) Seeks adventure- wants to search for, to investigate, to want to find out or explore the unknown. Coded when a character questions their life/situation or longs for a change. May express they ‘want more’ from their life when a character feels like something better must exist.

22) Cautious (of adventure)- weighing up the right thing to do when presented with the prospect of adventure. Coded when a character expresses the potentially negative consequences of their actions. Also coded when a character is hesitant or expresses that they do not know what to do.

23) Hopeless- becoming disheartened, wanting to give up on something such as a mission, pursuit, or person. The character may appear to be in state of despair, for example, their face may be in their hands, they may be physically slumped, or their body language/facial expression may suggest they are giving or have given up. Can also be coded if they express their readiness to give up vocally.

24) Independent- doing something despite being advised not to or it is against the norm. Performing an independent action against many, being alone when it was not the norm, or not participating in the expected culture. Not depending on the authority of another. Is autonomous/self-governing.

25) **Daydreaming**- being lost in thought or appearing distracted by their own thoughts. May include singing, humming, twirling, while engaged in thought as if in their own world.

26) **Wants to find romantic love-** explicitly expressing the desire to find love or marry generally, or after having met and fallen in love with another character.

27) **Uninterested in love-** character expresses that they do not want to find a partner, seems oblivious to the opposite sex or in extreme cases, expresses disgust at idea of finding love.

28) Shows romantic interest- coded when a character encourages conversation with the intention of getting to know another character in a way that suggests a romantic interest is being or will be developed. Can also be coded when a character is unable to control themselves when their love interest is around, they may be glazed over or look amazed, mesmerised, or stunned. They may lose control over their body or struggle to speak.

29) Purposefully troublesome- causing trouble, turmoil, disturbance for entertainment including in cheeky manner or to gain something, including stealing. Also coded when the character was being discussed by other characters in a way that made clear that the character had deliberately caused trouble that needed to be solved or needed to be reprimanded for their actions.

30) Incompetent/unintentionally troublesome- unintentionally getting themselves and/or others into a troublesome or dangerous situation. Also coded when the character was being discussed by other characters in a way that made clear that they caused trouble due to incompetence. Also coded when a character is clumsy.

31) Sensitive/empathetic- —perception, knowledge, and understanding of other people's/ animals' emotions. Being able to understand how another character feels. Can be coded when a character listens to another's problems or emotionally supports another character. Can also be coded when a character does something nice for another, and/or is selfless, friendly, and warm.

32) Insensitive- unaware of another person's emotions or does not care about them. Could also be coded when a character does not show emotion in a sad situation such as a death.

33) **Angry/frustrated –** an outburst of anger in which the character may shout, scream, or otherwise express their frustration vocally or physically. Also coded when a character goes red in the face when provoked or when a character storms away from another character or situation.

34) **Panic-** a sudden uncontrollable fear or anxiety, often causing irrational or unthinking behaviour.

35) **Calm-** able to keep level-headed while others may be expressing anger. Could be coded when a character is calm when anger would be an acceptable response. Coded if the character is acting as a mediator in an argument or can think clearly in a stressful situation.

36) Physically aggressive- smashing/ throwing objects or being physically violent towards others when this is not a result of anger frustration. Can also be coded for less extreme aggression such a grabbing (a character, their clothing, or an object) as well as snatching something from another character.

37) Verbally aggressive- making threats, or verbally attacking another character for purpose of upsetting or intimidating them.

38) Ashamed/ guilty— affected with shame, the painful emotion arising from the consciousness of dishonouring and guilt.

39) **Sad-** coded when a character has tears in their eyes, shedding a single tear or some tears but is not hysterical when in a sad situation, or because of upset. Was also coded if a character's facial expression or body language suggests they are unhappy.

40) Collapses crying—the character puts his/her face down, such that it was no longer visible, and cries, (hysterically) usually in rocking shakes and sobs. Sitting and crying while showing the face did not count; the character must have thrown him/herself on or against something (e.g., a bed, the floor).

41) **Excited/amazed**- a character may express their excitement vocally by suggesting that they are looking forward to an event or situation. They may physically express excitement and this can be coded when a character is jumping up and down or clapping out of eagerness, or their eyes widen when looking at something. Was also be coded if a character become hyperactive and rushes around or speaks quickly due to excitement.

42) **Expresses positive emotions (excluding excitement)-** a character may vocalise that they are happy or content. This may be reflected in their facial expressions or body language. They may also express their happiness for another character.

43) **Unimpressed-** being unamused, having no interest in something or underreacting to something that is expected to bring excitement, may seem underwhelmed/bored.

44) **Charming-** when a character tries to or succeeds in being liked and/or trusted by delighting, attracting, or fascinating another character.

45) **Deceitful-** coded when a character deliberately lies about something (including a small unimportant lie) or is deemed untrustworthy. Also coded when a character creates a plot or executes a plan to bring down another character behind their back. Can also be coded when a character creates a distraction.

46) **Honest-** tells the truth even if it gets them in trouble. Coded when a character confesses something or says/behaves as though they do not want to lie.

47) **Shocked/confused-** coded when a character seemed to be confused or unable to comprehend something or is shocked. This could be reflected in facial expressions.

48) **Funny/playful-** when a character says or does something for the purpose of being entertaining or having fun including mocking another character or referring to them using a nickname in a light-hearted manner.

49) Selfish- does something for their own gain even if this is at the detriment of another character. Was also be coded if a character is being competitive.

50) **Domestic**-coded when a character is doing domestic work or chores within the home.

51) **Voluntarily singing or dancing**- coded when a character was willing to dance or sing or did so voluntarily or without persuasion.

52) **Reluctant to sing or dance- coded** when a character either refused to sing or dance or needed persuasion to do so. Also coded if a character says they do not want to sing or dance.

Appendix B- Gendered Split of the Coding Framework

Masculine Traits	Feminine Traits	Gender Neutral Traits
Shows romantic interest	Focuses on physical appearance	Deceitful
Seeks adventure	Cautious (of adventure)	Honest
Physically strong	Physically weak	Shocked/confused
Assertive towards adults	Assertive towards children/animals	Selfish
Insensitive/unempathetic	Sensitive/empathetic	Calm
Independent	Submissive	Hopeless
Athletic	Shows affection	
Knowledgeable/experienced	Needs teaching	
Physically aggressive	Helpful	
Verbally aggressive	Unintentionally troublesome	
Leader	Purposefully troublesome	
Confident	Lacks confidence	
Angry/frustrated	Ashamed/guilty	
Charming	Collapsed crying	
Uninterested in love	Wants to find love	
Reluctant to sing/dance	Voluntarily singing or dancing	
Unimpressed	Domestic	
Funny/playful	Nurturing	
Brave	Scared	
	Victimised/helpless	
	Sadness	
	Described as attractive	
	Panic	
	Daydreaming	
	Seeks advice/approval	
	Excited/amazed	
	Positive emotion	
Total = 19	Total =27	Total=6

Chapter Five: The Portrayal of Gender in Marvel and Star Wars Media Targeted Towards Children (Study Two).

5.1 Introduction

The literature review (chapter two) drew upon an abundance of previous research that had investigated how gender has been portrayed within feature length films produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios (sometimes referred to as 'Disney Classics'), particularly those within the Disney princess franchise (England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018a; Towbin et al., 2004, Primo, 2018; Dundes, & Streiff, 2016; Giroux & Pollock, 2010; Streiff & Dundes, 2017a; Streiff & Dundes, 2017b). Chapter four (the first empirical chapter of this thesis) expanded upon previous content analyses (England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018a) and made an important contribution to previous research by analysing the masculine, feminine and gender-neutral behaviours displayed by male and female protagonists both within and beyond the Disney princess franchise that is targeted towards girls. However, whilst chapter four filled an important gap in the current understanding of the portrayal of male and female protagonists in feature length films produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios, it is important to acknowledge that the Disney corporation has acquired the Marvel and Star Wars franchises which are likely to contain protagonists that are more influential to young boys. Despite this, animated Marvel and Star Wars content that is suitable for child viewers is yet to be examined for their representations of male and female protagonists, making such research necessary.

Overall, this chapter aims to conduct a qualitative investigation of how gender is portrayed in animated Marvel and Star Wars media. The study will utilise thematic analysis by drawing upon the method adopted by Towbin et al., (2004). A qualitative study will allow for an in-depth exploration of how gender is portrayed in these texts

which will be insightful considering little is currently known in this domain. The process of selecting the relevant animated content from each franchise will be discussed in the method section of this chapter. This study will aim to answer two research questions:

1) How is gender portrayed within a Marvel animated television series?
2) How is gender portrayed within a Star Wars animated television series?

5.1.2 Gender in Disney

The portrayal of gender in Disney princess animations (those that were produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios, and feature in the official Disney princess franchise) has been relatively widely researched (England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018a; Towbin et al., 2004, Primo, 2018; Dundes, & Streiff, 2016; Giroux & Pollock, 2010; Streiff & Dundes, 2017a; Streiff & Dundes, 2017b). This is perhaps unsurprising as the franchise has become incredibly successful in targeting a female audience and female consumers (Heatwole, 2016; Johnson, 2014) and research suggests that children engaging with Disney princesses seem to be high in feminine traits themselves (Coyne et al., 2016). Therefore, because Disney princesses are so influential in the lives of young girls, understanding the portrayal of men and women within the associated animations has been at the forefront of research.

5.1.3 Disney, Marvel, and Star Wars

Despite numerous investigations into how male and female protagonists are portrayed in films produced by the Walt Disney Animation Studios, little research has investigated the portrayal of gender within the Marvel and Star Wars franchises, which Disney acquired in 2009 and 2012 respectively. This is problematic as Disney’s acquisition of the Marvel and Star Wars franchises could have been motivated by the corporation’s desire to own content that captures a male centric

audience. Indeed, Wu (2021) suggested that “Disney represents girls' childhood, while Marvel tends to be more attractive to boys [finding that] … the targeted audience of Marvel and Disney… rarely overlap” (Wu, 2021, p. 631). Similarly, Koushik and Reed (2018) state that “in the popular imagination, [Star Wars] has always been a boy’s story” (Koushik & Reed, 2018, p. 6). Taken with the fact that children perceived princesses to be appropriate for girls and expressed little interest in prince characters, while “[b]oys reported personal interest in superheroes (who were rated as highly masculine)” (Dinella et al., 2017, p. 275), it seems likely that Disney acquired the Marvel and Star Wars franchises to capture a male audience more successfully. This is presumably a business decision motivated by generating higher profits (Jing et al., 2021). Therefore, expanding analyses of the portrayal of gender to incorporate Disney’s newly acquired Marvel and Star Wars franchises is essential, to understand the gendered messages that may be consumed particularly heavily by young boys.

5.1.3 Gender in Superhero Media

The concepts of masculinity and femininity highlighted in the second chapter of this thesis have been utilised to understand the portrayal of gender in superhero media, and such research will be drawn upon in this sub-section. For example, Miller et al., (2016) conducted a quantitative content analysis of the portrayal of male and female superheroes in animated and non-animated films released between 1978 and 2009. The findings suggested that the portrayal of male and female superheroes was in line with broader gender role stereotypes. For example,

> “males were significantly higher than… females on the items measuring power, muscularity, violence, and evil. In comparison, means for females were significantly higher than means for males on attractiveness, thinness, sexiness/seductiveness, innocence, fear, and helplessness” (Miller et al., 2016, p. 9).

It was also found that although the "[r]esearchers selected and analyzed only two male heroes and *all* female heroes per movie… there were still twice as many males" (Miller et al., 2016, p. 15, italics added). Additionally, violence and aggression tend to be perpetrated more by protagonists than antagonists, and more by male characters than female characters (Muller et al., 2020). This is supported by Miller et al., (2016) who found that males utilised weapons and fighting skills more frequently than females, meaning that they were portrayed as more aggressive and violent overall. Taken together, these results suggest that women are underrepresented in superhero films, and men and women are portrayed in line with stereotypical masculinity and femininity respectively.

Similarly, Baker and Raney (2007) also conducted a quantitative content analysis of the portrayal of gender stereotypes in superhero media, although the researchers analysed one episode of a selection of children's animated television shows. The coding scheme assessed characters on their physical appearance, personality traits, physical behaviours, communicative behaviours and superhero-specific characteristics, mostly on Likert Scales. The results indicated that there were 44 variables that were not significantly different between male and female superheroes, including the portrayal of violence, in contrast to Miller et al., (2016). The researchers state that:

> "[t]he apparent reason for so few significant differences in portrayals seems not to be because males are being portrayed as more feminine, but rather that females are being presented as more masculine. Adding the masculine trait of aggression to a character who is already portrayed as having traditional feminine traits such as being beautiful, emotional, slim, and attractive, while also losing other more prominent feminine stereotypes (i.e., domesticity, passivity), might suggest that to be heroic, one has to be more masculine, regardless of gender" (Baker & Raney, 2007, p. 37),

Therefore, it seemed that for female superheroes to fit into the superhero genre, they had to represent at least some aspects of traditional masculinity. Additionally, of the

significant differences found between male and female superheroes, females were more emotional, more attractive, more worried, and more likely to be excited in a crisis than males (Baker & Raney, 2007). Alternatively, males were more likely to express anger and be portrayed as threatening than females (Baker & Raney, 2007), whereas females were more likely to have a mentor, and more likely to work in a group. This suggests that the differences in the portrayals of male and female superheroes found by Baker and Raney (2007) were in accordance with gender stereotypes, much like the findings of Miller et al., (2016). Further, Marvel superheroes "when acting in their capacity as a hero… talked about their emotions, accepted physical comfort, and expressed trust significantly less often than when acting in their capacity as self" (Shawcroft & Coyne, 2022 p. 232) suggesting superheroes do not express vulnerability.

Overall, the findings of Baker and Raney (2007) and Miller et al., (2016) suggest that stereotypical masculinity is favoured in superhero content. Indeed, it has been said that superhero narratives seem to "indulge in fantasies about the heroes' unlimited ability to protect a silent and largely feminized humanity from that which threatens it" (Stabile, 2009, p. 87). Therefore, it is possible, or perhaps inevitable, that concepts of dominant masculinity will be prevalent within superhero media to some extent. For example, in Marvel's Avengers, a Marvel superhero team consisting of several males and one female named Black Widow, her role is much less central, and she seems to be unrepresented in some Avengers merchandise which led to a child simply stating that "Marvel doesn't like women as superheroes" (Dallacqua & Low, 2019, p. 76). Similarly, Guerrero (2021) suggests that the male Avengers are narcissistic, arrogant, and sexist in their treatment of Black Widow, traits that are more broadly associated with 'lad culture' (Phipps & Young, 2015).

However, the extent to which this is normalised or problematised will be important in understanding gendered portrayals within such narratives.

‘Lad culture’ is often used to describe a male group mentality that favours banter and is associated with perpetrating everyday sexism (Phipps & Young, 2015; Nichols, 2018; Whelenhan, 2000). The concept may also be tied into ‘toxic masculinity’ which is often aligned with perpetration of aggression, sexism/misogyny, and homophobia (Harrington, 2021). The concept of ‘lad culture’ seemed to emerge in the 1990’s as a backlash to second-wave feminism’s call for the ‘new man’ to be more involved in domestic labour (Whelehan, 2000). The ‘lad’ “proved himself a domestic catastrophe, but [with] a certain boylike vulnerability [that] supposedly made up for his deficiencies” (Whelehan, 2000, p. 5). Components of ‘lad culture’ as seen in the rise of ‘lad mags’ in the 1990’s, include objectifying women’s bodies and making “sexist comments… under the shield of irony” (Whelehan, 2000, p. 5). The term ‘lad culture’ was also utilised by researchers investigating the high number of female students being sexually harassed in university campuses (Phipps & Young, 2015). Although the links with ‘lad culture’ and sexual harassment are unlikely to relate to superhero media targeted towards children, it is wholly possible that when thinking of “contemporary laddism [as…] young, hedonistic and largely centred on homosocial bonding… [which] often consists of ‘having a laugh’, objectifying women and espousing politically incorrect views (Francis, 1999; Knowles, 2004)” (Phipps & Young, 2015, p. 461), it could be prevalent in superhero narratives, especially those that present male superheroes working together as a team.

Further, Strong (2013) identified several components of ‘team films’ that may be relevant to the portrayal of superhero groups. A key feature of a ‘team film’ is the coming together of individual characters who are markedly different from one

another and have different strengths. This is likely to create tensions within the group narrative and mean that the team have to frequently put aside their differences to complete their task or mission (Strong, 2013). Therefore, perhaps the use of banter and mocking is an inevitable result of creating teams with interesting group narratives and group dynamics. Phipps and Young (2015) frame the humour associated with 'lad culture' as important for male bonding. The use of humour may also be important narratively. Additionally, the use of humour is regarded a prosocial behaviour by Bergin et al., (2003), suggesting it may have benefits. Indeed, for men, humour can be used to "sustain friendships and, at the same time…, establish one's personal masculine status" (Huuki et al., 2010, p. 380). These concepts suggest that the use of humour and 'banter' may therefore relate to interactions between superheroes who seem to be particularly masculine (Baker & Raney, 2007; Miller et al., 2016) and have a heroic status. Although it is possible to expect that humour may be utilised as a means of emotional expression in men, there is little evidence that prosocial teasing is associated with traditionally masculine males who report little difficulty in expressing their emotions, and humour also seems to be unrelated to wellbeing (Podnar, 2013). Therefore, the positive impact of engaging with 'banter' and humour seems limited to its bonding quality, particularly between men (Phipps & Young, 2015). The extent to which this is evident in Marvel and Star Wars media will be important in understanding the relationships between male heroes, particularly.

Overall, little is known about the representation of gender in group superhero narratives, like Marvel's Avengers. This means that little is known about the means of communication in superhero groups, including the use of humour and aggression. Additionally, the previous content analyses considered here do not necessarily account for broader social structures that may be represented within specific

superhero narratives (such as hegemonic masculinity, and ‘lad culture’) which may only be possible via an in-depth qualitative appraisal.

5.1.4 Superhero Media and Children’s Behaviour

As discussed in chapter two of this thesis, there seems to be a relationship between the largely stereotypical masculinity portrayed by male and female superheroes in children’s media and children’s stereotypically masculine behaviour (Coyne et al., 2014). Social cognitive theory of gender development (Bussey & Bandura, 1999) posits that children learn gendered information through models in their direct environment such as their parents, siblings, and peers as well as through the media. Therefore, the theory suggests that if male and female characters in media largely behave in line with gender role stereotypes, children are likely to replicate such stereotyped behaviours themselves. Therefore, considering the research that has been discussed up to this point of the chapter, it is likely that children engaging with superhero media would be more likely to replicate masculine behaviour themselves and, indeed, this seems to be reflected in the literature.

Coyne et al., (2021b) investigated the impact of Disney princess (feminine-typed), Marvel (masculine-typed), and gender-neutral dressing-up outfits on children’s performance on various behavioural tasks. When boys wore the superhero outfit, they were less likely to show feminine-typed toy preferences and prosocial behaviour than when they were in gender-neutral costumes or Disney princess outfits. Additionally, engagement with superhero media in children aged between four and five years old was “associated with endorsement of the muscular [body] ideal and some aspects of hegemonic masculinity five years later” (Coyne et al., 2022, p. 642). For example, engagement with superhero media in a sample of children with the mean age of 4.83 years was related to superhero engagement at

wave two of data collection when the mean age of the sample was 10.05 years and this later engagement predicted less egalitarian attitudes towards men and women. Taken together, these findings suggests that boys associate and emulate the masculine gender stereotyped behaviour associated with Marvel superheroes when they play as these characters (Coyne et al., 2021b) and that superhero narratives inform attitudes towards men and women more broadly (Coyne et al., 2022).

Additionally, although not directly relating to the Marvel franchise, Coyne et al., (2014) found that superhero media predicted masculine behaviour in pre-school aged boys in the US, but not girls. Further, superhero media engagement was also predictive of higher levels of weapon play for both boys and girls (Coyne et al., 2014). These findings suggest that although girls may not replicate the masculine behaviour of superheroes in the same way that boys do, both boys and girls may be more likely to play with weapons as a result of such media. This is potentially concerning, as weapon play may be associated with levels of aggression displayed by children (Watson and Peng 1992, as cited by Coyne et al., 2014, p. 426). Further, this adds to the "[n]early 3000 studies and reviews [which] have found a significant relationship between media violence and real-life aggression" (Strasburger, 2009, p. 655), including in videogames, according to a recent metanalysis (Prescott et al., 2018), suggesting a real-world impact of this messaging. This concept will be considered more fully within chapter six.

5.1.5 Limitations of Previous Superhero Research

The previous sections of this chapter highlighted that, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, no research has investigated the portrayal of male and female superheroes within the Marvel franchise specifically. This limits the understandings of how gender is portrayed in content that is now owned by the

Disney corporation, despite the company's increasing domination of the television and film industries since their acquisition of the Marvel (and Star Wars) franchise(s).

Further limitations are present in the previous research, such as the sample selection of previous analyses (Miller et al., 2016; Baker and Raney, 2007). Miller et al., (2016) analysed both animated and live-action superhero films, the latter of which tend to have high age ratings and are deemed unsuitable for children, whereas the former tend to be more child-friendly. By analysing both child targeted and adult targeted superhero media, the messages that are likely to be consumed exclusively by young children cannot be identified. That is not to say that children do not consume the films with higher age ratings, however, for the purpose of the current research it was important to focus upon the media that children would be most likely to have engaged with, and so 'age-appropriate' content was selected. Although Baker and Raney (2007) specifically analysed superhero content targeted towards child viewers, the researchers analysed one episode of each target series. This approach provides a mere snapshot of the portrayal of gender within a particular series and does not consider whether one episode can be an accurate representation of an entire television series. Therefore, an investigation of the portrayal of male and female superheroes within a whole series of media targeted towards children is yet to be achieved.

Additionally, both the previous studies utilised quantitative content analysis. With little existing literature regarding the portrayal of gender in superhero content, a qualitative investigation would lead to a greater depth in the current understanding. For example, rather than being able to comment on whether specific traits are displayed at different rates by males and females, being able to explore how males and females are treated within the narratives could provide a more nuanced

appraisal of gendered messages. Based on the limitations considered above, namely, that previous research has not considered the portrayal of gender within the Disney owned Marvel franchise, that sampling limitations were present in superhero research conducted by Baker and Raney, (2007) and Miller et al., (2016), and that no qualitative research seems to have been conducted in this area, a qualitative analyses of Marvel superhero media targeted towards children is warranted.

5.1.6 Star Wars Representations

Even fewer studies have investigated the portrayal of gender within Star Wars media than Marvel media. However, the Star Wars story world is largely deemed male dominated and patriarchal (Pianka, 2013; Bruin-Molé, 2017). Such arguments relate to the Force which, according to the Star Wars website,

> "is a mysterious energy field created by life that binds the galaxy together. Harnessing the power of the Force gives the Jedi, the Sith, and others sensitive to this spiritual energy extraordinary abilities, such as levitating objects, tricking minds, and seeing things before they happen. While the Force can grant users powerful abilities, it also directs their actions" (Star Wars, n.d., p. x).

In the original Star Wars film trilogy, princess Leia seems to have the capabilities to utilise the Force but never truly does so. Instead, the fully realised power of the Force lies with her father, Anakin Skywalker/Darth Vader and her twin brother Luke Skywalker, suggesting harbouring the Force, in the original trilogy at least, it is a masculine endeavour (Bruin-Molé, 2017). The Force is a powerful source of energy, and that only male protagonists (in the original trilogy) utilise it reinforces the idea that they are the most powerful and important characters. However, it is also important to note that a key element of the process of becoming a Jedi is that "[j]ust like American boys, Jedi younglings are taught to separate themselves from feelings deemed harmful or reckless and are therefore taught to never experience and healthily solve their emotional traumas" (Moran, 2019, xviii). Similarly, Bettis and

Sternod (2009) suggest that successful “Jedi are to be strong and rational and are discouraged from expressing any and all emotions, even love” (Bettis & Sternod, 2009, p. 33). This is a problematic and damaging depiction of emotional suppression that may be rooted in the expectations of stereotypical masculinity (Parent et al., 2019) and disguised as a source of power in the original Star Wars trilogy. Therefore, the patriarchal culture that the Star Wars galaxy emulates may represent a depiction of men and women that may be concerning.

However, as stated in the literature review, beyond the original trilogy, the Star Wars franchise seems to portray a more progressive depiction of women with its leading protagonist Rey (Bruin-Molé, 2017). She has been “heralded as a hero whose gender is unimportant to her characterisation” (McGucken, 2020, p. 153). However, some fans raised the question of whether she was seen to be unrealistically skilled as she had no Jedi training and interestingly, such beliefs were associated with higher levels of hostile sexism (White & Baldwin, 2018). Additionally, there was some backlash from Star Wars fans at the introduction of a female Jedi. However, in a study that investigated female Star Wars fans perspectives on Rey, it was found that participants seemed to be split between whether they felt that male fans perceived female protagonists negatively or positively which could suggest that

> “they felt that accusations of the female lead characters being Mary Sue’s [that is, a character who is unrealistically presented as lacking any flaws] was from a ‘loud minority’ rather than male fans at large” (Austin, 2018, p. 56).

Further, the lack of merchandise depicting Rey caused outrage, which was also described in the literature review. Despite various controversies, it is important to recognise that Rey has provided the Star Wars franchise with a positive female hero who is smart, capable, and strong.

Additionally, there have been strong, positive, and important female protagonists in Star Wars animated television series such as *Clone Wars* and *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018; McGucken, 2020; Pianka, 2013). Researchers indicate that the Star Wars franchises' depiction of women reflects the developments within the women's movement in the US more broadly (Bruin- Molé, 2017; McGucken, 2020; Langsdale, 2019). For example, McGucken (2020) states that the female protagonists of *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) (Hera and Sabine) represent both traditional femininity and a rejection of it. Hera for example, represents the notion that a female can be both a capable warrior and a kind and nurturing mother as "[t]hroughout the show, the Ghost crew is constructed as a family, with Hera as its matriarch… Thus Hera, as the crew's leader, is framed as Mother to Kanan's [the adult male protagonist] Father" (McGucken, 2020, p. 157).

Although there is nothing inherently wrong with the family structure presented in *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018), and indeed, McGuken (2020) finds Hera's balance between pilot and mother figure empowering, it may suggest that women must have at least some feminine traits and roles to also have some masculine ones, which was also found in Baker and Raney's (2007) investigation of superheroes. Further, McGucken (2020) does not consider how the roles of 'mother' and 'father' are represented and endorsed by Hera and Kanan respectively. It would be interesting to investigate whether there are differences in their 'parenting' roles and/or responsibilities which may be rooted in gendered parenting stereotypes. For example, research suggests that although both mothers and fathers have anxieties relating to parenting, these anxieties reflect the gendered split of parenting where mothers are more concerned with the quality of 'hands-on' parental care they provide, and fathers are more concerned with financial pressures and long-term

planning (Shirani et al., 2012). Additionally, according to Kluwer et al., (2002), as cited by Forbes et al., (2020), parenting often leads women into “more traditional family roles” (Forbes et al., 2020, p. 64). This may reflect the wider belief that women are better parents than men, which may mean that women are more pressured to live up to these high expectations (Forbes et al., 2020; Faircloth, 2014). Therefore, an analysis of the portrayal of gender within a family structure such as that within *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) could reveal whether the portrayal of a ‘mother’ and ‘father’ figure in the series is portrayed to be in line with gendered perspectives of parenting, to provide greater insight into whether the representation of men and women in the series endorses these stereotypes or manages to transcend them. Further, there has been little investigation of the portrayal of men in *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018), which means that the gendered portrayals within the series are not fully understood.

5.1.7 Limitations of Previous Star Wars Research

The previous sections of this chapter firstly highlighted that the portrayal of gender in the Star Wars franchise has been limited in quantity. The research that has been conducted finds that the portrayal of women in the Star Wars franchise seems to be changing, with positive portrayals shown within the sequel film trilogy and in some of the animated television series (Bruin-Molé, 2017; Larabee, 2016; Pianka, 2013; McGucken, 2020). However, McGucken (2020) only considered how the female protagonists are portrayed in *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) and did not fully investigate the portrayal of men in that series. Secondly, McGucken (2020) did not disclose the analytical approach utilised to reach their conclusions. Therefore, a systematic and transparent approach to analysing the portrayal of men and women within Star Wars media targeted towards children is necessary.

5.1.8 The Current Research

The introduction of this chapter finds that the gendered messaging within feature length films produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios has been more widely analysed than Marvel and Star Wars media. Such research is important considering that the messages in superhero media seem to be affecting the gendered behaviours displayed by young boys (Coyne et al., 2021b; Coyne et al., 2014). Additionally, the limited research that has considered the portrayal of gender in Marvel and Star Wars media has methodological limitations, which have been discussed. Therefore, the current study will a) fill an important gap in the literature and b) provide the relevant background to the third study of this thesis which will investigate whether children's engagement with the Disney, Marvel and Star Wars franchises influences their gender stereotyped behaviour and levels of weapon play. Overall, the current study aims to qualitatively analyse the representation of male and female characters in Marvel and Star Wars media. The study will be guided by two research questions:

1) How is gender portrayed within a Marvel animated television series?
2) How is gender portrayed within a Star Wars animated television series?

5.2 Method

5.2.1 Selection of Target Marvel and Star Wars Material

Marvel and Star Wars live-action films are incredibly popular, which is reflected in their grossing figures, however they tend to be rated as suitable for children aged twelve and above. Therefore, for the purpose of the current research, one animated television series each from the Marvel and Star Wars franchises were selected for analysis as they are rated as suitable for children aged six and above.

Because parents of children aged between four and eleven years were recruited for study three, the content analysed needed to be appropriate for children between those same ages for the results to provide insight into how gender is portrayed in content that such children are likely to have engaged with. Grossing figures had been utilised to identify media that were the most popular and influential in study one, however, there is a lack of grossing figures available for television series. Therefore, for this study, parameters/inclusion criteria were designed to inform which TV series (and thus characters) would be analysed. To do this, figures of the average worldwide grossing of each Marvel character's films were calculated and are shown in order from highest to lowest, in Table 5.

The averages were calculated by adding the figures for the highest grossing films for each character together (from a list available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_highest-grossing superhero films). The figures on this list were amended as per the grossing figures available on Box Office Mojo, with the grossing figures of any additional films that had been centred around that character but did not feature on that highest grossing superhero list added (based on the IMBD and Box Office Mojo figures). That figure was then divided by the number of films that each character featured in (as a leading character, indicated by their name being within the title). Such calculations found that The Avengers had the highest average worldwide grossing of over $1,500,000,000. Based on this, it was decided that an Avengers television series should be the focus of the current study. It should be noted that the calculations were conducted in March 2022.

In summary, the presence of character/s in the highest grossing Marvel films were utilised as guides to establish the target television content in the current study because the same characters appear in the television shows and films. It was

assumed that by calculating the grossing figures of Marvel films, characters that are likely to be popular in both film and television format would be identified. Although some of the same characters appear in single-character centred films as well as collective films (i.e., Thor, and Ironman have titular films and appear in the Avengers films), a character's grossing was only calculated for films that were centred around them, indicated by their name appearing in the title. This was a practical decision as inevitably characters that appear in films centred around multiple characters may be present within the narratives and influential to the plot to varying degrees. Therefore, the character had to be named in the title for it to be considered a film centred around them. This is perhaps a limitation in the sampling method but one that was practically important.

There were several Avengers television series that could be analysed for the purpose of the current study. To identify which should be analysed, the researcher searched for 'Avengers' on Disney+ within a 'kids' profile. The 'kids' profile displays media that is appropriate for young children only (the majority of which was rated suitable for children aged six and above). The series named *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) was the first Avengers television series to be listed and had most recently ended production, meaning it was likely to have been available on television channels most recently. As a result of these factors, the first series of *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) was analysed. Series one consisted of twenty-six episodes, each approximately twenty-four minutes long (10.4 hours of content).

Because Star Wars films are not focused on individual characters in the same way Marvel films are, it was not necessary, or possible, to calculate grossings in the same way to narrow down the available content for this franchise. Instead, the *Star*

Wars Rebels (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) series was selected as it was the series released closest in time to the first series of *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019). There were fifteen episodes within that series, and each was approximately 24 minutes long, equating to six hours of content.

Table 5

The Marvel Characters' Average Grossing Per Film.

Marvel Characters	Average film Worldwide Grossing (in USD)
Avengers	1,558,174,215
Black Panther	1,347,597,973
Captain Marvel	1,128,462,972
Spiderman	895,055,428.2
Guardians of Galaxy	818,553,099
Iron Man	808,180,276.7
Deadpool	784,366,700
Captain America	746,109,591
Venom	679,041,900
Dr Strange	677,796,076
Thor	649,364,556.3
Ant man	570,993,052
Wolverine/Logan	469,023,687
X-men	388,586,928.9

5.2.2 Procedure – Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted whereby episode one of series **two** of *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) was analysed by the researcher and the supervisor of the project. This episode was selected because it was from the same animated series and so would be narratively similar, and consist of the same protagonists, but was not within the first (target) series. The process followed the procedure of Towbin et al., (2004), which, as highlighted in the methodology chapter of this thesis, utilised a transparent procedure with clear steps which seems to be lacking in other qualitative appraisals of gender in Disney feature length animations. Due to a lack of research investigating the gendered messages prevalent in Star

Wars and Marvel media, the procedure adopted by Towbin et al., (2004) was utilised and applied to such media.

The episode was watched once in its entirety before the researcher rewatched the episode and began identifying codable units/segments of material. The data units were identified to either relate to a character's characteristics, their role, or their behaviours, as per Towbin et al., (2004). When a unit was identified, a brief description of the content was written. If the data unit was speech, it was transcribed exactly, utilising subtitles for accuracy. Each unit of data was then coded. A code was a brief word or short sentence that captured why the unit of material was interesting and relevant to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2004). The purpose of the pilot study was firstly to practice the method of data collection and highlight any practical issues that may need to be addressed, and secondly, to assess whether both the researcher and the supervisor selected similar data units and codes, to establish dependability (Yilmaz, 2013). The researcher and supervisor discussed the concepts of dependability and credibility of the data collection process in a meeting following their separate coding of the episode, constructs that are frequently applied to qualitative inquiries instead of reliability and validity which are more relevant to quantitative inquires (Yilmaz, 2013).

In the meeting, an insightful discussion between the researcher and supervisor ensued, particularly around the practical challenge of placing data units into the codes outlined above (as either characteristics, roles, or behaviours). Many of the data items were relevant to two or more of the categories. For example, a character acting as the informer of the group could be both a role and a characteristic. As a result, after the pilot study had been conducted it was decided that data did not need to fit rigidly into one of the three codes defined by Towbin et

al., (2004) to allow more flexibility in the analysis. This reflected that the current research aimed to capture the overall gendered profiles of the protagonists analysed and it did not seem necessary to place units of data in specific categories to achieve this. To consider credibility, discussions were had regarding whether the identified units of analysis and codes represented the content of the episode accurately, and whether the codes were likely to lead to the development of themes that were comprehensive (Yilmaz, 2013). Dependability was established by considering whether there was adequate similarity in the units of data and the codes identified between the researcher and supervisor. Few discrepancies were highlighted between the researcher and the supervisor, and the themes being drawn upon were similar, therefore it was deemed appropriate for the researcher to begin the data collection process by analysing the target material. After the target data was collected, it was analysed utilising thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

5.2.3 Analysis

The data collected from the Marvel and Star Wars franchises were treated at separate data sets. A ‘bottom-up’ data driven thematic analysis as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013) was conducted on each data set. The data was collected and analysed from the *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) first, and *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) second. The first four steps of thematic analysis; familiarisation, generating initial codes, searching for themes, and reviewing themes are usually conducted for the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, initial coding was conducted in two phases in the current study. During the first stage, initial codes were developed while the data was being collected. This was deemed appropriate due to the unconventional method of data collection that was utilised, namely, because units of data were identified from

television content while it was being watched (following Towbin et al., 2004), it was important to note why each unit of data had been perceived to be relevant to the research question(s). This therefore led to the data being initially coded whilst it was being collected. After the data set had been created and stage one of initial coding was completed, the second phase of coding was conducted.

In phase two of initial coding, due to the length of the Avengers data set (approximately 2600 units of data had been extracted and coded from the series overall) the data were split into four groups and the coding was edited. Group one consisted of data from episodes one to seven. Group two consisted of data from episodes eight to fourteen. Group three consisted of data from episodes fifteen to twenty and group four consisted of data from episodes twenty-one to twenty-six. The data in each of the groups were read through several times before phase two of coding was conducted. In phase two of coding, additional codes could be applied, or codes could be removed. The process of data analysis will be evaluated in the discussion section of this chapter. This method was then followed with the *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) data set, with episodes one to seven being analysed as the first group, and episodes eight to fifteen being analysed in the second group.

Once provisional themes had been established for each data set, the researcher met with the supervisor to discuss them to ensure that the themes were representative of the data itself. When the supervisor had confirmed that the themes seemed the represent the portrayal of male and female characters in each series, Braun and Clarke's (2004) step five - defining and naming themes and step six – writing the report, could take place.

5.3 Results

5.3.1 Avengers Assemble Results

The male Avengers protagonists analysed were Iron Man (IM), Captain America (Cap), Thor, Hulk, Hawkeye (HE) and Falcon (F). The female Avenger analysed was Black Widow (referred to as Widow in the series). The current research aimed to answer the research question: How is gender portrayed within a Marvel animated television series? The main themes established were ‘stereotypical masculinity/lad culture’ and ‘being flawed and fallible’. There were several subthemes for each of the main themes which provide further detail of the portrayal of gender within *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019). Within the ‘stereotypical masculinity/lad culture theme there were five subthemes: ‘teamwork’, ‘battles and aggression’, ‘banter’, ‘odd one out (Widow)’ and ‘strength and muscularity’. Within the ‘being flawed and fallible’ main theme, there were three subthemes: ‘respect is earned’, ‘anger needs to be controlled’ and ‘vulnerable without suits’. The themes and subthemes generated from *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) can be found in Table 6.

5.3.2 Main theme: Stereotypical Masculinity/Lad Culture

There were many concepts of stereotypical masculinity (as discussed in the literature review of the thesis) and ‘lad culture’ (Phipps & Young, 2015) endorsed by the male protagonists within *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019). Interestingly, much of this was also endorsed by Widow, the only female protagonist within the series. This suggests that conforming to stereotypically masculine gender norms is essential to be a valued member of the Avengers team. However, Widow is also presented as somewhat of an outsider, which could relate to her being the only female team member. There are four subthemes within the stereotypical masculinity/lad culture main theme that will be explored below.

Table 6

Theme and Sub-themes Answering the Research Question 'How is Gender Portrayed in a Marvel animated television series?'

Theme	Subtheme	Unit of Data
Stereotypical masculinity/lad culture	Teamwork	Thor fights Attuma - knocks him with his hammer towards Hulk who punches him, sending him flying up into the sky (E16, unit 14)
	Battles and aggression	IM: 'Looks like we get to smash the cabal ahead of schedule' (E21, unit 32).
	Banter	HE: 'So, are you guys gonna hug now, or what?' (E13, unit 89)
	Odd one out (Widow)	F: 'This must be Widow's room. No way it's Hulk's. Looks like my mum cleaned it' (E3, unit 46).
	Strength and muscularity	[NA. This is visibly portrayed continuously, not within specific data units]
Being flawed/fallible	Respect is earned	IM: 'That an acceptable plan Mr Hawkeye?' HE: 'I'll let you know when it works' (E1, unit 96)
	Anger needs to be controlled	IM: 'Thanks to Mr Anger-Management, we have an unknown number of unstable particles loose in the tower' (E23, unit 47)
	Vulnerable without 'suits'	They are being dragged into the whirlpool. IM: 'Steve, I'm sorry. My armor, it's not enough' (E13, unit 81)

5.3.2.1 Subtheme: Teamwork

There were many incidences of teamwork within each episode of the *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) particularly during battles where the team almost always worked together to take down an antagonist or enemy. The teamwork presented in *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) is similar to the teamwork that is portrayed in sports dominated by men, one that "celebrates and

promotes toughness, competitiveness, violence, and confrontation" (Kessler et al., 1982, p. 5 as cited by Yang et al., 2020 p. 325).

For example, in the units below, several members of the team worked together to attack MODOK who had combined with the Adaptoid, creating a particularly dangerous villain:

> [W, F and Cap] All jump and land ready
>
> [W] Jumps and kicks MODOK
>
> [F] Lands on stomps on head
>
> [Cap] Hits him with shield
>
> [Cap] Hits him with shield again
>
> [W and F] Shoot him with their weapons
>
> [W] Tumbes/ forward rolls to get out the way of MODOK's blast (E8, units 84-90).

The combined aggression displayed by several members of the team throughout these units reflects that stereotypically masculine behaviour was fundamental to the teamwork that was presented in the series. The Avengers' unity was often celebrated for creating a formidable force for fighting evil. For example, a villain stated that:

> 'It is said that the together, the Avengers can face threats that no single hero can' (E13 unit 15),

which provides evidence for their power – a stereotypically masculine concept - being associated with their ability to work together.

In addition to the teamwork that was represented in battles, there was a strong sense of loyalty, trust, and protectiveness within the Avengers team. Interestingly, such traits were often mocked by villains who saw this as the Avengers'

weakness. However, their trust in each other and their willingness to fight to save each other was how the Avengers managed to overcome their enemies in almost every episode. Their loyalty to each other was strong, even though it was often paired with them mocking and challenging each other – providing a strong sense of 'lad culture'. For example, in episode one *The Avengers Protocol* the following interaction ensues between Hulk and Hawkeye, after Hawkeye has been mocking Hulk:

> Hulk picks up HE and Widow and puts them in a whole in the wall for safety
>
> Hulk: 'Next time you want to complain about my breath, remember I just saved your…' [then gets shot and goes flying]
>
> HE: [smugly]: 'Sorry, I didn't get that last part' (E1, unit 78).

The unit above highlights that being protective of teammates was often simultaneous with mocking and being mocked by those same teammates, creating a sense of 'lad culture'.

An additional trait that united the Avengers was their joint motivation to 'do the right thing' and protect civilians from danger. This was particularly evident in the episode in which a villain named Hyperion enters New York and attempts to kill another villain who had been causing chaos. The Avengers stop him:

> [Cap] 'Avengers don't take lives, we save them.' [shot pans out and they are all assembled behind Cap]' (E7, unit 65).
>
> Hyperion: 'But this scum adds nothing to the good of Earth. He's a parasite.'
>
> Cap: 'That may be true, but we're not judge and jury. We have laws. If we don't follow them, we're no better than criminals.'
>
> IM: 'Stand down, Hyperion. Now.'
>
> Hyperion: 'I understand.'

F: ‘Great. Cooler heads, right? Whew, for a second there I thought you'd gone... uh-oh.’ [Hyperion attacks] (E7, unit 66).

Therefore, abiding by strong principles and being the ‘good guys’ were key aspects in the portrayal of teamwork within the series. This was also shown in episode nineteen *The Ambassador* in which the Avengers protect Dr Doom, a villain who is at risk of being attacked by Red Skull, another villain. Despite the team’s rivalry with Dr Doom, whom they have fought in previous episodes of the series, they commit to protecting him. In several units the Avengers, and particularly Cap, are clearly motivated by adhering to principles and morals:

[Cap:] ‘Doom is protected under diplomatic immunity. Unless he does something wrong, we can’t touch him. Or we’re breaking the law’ (E19, unit 12)

[Cap:] ‘Free speech, Hawkeye. If we don’t respect his right to talk today, who knows tomorrow it could be you’ (E19, unit 16).

Therefore, the Avengers utilise teamwork to protect villains when this is required either by law, or to protect their fundamental ‘human’ rights, further highlighting the team’s strong moral compass overall. However, even though they are seen to be motivated to work together to protect civilians and ‘do the right thing’ and are therefore presented as the ‘good guys’, the Avengers are incredibly aggressive throughout the series and are often destructive of New York city which is frequently damaged in their confrontations with villains.

5.3.2.2 Subtheme: Battles and Aggression

A very significant proportion of the series is dedicated to the Avengers fighting villains/antagonists. In these battles the Avengers utilise weapons as well as direct aggression (such as a punch or a kick). Because every episode had a battle, and

every battle lasted several minutes (sometimes almost the entire episode) the amount of violence and aggression displayed was vast. Because of this, it was important to represent that 'battles and aggression' were incredibly prominent elements of the stereotypical masculinity/lad culture portrayed in the series. It should also be noted that when Widow was present in episodes, she would also partake in the battles and frequently displayed aggression.

Perhaps rather problematically, the battles were handled in a light-hearted manner, sometimes even being framed as fun by the Avengers. For example, when IM comes up with a strike and retreat plan as a part of taking down the Doomstroyer in episode 10, there were the following reactions:

[H:] 'Stupid plan. Sounds fun' [E10, unit 103]

And,

[HE:] 'I got to say, this is kind of fun. W: 'You're weird' (E10, unit 106).

In other episodes, battles were referred to as parties:

[IM:] 'Mind if I crash the party? I'm running a scan on your playmate Thor. One second and I should know exactly how we should deal with…' (E4, unit 7).

That aggression was so prominent in this series as a method of resolution and that it is often regarded as a fun pastime is perhaps troubling considering that the media is deemed to be appropriate for children as young as six.

Additionally, there were several instances where the Avengers would have physical altercations with each other, sometimes for fun, and sometimes out of anger. For example, in episode two – *The Avengers Protocol Part 2,* Iron Man tells the team that they are no longer needed after uniting them briefly. Before they leave the Avengers tower, Hulk and Thor decide to battle.

[Hulk and Thor] go into training room and reminisce about old battles.

They start to battle for 'old time's sake'.

[H:] 'You kept thinking you could knock me down'.

[T:] 'Did more than think, I think'.

[H]: 'Wouldn't want to mess up that pretty hairdo'.

[T] throws Hammer, Hulk dodges it, jumps on top of him

[T] Calls his hammer and it knocks Hulk. Jumps and tries to fly into Hulk and he pushes him back.

[H] Does get hit by hammer and smashes through a wall.

[T and H] smash some glass and bugs enter and get into Hulk's mouth.

They both smile (E2, units 68-76).

The reminiscent tone in which Hulk and Thor discussed their battles and decided to fight for 'old time's sake' implied they have previously enjoyed, and will miss, their opportunities to battle each other. Further, the fact that they both smile during their battle shows that fighting is a form of entertainment and perhaps, a form of male bonding.

Further, in episode three – *Ghost of Chance,* Thor and Hulk fight with each other over a cookie. However, their fight does not make logical sense as Widow has the cookie they both desire:

As Thor takes one [cookie] Widow calls dibs and shoots an arrow into it, gets it out of Thor's hand, and jumps over them to catch it

Hulk and Thor look at her as if they are going to go after the cookie. Hulk knocks Thor over in one small movement

Hulk tries to take Widow's cookie, but she dodges his grabs

Hulk gets angrier and roars

Thor says: 'The son of Odin shall have that cookie'

Thor runs and jumps on Hulk and wraps his arms around his neck [even though Widow still has the cookie]

While Hulk and Thor fight, Widow laughs, waves the cookie in front of them and eats it.

Thor is punching Hulk repeatedly [still unsure why because if they wanted the cookie, they should be attacking Widow]' (E3, units 13 to 20).

These units suggest that the male Avengers are more likely to fight each other than Widow, even if she is the cause of their anger and frustration. This perhaps suggests that aggression towards teammates was more of a male phenomenon.

Aggression is displayed incredibly frequently within *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019). Aggression is shown both towards villains and towards teammates and is a clear aspect of stereotypical masculinity that seemed to be part of the Avengers' group dynamic. However, perhaps the extent to which children are likely to perceive these battles as representative of real life will influence the extent to which they replicate this behaviour themselves, a concept that will be considered within the conclusions chapter of this thesis.

5.3.2.3 Subtheme: Banter

Consistent with the 'lad culture' of the Avengers, banter was the main source of communication between the teammates (Phipps & Young, 2015) as they almost constantly mocked each other. This seemed to be an important part of the bonding between the Avengers, as although the mocking was sometimes cruel, it was usually received with the good humour in which it had been given. In a typical example of an interaction below, Iron Man wants to update Captain America's armour, providing him with more technology to improve his battle skills:

> [IM]: ‘You’re right. What you need is a way to keep up with me in case there’s no sky-cycle around. Hence, I took your boring old butt-kickers and teched them up a bit.’
>
> [Cap]: ‘More tech does not always equal more better.’
>
> [F]: ‘I don’t think that’s proper grammar.’
>
> [Cap]: ‘I’m dumbing it down for the genius.’
>
> [IM]: ‘This will be more better then. And hot chocolate for you if you don’t break anything.’
>
> [IM] turns on the boots so Cap starts flying in the air.
>
> [IM] laughs as Cap is being flung around and hitting things. F: ‘Shouldn’t you, like, shut It down?
>
> IM: [laughs] ‘In a second. This, my friend is what technology was made for’. The flying boots come off and start flying towards IM and F. One hits each of them. Cap: ‘Yeah, and sometimes, it just kicks you in the butt’ (E17, units 4-14).

Throughout these units, there is constant tone of Cap and Iron Man mocking each other, including being entertained by physically hurting one another. This was also prevalent in short quips that were utilised between the Avengers almost constantly.

Additionally, genuine sincerity was rare between Avengers, and it was often followed by mocking, or aggression, as if to balance the less stereotypically masculine form of communication. For example, in episode eighteen *Mojoworld*, Hawkeye accidently breaks one of Hulk’s much-loved glass sculptures. Throughout the episode Hawkeye refuses to apologise in a genuine way. They are then forced to work together and at the end of the episode, they have the following interaction:

[HE]: ‘Look Hulk. Mojo said a lot of dumb stuff but one thing made sense. You and me make mountains out of molehills, and you know, [turns away from him at this point] the whole thing with the crystal in your room, and all that… I’m sorry’

[Hulk]: ‘Already apologised’ [not even looking at him]

[HE]: I know… just wanted it to be sincere’ [Looking at him]

[This interaction is shot from behind so you can see the side of HE and only the back of Hulk]. Hulk: ‘We’re good’ [Elbows him hard so he goes flying]

HE returns to room to find loads of boxes of pickles and thinks it’s a nice thing Hulk has done for him. Starts opening boxes and they’re all empty. Hulk has left a note that reads ‘I.O.U. 15 boxes of pickles. Got hungry’ and HE is angry and screams: ‘HULK!’ (E18, units 126 – 128)

This interaction is an example of a time where a sincere moment of two Avengers resolving an issue becomes overshadowed by their utilisation of banter and mocking of each other. Firstly, Hulk elbows Hawkeye directly after he has made his sincere apology, something that is almost completely unnecessary in the interaction, other than to insert a sense of the ‘lad culture’ that is evidently part of being an Avenger. This is then further exaggerated by Hulk playing a prank on Hawkeye directly after the interaction which creates a sense of ‘everything being back to normal’ – normal being the sense of unity that comes from the team’s constant banter.

Further, when there was a sincere moment between Iron Man and Cap in episode twenty-five, Hawkeye makes the comment:

‘Uh, hey, sorry to break up this bromance but anyone got an idea where Skull went?’ (E25, unit 139).

This provides further evidence that banter is the default means of communication in the team and ironically, anything else becomes a source of further mocking.

5.3.2.4 Subtheme: Odd One Out (Widow)

The subtheme ‘odd one out (Widow)’ speaks to the notion that although Widow was able to be a part of the stereotypical masculinity and ‘lad culture’, she was also portrayed as somewhat different to the male Avengers.

The most obvious way in which Widow was presented as ‘different’ was that she was absent for a total of nine episodes out of the twenty-six within the series. Although other characters were occasionally missing, Widow was the only character who was absent for numerous episodes. Importantly, when she was absent, it was not mentioned by other characters suggesting that rather than being a vital part of the team, she was a disposable addition to it. She was also the only character who had additional employment (she is a spy for the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division, referred to as S.H.I.E.L.D), and as a result her loyalty to the team was occasionally questioned, suggesting that she was less trustworthy than the other Avengers.

Many of the units drawn upon in this section were from episode eight – *Molecule Kid* as this is one of the rare episodes in which Widow is at the forefront, meaning this episode was key for shedding light on the presentation of the only female Avenger. In episode eight Widow attempts (unsuccessfully) to lead herself and Hawkeye through a mission assigned by S.H.I.E.L.D. whilst keeping it hidden from the rest of the Avengers. In this episode there are several instances of covert and overt sexism. For example, Hawkeye overtly implies that being a leader is masculine by referring to Widow as sir:

‘Permission to fire the champion shot you should’ve let me fire back in the alley, sir!’ (E8, unit 34).

Just a few second later, HE says:

‘Where did you learn to drive, huh, video games?’ (E8, unit 38),

drawing upon a well-known sexist stereotype that women are inadequate drivers. Further, the following interaction is another way in which Widow’s gender is mocked:

[They end up in honey]

W: ‘Honey?

HE: ‘Yes, dear?’

W: ‘No, we're stuck in honey.’

HE: ‘You said the wand doesn't do organics. So this isn't honey, honey. Hey great mission plan so far by the way. Perfection. Really.’ (E8, unit 62)

Hawkeye repeatedly calls Widow honey, a remark/nickname that is often adopted by romantic partners. Therefore, heteronormative jokes are made between men and women, and these were less likely to be utilised in an interaction between two male Avengers.

Additionally, Widow is presumed to have maternal skills and instincts, although she is quick to threateningly challenge outdated sexism:

HE: 'Okay. What we have here is more scared kid than crazed super-villain. Can you just 'mommy-talk' him before he destroys the city]’ (E8, unit 58)

W: 'Mommy-talk? You did not just say that with me positioned to kick you in many painful places’ [she's still hanging from his waist] (E8, unit 59).

Further, Widow was the only character to utilise language that could relate to romantic pursuits. For example, just before IM explains that he wants the Avengers to disassemble in episode two, she says:

‘I know that look, it comes just before 'it's not you it's me' (E2, unit 60).

This phrase is widely known to be utilised within the breakdown of relationships and symbolises romantic rejection. Similarly, in episode seven, herself and Hawkeye discuss that Hyperion had managed to make them believe he would be a good addition to their team before he revealed himself as a villain. She utilises language that relates to romantic endeavours:

‘We were all taken in. Power can be... seductive.’ (E7, unit 104).

The word ‘seductive’, meaning tempting or attractive, is commonly attributed to the attractiveness of a romantic partner.

Further, Widow is also the only Avenger to have sexual comments made to them. In episode 12, Impossible Man, a character from another planet, utilises a sexually suggestive tone when speaking to Widow:

> Imp says: ‘I may have just found my leading lady [and growls in a sexually suggestive tone]’
>
> [Widow] squeezes him harder ‘I’m not playing. What are you doing?’ (E12, units 76 and 77)

Although the romantic language she utilised was infrequent, as was her being spoken to a sexually suggestive tone, such units seem to situate Widow as a more sexualised character than her male counterparts. This is part of the underlying sexist tones that seem to be present within the series. Overall, there were numerous ways in which Widow was presented to be both a part of the Avengers ‘lad culture’, but also as the odd one out.

5.3.2.5 Subtheme: Strength and Muscularity

Strength and muscularity were represented by the physical representations of the male Avengers but not Widow, suggesting it was a component of masculinity.

Thor, Hawkeye, Captain America and Falcon all wear skin-tight superhero suits through which their muscle definition, particularly of their chest, arms, and shoulders, are clearly visible. Hulk is the largest Avenger in size and muscle mass, and this is physically highlighted because his ‘suit’ consists of only a pair of ripped trousers. This makes the muscle mass, particularly of his upper body, constantly visible to the audience. In contrast, Iron Man is the most physically concealed of all the Avengers, as his suit is a hard red shell. However, the suit seems to be designed in the shape of a muscular body, with particularly defined shoulders, arms, and chest, making his physicality like that of the other male Avengers. When he is seen outside of his suit, his muscularity also matches that of the other male Avengers. The physical representation of the male Avengers matched their physical performance as they displayed incredible strength throughout the series. This could suggest that the skin-tight suits the male Avengers wore, which are revealing of their bodies, is almost justified because their bodies are seen as active (Strong, 2003). Beyond their muscularity, the male Avengers also have other physical attributes that are aligned with masculine appearances. The male Avengers all have masculine facial bone structures such as chiselled jawlines and prominent cheekbones. Additionally, Iron Man has facial hair, and Thor wears a metal helmet, which could be utilised to counterbalance his more feminine shoulder-length hair.

Although Widow also wears a skin-tight suit, much like those of Thor, Hawkeye, Cap and Falcon, beyond this, her physical representation is noticeably different from the male Avengers. She has no muscle definition whatsoever, with her shoulder width and biceps being noticeably smaller and less defined than those of the male Avengers. Because she has no visible muscle mass, she is much more petite and, in some scenes, she appears to be around half the width of her male

counterparts which has implications for power dynamics that are associated with muscular bodies over slimmer ones. Her slim body could reflect her athleticism – she is often running and jumping throughout the series which would support this notion. Alternatively, or perhaps additionally, it could be a sign that Widow, as the only female protagonists in *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) is more sexualised than the male Avengers. In support of the latter, it is important to acknowledge she has large breasts which are exaggerated by her small waist. Perhaps her slimmer more sexualised frame is more representative of a stereotypically feminine body that is more passive despite her physical performance largely being the opposite, something that is discussed in relation to female body builders who will often pose differently to their male counterparts in competitions (Strong, 2003). The shape of Widow's breasts are clearly defined in almost every scene in which she appears (see the screen at 12:22 in episode one). She is particularly sexualised in a scene in episode eight where she is shown as physically on top of Hawkeye and her cleavage is clearly visible. This is described in unit eight of this episode:

> 'Still on top of him and sexualised, pinning him down. Her cleavage is showing, and her hair is over one eye' (E8, unit 8).

Overall, this subtheme indicates that physical representations of muscularity are exclusive to male Avengers, while Widow's appearance is less muscular and more sexualised, suggesting that muscularity is a masculine trait in the series.

5.3.3 Main theme: Being Flawed and Fallible

The second main theme represents that although the Avengers are an incredibly powerful team and are successful in overthrowing each of the villains they encounter in the series, they must work hard to do so, with it sometimes seeming as

though they are close to being defeated (and inevitably, this near defeat motif adds to be drama and appeal of these narratives). This is seen in the battles where they are very often victims of punches, blasts, and other forms of attack from the villains. Additionally, they are seen to have flaws in their characters or personalities. This means that the masculinity presented by the male protagonists throughout the series is seen to have some considerable drawbacks. The concept of 'being flawed/fallible' will be explored within each of its subthemes: 'respect is earned', 'vulnerable without suits' and 'anger needs to be controlled'. These subthemes can be related to the concept of 'manhood' needing to be proven (Vandello & Bosson, 2012) as well as some of the "undesirable traits" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 840) associated with hegemonic masculinity discussed in chapter two of the thesis.

5.3.3.1 Subtheme: Respect is Earned

The concept of 'respect is earned' was most frequently portrayed by Falcon. As the newest and youngest Avenger, he was frequently referred to as the 'rookie' and 'little bird' by both his teammates and the villains. These nicknames, which were based on both his lack of experience and his younger age, indicated that he needed to prove his capabilities and perhaps, his masculinity, to the team as well as to the wider public within the series.

At the start of episode three, Falcon is being mocked by Iron Man for being nervous about his first day as an Avenger and moving into the Avengers tower. Iron Man reveals his room to him, which is full of equipment and hardly usable. However, as the episode unfolds, Falcon then manages to save the Avengers, almost singlehandedly. At the end of the episode IM says:

'I'll have the stuff moved out' [of your room]

F: ‘After today, you’re building me a bigger room. Off the helipad. You can afford it’ (E3, unit 131),

implying that he has managed to earn the respect of the leader.

In another episode, Falcon was not recognised as an Avenger suggesting that Avengers also needed to earn the respect of civilians:

A woman says, ‘Those avengers are amazing’ to Falcon and he says ‘I’m one of them.’ [None of the civilians know him] (E12, unit 13).

This is further supported when a civilian seems to be mocking Falcon’s lack of natural strength:

[He tries to move/drag Hulk and civilians watch on and laugh and film on their phones to humiliate him. He then thinks and uses his wings to lift and throw Hulk into water] (E4 unit 81).

Further, the ‘respect is earned’ subtheme is also presented by Iron Man. He is the leader of the Avengers but is frequently challenged by his teammates. They sometimes disagree with him or believe that his plans for the team are inadequate. If/when his plan is executed successfully, he is treated with more respect. For example, in Episode 21- *The Numbers*, the following interactions happen during a group training session which Iron Man is leading.

F: ‘Is there a point to this?’

Cap ‘I’m with Falcon. This isn’t the best team building exercise you’ve ever come up with’

Hulk [Has a ball in his hand and pops it] ‘What he said’

IM: [Describes that he has come up with a new system and algorithms since the Cabal hacked him]. ‘The Stark probability engine. It predicts a sure path to victory in any combat situation.’

> Cap: ‘There are no sure things in combat. You’re forgetting the human factor’
>
> IM: ‘The human factor is in there, it’s just insignificant. Statistically speaking’
>
> Cap: ‘Insignificant? [cracks muscles] Do it again. We’ve got a little surprise of our own’ (E21, units 13 to 19).

The units above provide an example of how Iron Man must continue to earn the respect of his teammates. Several of them firstly express doubts over the efficiency of the training exercise he is leading, and Cap then questions the logic of his invention. This suggests that respect is not gained easily within the Avengers team.

5.3.3.2 Subtheme: Vulnerable Without Suits

The first episode of *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) begins with Iron Man reuniting the team because his suit has become damaged and he needs the help of the Avengers to rescue Cap, who was captured by Red Skull. The concept that Iron Man is vulnerable underneath his armour could represent the notion of males feeling as though they need to keep their vulnerabilities hidden. Red Skull explicitly states the source of Iron Man’s power is his suit:

> ‘You’re just a fool in a machine, Stark! Without your technology you have nothing.’ [There are cracks in his suit and there are sparks coming from it, as if to reassert Red Skull’s point. RS goes on]: ‘No instinct for battle, no fire to lead. You hide behind armor so you don’t have to make sacrifices for victory!’ [Jarvis says, ‘power is at 20% sir, and you have a new problem teleporting in]’ (it’s MODOK). (E1, unit 20).

Red Skull is clearly attempting to belittle Iron Man in the unit above, and undermine his skill and power – essentially, emasculating him. This is also evident in episode 13:

MODOK says: ‘Stark is powerless without his armor’ (E13, unit 56).

Throughout that episode, Cap and Iron Man enter the cabal’s ship by disguising themselves as villains, meaning that neither of them have their usual suits or the associated weapons. Although this does not seem to trouble Cap, Iron Man repeatedly asserts that they need their armour back. Iron Man goes on to reveal that he feels insecure and vulnerable without the protection of his suit:

> Cap: ‘Thanks, but…’ IM: ‘But with my armor gone, all I do is improvise. Steve, even without your shield, you’re still Captain America. Without my armor, I’m just…’ (E13, unit 58).

Similarly, in episode 17, Cap has challenged Iron Man and the team (other than Hulk and Thor who stay in Avengers tower, and Widow, who is absent which again, seems to go unnoticed) to survive without any technology in a different environment. Iron Man takes the team to Savage Land, a location infested with dinosaurs. He is repeatedly unable to do tasks such as climb a tree or meaningfully help when a dinosaur attacks. Later in the episode he makes a rock suit to wear as he fights against the villain (for several minutes) who had captured his other teammates, suggesting that he is too weak to do so without something to hide behind or protect himself. He describes his new suit:

> [His suit blocks the zaps of the raptor’s weapons]
>
> IM: ‘That’s high-density crystalline obsidian. Only needs to be a centimetre thick to repel light and raptor claws. Vines of the Kantuna tree can be vulcanized and woven to match the tensile strength of steel. While also allowing for elasticity. That means I can jump, punch and move, while covered in rock.’ (E17, unit 99).

However, importantly, when Iron Man's rock suit is ultimately destroyed by the villain, he must punch him with his bare fist for them to escape. This suggests that he feels more vulnerable without his suit than he truly is, providing more evidence for the suit being a symbol of masculinity for Iron Man to hide his insecurities behind.

5.3.3.3 Subtheme: Anger Needs to be Controlled

The 'anger needs to be controlled' subtheme particularly related to Hulk. Hulk is the focus of three episodes in the series and in two of these his anger is portrayed as a problem. This is also a recurring theme across many other episodes of the series.

The following interactions happen at the start of episode nine, where the Avengers are responding to a monster attack:

[H]: 'Less talking, more smashing' [has damaged the arms of the chair by gripping them]

[F]: 'Speaking of rampaging monsters…'

[HE]: 'Don't sweat it Falcon. He's just grumpy because he missed breakfast'

[H]: 'Didn't miss, fridge was empty. Let me at him. If I can't eat, I gotta smash'

[Cap]: 'Let him out before he breaks down the door again.'

[Hulk roars and kicks down the door. He jumps out and lands on a gigantic beast, clearly having no fear of it. He punches beast].

[IM and Thor jump out of plane to follow Hulk.] IM: 'Don't you just love it when the Hulk goes all rage monster? Like we need another one to deal with.'

T: [Laughs] 'Hopefully, his rage will serve us well in battle this time' IM: 'Famous last words' (E9, units 4-13)

Throughout these units, it is clear that Hulk's anger has been continuously problematic to the team. He is described to have broken down doors in the past, and

then proceeds to do so a few seconds later in a mindless display of anger and aggression. Both Iron Man and Cap's comments imply that his anger is detrimental, rather than of use. It is also notable that this rage seems to come from him being unable to eat breakfast, suggesting that Hulk has animal like instincts – to eat and to destroy.

Later in the episode, Hulk continuously fights with the villain, even after being told not to, compromising the team's entire mission as a result:

> IM: 'Put a leash on him. This isn't going to work out if we have to get Hulk under control too.' Cap to Thor: 'They're compromising the energy barrier. Get in there and help Hulk end this' (E9, unit 117)
>
> IM to Hulk: 'Will you get a grip! Your wrestling match with Attuma isn't helping anyone' (E9, unit 121).

However, Hulk's strength and control of his rage ultimately enables the Avengers to overcome the villain. After Hulk sees Iron Man and Thor being attacked by Attuma, the following happens:

> [Hulk] gets intense rage at seeing them [IM and T] getting attacked [by Attuma, underwater]. He roars
>
> Attuma takes off IM's mask – he is going to drown.
>
> [Hulk] gets insanely angry, his eyes turn yellow and red, and he roars. This gives him extra strength to break off some debris [from the huge bolder he is holding above his head] and throw it at Attuma.
>
> [Hulk] is also able to lift up the city higher and throw IM and Thor out of the ocean.
>
> [IM and T] land on the surface. Thor asks if IM is okay. IM says, 'forget about me, we got to get back down there'.

Attuma then comes flying. IM: ‘Never mind’

[Hulk] Comes flying towards Attuma, still ‘extra green’ and in extra rage mode. Roars and hits him into the ground.

[HE]: ‘Now we’ve won’

[Hulk] Turns around, still in extra rage mode. Thor: ‘At ease friend. You fought well today. Hulk. We are not your enemies.’

IM: ‘Everyone relax. He’s alright. Right, Hulk? You still with us big guy? How’s your rage?’

[H]: ‘Under control’ and returns to normal

[Cap]: ‘Of course it is’

IM: ‘Hulk got his rage under control and saved the entire city. That’s why he’s Avenger of the month’ (E9, units 149 to 161)

Therefore, within one episode Hulk’s anger has gone from being the team’s main issue to being the source of the resolution *only when it is controlled and channelled appropriately.*

Further, Episode eleven is based on the narrative that S.H.I.E.L.D. recognises Hulk would be dangerous if he were to lose control of his anger. As a result, Widow is tasked with the mission to find a contingency plan if this were to ever happen. While Widow discusses this with her S.H.I.E.L.D boss, Nick Fury, the following comments are made:

[Widow] throws grenades behind her to the A.I.M people while running and admitting that Hulk losing control would be ‘very very bad.’ (E11, unit 21)

[W]: ‘I’ll get you a contingency plan.’ (E11, unit 22)

[W]: ‘If the Hulk did ever lose control, we’d all wind up smashed.’ (E11, unit 24).

Then, throughout the episode, the other Avengers are infected by a virus that means they become infected by gamma-radiation meaning they become ‘Hulk-like’. Having many Hulks together quickly leads to disaster. Hulk reluctantly reveals that he has access to a device that can reverse the gamma-radiation within the Avengers but could kill him if it was utilised against him. Hulk and Widow then work together to capture the Hulk-like Avengers, reversing the effects of the gamma-radiation. When they become themselves again, the Avengers are astounded by how the Hulk can control his anger, after experiencing it for themselves. This suggests that the Hulk’s ability to control his anger is (momentarily at least) admired by the Avengers.

Although the Hulk’s anger is perhaps the most significant in the series, other characters also display mindless acts of anger. For example, in episode four:

> They see that the weapon is in the Latvarian embassy and Thor shouts and throws his hammer straight into the screen
>
> ‘I’m gonna bill you for that’ (E4, units 29 and 30).

Therefore, anger is expressed by the Avengers throughout the series and is seen as ‘natural’ but also an inconvenience for the team when it leads to mindless destruction, implying that it needs to be controlled. This subtheme also represents that anger is one of the only emotions available for male Avengers, and therefore seems to be a part of masculinity. However, it is controlled anger that is required of the male Avengers, and left uncontrolled, anger is detrimental to their missions, the city in which they work, and the team’s moral compass which suggests that male protagonists must strike a difficult balance between utilising anger to help the team, rather than hinder it.

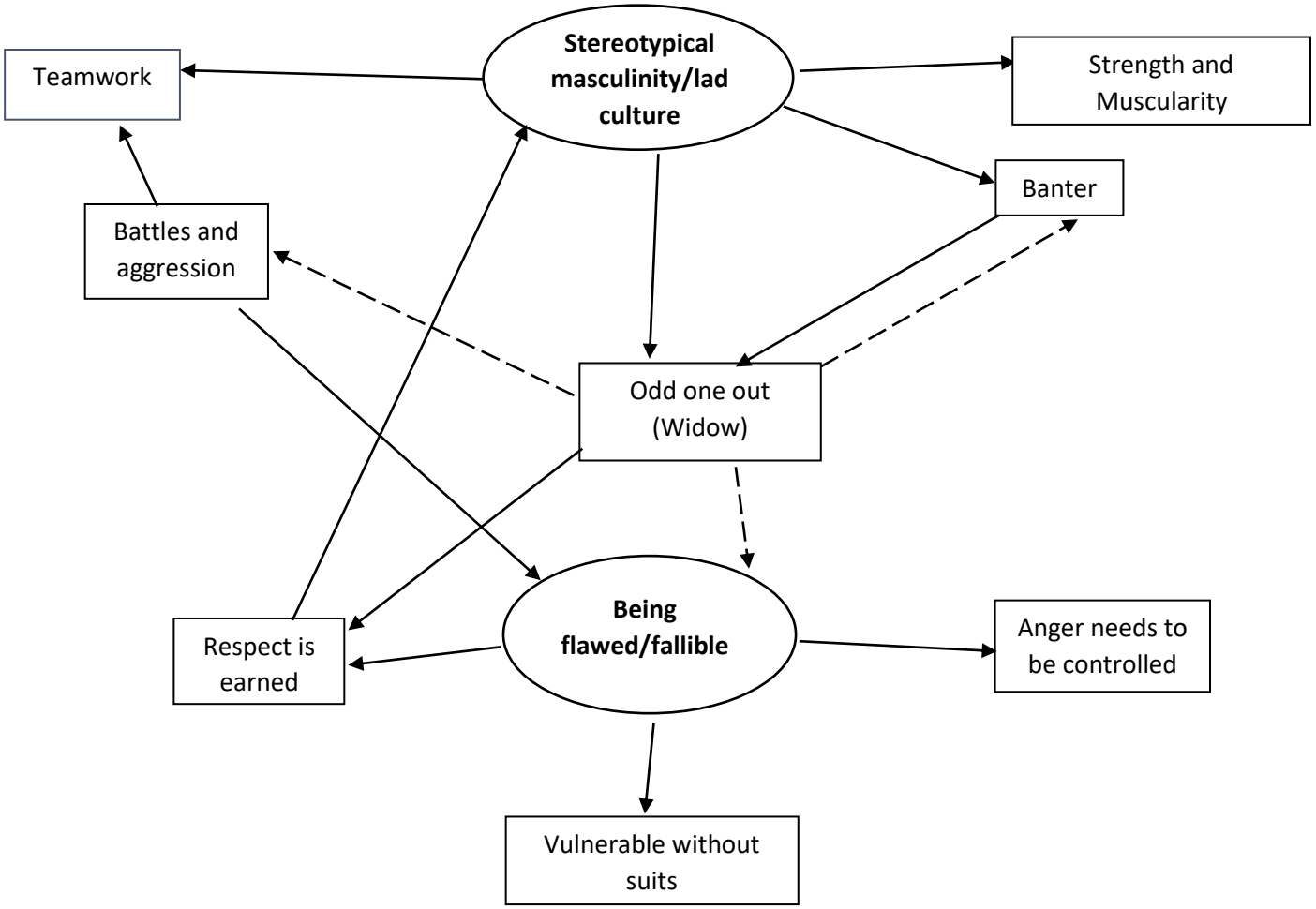

Figure 1

Thematic Map: How is gender portrayed in a Marvel animated television series?

Figure 1 illustrates the final thematic map that answers the research question, how is gender portrayed in a Marvel animated television series? It intends to show the connections between each of the themes (in ellipses) and subthemes (in boxes). The solid arrows indicate a causal relationship whereas the dotted arrows represent conflicts.

5.3.4 Star Wars Rebels Results

The characters analysed from *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) were the crew members of the ship, the *Ghost.* Kanan (K), Ezra (E) and Zeb (Z) were male protagonists and crew members, and Hera (H) and Sabine (S) were female protagonists and crew members. Although Chopper was a crew member and was referred to with male pronouns, he was not analysed because he was a droid with no human features and was unable to speak. Hera (a Twi'Lek) and Zeb (a Lassat) are also non-human crewmembers but are considered humanoid and have human features including the ability to speak. Three themes were established to answer the research question: How is gender portrayed in a *Star Wars* animated television series? The themes are 'multifaceted masculinities', 'strong females' and 'gender co-operation'.

3.3.5 Main Theme: Multifaceted Masculinities

The main theme multifaceted masculinities was established based on how the male protagonists in the series (namely, Kanan, Ezra and Zeb) were portrayed, with each subtheme capturing a distinct aspect of the masculinity reflected in the series. While Kanan was portrayed predominantly as a 'leader and mentor', Ezra was portrayed as a 'mentee'. 'Emotional vulnerability' had a part in both Ezra's and Kanan's roles whereas Zeb's masculinity was 'toxic/stereotypical'. Although Ezra did display some stereotyped and toxic masculinity traits at points, it was not fundamental to his character.

2.3.5.1 Subtheme: Toxic/stereotypical

Toxic/stereotypical masculinity was represented most clearly and consistently by Zeb's character. Zeb was frequently aggressive – and although this was true of almost all of the protagonists analysed, Zeb seemed to enjoy being aggressive more than his counterparts. He was also unwilling to express emotions outside of anger. For example, in episode two – *Spark of Rebellion Part 2*, Ezra was captured by the enemy and Zeb leaves him on their ship:

> [Zeb] Looks sad/hopeless as he returns to the ship without Ezra. Slumps on to the floor (E2, unit 25).

However, when he had to tell the rest of his crew what happened, he seemed to be unwilling to express the remorse that he displayed when he was alone moments earlier. He had an angry and defensive tone and implied that Ezra had no importance to him or the crew:

> [Zeb]: 'I didn't do anything to him. But that ISB agent grabbed him… The kid got grabbed, okay?'
>
> [Hera]: 'Garazeb Orrelios!'
>
> [Zeb]: 'Oh, come on. We we're dumping him after the mission anyway! This saves us fuel. They'll go easy on him. He's just a kid' (E2, unit 34).

Then, later in the episode when the crew were discussing an attempt to rescue Ezra, Zeb angrily shouted

> 'No! No, no! No way! You cannot be serious… Come on Hera! We just met this kid! We're not going back for him!' (E2, unit 41)

This was contrasted against the muted and regretful tone of Sabine (a female crew member), who although agreed with Zeb that it would not be possible to save Ezra, was clearly sombre and sad, rather than rageful and angry.

Table 7

The Themes and Subthemes Established to Answer the Research Question: How is Gender Portrayed in Star Wars Rebels, series one?

Theme	Sub-Theme	Unit of Data
Multifaceted masculinities	Toxic/stereotypical	H: 'Zeb. The pig! Scare it' Z: 'What? How?' H: Just be *you*.' (E11, unit 53)
	Mentor/leader	K: 'We'll draw them away! Get spectre-2 and Trayvis to the hatch' (E12, unit 78)
	Mentee	K: 'Stunts like that put us all in jeopardy. That is exactly why you need Master Luminara to teach you discipline' (E5, unit 60)
	Emotional vulnerability	K: 'Your emotions clouded the vision. It takes…' (E12, unit 108)
Strong female figures	Leader/mother figure	H: 'Positions, everyone. We're going in' (E14, unit 86)
	Action girl	H: 'Sabine, man the nose gun!' (E2, unit 21)
Gender(ed) co-operation	Hierarchies	H: 'So, how's the Jedi training going with Kanan?' E: 'Jedi training? Never heard of it.' H: 'We'll see about that' (E3, unit 51)
	Heterosexual tones	H: 'You're welcome, dear' [they hug]' (E15, unit 113).

Additionally, in episode three – *Driods in Distress,* Hera must intervene in an altercation between Zeb and Ezra. Zeb had forcibly removed Ezra from their shared bedroom and Hera:

> Intervenes in the argument. Hera: 'But maybe you could cut Zeb a little slack today' [and explains that Zeb's people were killed by the T-7 Disruptors, like the ones they have onboard] (E3, unit 48).

The unit above provides evidence that Zeb is unwilling to express his emotions verbally. This then leads to a female crew member becoming responsible for interpreting and communicating his angry and aggressive behaviour as a sign of potential upset.

Similarly, in episode eight - *Empire Day,* Ezra also shows signs of being unwilling to express his emotions. In the episode, the crew plan and execute an attack on the Empire on a day that is dedicated to celebrating its takeover of the galaxy. In the episode it is clear that Ezra is upset but he refuses to discuss it. For example, when he takes the crew to his family home that has since been abandoned (and it is unclear as to whether Ezra's parents are alive), the following interaction ensues:

[Ezra] Uses the swipe card, which is the object he got out of the box and held looking sad earlier in the episode.

[K]: 'You were coming here today. This was your home, wasn't it? Where you grew up?'

[E]: 'I grew up on the streets, alone.' (E8, units 39 and 40).

The units above provide evidence for Ezra being emotionally guarded and unwilling to be truthful about a potentially traumatic situation with his crewmates. Again, later in the episode Kanan attempts to approach Ezra:

[K] 'Ezra, you okay?'

[E]: I'm fine'

[K]: 'I told you, sometimes you have to let your guard down'

[E]: 'I said I'm fine' (E8, units 48-51)

The units above are another example of a male protagonist refusing to be emotionally open, suggesting this is a masculine trait in the series. However, the significance of Kanan being the person to encourage emotional vulnerability is important and will be discussed in the emotional vulnerability subtheme.

Further behaviour that led to the definition of the toxic/stereotypical subtheme were that Zeb frequently mocked other teammates often (particularly Ezra), seemed

to be feared, and was referred to as intimidating. Therefore, Zeb seemed to represent stereotypical and toxic masculinity most strongly, although this was also seen in Ezra's character. This is particularly significant because Zeb is the only male non-human protagonist crewmember, therefore Zeb did not necessarily need to be assigned a gender by the *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) producers, and much less, adhere to restrictive gender norms.

5.3.5.2 Subtheme: Mentor/Leader

Kanan, an adult male character, is consistently portrayed as Ezra's Jedi master and as a result, is shown in many scenes across the series to be training Ezra. For example, episode five *The Rise of the Old Master*, episode eight *Empire Day,* and episode twelve *Vision of Hope*, all opened with Kanan advising and testing Ezra by giving him a task to hone his natural utilisation of the Force. Episode five opened with Kanan telling Ezra to

> 'Focus. Focus on letting go' (E5, unit 2),

And when Ezra seems to be not taking the assignment seriously, Kanan says

> 'Enough jokes, focus' (E5, unit 4).

Again, in episode twelve Kanan also gives Ezra practical advice:

> 'You've got the blocking for the most part but you shouldn't just randomly deflect the energy any which way' (E12, unit 3).

In these short units, it is clear that Kanan is in a position of power over Ezra (which also related to the hierarchy subtheme) and is attempting to pass on his Jedi knowledge to his younger crew member. In order to do this, he is often assertive towards Ezra, and gives him orders regularly. This is also shown in episode ten – *Path of the Jedi* when Ezra has missed training:

> [E] Is out of breath

[E]: ‘Hey Kanan. Sorry I’m late. I was with Sabine. So, are you gonna invite me in?’

[K]: ‘You didn’t knock, so what makes you think you need an invite?’

[E]: ‘I’m sorry.’

[K]: ‘Then you should knock first.’

[E]: ‘Not for that. For missing training.’

[K]: [angrily] ‘It’s all the same thing. The fact that you don’t see it [sighs]. Ezra when we were on that asteroid you made a dangerous connection through the Force. Now I have to know if you are ready.’

[E]: ‘I am ready. Wait, ready for what?’

[K]: ‘For a test, a real challenge, one that could determine if you’re meant to be a Jedi or not’ (E10, unit 3).

Again, Kanan is clearly in a mentoring role where he is attempting to teach Ezra the skills he needs and test him with challenges.

Kanan also had a role as leader of the crew. He would often direct the crew when they were completing missions on foot (rather than on the ship, where Hera, a female character and pilot, was more in control). In episode thirteen *Call to Action* the crew embark on a particularly dangerous mission where they plan to take control of an Imperial communications tower and send a message of hope to inspire other rebels. The Imperials seem to discover the crew are attacking and fly into their remit much quicker than the crew expected meaning they are vulnerable to attack. In this situation, it is Kanan that decided he must change the crew’s plan and gives orders to them in the following consecutive units:

[K]: ‘Sabine, we got targets incoming, let’s move’

[S]: ‘You said I get three minutes’

[K]: ‘Well, now you get one, so hurry up!’

[K]: [to Ezra] ‘Go get Zeb’ [pushes him]

[E]: ‘I’m staying right here’

[K]: ‘No, [puts his hands on his shoulders] you’re getting Zeb then coming back here. Now go!’

[K]: Tells Hera they’re changing their pickup

[H]: ‘Not a good idea, Spectre-1’

[K]: ‘Plans changing. Just get your eyes on the sky. We’ll meet you up there’

[H]: ‘Copy that’ (E13, units 60 to 68)

In the units above, although all of the crew members initially resit Kanan’s orders, they all do as they are told – suggesting they recognise and trust Kanan as their leader in high intensity and action-based settings. Therefore, both of Kanans’ roles in the crew, as a mentor and a leader, are positions in which he has power as a knowledgeable and experienced male, suggesting this is a fundamental part of his character and masculinity. Interestingly though, his role as the leader of the crew also means that he is vulnerable. Later, in the same episode Kanan is battling with the Inquisitor (a villain within the series) and has no way of escaping:

[Kanan] Pinned against the wall – in the air

[K]: ‘Spectre-2, get out of here’

[H]: ‘Not an option, Kanan.

[K]: ‘No time! Go!’

[E]: ‘We can’t!’

[K]: Hera!

[Hera looks sad and presses a button] (E13, unit 93).

Kanan has demanded that Hera leave him to keep the crew safe, sacrificing his own life. In the following episode, he is shown to be captured and tortured by Imperials, and thus, vulnerable rather than powerful (as he is within the crew). However, because Kanan has demanded to be left in one last assertion towards Hera, his masculinity could be perceived to remain intact as he is in control and decisive, as well as sacrificial, brave, and protective of the rest of his crew.

5.3.5.3 Subtheme: Mentee

Ezra is the focus of much of series one of the *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) due to his growing skills and utilisation of the Force. He has a natural skill in being able to harness the Force which is portrayed from the outset of the series. However, his skills need to be refined for their true power to be realised, and his vulnerability to the dark side of the Force to be limited. He is presented as continuously learning various skills, particularly from Kanan. Because of this, Ezra's role within the crew and team is very much as a mentee.

When Ezra and Kanan have to face a battle with the Inquisitor, Ezra has to protect Kanan who is injured:

[E]: 'Shouts: 'Get back!

[I]: 'Ah, yes, good. Go on. Unleash your anger [laughs] I will teach you what your master could not'.

[E]: 'You don't have anything to teach me.'

[I]: 'The darkness is too strong for you, orphan. It is swallowing you up, even now.'

[E]: 'No!'

[I]: 'Your Master will die.'

[E]: 'No!'

[I]: ‘Your friends will die. And everything you’ve hoped for will be lost. This is the way the story ends.’

[E]: [hears the Force] ‘No!’ [harbours the Force and a huge beast rises up from behind E and the villains back away. He gestures and the beast goes after the villains but he falls unconscious] (E9, unit 55)

In the unit above Ezra is deemed to be vulnerable because of his lack of complete training. However, Ezra’s eventual utilisation of the Force appears to have partially protected him. When Ezra wakes up after falling unconscious, he has the following interaction with Kanan:

[E]: ‘But something doesn’t feel right.’

[K]: ‘If your will isn’t strong enough when you open yourself to the Force, you become vulnerable to the dark side.’

[E]: ‘Well, I was trying to protect you.’

[K]: ‘I know. But your anger and fear caused that giant creature to attack.’

[E]: ‘I don’t remember it.’

[K]: ‘That’s for the best. your powers are growing so quickly so you weren’t prepared. I didn’t teach you what you needed to know. I’m sorry.’ (E9, unit 61).

It becomes clear that Ezra still has much to learn in order to utilise the Force successfully, meaning his role as a mentee remains.

In non-battle situations Ezra is also seen to create problems for the crew as he needs to learn key skills. He has gone against orders before the following interaction with Kanan:

[K]: ‘Stunts like that put us all in jeopardy. That is exactly why you need Master Luminara to teach you discipline’

[E]: ‘I was just trying to follow your example’

[K]: ‘Try following the plan instead’ (E5, units 60 to 62)

Overall, although Ezra has a natural ability to access and utilise the Force which is celebrated in much of the series, he is represented as a mentee – a young male in training. It is perhaps no accident that the oldest male is the person who is responsible for Ezra’s training, suggesting that the skills of the Force are both masculine and age related, arguably representing the notion of ‘manhood’ being earned (Vandello & Bosson, 2012).

5.3.5.4 Subtheme: Emotional Vulnerability

A concept that further linked Ezra and Kanan’s masculinity (and was not displayed by Zeb) was emotional vulnerability. Although Kanan is in control of Ezra’s training, he frequently expresses self-doubt. Therefore, Kanan expressed vulnerability in several episodes. For example, in episode ten – *Path of the Jedi*, Kanan sets Ezra a challenge. However, it transpires that he doubts his own abilities as a mentor. Hera and Kanan have the following interaction:

[K]: ‘I might regret this.’

[H]: ‘You have to do this, Kanan. After what happened on the asteroid, you have to help him.’

[K]: ‘I hope I can.’

[H]: ‘I know you can’ (E10, unit 13).

This portrayed Kanan as needing reassurance about his abilities, and Hera, his female companion, was able to provide it for him. Later in the same episode, Kanan admits his feelings to Yoda:

[K]: ‘It’s true. I’m not sure of my decision to train Ezra. Not because of him or his abilities, because of me, because of who I am’

> [K]: '…I feel his abilities are growing faster than I can teach him' (E10, units 58 and 59)

Insecurity and emotional vulnerability are therefore shown by a male character who has power over his mentee and the rest of the crew, suggesting his masculinity is multifaceted.

Additionally, during Ezra's Jedi training there are many references to the need to be willing to connect with other beings, and face fears and insecurities. This often led to some sincere and emotionally charged conversations between Ezra and Kanan such as in the example below:

> [K]: 'The point is that you're not alone. You're connected to every living thing in the universe. But to discover that, you have to let your guard down. You have be willing to attach to others.'
>
> [E]: 'And what if I can't?'
>
> [K]: 'If you hang on to your past, if you always try to protect yourself, you'll never be a Jedi'
>
> [E]: 'Then maybe I'll never be a Jedi'
>
> [K]: 'Kid, whatever's going on with you, you need to spill it'
>
> [E]: 'I'm sorry, Kanan. I don't mean to wear your out. Today's never a good day. It's never a good day… Empire Day' [TIE fighters start flying ahead] (E8, units 9 to 15).

In the units above, Kanan, the older more powerful male encouraged Ezra to be more emotionally vulnerable. This therefore suggests that emotional vulnerability was presented as part of being powerful with the Force as well as masculinity.

In another example, before Kanan must change the crew's plan in episode 13, him and Ezra have the following conversation:

[K]: ‘She’s right about that [glumly]’

[K]: ‘What’s with you?’

[E]: ‘Nothing.’

[K]: ‘Let’s take a walk.’

[K]: ‘What’s on your mind?’

[E]: ‘I’m not sure we should go through with this.’

[K]: ‘Ezra, you are up to this. I know you are.’

[E]: ‘I know that’s what you want to think. But look. As much as I wish I was like my parents, I’m not.’

[K]: ‘There’s something else.’

[E]: ‘My parents spoke out and I lost them, and I don’t… [angrily grunts] I don’t want to lose you guys, okay? Not over this.’

[K]: ‘Hey. All of us have lost things. And we will take more losses before this over. But we can’t let that stop us from taking risks. We have to move forward. And when the time comes, we have to be ready to sacrifice for something bigger.’

[E]: ‘That sounds good, but it’s not so easy.’

K: ‘It’s not easy for me either. My master tried to show me, but I don’t think I ever understood it until now, tying to teach it to you. [sighs] I guess you and I are learning these things together’ (E13, units 45 to 49).

In the interaction above (and in the toxic masculinity subtheme previous discussed), it was clear that initially (when the crew are present) Ezra did not want to speak about his emotions, a toxic/stereotypically masculine trait. However, when Kanan and Ezra are alone, Ezra discusses his emotional vulnerabilities, such as his feelings of inadequacy and fear of loss. Kanan then draws on his own vulnerabilities.

Therefore, this private conversation portrays that emotional vulnerability is something that connects Ezra and Kanan because being emotionally vulnerable is part of their utilisation of the Force, and, more broadly, in their fight as rebels. In another example, fear is considered part of being a Jedi:

> [E]: 'Kanan, I can't. I'm afraid'
>
> [K]: [chuckles] 'I got news for you kid. Everyone's afraid, but admitting it as you just did, makes you braver than most and it's a step forward'
>
> E: 'Yeah. Into the jaws of a nightmare [They're flying into the planet] [breaths heavily] Okay. [Voice quivers] Okay' (E9, units 33 – 35).

5.3.6 Main Theme: Strong Female Figures

The second main theme was established based on the representations of the female protagonists, Hera and Sabine, in the series. Similar to the multifaceted masculinities theme, by presenting two female characters, it seemed that there were two possible representations of the female gender role, each represented by a subtheme: leader/mother figure and action girl.

5.3.6.1 Subtheme: Leader/Mother Figure

Hera is represented as a leader, mainly within the domain of the crew's ship, which she owns and pilots. Her role as a pilot and leader is invaluable and fundamentally important to the crew's pursuits which justifies the inclusion of this subtheme within the 'strong female figures' main theme. An example of Hera taking the lead within the domain of the ship can be found in episode nine which opens with the crew in danger and Hera making several demands of them:

> [Hera has given Chopper orders but he's broken. Zeb comes in. [Z:] 'I've got you covered, Hera. Roll away!' (E9, unit 1)
>
> [H]: 'Sabine, I need you in the nose gun, now!' (E9, unit 3)

[H]: ‘Ezra, Nav-computer is off-line. With Chopper down, I need you to fix it’

[E]: ‘Not exactly my specialty’

[H]: ‘Well, make it your specialty and make it fast. Or this ship becomes a real ghost’ (E9, unit 10).

Hera is presented as taking control in adversity in the units above.

Further, when Hera is absent, Kanan struggles to fulfil her piloting role, providing evidence that she provides important and necessary skills to her team:

‘Uh, Kanan, when they shoot at us, Hera usually shoots back’

‘Well, I’m not Hera. I’m having enough trouble keeping ahead of these guys’ (E11, units 38 to 39).

However, Hera’s role as a leader is almost exclusively confined to the ship, which is also the crew’s home, making it a domestic space. That Hera is in control of the domestic space has implications for the gendered narrative within the series, as such spaces have been historically marked as feminine domains (Connell, 2005) as discussed in the literature review. Also in-line with broader gender role stereotypes, she is portrayed to be a mother-figure in the series. For example, she takes control of the sibling-like issues that arise between Ezra and Zeb often:

[H] Standing at the top of the railings looking at Ezra and Zeb and coughs and frowns. They both say: ‘It’s his fault’

[Z and E] Bicker about whose fault it is.

[H]: ‘Enough. This is my ship you’re wrecking, and I want you off it. [Gives them a market list]. Don’t even think about coming back without at least one meiloorun fruit’ (E4, units 21 to 23).

The units above show Hera in a mothering position in that she seems to not only take charge of the domestic space, rightfully referring to it as ‘my ship’, but she takes

on the responsibility of disciplining the younger crew members who create issues with their bickering and fighting.

Further, she seems to have a mothering instinct. When the team are discussing Ezra's parents she states:

> 'They had hope. That they could do something to make the galaxy a better place for their son' [Ezra is overhearing this and isn't meant to]'

This suggests that although her role is more a surrogate mother within the crew, she seems to understand the desire for parents to protect their children. This is also true in other episodes such as episode six:

> [H]: 'Tells Jai that they'll take him back to his mother, and help him hide' (E6, unit 43).

Again, Hera seems to have maternal instinct for childcare as she wants to unite children with their mothers. It is also notable that she refers to 'mother' and not parents in the unit above.

Overall, Hera's role as a leader is fundamentally important to the crew. She is skilled and necessary to the missions even when she stays aboard the *Ghost* meaning that Hera is represented a strong female character. However, her role as a leader within the crew had tones of mothering suggesting she was also partially defined by the stereotypically feminine nurturing instinct that was lacked by other crew members. Therefore, the gender role she represents is both progressive and stereotypical.

5.3.6.2 Subtheme: Action Girl

Sabine's role in the crew is as a tough and action-based girl. Like Ezra, Sabine is in her teens and is important in missions and battles when they happen both in the air (from the ship), as well as on foot. This means that when Hera is flying

the *Ghost* during the on-foot missions and battles, Sabine provides female representation. In such scenarios she is confident, skilled (especially with explosives) and aggressive.

For example, episode fifteen – *Fire Across the Galaxy* opens with Sabine attacking stormtroopers:

[S]: ‘Miss me bucketheads?’

Jumps and climbs a wall.

They’re shooting at her. S: ‘Yep, you definitely missed me’ [Jumps down from the roof].

[E and Z] Are waiting in the wings.

[E]: ‘Sabine’s distraction is working’ [jumps, pulls herself up on things].

[E and Z] Are in the background, entering the ship.

[E] Presses a few buttons to get the enemy ship to turn on.

[S]: [To the villains who are shooting at her]: ‘You got a little better…’

[S]: [Jumps down, spins in the air, lands on a Stormtrooper’s head, knocking him down].

[S]: ‘But I got a lot better’

[S] Jumps on to the ship that Ezra and Zeb are in

[S]: ‘Bye-bye, bucketheads!’ (E15, units 1 to 13)

In the units above, Sabine is clearly a natural action girl displaying agility, strength, confidence, and skill. She is also often responsible for explosives, a perhaps more masculine hobby. In episode eight the following interaction ensued between her and Zeb:

[S]: Says to Zeb ‘When I say now, throw this as high as you can’ [tosses him a grenade]. He’s looking at it and it starts to beep and he says,

[Z]: Now? Now?' [looking more and more panicked]

Then S tells him to throw it and it explodes in the air as fireworks (E8, units 23 to 25).

This indicated that she is in control of explosives and seems to be less fearful on them than Zeb in the scene. In episode two it is clear that she enjoys her role as explosive expert:

[S] Presses a button so that the bombs she planted blow up the transport.

[There's a big explosion as they fly away] 'Ah, I didn't see it from here. How'd it look?'

[K]: 'Gorgeous, Sabine. As always' (E2, units 28 to 30).

Sabine then had some stereotypically masculine traits and was presented as a key action girl throughout the series. Importantly, this meant that when Hera was absent from battles and missions, Sabine provided female representation that would otherwise have been lacking. However, it is important to note that both Hera and Sabine being directly involved in battles and missions was rare, so females, even when occupying vital roles within a more masculine battle environment, were still outnumbered.

5.3.7 Main Theme: Gender(ed) Co-operation

The gender(ed) co-operation theme represents that the team are successful in most of their missions and battles, and often use teamwork in order to complete them. Each member of the mixed-gender crew had important and valued roles. However, there were some hierarchies represented in the team, some of which were gendered and will be explored below. Additionally, there were some heteronormative tones within the series. These concepts are represented as sub-themes and will be discussed in turn.

5.3.7.1 Subtheme: Hierarchies

As previously noted, Kanan and Hera are presented as leaders of different domains which facilitates a largely egalitarian representation of leadership in the series. However, there are signs of gendered domains as Hera is more of a leader on the ship, partly a domestic space, and is seen as a motherly figure, while Kanan is a leader in battles, a more masculine environment. Despite this, Hera and Kanan were both displayed to be more powerful than the rest of the crew when it came to decision making and survival, suggesting that they were parental figures to the other crew members. Because the crew were rebels, they needed to complete missions to obtain credits (their currency) to get food and supplies. It seemed to be the joint responsibility of Kanan and Hera to provide these jobs. When the crew and Hera tell Kanan they are low of supplies in episode three – *Droids in Distress*, the following interaction happens:

‘There’s always Vizago’s job’ (E3, unit 7).

[Zeb]: ‘Oh, so we’re arms dealers again?’

[Kanan]: ‘Mm, more like arms redistributors’ (E3, unit 8).

Then Kanan attempts to get Hera on board with the idea, suggesting that her agreement is vital, whereas Zeb’s protests are given very little attention.

[K, to H]: You game?

[H]: ‘Say I am. What then?’

[K]: ‘I already know the mission. Let’s head to the spaceport’ (E3, unit 11).

Additionally, the units above indicate that Kanan is knowledgeable about the work-orientated missions that are essential for the team’s survival.

The pair often shut down conversations from the crew about where their intel comes from, highlighting their position of power, such as in episode seven – *Out of Darkness:*

> [S]: 'I'd like to know why we're relying on intel from this Fulcrum, whoever he is.'
>
> [K]: 'It's Hera's job to find missions that create problems for the Empire and profit for us. If she trusts the contact, I trust the contact. No questions asked' (E7, units 24 and 25).

These units also highlight the essential element of trust that all crew members must have with each other in order for their co-operation to work. Of course, the leaders did sometimes disagree with each other, which could be a representation of a power struggle between them.

There was a second hierarchy within the crew. Because Ezra's Jedi training is much of the focus of the series, his development was seen as vitally important while Zeb and Sabine's roles were less focused upon. This seemed to provide the narrative that Ezra was the most important of the (non-leader) crew members while it elevated Kanan's power status because he was Ezra's mentor. It also notable that Ezra and Kanan, two male characters, are the only crew members to have the ability to utilise the Force. As a result, it is only ever Kanan and Ezra who battle the Inquisitor who has been tasked to hunt Jedis by Lord Vader in episode one and is presented as one of the most powerful villains in the series. Therefore, the risk to Ezra and Kanan could be perceived as higher than the threats to the other crew members because they have the greatest potential to trigger a larger Jedi rebellion. Kanan and Ezra then are arguably shown to be the most important and valued crew

members by the villains who wish to maintain the hold of the Empire – both of whom are males, suggesting a gendered representation of skill and power.

5.3.7.2 Subtheme: Heteronormative Tones

The crew can be seen as a (non-biological) family with Hera and Kanan as the parental figures (McGucken, 2020) which represents a heteronormative dynamic. Indeed, there are suggestions that Kanan and Hera are in a romantic relationship. The insinuations were subtle and infrequent and yet it was notable that on the occasions where romantic pet-names are utilised, it is by Hera, suggesting she is more affectionate or romantic as a female:

[K]: ‘Can we discuss this later?’

[H]: ‘That’s fine, love. But we will discuss it’ (E3, unit 52).

Her use of the word ‘love’ seems particularly interesting considering it may be utilised to soften her assertive tone (often associated with masculinity) within the sentence. Further, they agree to discuss Ezra’s Jedi training which positions Hera and Kanan in parental roles in which they need to discuss the treatment and progression of their younger crew member (or child figure).

Additionally, in the last episode of the series when the crew have successfully rescued Kanan he expresses his gratitude, and she responds:

‘You’re welcome, dear’ [they hug]’ (E15, unit 113).

Again, it is Hera who utilised a romantic pet-name (and Kanan never reciprocates) and this is the first true sign of affection in the series.

Additionally, heteronormativity is also shown through interactions between Ezra and Sabine. In the first episode Sabine takes off her helmet and Ezra sees her for the first time. He looks momentarily amazed and a few seconds later uses a flirtatious tone while he says:

‘My name’s Ezra, what’s yours’ (E1, unit 78).

Ezra speaks to Sabine in this flirtatious tone in other episodes throughout the series, despite her showing no romantic interest in him. She either ignored him, or made it clear his interest was not reciprocated, such as in the interaction below:

[E]: ‘Thanks for saving me back there [in a flirtatious tone]’.

[S]: ‘Don’t read too much into it, kid.’ (E7 units 101 and 102).

That Ezra is seen to be romantically interested in Sabine challenges the family structure of the crew as it implies there are possible romantic relationships between characters who would be considered non-biological siblings in the family. However, it is the presence of parental figures that facilitates a reading of the group as a family unit. Therefore, heteronormativity within the group both facilitates and challenges the representation of a family dynamic which is not acknowledged by McGucken (2020).

Overall, this subtheme represents that although the crew consists of males and females who successfully work together as a team, there are heteronormative tones present. This both allows and challenges the reading of a heteronormative family dynamic being portrayed. Perhaps then, *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) implies that heteronormative romance is an inevitable part of a mixed-gendered team.

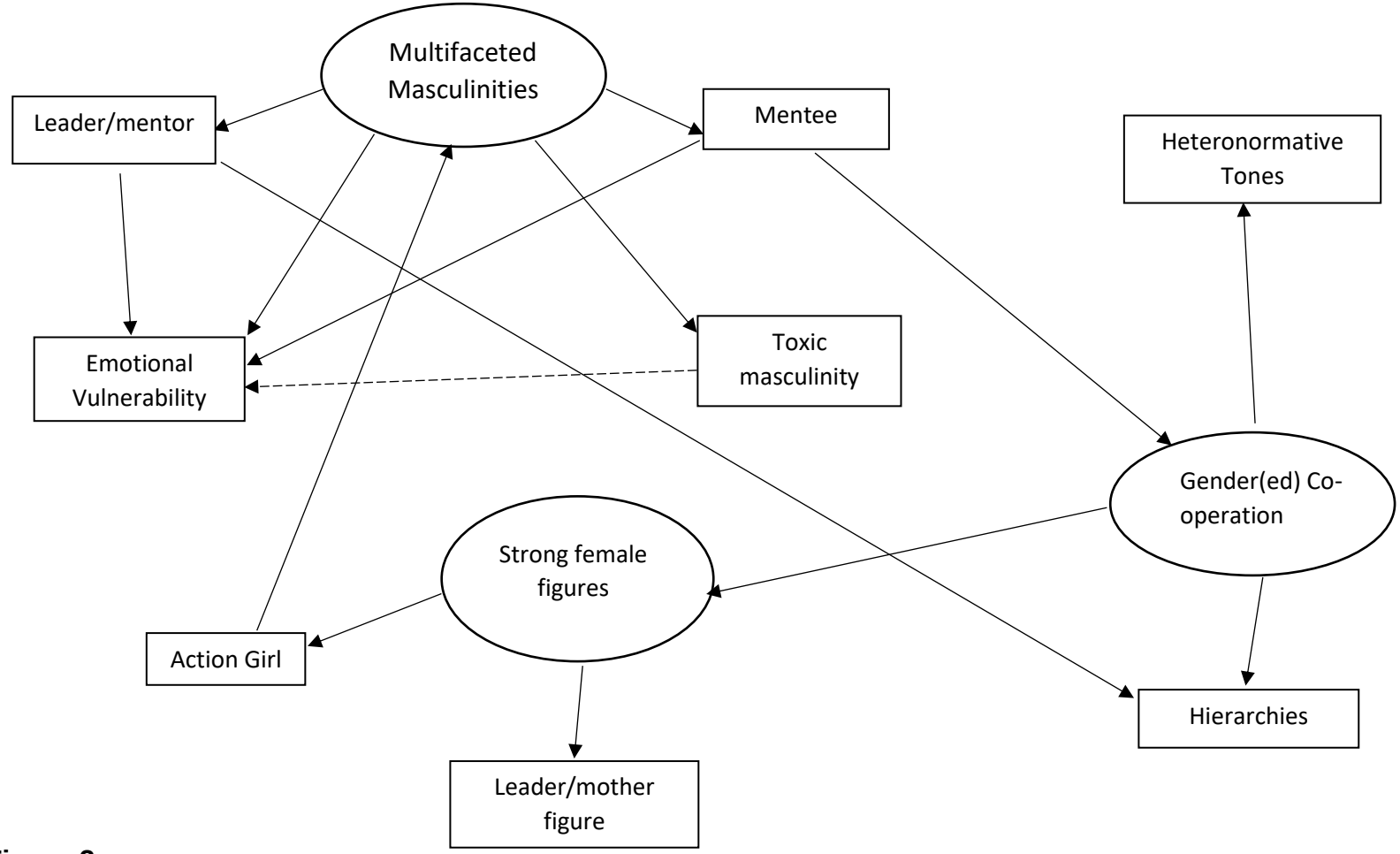

Figure 2

Thematic Map: How is gender portrayed in a Star Wars animated television series?

Figure 2 illustrates the final thematic map that answers the research question, how is gender portrayed in a Star Wars animated television series? It intends to show the connections between each of the themes (in ellipses) and subthemes (in boxes). The solid arrows indicate causal relationships whereas the dotted arrows represent conflict.

5.4 Discussion

5.4.1 How is Gender Portrayed Within a Marvel Animated Television Series?

Two main themes were established in answering the first research question. These were stereotypical masculinity/lad culture and being flawed/fallible.

5.4.1.1 Stereotypical Masculinity/Lad Culture

Stereotypical masculinity and lad culture were incredibly prevalent throughout *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) and were, in many ways, endorsed by both the male and female superheroes. For example, both the male and female Avengers were aggressive, utilised banter frequently, engaged in teamwork and were physically strong which was represented visually by their muscular physiques (the latter portrayed by male Avengers only). These concepts, particularly the use of banter, have been regarded to be a common feature of ‘lad culture’ (Phipps & Young, 2015). This is problematic as ‘lad culture’ has been associated with sexual harassment and the mistreatment of women (Phipps & Young, 2015). Although sexual harassment was not and could not be portrayed in Avengers media targeted towards children, it is possible that young boys being exposed to the concepts of ‘lad culture’ from a young age may be more likely to normalise and accept it later in life, when it may be related to such issues. Therefore, it is possible that the implications

of representing culture between men as ‘laddish’ could have important and problematic repercussions.

Alternatively, the use of humour can be prosocial (Bergin et al., 2003; Huuki et al., 2010) and important in developing relationships. Indeed, there was evidence for this in *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) as even though the characters constantly mocked and belittled each other it was almost always perceived to be in good jest and ‘banter’ seemed to be a part of the bonding between the teammates. The use of banter between the teammates may also be related to the friction between them that is often a feature of ‘team films’ that adds narrative interest to the group dynamic (Strong, 2013). This is paralleled by Phipps and Young’s (2015) articulation of ‘lad culture’ that was arguably normalised within the Avengers team. Perhaps a problematic portrayal of ‘banter’ was shown between Widow and Hawkeye. Hawkeye mocked Widow with sexist jokes in the series. Therefore, although Black Widow is not necessarily shown to be harassed, the series did seem to have some sexist undertones in line with the (mis)treatment of women associated with ‘lad culture’ (Phipps & Young, 2015; Nichols, 2018) which added to her being perceived as the odd one out.

Further, it is possible to perceive the stereotypical masculinity represented in Avengers as hegemonic – that is – dominant over other subordinated masculinities and femininity (Connell, 2005). The Avengers are a team of predominately male superheroes who are represented to be in an inherently powerful position, with the responsibility to protect a “largely feminized” (Stabile, 2009, p. 87) and vulnerable human population. This suggests that their societal position within the series is hegemonic. Additionally, the blatant lack of female representation in *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019), with Black Widow being the only female

superhero within the Avengers team denotes the dominance of male Avengers over female protagonists (and masculinity over femininity). This lack of female representation is in line with previous research which finds that male superheroes are much more prevalent than female superheroes (Baker & Raney; Miller et al., 2016).

Furthermore, Widow did, in some ways, behave in accordance with the stereotypical masculinity that was being portrayed strongly by the male Avengers. She communicated via banter, was aggressive, and was a part of teamwork when she was present. This suggests that it was necessary for her to perform the norm of masculinity present in the Avengers team, implying that it is indeed a hegemonic masculinity. Baker and Raney (2007) also found that female superheroes had to be masculine and suggested that this implied that heroism is essentially synonymous with masculine gender norms. Importantly though, despite Widow's performance of masculinity, she was *still largely on the periphery of the team*. She was absent from many of the episodes which was scarcely acknowledged and did not impact on the team's performance meaning that she was arguably the most disposable member. This implies that even female superheroes engaging in masculinity is not enough for them to fully 'fit in' which could support a reading that the masculinity portrayed by the Avengers team was hegemonic, because Widow had to adhere to these norms, and even so, was still seen as a disposable addition to the male-centric team, presumably, because of her gender. If the masculinity displayed in *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) is perceived to be hegemonic, this may have important implications. For example, social cognitive theory of gender development posits that children learn the behaviour that is appropriate for them to replicate from media they consume and are more likely to do so if the behaviour is celebrated or

portrayed by models with power and status (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Therefore, the masculinity being portrayed by the Avengers, protagonists whom children are likely to admire, implies that children exposed to such messaging will be likely to replicate this behaviour. This justifies a discussion of the components of stereotypical masculinity that is portrayed in *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019).

In this vein, one of the most prevalent components of stereotypical masculinity/lad culture portrayed by both the male Avengers, and Widow was aggression. Aggression has been conceptualised as a part of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) and is largely seen as a stereotypically masculine trait in analyses of gender in mass media content (England et al. 2011; Hine et al. 2018a; Baker Raney, 2007). Aggression was incredibly pervasive throughout the twenty-six episodes. The male and female protagonists would frequently punch and kick others, as well as utilise an array of weapons, such as guns, grenades and technologically based explosives that were built into their suits. This is consistent with Muller et al., (2020) who suggested that, contrary to expectations, the protagonists in superhero content were more aggressive than antagonists or villains. That aggression and violence were such a large part of each of the episodes and were portrayed by each protagonist within the Avengers team may suggest that it is seen as an essential element of being a hero. Therefore, because the characters perpetrating aggression are seen as powerful, heroic, and idolised within the series, children may perceive such behaviour as ‘positive’ and worthy of replication (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). This is likely to have important implications in that a stereotypical masculinity that is aggressive, dominant over women, and associated with ‘lad culture’ may be reproduced by children, making it perhaps, particularly concerning. Indeed,

Strasburger (2009) states that there are thousands of studies that find children who are exposed to aggressive behaviour in media are more likely to be aggressive in their later life. This is further supported by a meta-analysis of the effects of violence in videogames (Prescott et al., 2018). Additionally, Coyne et al., (2014) found that exposure to superhero media specifically, predicted higher levels of weapon play in both boys and girls, after one year. That violence is so prominent in this media despite the research that suggests it has problematic implications for children, is rather shocking.

Further, although the current research did not quantify the aggressive behaviour perpetrated by superheroes, it seemed that Black Widow was just as likely and able to perpetrate aggression against antagonists. This supports the findings of Baker and Raney (2007) who found that aggression was a key component to the masculine portrayals of female superheroes, although this was contrary to the findings of Muller et al., (2020) and Miller et al., (2016). However, in the current research, it did seem that Black Widow was less likely to be aggressive towards her teammates, suggesting some subtle gender differences. Additionally, aggressive behaviour displayed by both male and female superheroes within *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) was also handled in a casual manner by all the superheroes analysed. The superheroes often made jokes and utilised quips whilst engaging in physical altercations, and generally, seemed to find the battles a source of fun, arguably glorifying violence. This representation of aggression, as well as its prominence, added to the sense of a ‘lad culture’ that was based around stereotypical masculinity. It is possible that the glorified violence in *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) may mean it is particularly attractive

behaviour to replicate, which could explain the increased levels of weapon play in boys who engage with superhero media (Coyne et al., 2014).

5.4.1.2 Being Flawed and Fallible

The second main theme established was ‘flawed and fallible’. This theme was, in some ways, in contradiction to the stereotypical masculinity/’lad culture’ subtheme, as many of the concepts were against male gender norms. For example, there were occasions where the male characters, particularly Iron Man, was shown to be vulnerable without his suit and technology. “Toughness and violence” (Wall & Kristjanson, 2005, p. 88) and “stoicism” (Wall & Kristjanson, 2005, p. 88) are considered key components of hegemonic masculinity and such qualities seemed to be associated with the masculinity portrayed by Iron Man within his suit. However, beneath his suit, arguably, a metaphor for the “toughness” associated with masculinity, he was more vulnerable in a physical (he was attacked more easily) and emotional (he was self-conscious and felt inadequate) sense. His vulnerability was acknowledged by himself, as well as by villains throughout the series. In this way, Iron Man’s suit could be interpreted as a metaphor for masculinity, beneath which he was more able to express his emotions and vulnerabilities, concepts that are rarely expressed by men who feel pressured to adhere to stereotypical gender norms (Parent et al., 2019). This also supports the work of Shawcroft & Coyne (2022) who found that superheroes were less able to show vulnerabilities as heroes (in their suits) than as humans (without their suits). That Iron Man was (sometimes) able to express vulnerability, may be an important representation for young boys as it may allow them to better understand that the pressures to be stereotypically masculine, i.e., powerful, aggressive, and stoic (Wall & Kristjanson, 2005; Parent et al., 2019), cannot be permanently and consistently maintained.

Additionally, uncontrolled anger was presented as a significant and consistent issue within *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) particularly by Hulk. It is notable that in *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019), Hulk does not transform back to Dr Bruce Banner (his human scientist form) when his anger is within his control. This could suggest that it is Hulk's exaggerated rage and destruction that appeals to audiences and provides narrative interest. It was particularly significant that anger was one of the only emotions portrayed by the Avengers. This could reflect that anger is seen as a more acceptable emotion in males compared to females, and as a result, from a young age, boys seem to be permitted to display more anger than girls (Blakemore et al., 2009). In the Avengers, uncontrolled anger often led to unnecessary and problematic destruction of objects and property. However, there were several occasions where being able to control anger was celebrated. The implications for children exposed to the positive response to controlled anger in such media are unclear. It could suggest that although uncontrolled anger is an inconvenience, acting on such emotions is 'natural' for men, and any time anger is controlled, they deserve recognition, which could normalise problematic behaviour. Alternatively, because there is evidence that discouraging anger in children (particularly those identified to be at risk of psychopathology) predicts an increase in symptoms of depression in adolescence (O'Neil et al., 2017), celebrating *controlled* anger in *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) may have more positive implications than the emotion being discouraged completely. However, perhaps it is the lack of other emotional displays in *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) that is problematic, as it is unlikely that children will learn a range of emotions from the protagonists portrayed within this media.

Lastly, *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) seemed to suggest that respect needed to be earned by the superheroes. This fed into the stereotypical masculinity theme, as respect was gained through masculine endeavours such as being skilled in battles, utilising intellect, and proving that you brought something of value to the team. This seems to relate to the very concept that moving from 'boyhood' to 'manhood' is earned and proven via social achievements as well as men's personalities and behaviours (Vandello & Bosson, 2012). Because 'manhood' is achieved, it can also be lost meaning that "men's behaviors (particularly stereotypically masculine behaviors) are often motivated by *an ongoing need to prove manhood status to others* (Kimmel, 1997)" (Vandello & Bosson, 2012, p. 103, emphasis added). This particularly related to Falcon and Iron Man as their attempts to earn the respect of their teammates were continuous – it could not be achieved through the completion of one (or even several) task(s). Even as the leader of the team, Iron Man's battle plans and leadership skills were often challenged, and he earned his teammates' respect when his plans were successfully executed. This also links to the concept of manhood being earned through public action (Vandello & Bosson, 2012). Further,

> "the precariousness of manhood, for example, can explain why men: value status and achievement; display traits such as assertiveness and dominance; engage in risky and aggressive behaviors; avoid femininity in their appearance, personality, and conduct; and experience anxiety and stress when they fail to achieve cultural standards of masculinity" (Vandello & Bosson, 2012, p. 107).

Arguably then, much of the stereotypically masculine behaviours displayed by the male Avengers, could be at least partially explained by their continuous need to prove their masculinity, which seems to be tied up with their identities as heroes.

5.4.1.3 Avengers Assemble Conclusions

The stereotypical masculinity and ‘lad culture’ was the most prominent feature of the portrayal of gender in *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) which largely supports previous research (Baker & Raney, Muller, 2020; Miller et al., 2016). The stereotypical masculinity/lad culture was arguably problematic because it seemed to reinforce negative stereotypes that relate to men being aggressive, speaking through banter and continuously mocking each other, being muscular, and partly excluding females who are just as competent, presumably based on their gender. Additionally, there were signs that male superheroes can be flawed and fallible which partially challenged concepts of stereotypical masculinity as it implied that men can be both tough and stoic as well as emotionally and physically vulnerable. However, different components of the flawed and fallible main theme seemed to reinforce notions of stereotypical masculinity in that controlling anger is figured as difficult and something that should be celebrated when achieved, and that it is necessary to constantly earn the respect of others, arguably, by proving ‘manhood’. Therefore, children could be receiving some troubling gendered messages from *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) which may be particularly concerning as the Avengers is such a successful franchise within the Marvel universe. As a result, the impact of Disney owned Marvel media on children engaging with it, should be researched more fully.

5.4.2 How is Gender Portrayed Within a Star Wars Animated Television Series?

5.4.2.1 Multifaceted Masculinities

The masculinity represented by the male crew members in *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) suggested that it was complex. Zeb was often presented as angry, intimidating, and emotionally guarded – as were Ezra and Kanan, although less frequently, which led to the toxic masculinity subtheme being established. Anger

is an emotion that is largely perceived to be more acceptable for men to produce than women (Blakemore et al., 2009) and is largely perceived as a male or masculine emotion. Further, as mentioned above, the suppression of emotions other than anger has been considered a trait of toxic masculinity (Parent et al., 2019).

However, although there were signs of a ‘toxic’ masculinity in the series, perhaps contradictorily, emotional vulnerability was seen as an essential component to the masculinity represented by Ezra and Kanan (but not Zeb). This observation opposes those of Moran (2019) and Bettis and Sternod (2009) who suggested that emotional suppression was encouraged among male Jedis throughout the Star Wars trilogies. Although perhaps a matter of perspective, this was found to not be the case in the current analysis of men in *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018). Although it remains the case that fears and insecurities are presented to make Jedis vulnerable to the dark side of the Force in *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018), it did not seem to the researcher that Kanan and Ezra were encouraged to supress them. In the results section, it was made clear that emotionally charged conversations were prevalent in the series, with Kanan actively encouraging Ezra to emotionally ‘open up’ particularly about his previous traumas. Therefore, the concept of emotional vulnerability added to the notion that masculinity was multifaceted in the series as this is largely against the gendered socialisation of emotion (Blakemore et al., 2009). Sadness and fear are largely perceived as more feminine and tend to be more tolerated by parents of young girls than young boys (Blakemore et al., 2009). Interestingly though, Ezra and Kanan’s willingness to reflect on their fears and vulnerabilities allowed them to utilise the Force, therefore seemed to be associated with power. Further, Bettis and Sternod (2009) suggested that love is discouraged within the Star Wars films. However, although not necessarily a reflection of love in

the romantic sense, it is through Ezra's attachments to his crew members that his skills are able to develop. Indeed, Kanan explicitly tells Ezra that "you have to let your guard down. You have to be willing to attach to others". This suggests that in *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018), perhaps rather than suppress their emotions and minimise their connections to others, males are encouraged to do the opposite. Perhaps without the confines of the previous narratives established within the Star Wars film trilogies, a more positive, or at least, more multifaceted depiction of masculinity can and are represented in *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018).

5.4.2.2 Strong Female Figures

The female crew members in *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) were portrayed as strong and valued. The leader/mother-figure subtheme described Hera's role within the crew. She led the team in the sense that she owned and piloted their ship (the Ghost). Perhaps because of this, she was seen to be a leader specifically within that environment. She would often give orders to the crew on the ship and save them from danger when they relied on her piloting skills for their escape. In these ways she was seen as a successful and celebrated leader – and led her to encapsulate the strong female figures theme. Although her leadership and piloting role are contrary to feminine gender stereotypes, it is important to acknowledge that because the crew lived on the ship it was also a domestic space that at least partly represents the private sphere. A female figure being portrayed as a leader almost exclusively within a domestic space suggests that Hera is still somewhat constrained by feminine gender role stereotypes. As discussed in chapter two, historically, the private sphere has been equated with femininity and women, whereas the public sphere has been equated with masculinity and men (Connell,

2005; Kriemer, 2004; Elgarte, 2008). This gendered distinction of the public and private spheres facilitated the subordination of women (Connell, 2005; Kriemer, 2004; Elgarte, 2008), which makes this representation of Hera in *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) problematic. Further, Hera's role as a leader within the private sphere is contrasted with Kanan's role in mentoring and passing on practical skills that could be utilised for important public work– namely, the taking down of the Empire. Therefore, an arguably strongly gendered private and public distinction can be identified in *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018), when comparing the roles of Hera and Kanan.

Further, Hera was also presented as a mother figure to the younger crew members. She seemed to feel responsible for ensuring there was harmony within the crew and was often more affectionate (albeit subtly) and patient with the younger crew members than Kanan, but also chastised their disruptive behaviour. This associated Hera with nurturing/reproductive work and the 'private' sphere (Elgarte, 2008) more strongly. Further, more direct and 'hands on' parenting is largely a responsibility felt disproportionately by women and men tend to be focused more on long-term planning (Shirani et al., 2012). Therefore, the mother-figure role fulfilled by Hera seemed to be a way in which *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) subtly implied that for a female figure to be a leader, she must also be motherly – supporting gender stereotypes. This is perhaps, as McGuken (2020) suggested, representative of fourth wave feminist sensibilities whereby Hera and Sabine (that latter of which will be discussed later):

> ''certainly meet fourth wave criteria, they also reflect traditional female roles and suggest an inherent tension in defining female, femininity, and feminism itself. This reflects divisions and important factors in identifying the fourth wave, which is marked by a multiplicity of definitions and contradictions – and

> a welcoming of them in order to better understand the next steps within the feminist project" (McGucken, 2020, p. 155).

Alongside Hera, Sabine is also presented as a representation of a strong female figure within *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018). She is portrayed as an action girl who enjoys and is useful during battles. She also has essential knowledge that is useful to the crew, including being an explosives enthusiast. Therefore, Sabine represented a strong and largely non-stereotyped female crew member. However, her role as 'lesser than' Ezra provides evidence of a gendered hierarchy within the series which will be further explored below.

5.4.2.3 Gender(ed) Co-operation

The gender(ed) co-operation theme was established to articulate that the male and female crew members were able to effectively work together throughout much of *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018). However, there were some gendered aspects to the co-operation that was displayed that seemed to maintain men and women in specific and different roles. In the exploration of the hierarchies subtheme within the results section it was noted that the power of the Force was only within Kanan and Ezra. Arguably, this created a gendered hierarchy as the two male protagonists were two of the most powerful crewmembers in the series. Similarly, the ability to utilise the Force in the original Star Wars film trilogy was also exclusive to male characters. This is a particularly interesting narrative choice considering the sequel trilogy, which was released just one year after the first series of *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018), had a female Jedi as its leading protagonist which was considered a more empowering representation of women than those in the earlier trilogies (Bruin-Molé, 2017; McGucken, 2020). That the power to utilise the Force was represented to be an exclusively male phenomenon in *Star Wars Rebels*

(Filoni et al., 2014-2018) was therefore more consistent with the original trilogy. This could suggest that Star Wars was not willing to commit to representing female characters as powerful in this way, perhaps because it was still relatively unclear how its fanbase would respond to such a change.

Additionally, because much of the series was focused on Ezra's journey to become a Jedi, it was implied that the male Force-wielding characters were the most powerful and significant of all of the crew members. At the start of the series, Ezra is shown to have a natural ability to utilise the Force and also have natural abilities beyond the force too. For example, in the first episode he is able to steal a crate from the crew he has yet to become a part of and successfully escape the stormtroopers who are chasing him, leading Hera to say to Kanan that he "must be some kid". Therefore, Ezra's importance is elevated above the other crew members, particularly Zeb and Sabine.

Another aspect of the gender(ed) co-operation theme were the heteronormative undertones. For example, Ezra is clearly romantically interested in Sabine, who does not reciprocate the interest. Similarly, Hera and Kanan seem to be in a relationship. Although they do not show significant affection towards each other until the last episode of the series, it is Hera's occasional use of romantic pet-names that reveals a romantic tone to their relationship. Taken together, this suggests that romance is inevitable in mixed-gendered teams – a heteronormative concept.

5.4.2.4 Conclusions

Overall, the gendered messages within *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) seemed to be complex. The masculinity portrayed by the male protagonists was multifaceted, with emotional vulnerability being a key and unexpected component of the dominant males' masculinity. Therefore, it could be argued that the

representation of a masculinity that allows for more emotional vulnerability could encourage this in the children engaging with these characters and have some positive implications as a result. However, the perception of emotional vulnerability being expressed in *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) was largely conflicting with researchers who stated that emotional suppression was portrayed by male Jedis within the Star Wars franchise (Bettis & Sternod, 2009; Moran, 2019). It is possible that this is due to different interpretations of the messages within the Star Wars franchise. Alternatively, it is possible that this reflects inevitable narrative differences between the Star Wars film content and the Star Wars animated television content, the latter of which it should be acknowledged, are largely deemed to be lower status, in terms of their popularity and influence, than the former. Therefore, perhaps further research is needed to establish whether the themes and subthemes established in the current study apply to the Star Wars film content, particularly in the portrayal of emotional vulnerability.

It was also found that although initially it may appear that the representation of women within the series surpassed stereotypes in that there is a female leader, and a female action girl, a closer more critical analysis revealed that the female protagonists are subject to some stereotyped restrictions. Lastly, there were gendered components to the team. Although both men and women bring essential skill sets to the crew, there were hierarchies present within its structure and some of them were gendered. Further, there were heteronormative undertones which suggested that heterosexual relationships are inevitable within mixed-gendered teams. Overall, the gendered messages within *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) were arguably, complex and nuanced with some subtle gender stereotypes being portrayed. Because the gendered representations in the series are subtle, the

extent to which they may influence children who are engaging with such media would provide interesting and warranted research.

5.4.3 Star Wars and Marvel Differences

Marvel and Star Wars media was likely to have different portrayals of gender, having been produced by separate companies. However, now that both franchises are owned by the Disney corporation, it is important to consider the differences and similarities in the gendered portrayals within these franchises. This section will discuss some of the differences and similarities in the portrayal of men and women in the *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) and *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018).

Firstly, it is important to acknowledge there were stereotypical aspects of masculinity in both *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) and *Star War Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018). However, the stereotypical masculinity seemed more exaggerated and narratively dominant in *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) possibly because as a group, the Avengers were powerful and admired which is associated with hegemonic masculinity. The Avengers seemed to be hegemonic (Connell, 2005) in that they had more power over the largely subordinate human society within which they existed, whereas the crew in *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) were fighting against the dictatorial government body ruling over them (the Empire). As a result, the latter were more subordinate and vulnerable. For example, the crew had to take jobs to gain credits that they could exchange for essential supplies whereas the Avengers (and particularly Iron Man) were extremely wealthy and lived in relative luxury. It could be argued then that the larger role of emotional vulnerability in *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018), when compared with the Avengers, could reflect that their masculinity was less defined by

associations with hegemonic masculinity. Interestingly, Ezra and Kanan's willingness to reflect on their fears and vulnerabilities allowed them to utilise the Force, therefore was arguably, associated with power. Therefore, emotional vulnerability was largely rewarded in *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018). Additionally, it is also possible that stereotypical masculinity was more prominent in the *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) simply because the group consisted of six males and only one female. Comparatively, the crew in *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) consisted of three males and two females, which likely influenced a less dominant depiction of masculinity.

The key difference in the portrayal of female protagonists between *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) and *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) was that in the latter, the female protagonists seemed to be more genuinely valued. For example, Hera's piloting skills were vital to the team, and she was presented as a leader alongside Kanan. Sabine was also a valued female figure who brought important skills to the crew, and her gender was never mentioned or mocked. However, Hera's leadership role was within a domestic domain, and she was also presented as a mother figure, which suggested some gendered stereotyping. Additionally, only Ezra and Kanan, male crew members, were able to utilise the Force. However, these were perhaps more subtle patriarchal themes presented in *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) in comparison to the treatment of Widow throughout *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019). Widow seemed to be an add-on to the Avengers team and did not seem as genuinely valued. The Avengers worked without her just as successfully for a large proportion of the series. Further, there were several occasions where Widow was mocked based on gender stereotypes. This suggests that the portrayal of women in

Star Wars Rebels (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) was largely more positive than *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019). This was also reflected in the more balanced ratio between male and female protagonists in *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018). Overall, this may suggest that *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) seemed to provide children with more examples of how men and women can successfully work together and respect one another than *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019).

5.4.4 Limitations

The current thematic analysis was conducted on the first series of *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) and *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018). Therefore, it is possible that the portrayal of men and women would have developed throughout subsequent series of these television shows and analysing all available episodes may have led to a greater understanding of the portrayal of gender within them. However, there were four series of *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018), each with a minimum of fifteen episodes, and four series of *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019), each with a minimum of twenty-three episodes. For practical reasons, namely, the time constraints of the current PhD project, it was not possible to analyse all episodes. Future research could investigate the portrayal of gender throughout the entirety of an animated series associated with Marvel and Star Wars franchises, to mitigate for this limitation.

Further, because the current research focused on one series of animated content from the Marvel and Star Wars franchises, the themes are not generalisable to those franchises more broadly, and most notably, to films of these franchises. That said, the current study conducted a focused appraisal of protagonists that featured in Marvel and Star Wars media that was age-rated as appropriate for

children aged six and above, which had yet to be achieved. This is important for understanding the gendered messages being consumed by young children in a theoretical sense, but also provided the necessary background information required for the third study of this thesis. However, perhaps future research could examine the portrayal of gender in the influential feature length films of both the Star Wars and Marvel franchises and compare the findings to those of the current research. This would enable the portrayal of gender within the franchises more broadly, to be understood.

Thirdly, the method adopted in the current study largely followed Towbin et al., (2004) whereby media was viewed by the researcher and when a unit of analysis was identified, a description of the content was written. If the unit contained speech, it was copied verbatim utilising the subtitle function of Disney+. Codes, themes, and subthemes were then established based on the written units of analysis for each series, rather than the units as they appeared in the television series directly. This is a potential limitation as the units of analysis may not represent the content as accurately as intended. However, the researcher ensured that important detail was contained within the descriptions of the data units to mitigate for this. Additionally, although there were no reliability checks conducted on the target data, a pilot study was conducted whereby consistency in identifying units was considered and discussed with the supervisor of the project. Therefore, the pilot study provided evidence that the data units and codes being identified were consistent.

5.4.5 Implications

The current study could be utilised to discuss the portrayal of gender within the Marvel and Star Wars franchises with parents and teachers of children who are likely to engage with such media. Three main findings could be communicated. Firstly,

parents and educators could be made aware of the more ‘positive’ portrayal of male characters engaging in emotionally charged conversations in *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) in comparison to the lack of sincere conversations and emotional expression in *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019). Based on this, parents could be advised to balance some of the ‘negative’ representations of male protagonists largely supressing emotions in *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) with those in *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) as it is likely that viewing a more balanced portrayal of emotional expression would be beneficial to young viewers. Secondly, media violence is impactful on children’s aggression (Strasburger, 2009; Prescott et al., 2018) therefore, the pervasiveness of violence in Marvel and Star Wars media found in this study should be communicated. Additionally, the high levels of violence and weapon usage found in both franchises suggest that further research investigating the effects of these specific franchises on children’s aggression and weapon play is warranted. It is possible that because the Avengers seem to particularly celebrate aggression, Marvel media will have a larger impact on children’s levels of weapon play and aggression than Star Wars media. Whether this is the case needs to be further researched so that such information can also be communicated to parents. Thirdly, the subtleties of gendered messaging in children’s media should be communicated to parents and educators. The current study suggested that it is possible that the portrayal of women in *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) could be considered ‘positive’ and ‘progressive’. However, when considering the nuances in those portrayals, it is possible to see some problematic gendered messages. By raising awareness of the subtleties of gendered representations in children’s media,

parents and educators may be able to make more informed decisions about the media their children consume.

5.4.6 Conclusion

This study, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, was the first to qualitatively assess how gender is portrayed exclusively in Marvel and Star Wars media targeted towards children. This was essential given that the Disney corporation acquired these franchises, presumably, to target a young male audience more successfully. This research fulfilled a substantial gap in the existing literature by investigating the gendered portrayals within one Marvel and one Star Wars animated series, namely, *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) and *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018).

The findings suggested that there was a more overt portrayal of stereotypical masculinity in *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) in comparison to *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018). Additionally, the women in the latter series seemed to be more valued than the one female protagonist in *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019), however, the female protagonists were stereotyped in both series. Overall, the current research suggests that there was more overt gender stereotyping in *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019), which could suggest that this media may be particularly problematic for children engaging with it, who may replicate its messages (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Coyne et al., 2014). However, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, no research has investigated the impact of Star Wars media on children's gendered behaviour. Overall, the current study has facilitated a greater understanding of the gendered messages that may be consumed by children who engage with Marvel and Star Wars media. The findings also provide important background for investigating the relationship between

children’s engagement with the Marvel and Star Wars franchises and their gendered behaviours, which will be explored in the next empirical chapter of this thesis.

Chapter Six: Investigating Whether Engagement with the Marvel, Star Wars and Disney Franchises Predicts Stereotypically Gendered Behaviour and Weapon Play (Study Three).

6.1 Introduction

The previous two empirical chapters of this thesis have identified the gendered messages within Disney animated feature length films (chapter four) and Marvel and Star Wars animated television content (chapter five). Taken together, these chapters provide insight into the gendered messages within some of the most popular franchises of the Walt Disney company. Chapter four found that although the earliest female protagonists were highest in feminine traits, female protagonists across all three eras of animations were higher in feminine traits than masculine ones. Additionally, male protagonists were higher in feminine than masculine traits also, although the gendered behaviour displayed by the male characters remained more stable over time. Chapter five established that there were prevalent themes of stereotypical masculinity in Marvel and Star Wars media, including traits of toxic masculinity and 'lad culture' (Phipps & Young, 2015), however the latter seemed to value its female protagonists more genuinely. It was also found that both violence and the use of weapons were prevalent in the Marvel and Star Wars media analysed, in line with previous research which has found this to be true of superhero media more broadly (Miller et al., 2021; Muller et al., 2020; Baker & Raney, 2007). Utilising chapters four and five of this thesis as background, this study aims to examine whether engagement with the Disney, Marvel and Star Wars franchises predicts children's gender stereotypical behaviour and weapon play by expanding on the work of Coyne et al., (2014) utilising parent report methodology. Although there

are limitations to this approach it also has substantial practical benefits (as discussed in chapter three of this thesis).

It is expected that engagement with the Marvel and Star Wars franchises will predict higher levels of masculine behaviour and weapon play (Coyne et al., 2014) while Disney engagement will predict lower levels of masculine behaviour (Coyne et al., 2016; Golden & Jacoby, 2018) and will not predict weapon play. The current study, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, will be the first to establish whether there are predictive relationships between engagement with these specific franchises and children's behaviour, addressing a substantial gap in the literature. The current study will also examine whether any predictive relationships found between engagement with each of the franchises and gender stereotypical play and weapon play are moderated by parental mediation, and whether the predictive relationship between engagement with each of the franchises and weapon play is moderated by exposure to television violence, as per the original study (Coyne et al., 2014). Such research is necessary to understand the relationship between engagement with the Marvel, Star Wars and Disney franchises and children's behaviour, particularly in a UK sample, which there is very little currently known.

6.1.1 The Link Between Media Violence and Weapon Play

Chapter five found very high levels of violence and aggression in Marvel and Star Wars media targeted towards children, in line with previous research (Miller et al., 2021; Muller et al., 2020; Baker & Raney, 2007). There is both theory (Anderson & Bushman, 2018) and empirical evidence that children who have engaged with violent media display more aggressive behaviour in the short-term i.e., directly after being exposed to violence enacted by humans or cartoons (Bandura et al., 1963). However, the link between engagement with superhero content and children's

aggression may be more complex, given that violence is often seen as prosocial and protective to wider society in these narratives (Cingel et al., 2020). This may explain why “exposure to violent superhero content elicited prosocial outcomes among [adolescent] males, and did not elicit anti-social outcomes among any participants” (Cingel et al., 2020, p. 470). Conversely, superhero media engagement has been related to higher levels of weapon play (Coyne et al., 2014) and whether the same is true for engagement with the Marvel and Star Wars franchises specifically will be considered in this study. Further exploration of the impact of weapon violence in media will be discussed below.

In an experimental study, children who played a videogame containing weapon violence touched a real handgun hidden in a play setting at higher rates (Chang & Bushman, 2019). Additionally, violent videogame play was associated with more incidences of pulling the gun’s trigger while pointing it at oneself or a peer and holding the gun for longer (Chang & Bushman, 2019). Such findings were also found after children watched a film containing gun violence that was rated as age appropriate for them (Dillon & Bushman, 2017). Such research suggests there is a relationship between children’s exposure to violent media and their likelihood of behaving aggressively and handling a weapon, at least in the short term. Although this is incredibly important research, examining whether exposure to violent media has long-term implications is just as important.

Research that aims to investigate the long-term predictive relationship of engagement with violent media tends to be focused on outcome levels of aggression rather than weapon use, however, such research can provide insight into the potential impact of violent media more broadly. For example, exposure to television violence significantly predicted verbal and physical aggression between two and six

months later (Gentile et al., 2011). This also seems to be the case in longitudinal studies with longer follow-up periods. For example, there was a correlation between children's exposure to television violence between the ages of six and nine years and their aggressive behaviour as young adults in their early twenties (Huesmann et al., 2003). Specifically,

> "more childhood exposure to TV violence, greater childhood identification with same-sex aggressive TV characters, and a stronger childhood belief that violent shows tell about life "just like it is" predicted more adult aggression regardless of how aggressive participants were as children" (Huesmann et al., 2003, p. 216).

Further, childhood engagement with violent videogames and films was correlated with weapon-based arrests ten years later and predicted weapon carrying (Huesmann et al., 2021). However, in conflicting research, Smith et al., (2018) suggests that weapon play seems to correlate minimally with criminality later in life which could imply that weapon play is not detrimental in the long-term. Therefore, although there is evidence of a long-term association between exposure to violent media in childhood and levels of aggression and weapon use, there is also some conflicting evidence and perspectives.

Despite conflicting evidence of its long-term impact, some nursery and early year settings have banned weapon play, war play and superhero play (Holland, 2000; Mechling, 2008). Whether banning such play is the correct approach has been questioned (Holland, 2000; Mechling, 2008) because weapon or war play can encourage children to utilise skills associated with learning such as discussing, explaining, and creating (Heikkilä, 2021). Therefore, discouraging weapon play may limit the development of keys skills (Heikkilä, 2021). Discouraging weapon play, war play and/or superhero play may be particularly detrimental to children with interest in these play themes, as they may miss important social, learning and confidence

building opportunities as a result (Holland, 2000), and researchers seem to suggest that it is stereotypically boys that have such interests (Mechling, 2008). Teachers can facilitate ‘useful’ superhero play and/or weapon play by including cooling off periods when the play becomes too ‘rough’ or repetitive, replacement of superhero play with other activities when necessary, and utilising such play to provoke thought (Wiwatowski, et al., 2020), suggesting it can be managed effectively.

Tolerance of weapon play may be impacted by cultural factors. For example, it is legal to own a gun in some states in the US without registration and, although restrictions vary, a broad range of firearms, including handguns and military-type assault rifles, may be legally owned. In addition, in many US states it is legal to carry a firearm in public places. However, in the UK there are stringent gun laws in place and a license must be obtained for rifles and shotguns to be owned and many firearms are illegal to own at all. Additionally, it is now necessary for applications for gun licences to be supported by a medical form signed by a doctor (Home Office, 2021). It is possible that weapon play will be less prevalent in the UK than the US comparatively, as firearms are so rarely seen in the former culture. Alternatively, it is possible that weapon play will be discouraged more in the US because the ‘risk’ of handling a gun in non-play settings could have much more serious consequences. For example, there are many incidences of children fatally shooting others with a real gun presuming it was a toy (Solnick & Hemenway, 2019). In fact, “unintentional shooting deaths by children [in the US] increased by nearly one-third comparing incidents in March to December of 2020 to the same months of 2019” (Aftermath, 2022, p. x). Considering these cultural differences, it is important to assess whether Disney, Marvel and Star Wars engagement will statistically predict levels of weapon play in a UK sample.

6.1.2 Violence and Weapon Use in Disney, Marvel, and Star Wars Media

The extent to which Disney, Marvel and Star Wars media promotes violence and may therefore be associated with weapon play in the current study will be considered. According to a content analysis of Disney animations released between the years of 1937 and 2000, the use of weapons such as guns, swords and explosives was uncommon and only a small percentage of violent acts were accepted i.e., laughed at, or encouraged, by other characters (Everhart & Aust, 2006). This is supported by chapter four of this thesis, as aggression accounted for a small proportion of the behaviour displayed by the protagonists analysed. Further, indirect aggression which was defined as "any behavior that is intended to hurt another person by using psychological or social means" (Coyne & Whitehead, 2008, p. 386) was largely represented as unacceptable in Disney animations, according to the authors. However, "good characters that used indirect aggression did so many times in response to a bad character's actions" (Coyne & Whitehead, 2008, p. 393) meaning that it was often perceived to be justified. As a result, indirect aggression may be perceived to be appropriate based on the messages within Disney content, although whether indirect aggression is predicted by Disney, Marvel and Star Wars media will not be assessed in the current study. Additionally, physical violence and weapon use is minimally present in Disney media (Coyne & Whitehead, 2008; Everhart & Aust, 2006) meaning that engagement with the Disney franchise is unlikely to be predictive of weapon use.

Conversely, unlike chapter four, chapter five of this thesis found that violence was prevalent in Marvel and Star Wars media and seemed to be particularly celebrated and deemed heroic in the former. Similarly, in a master's dissertation project, it was found that violence tends to be rewarded at similar rates when it was

displayed by male and female Marvel superheroes and they “were rewarded for their violence in 34% of the violent scenes” (Ray, 2020, p. 24). The researcher acknowledged that the rewards coded were very specific, and only violent scenes lasting more than two minutes were coded, which means that the rate of rewarded violence could truly be higher. Similarly, in the Star Wars franchise, violence is considered the “primary vehicle for redemption. The ultimate victory of good over evil always boils down to firing laser blasters, detonating bombs, or slicing through one's enemies with a light saber” (Stone, 1999, p. 10). This therefore implies that there are positive connotations to the violence displayed in the Star Wars franchise as well as the Marvel franchise, because it enables the protagonists to overcome villains. According to social cognitive theory (Bussey & Bandura, 1999), this may increase children’s motivation to replicate this behaviour themselves. This may also be true of weapon play and weapon usage as both franchises have weapons associated with some of their most popular heroes. For example, Thor has his hammer, Iron Man has his repulsors, Hawkeye has his bow and arrow, and the Jedi predominately use light sabres. There are many toys associated with these weapons available to purchase for children’s play. Considering the research above that finds that there is some (albeit mixed) evidence that exposure to weapon use and violence in media can impact children’s future outcomes (Huesmann, 2003; Huesmann et al., 2021; Smith et al. 2018), it is important to consider whether engagement with the Marvel and Star Wars franchises relates to weapon play.

6.1.3 The Link Between Engagement with Superhero Media and Gender Stereotypical Behaviour

Along with the potential predictive relationship of engagement with the Disney, Marvel, and Star Wars franchises on children’s levels of weapon play, the current

study will also assess whether such engagement predicts gender stereotypical behaviour more broadly. As the previous chapters of this thesis have discussed, both theory (Bussey & Bandura, 1999) and empirical research (Coyne et al., 2014; Coyne et al., 2016; Coyne et al., 2021b, Coyne et al., 2022; Golden & Jacoby, 2018) support the notion that the portrayal of gender in media consumed by children impacts their behaviour and attitudes. Moreover, although no studies have investigated the relationship between engagement with Star Wars and Marvel media specifically, Coyne et al., (2014) found that engagement with superhero media predicted masculine behaviour in pre-school aged boys in the US (but not girls) and higher levels of weapon play for both boys and girls. Additionally, superhero media exposure in early childhood has been related to the endorsement of a muscular body ideal (Coyne et al., 2022) likely due to the hypermasculine appearance of male superhero characters, consisting of muscular upper bodies and large shoulder to waist ratios (Burch & Johnsen, 2020). Further, when wearing superhero costumes, boys made more masculine-typed toy preferences and displayed less prosocial behaviour (Coyne et al., 2021b). Overall, engagement with superhero media seems to have a relationship with children's conceptualisation of gender, their gendered traits, and behaviours, as well as their toy preferences, particularly prominently in males.

Considering the research above, it is possible that the current study will find that the relationship between Marvel, and possibly Star Wars media engagement will be stronger in boys than girls. However, such research has been conducted in the US, meaning that examining this within a UK sample will provide further insight into the phenomena. Additionally, it is important to note that to the best of the researcher's knowledge, no research has investigated the link between engagement

with the Marvel and Star Wars franchises and children's gendered behaviour – as the previous research drawn upon above has discussed the impact of superhero media more broadly. Considering the findings of chapter five of this thesis, i.e., that stereotypical masculine traits are remarkably evident in the Marvel and Star Wars franchises, as well as the previous research discussed above, such research is warranted and necessary.

6.1.4 The Link Between Engagement with Disney Media and Gender Stereotypical Behaviour

As stated in previous chapters, engagement with Disney princess media has been associated with feminine traits in young girls. For example, girls tend to twirl and be fixated on their appearance and clothing when engaging in princess play (Golden & Jacoby, 2018) and both boys and girls have higher levels of feminine traits after a one-year period, when their Disney princess engagement is high (Coyne et al., 2016). This is perhaps unsurprising given that Disney princesses have been found to display high rates of feminine behaviours (England et al., 2011), a notion that is further evidenced in chapter four of this thesis, and, as social cognitive theory (Bussey & Bandura, 1999) suggests, this is likely to be replicated by children exposed to such messages.

However, the predictive relationship between Disney princess engagement and children's behaviour over a five-year period seems to be in unexpected directions. For example, princess exposure was associated with less adherence to traditional gender roles associated with hegemonic masculinity in boys and girls (Coyne et al., 2021a). Princess engagement was also not associated with lower body esteem, something that was against researcher's predications given the relatively consistent thin body-ideal portrayed in the franchise (Coyne et al., 2021a).

Why the associations found in previous research with short follow-up periods conflicts with the longer longitudinal research remains relatively unclear. It could be that some of the progressive representations of modern Disney princesses that have been identified by previous researchers (e.g., Hine et al., 2018b) have been impacting these associations in more recent years. Alternatively, it could be that the relationship between princess culture and children's behaviour and attitudes becomes weaker the older they become. Perhaps in later childhood, other (non-princess) media engagement increases, and the relationship with Disney princess media and gendered attitudes is lessened as a result. Further, as with research that has investigated the link between Marvel and Star Wars media and children's behaviour, it is important to note that all the research that has investigated the implications of Disney engagement on children's gendered traits has utilised US samples meaning that is necessary to investigate this phenomenon in UK samples also.

6.1.5 Parental Mediation

The research discussed so far in this chapter generally finds evidence that there is an association between superhero and princess media and children's gendered traits, and mixed relationships between media violence (which is high in Marvel and Star Wars content) and levels of violence and weapon use in children. As such, it is important to consider some factors that may minimise these relationships and parental mediation is thought to be such a concept (Coyne et al., 2014). Parental mediation suggests that parents can purposefully act as buffers between their children and the media their children consume. In other words, "parents utilize different interpersonal communication strategies in their attempts to mediate and mitigate the negative effects of the media in their children's lives" (Clark, 2011, p.

325). Parents may utilise active parental mediation, i.e., they may discuss media content with their child(ren) such as the desirable or undesirable behaviour being displayed by characters, or the themes/messages being perpetrated, (Collier et al., 2016; Valkenburg et al., 1999). Alternatively, or perhaps additionally, parents may restrict their child's consumption of certain television shows or films, and/or set viewing rules in a process referred to as restrictive mediation. Co-viewing, where a parent engages with media alongside their child (i.e., watches a film with them) but does not discuss its content is another type of parental mediation.

In a review of parental mediation research, active mediation seemed to lead children to be less vulnerable to some of the negative effects associated with media viewing, such as displaying aggression, using substances and sexual outcomes in adolescence (Collier et al., 2016). Further, Nathanson et al., (2002) found that parents engaging in active mediation by challenging gender stereotypes in media can lead children to endorse fewer gender stereotypes themselves. Encouragingly then, it seems as though parental mediation can be a protective buffer between children's engagement with stereotyped content and its effects. However, the effect sizes of parental mediation on media-associated risks tended to be very small, according to a recent meta-analysis (Chen & Shi, 2019). Further, there is some evidence to suggest that parental mediation is informed by the child's tendencies such as hyperactivity and emotional needs (Beyens et al., 2019) suggesting that parental mediation is a complex phenomenon. Further, in more recent years, research focusing on parent's mediation of internet use (for example, Symons et al., 2017 and Livingstone & Helsper, 2008) and mobile devices (for example, Beyens & Beullens, 2017) seems to be increasing in frequency as they are becoming more

prominent in family homes. With this trend in research as well as family life, it is unclear whether mediation of television media remains a priority to parents.

The current research will investigate whether parental mediation moderates the relationship between engagement with the Disney, Marvel and Star Wars franchises on children's gendered traits and weapon play, as previously considered by Coyne et al., (2014). However, the current study will utilise a scale that assesses the three types of parental mediation outlined above and will utilise the total score as a parental mediation latent variable. This will broaden the type of parental mediation that is considered in the current study, when compared with Coyne et al., (2014).

6.1.6 Limitations of Previous Research

The current study aims to build on the previous research conducted by Coyne et al., (2014), and, by doing so, address some of its limitations. For example, although Coyne et al., (2014) considered whether engagement with superhero media predicted children's gender stereotyped play and weapon play, only one item was utilised to measure superhero media engagement in the study. The item read:

> "How often does your child watch television shows or movies (including DVDs) portraying superheroes (like the ones depicted above?)". Responses for this single-item measure were indicated on a 7-point Likert scale (0 = "never",6= "2–3 times a week")" (Coyne et al., 2014, p. 421).

Measuring the concept of superhero engagement with one item is may not sufficient especially when considering that superheroes are usually part of entire franchises that consist of much merchandise, meaning that children can be engaging with a large variety of items related to superhero media, beyond television shows or films. To build on the single-item engagement scale utilised by Coyne et al., (2014), the current study will include a greater number of engagement items. Specifically, items will ask parents to report how often their child watched television shows or films of

each franchise, how much they play with toys or games associated with each franchise (including electronic ones), how often they interact with merchandise from each franchise, and how much they speak about each franchise. Creating such a scale should provide a more accurate depiction of how much children engage with each franchise than the previous single-item measure. Additionally, the scale will have an additional point of ‘more than three times a week’ as it seems feasible that there will be some children who engage with the franchises more frequently than two or three times a week, which the previous study does not account for.

Secondly, in the previous study, the authors utilised twelve items of the Pre-School Activities Inventory (Golombok & Rust, 1993) to measure the extent to which children had gender stereotypical attributes. However, the original scale consists of twenty-five items. It is not clear as to why only a selection of items were utilised in the previous study, therefore, the current study intends to utilise all the items within the Pre-School Activities Inventory to capture the full gender stereotypical behavioural profile of the participants. Similarly, parental mediation was measured with three items in the original study. However, the current study will utilise a full parental mediation scale to accurately capture this potentially complex phenomenon. The current study aims to account for each of the limitations highlighted in this section. Further details of the measures utilised can be found in the method section of this chapter.

6.1.7 Research Aims

Overall, this research aims to expand upon the study conducted by Coyne et al., (2014) by examining whether engagement with the Marvel (rather than superhero media more broadly) Disney and Star Wars franchises predicts levels of stereotypically masculine behavioural profiles and weapon play. It will then consider

whether parental mediation and exposure to television violence are moderating variables in those predictive relationships. Focusing on children's engagement with the Marvel franchise rather than superhero content more broadly reflects this project's focus on the messages in, and impact of, Disney owned media. Disney acquired Marvel in 2009 and Star Wars in 2012, likely to capture a male audience more effectively than their own content may have been. However, little is known about the influence of these franchises on children's gendered behavioural profiles, a gap in knowledge that this study seeks to address.

Further, the extent to which engagement with the Marvel, Star Wars and Disney franchises predict gendered profiles and weapon play in a replication of Coyne et al., (2014) is particularly warranted, as the original study utilised a US sample. Conducting a replication in the UK will provide further insight into the relationship between these variables. As previously stated, this may be particularly true of the predictive relationship between the franchises and weapon play. An item on the weapon play subscale asks parents to report how frequently their child plays with toy guns or uses objects as guns as part of their play. Guns are more widely owned and relatively easy to obtain in the US, whereas in the UK stringent licensing means relatively few people own firearms and this difference may influence the reported levels of weapon play. Therefore, it is important to examine whether Marvel and Star Wars engagement will predict weapon play in a society where guns are less culturally acceptable, or whether the legalisation of guns in the US effected the results of the weapon play variable in the previous study.

The current study will also utilise a greater age range of participants than the original study conducted by Coyne et al., (2014). This is important because theories of gender development such as cognitive-developmental theory posited by Kohlberg

(1966, as cited by Bussey & Bandura, 1999) state that children's conceptualisations of gender, including their ability to label their own and other people's gender and understand that gender is constant and stable across time, develops in several stages. This means that at different ages across childhood, children's level of motivation to adhere to gender norms may fluctuate, relative to their current stage of gender cognition. Therefore, by capturing a wide age range of participants in the current study (between ages four and eleven), children across all gender developmental stages are considered. Arguably, this means that the results of the current study will be more generalisable as the sample will not consist exclusively of children whose gendered behaviour may be heavily defined by a particular stage of gender development.

6.1.8 Research Question and Hypotheses

Study three aims to answer the broad research question: Does engagement with the Disney, Marvel and Star Wars franchises predict children's gendered behaviour and weapon play? The current study will test several specific hypotheses, listed below.

Engagement with each Franchise and Masculine Typed Behaviour

H1: Engagement with the Marvel, and Star Wars franchises will positively predict masculine typed behaviour.

H1A: Engagement with the Disney franchise will negatively predict masculine typed behaviour.

Engagement with each Franchise and Weapon Play

H2: Engagement with the Marvel and Star Wars franchises will positively predict weapon play.

H2A: Engagement with the Disney franchise will not predict weapon play.

Gender Differences in the Predictive Relationships

H3: There will be gender differences in the predictive relationship between engagement with the Marvel, Disney and Star Wars franchises and masculine typed behaviour.

H4: There will be gender differences in the predictive relationship between engagement with the Marvel, Disney and Star Wars franchises and weapon play.

Moderating Relationships

H5: Parental mediation will moderate the relationship between engagement with the Marvel, Disney and Star Wars franchises and masculine typed behaviour, and weapon play.

H6: Exposure to TV violence will moderate the relationship between engagement with the Marvel, Disney and Star Wars franchises and weapon play.

6.2 Method

6.2.1 Design

The current study is a correlational design aimed at assessing whether there are predictive relationships between engagement with the Disney, Marvel and Star Wars franchises and stereotypically gendered behaviour and weapon play, as well as whether parental mediation and television violence moderates those relationships. The survey was designed and distributed to participants through the online platform named Qualtrics.

6.2.2 Participants

6.2.3 Recruitment

11 schools local to the University of West London (UWL) campus were contacted by the researcher. Initially, an email invitation with the study information was sent. It was made clear that to support the study, the schools would simply be asked to disseminate the Qualtrics survey link to parents of children that attend their school. These emails were followed up with phone calls on two further occasions by the researcher, and once by the principal supervisor. None of the schools contacted were willing to support the study. As a result, the principal supervisor of this PhD approached the Executive Deputy Headteacher of Green Oaks Federation in Hartley Wintney, UK which consists of two schools, Oakwood Infant School and Greenfields Junior School as he had personal contact with the organisation. After the information of the study had been shared, the federation agreed to take part. The UWL offsite ethics form was signed by the Executive Deputy Head of the federation and ethical approval was gained from UWL Ethics Committee on 14th December 2021.

The time one data was collected between 17th December 2021 and 31st January 2022 (approximately six weeks of data collection). The time two data was collected between 9th May 2022 and 11th July 2022. This was to ensure that there would be approximately three months between the closing date of the first wave of data collection and the opening of the second wave of data collection. However, only 34 participants completed the survey at time two therefore the second wave of data was disregarded. The time one data only was analysed and is reported below.

6.2.3.1 Participant Information

108 parents participated in the survey at time one. 89 mothers completed the survey (82.4%) versus 19 fathers (17.6%). Parental age ranged from 25 to 54 years (M = 39.41, SD = 5.91). 75.9% of parents reported that they were married or in a Civil Partnership. 16.7% were living with a partner, 6.5% were single or not living

with a partner and 1 (.9%) chose the prefer not to say. 64.8% of parents had a bachelor's degree or a higher degree. Most parents were working either full (44.4%) or part-time (38.9%). 13.9% said they did not work and 2.8% chose to not specify. 39.8% of parents reported a household annual income of between £30,001 and £80,000 and 40.7% reported a household income of more than £80,000. 59 of participants identified their child as male and 49 participants identified their child as female. The children's ages ranged from four to eleven years (*M* = 6.88, *SD* = 2.09). The majority of parents identified their child as white (93.5%), 2.8% identified their child as mixed, or a multiple ethnic group and 1.9% identified their child as Asian or Asian British.

6.3 Materials

6.3.1 Engagement with the Marvel, Disney, and Star Wars Franchises

The Marvel, Star Wars and Disney engagement scales were expanded from Coyne et al., (2014) to ensure that engagement with the entire franchises, rather than just television and film content, was measured. Each scale consisted of four items that assessed children's engagement with television shows and films associated with each franchise, such as 'How often does your child watch Disney television shows (such as *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse*) or films (such as *Lion King* and *Beauty and the Beast*)?'. Further items assessed the frequency children engaged with toys or games associated with each franchise, merchandise of each franchise, as well as how frequently their child talked about each franchise or characters within it which was deemed indicative of their interest. The scale was scored from never = 0 to more than three times a week = 7. The current study added a Likert response for 'more than three times a week' as it seemed possible that children could be engaging with the media more frequently than between two or three times a week,

especially considering that the items were assessing engagement with various media forms, rather than just TV or film media. Cronbach's Alpha for Star Wars engagement scale was .93. Cronbach's Alpha for Disney engagement was .88. Cronbach's Alpha for Marvel engagement was .94 meaning all had high internal reliability.

6.3.2 Gender Stereotypical Behaviour

The Pre-School Activity Inventory (Golombok & Rust, 1993) was utilised to measure gender stereotyped behaviour. The scale was from 1 = never to 5 = very often for the masculine items such as 'How often in the past month has your child played with trains, cars, or airplanes'. Items for the stereotypically feminine activities, toys or characteristics were reversed scored (i.e., the scale became 5=never to 1= very often). An example of a reverse scored item was 'How often in the past month has your child played with dolls, dolls' clothes or a doll's carriage'. This means that the higher the score on this scale, the higher the masculine typed behaviour. Cronbach's Alpha for the Pre-School Activity Inventory was acceptable at .86.

6.3.3. Weapon Play

Two items from the Pre-School Activities Inventory (Golombok & Rust, 1993) were utilised to form the weapon play subscale as per Coyne et al., (2014). These items asked parents to report how frequently their child played with toy guns and toy swords, or utilised items as toy guns and toy swords. The scale ran from 1 = never to 5 = very often. Higher scores indicated higher weapon play. Cronbach's Alpha for weapon play was .81

6.3.4 Parental Mediation

Parental mediation was measured utilising the scale designed by Valkenburg et al., (1999), and was scored from 0 = never to 3 = often. An example item was

‘How often do you try to help the child understand what he/she sees on TV’. There is no reverse scoring in this measure. A total parental mediation score is calculated and utilised as the parental mediation variable for analysis. Higher scores indicated higher levels of parental mediation and Cronbach’s Alpha was .82 for the scale.

6.3.5 Television and Film Violence

As per the original study, this study asked parents to report their child’s favourite television shows (as well as films). The parents were provided with a description of violence, which was taken from previous research (Anderson et al., 2003, p. 83; Coker et al., 2015, p. 85), and the World Health Organisation (2020) and was thus deemed to be valid. The parents were asked to rate their child’s favourite television shows and films for their levels of violence utilising a Likert scale from 1 = ‘none at all’ to 7 = ‘very high amount’, the same scale utilised in the original study. There was no reverse scoring for this measure, therefore higher scores indicated higher exposure to television and film violence. Cronbach’s Alpha for television and film violence was .75

6.4 Procedure

The survey was an ‘other report’ design in that it asked parents to report their child(ren’s) Star Wars, Marvel, and Disney engagement; gendered behaviour; the level of violence in their children’s favourite TV shows and films; their levels of weapon play, as well as their levels of parental mediation utilising Likert Scales. The study largely built upon the work conducted by Coyne et al., (2014) and was designed to be longitudinal. Parents were informed that they would be asked to complete the same survey twice, between three and six months apart. However, the study suffered high participant drop out between time one and time two meaning that longitudinal analysis was not possible.

The parent report survey was designed and disseminated to parents of children aged between four and eleven years via Qualtrics. The link to the Qualtrics survey was sent to the Executive Deputy Headteacher of Green Oaks Federation and was emailed to parents on several occasions, as prompted by the supervisor of the current project, and the researcher. Repeat circulation of the survey link was required to ensure adequate participant numbers. Upon opening the survey, parents first saw the study information sheet and were required to tick boxes indicating they had read the information and were providing their informed consent. The researchers contact details were provided and participants were encouraged to ask any questions they may have had via email. Participants were informed that they would be debriefed after they had completed the second wave of data collection. The scales described above were then completed by the parents, after their informed consent was obtained. The debrief informed parents that the study had been investigating the impact of their child's engagement with the Disney, Marvel and Star Wars franchises on their children's *gendered* behaviour, rather than their general behaviour, as stated in the information sheet.

6.5 Results

6.5.1 Gender Differences Between Each Scale

Independent sample t-tests were conducted with gender as the independent variable to establish whether there were gender differences in the results of each of the scales. The results showed that there is a significant difference between boys' and girls' engagement with the Star Wars t (106) = 4.30, $p < .001$, Marvel t (102.97) = 7.01 $p < .001$, and Disney t (106) = 3.91 $p < .001$ franchises. The means suggested that males Star Wars engagement (M = 8.61 SD = 7.62) and Marvel engagement (M = 14.17, SD = 8.77) was higher than females Star Wars (M = 2.86,

SD = 6.27) and Marvel (M = 4.10, SD = 6.09) engagement. However, girls' engagement with Disney was higher (M = 16.24, SD = 6. 58) than the boys' (M = 11.07, SD = 7.08). This, therefore, supports the notion that the Star Wars and Marvel franchises are more attractive to boys, and the Disney franchise is more attractive to girls. Additionally, there were also significant differences in boys' and girls' gender stereotyped play *t* (85.39) = 11.11, p < .001, with boys being higher in masculine behaviour (M = 90.59, SD = 8.42) than girls (M = 68.47, SD = 11.65). Lastly there was a significant difference between boy's and girl's levels of weapon play *t* (105.43) = 6.17, p < .001 with boys scoring higher (M = 5.69, SD = 2.21) than girls (M = 3.37, SD = 1.70). There were no gender differences in parental mediation *t* (106) = .736, p > .05, or exposure to television violence *t* (106), 1.87, p > .05.

6.5.2 Engagement with the Marvel, Star Wars and Disney Franchises on Stereotypically Masculine Play Behaviour

A linear regression revealed that stereotypically masculine play behaviour was significantly positively predicted by Marvel β = .487, p < .001 and Star Wars β = .267, p < .001 engagement and negatively predicted by Disney β = -.268, p < .001 engagement. The model was significant *F* (1,18) = 12.70, p < .01. and predicted 46.9% (R squared adjusted) of variance. The beta coefficients suggest that engagement with the Marvel franchise is the largest predictor of stereotypically masculine play behaviour. Although engagement with the Star Wars and Disney franchises were almost as equally as strong predictors of stereotypically masculine play behaviour, the direction differed, with Disney engagement being a negative predictor and Star Wars being a positive one. This suggests that as both Star Wars and Marvel engagement increases, stereotypically masculine play behaviour also

increases. Conversely as Disney engagement increases, stereotypically masculine play behaviour decreases.

When the sample was split by gender of the child the model was significant for females, F (3, 45) = 7.20, $p < .001$ and it predicted 27.9% of the variance in stereotypically masculine behaviour. The beta coefficients suggested that only Marvel engagement significantly predicted stereotypically masculine behaviour in females, $\beta = .503$, $p < .01$, while Star Wars $\beta = .109$ $p > .05$ and Disney ($\beta = -.113$, $p > .05$) engagement did not. Additionally, the model was not significant for males, F (3, 55) = 2.03, $p > .05$ and only Star Wars engagement significantly predicted stereotypically masculine behaviour $\beta = .285$, $p < .05$, while Disney, $\beta = -.096$, $p > .05$ and Marvel engagement, $\beta = .131$ $p > .05$ did not.

6.5.3 Engagement with the Marvel, Star Wars and Disney franchises on Weapon Play

A linear regression revealed that weapon play was significantly predicted by Star Wars $\beta = 252$, $p < .01$ and Marvel engagement $\beta = .409$, $p <.001$ but not Disney engagement $\beta = -.097$, $p > .05$, as predicted. The model was significant F (3, 104) = 15.79, $p < .001$ and predicted 29.3% of the variance in weapon play. The beta values suggest that the Marvel franchise is the largest predictor of weapon play, followed by the Star Wars franchise.

When split by child's gender, for girls the model remained significant F (3,45) = 5.73, $p < .01$ with 22.9% (R squared adjusted) of variance predicted. However, only Marvel engagement significantly predicted weapon play in girls, $\beta = .579$, $p < .001$. For boys, the model was also significant F (3, 55) = 2.78, $p = .05$, however only 8.4% (adjusted R squared) of variance was predicted and according to the beta

coefficients, only Star Wars engagement significantly predicted weapon play in boys, $\beta = .312$, $p < .05$.

6.5.4 Are the Relationships Between Disney, Marvel and Star Wars Engagement and Stereotypically Masculine Behaviours Moderated by Parental Mediation?

Three models utilising Hayes PROCESS macro were tested to assess whether the predictive relationships of Disney, Marvel and Star Wars engagement and male stereotyped play were moderated by parental mediation. The results revealed that the predictive relationship between Disney engagement and masculine typed play was not moderated by parental mediation b= .0065, $t = .24$ $p > .05$. Similarly, the predictive relationship between Marvel engagement and masculine typed play was not moderated by parental mediation b= -.0257, $t = -1.26$, $p > .05$. However, the results revealed a negative and significant moderating effect of parental mediation on the relationship between Star Wars engagement and male stereotyped behaviour, b= -.0728, $t = -2.66$, $p < .05$.

6.5.5 Are the Relationships Between Disney, Marvel and Star Wars Engagement and Weapon Play Moderated by Parental Mediation?

To test whether parental mediation moderates the predictive relationships between Disney, Marvel and Star Wars engagement and weapon play three models were tested with weapon play as the outcome variable. The results revealed that none of these relationships were moderated by parental mediation. The predictive relationship between Disney engagement and weapon play was not moderated by parental mediation, b= -.0002, $t = -.05$, $p > 0.5$. Secondly, the predictive relationship between Marvel engagement and weapon play was not moderated by parental mediation b=-.0023, $t = -.67$, $p > .05$. Lastly, the predictive relationship between Star

Wars engagement and weapon play was not moderated by parental mediation, b=-.0066, *t* = -1.42, p > .05.

6.5.6 Are the Relationships Between Disney, Marvel and Star Wars Engagement and Weapon Play, Moderated by TV violence?

To test whether television violence moderates the predictive relationships between Disney, Marvel and Star Wars engagement and weapon play three models were tested with weapon play as the outcome variable. Firstly, the predictive relationship between Star Wars engagement and weapon play was moderated by television violence, b=-.0103, *t* = -2.37, p < .05. Secondly, the predictive relationship between Disney engagement and weapon play was not moderated by television violence, b=.0031, *t* = .73, p > .05. Thirdly, the predictive relationship between Marvel engagement and weapon play was not moderated by television violence, b=-.0047, *t* = -1.47, p > .05.

6.6 Discussion

6.6.1 The Relationship Between Marvel, Star Wars and Disney Engagement and Females Gender Stereotypical Behaviour

Although when the data from the entire sample were analysed, it was found that Marvel and Star Wars engagement significantly predicted higher masculine behaviours and Disney engagement predicted lower masculine behaviours, there were important gender differences. For example, when the data was split by child's gender, only Marvel engagement significantly predicted stereotypically masculine behaviour in females. It is likely that because both male and female superheroes tend to display stereotypically masculine traits (Baker & Raney, 2008, also supported by study four of this thesis), girls who are identifying with superheroes of either

gender will be more likely to identify and replicate masculine traits, behaviour, and play styles themselves (Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

Such findings conflicted with the results obtained from Coyne et al., (2014), who found that ‘superhero’ engagement more broadly did not predict girls’ gendered behaviour. However, Coyne et al., (2022) found that there were few gender differences in the effects of superhero media and the endorsement of hegemonic masculinity. That more modern research finds that girls attitudes (Coyne et al., 2022) and behaviours (as suggested in this study) are predicted by superhero and Marvel exposure respectively could reflect that Marvel have developed the Marvel Rising franchise which consists of television series, comic books and merchandise that features predominantly female protagonists. If the female protagonists within *Marvel Rising* have similar traits to those of the Avengers, as analysed in chapter five of this thesis, this could explain how engagement with the Marvel franchise predicts higher levels of masculine behaviour in females. This could also explain why the effect of superhero media was prevalent in boys and girls in the more recent study conducted by Coyne et al., (2022) as the series was released between the two waves of data collection. Indeed, the representation of the female superheroes in *Marvel Rising* portrays that “Disney has clearly decided to continue taking on shifting notions of female prominence in American society and moved toward emphasizing strong, assertive female characters” (Stevens & St. John III, 2020, p. 389), traits that are usually associated with masculinity. Additionally, the number of leading female characters has also increased in Marvel films (Ray, 2020). Perhaps then the relationship between girls’ Marvel engagement and higher masculine behaviour reflects that since it was acquired by Disney, the franchise is producing content and

merchandise with a higher number of female protagonists that contradict traditional gender norms.

However, wearing a superhero outfit did not influence young girls' toy preferences or prosocial behaviours while the opposite was true for boys (Coyne et al., 2021b) which partially conflicts with the current findings. This suggests that while Marvel media does seem to have an influence on young females broader gendered behaviours as evidenced by the current study, as well as their attitudes about masculinity (Coyne et al., 2022), this is not the case for more specific gendered constructs such as prosocial traits and toy preferences. Perhaps assessing broader gendered behavioural profiles is important in understanding the relationship between engagement with Marvel media and its female audience.

Interestingly though, Star Wars engagement did not predict stereotypically masculine behaviour in girls despite their being elements of stereotypical masculinity identified in the franchise (Bettis & Sternod, 2009; Bruin-Molé, 2017; Moran, 2019). Chapter five of this thesis found there were strong female figures present in the *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) series, however, they were not exclusively displaying masculine gender norms – they were stereotypically gendered in some nuanced and subtle ways. Therefore, if young girls are identifying with such characters, it would perhaps make sense that their engagement with the franchise would not predict their behaviours as their gendered portrayals combine feminine and masculine norms. Further, although in more recent years Star Wars has featured female leading protagonists such as Rey in its live-action films, she has notably been missing from much of the merchandise, and her narrative has been criticised for mirroring previous male-centric storylines (Scott, 2017). The current study's findings could reflect that not only are females engaging with the Star Wars

franchise at relatively low rates, and at lower rates than boys, but the franchise may not be creating and promoting female characters that are genuinely captivating a young female audience.

That Disney engagement did not significantly negatively predict masculine behaviour of girls was particularly surprising considering previous research finds that Disney princess engagement predicts more feminine behaviour (Coyne et al., 2016; Golden & Jacoby, 2018). Based on such research, it is likely that if the current study had specified Disney princess engagement should be reported, a relationship would have been found. However, the current study did not specifically ask parents to report Disney *princess* engagement but engagement with Disney as an entire media conglomerate. This meant that the relationship between engagement with the whole corporation and children's behaviour could be investigated rather than engagement with the Disney princess franchise specifically, which has been assessed more frequently. However, a study examining the long-term associations between Disney princess engagement and endorsement of stereotypical gender roles over a five-year period yielded non statistically significant results (Coyne et al., 2021a). The current study then perhaps adds to this research by finding no statistical evidence of a predictive relationship between engagement with the Disney franchise on girls' gendered behaviour – however, a follow-up period would have added further insight to the current findings.

6.6.2 The Relationship Between Marvel, Star Wars and Disney Engagement and Males Gender Stereotypical Behaviour

In the current study only Star Wars engagement significantly predicted stereotypically masculine behaviour in boys and Marvel engagement did not. Such findings conflict with Coyne et al., (2014) who found that superhero engagement did

predict masculine behaviour in boys. Why this was not the case in the current study requires speculation. It is possible that culturally, boys in the UK are less invested in superhero media, or that they do not identify with such characters as strongly as boys in the US. Additionally, Bussey and Bandura (1999) suggest that “the extent to which they [i.e., children] learn the details of the styles of behavior and become proficient at them depend[s] on their perceived efficacy to master the modeled activities” (Bussey and Bandura, p. 687). Perhaps the males in the current sample felt that they are more able to model the masculinity portrayed in the Star Wars franchise than the Marvel franchise. This may be because the masculinity portrayed in the Star Wars franchise was considered multifaceted in chapter five of this thesis – meaning that, although there were themes of stereotypical masculinity present, it was not the only portrayal of masculinity shown. For example, there were more emotionally significant conversations being had in the franchise which could have created a more attainable masculinity that may have led to young boys being able to identify with such characters more easily and feel more capable to reproduce the behaviour portrayed by them. Further, that many Star Wars protagonists feature in plotlines where they are fighting against governments rather than being in elevated social positions with high status could mean that boys may be more likely to believe that they can replicate such behaviour, whereas the elevated status of Marvel superheroes may mean that boys do not believe they have the capacity to reproduce the behaviours portrayed therein.

Alternatively, that Marvel engagement did not predict masculine play behaviour in boys could be accounted for by the relatively unrepresentative sample utilised in the current study (which will be discussed further in the limitations section of this chapter). Over 90% of participants in this study identified their child as white

which is higher than the 84.8% of the UK population identified as such in the 2019 census which was published in 2021 (Office of National Statistics, 2021). Additionally, the participants reported relatively high household incomes which may also be unrepresentative of the UK population more broadly. Perhaps if a more eclectic and diverse sample was obtained, a relationship between Marvel engagement and boys' stereotypically masculine behaviours would have been found. Further, it has been noted in the introduction of this chapter that in some educational settings, weapon and superhero play is discouraged (Holland, 2000; Mechling, 2008). It is possible that even though engagement with the Marvel franchise was higher than engagement with the Star Wars franchise (according to the means obtained), boys have learned that their own behavioural profiles should not reflect those of Marvel characters. Perhaps the current study could have asked parent and teacher perspectives on play based on Marvel heroes to establish whether such play is being actively discouraged in boys. This would have shed further light on this null finding.

Additionally, perhaps it was less likely that a predictive relationship between Marvel media and boys masculine behaviour would be found because of the more complex measure of children's engagement implemented in the current study. The scale asked parents to report the extent to which their child spoke about Marvel, and how frequently they engaged with Marvel merchandise and toys, as well as how much they engage with television and films associated with the franchise. This means that it was possible for children to have scored relatively highly for Marvel engagement without consuming the television or film content frequently. If this is the case, boys may appear to have high levels of Marvel engagement but be relatively unexposed to the behavioural profiles being perpetrated by Marvel protagonists

which would mean that such characters are less likely to be influential on their own behavioural profiles. Although the scale was designed to consider engagement with the whole media franchises studied, perhaps to obtain a more direct assessment of the extent to which children are being influenced by Marvel *characters*, it would have been more useful to assess the extent to which children are being exposed to Marvel superhero behavioural profiles only.

It is also possible that boys' Marvel engagement did not reflect their exposure to the television or film media because much Marvel content is rated as suitable for ages twelve years and above, meaning that parents may disallow their children from consuming it. Further, because there was a wide age range of children in the current study when compared to the previous study conducted by Coyne et al., (2014), it is possible that the older children may have had more exposure to Marvel content than the younger children. This could mean that the findings of the younger and older children effectively counterbalanced each other meaning that when the sample of boys is treated as a whole group, there was no relationship found. It is possible that if the sample was split both by age and gender, or if a larger sample was utilised a predictive relationship may have been found.

6.6.3 Weapon Play

As predicted, it was found that Star Wars and Marvel engagement but not Disney engagement predicted weapon play in the current sample. This can be largely explained by the fact that Disney animations tend to have minimal direct violence (Everhart & Aust, 2006) and the opposite seems to be true of Marvel (Ray, 2020) and Star Wars (Stone, 1999) media. The characters in Marvel and Star Wars seem to be rewarded for aggression and weapon use as this enables them to defeat villains, arguably meaning that it is glorified. Previous research has found that

children engaging with media containing weapon violence are more likely to touch and pull the trigger of guns (Chang & Bushman, 2019; Dillon & Bushman, 2017). Therefore, because violence and weapon use are pervasive in Marvel and Star Wars media, the predictive relationship between engagement with the franchises and weapon play was expected. However, it should be noted that the current study did not explore the long-term associations between engagement with Marvel and Star Wars media and weapon play. There is empirical evidence that engagement with violent media in childhood predicts weapon carrying and associated arrests in the long-term (Huesmann et al., 2021). Therefore, the findings of the current study – that there is a relationship between engagement with these franchises and weapon play, may be particularly concerning. Conversely, in conflicting research, Smith et al., (2018) suggest that weapon play seems to correlate minimally with criminality later in life. Therefore, the extent to which there are long-term associations between Marvel and Star Wars media and weapon play requires further research.

Further, it is implied in previous research, such as Mechling (2008), that weapon play is or could be predominately an issue for boys. Undeniably, in the current research, weapon play rates were higher in boys than girls, however, engagement with the Marvel franchise predicted weapon play in girls only. This suggests that girls are also vulnerable to the prevalence of weapon usage in media they consume. Therefore, weapon play should not be considered a wholly ‘male’ problem.

It is unclear as to why engagement with the Marvel franchise predicted girls’ levels of weapon play, but Star Wars engagement did not, and why the opposite was true for boys. Both franchises have high rates of weapon usage (Ray, 2020; Stone 1999), and more male than female protagonists for children to identify with (Baker &

Raney, 2009). However, it is possible that weapon play is more pervasive in the Marvel franchise meaning that girls may identify and be emulate such behaviour, despite the franchise having more male than female superheroes. It is also possible that because there is much weapon-based merchandise associated with the Marvel franchise, engagement with the franchise as a whole rather than just the television or film media, leads to higher weapon play in female fans. Engagement with the Marvel franchise not predicting weapon play in boys was unexpected, based on social cognitive theory of gender development (Bussey & Bandura, 1999) and previous research (Coyne et al., 2014). The null finding reflects the non-significant predictive effect of boys' level of Marvel engagement and gendered behaviour which was also against expectations. Therefore, perhaps, the sampling constraints earlier discussed were influential here also. Further, it is also possible that parents underreported their children's level of weapon play if they perceived such play to be problematic, adhering to social desirability bias (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2018; Gentile et al., 2012). Perhaps an observational study or self-report directly from children would have better captured this phenomenon.

Although weapon play was reported in the current study, it was measured with two items of the Pre-School Activities Inventory which asked parents to report how frequently their child played with guns or used object as guns, and how often their child played with swords, or used objects as swords. Therefore, little is known about *how* reported weapon play was enacted. If the children were utilising weapon play to discuss, and create scenarios with each other, as suggested by Heikkilä (2021) then the association between Marvel and Star Wars engagement and weapon play could be perceived as a positive outcome, as such skills are deemed important for development. This may be particularly true considering the nature of

the media that this study focused on, as although aggression was incredibly prevalent, it facilitated the positive intention of heroes protecting wider society from antagonists who were threatening it (Cingel et al., 2020). Perhaps a more nuanced assessment of the weapon play that the Star Wars and Marvel franchises predicted is required before a judgement on the extent to which this is problematic is needed.

Overall exposure to television violence only moderated the predictive effect of Star Wars engagement and weapon play. Why this was not the case for Marvel engagement is unclear. It could be that children who had engaged with Star Wars also happened to engage with higher levels of television violence beyond the franchises measured. However, it is possible that television violence could have been another predictor of weapon play in children, although this was not assessed in the current study. Perhaps then, future research could assess whether television violence was a predictor of stereotypically gendered play and weapon play, as well as assess whether it was a moderator.

6.6.4 Parental Mediation

The hypothesised moderation of parental mediation on the relationship between engagement with each of the franchises and weapon play was not observed. Similarly, Coyne et al., (2014) found that there was little evidence that active parental mediation reduced levels of weapon play, although suggested that, “mediation may actually enhance the effects of children’s exposure to superhero programming on weapon play for frequent viewers of superhero programming (at least for girls)” (Coyne et al., 2014, p. 427). This suggested that further research was necessary to assess this phenomenon, although in the current study, it remained that parental mediation did not moderate the relationship between engagement with each of the franchises and weapon play in children. Additionally, parental mediation

did not moderate the relationship between engagement with the Disney and Marvel franchises, however, it negatively and significantly moderated the relationship between Star Wars engagement and stereotypically masculine behaviour. Previous researchers have commented that parental mediation studies tend to have small effect sizes (Chen & Shi, 2019). Therefore, that no moderation was found in the majority of the relationships assessed in the current study is perhaps, not unusual. It is possible that peer mediation rather than parental mediation may have been more impactful to children. Nathanson (2001) found that peer mediation had a stronger influence than parental mediation in an adolescent sample. However, the extent to which this could be the case in younger samples could be investigated, particularly as in childhood, preference for peers versus adults is increasing relatively quickly (Ellis et al., 1981 as cited by Leman et al., 2019). Perhaps peer mediation would have been influential if it was assessed within the context of the current study.

However, it is also important to acknowledge that the current study did not ask parents to report the levels of parental mediation they utilised with the franchises that this study focused upon, but their parental mediation of media their children consumed more generally. Perhaps an edited version of the parental mediation scale could have been utilised in the current study to directly assess parents' mediation of the specific franchises this study focused upon in order to provide greater insight. Further, the current study did not ask parents to report their levels of parental mediation with media high in aggression, weapon usage, or gender stereotypes. Therefore, it is possible that if parents were asked to report their levels of mediation with such media, a moderation effect may have been found. Additionally, Symons et al., (2017) suggested that quantitative parental mediation measures, although insightful, inevitably do not capture the full nature of parental mediation and

qualitative research provides evidence that parents' mediation strategies were more complex than the measures capture. Therefore, it is also possible that capturing parental mediation qualitatively as well as quantitatively would have provided more of an insight into the nature of such strategies utilised by parents in order to better understand the lack of a moderation between engagement with the Disney, Marvel and Star Wars franchises, gender stereotypical behaviour and weapon play. Perhaps future research could build on the current study by utilising this strategy.

6.6.5 Implications

The current study, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, is the first to establish predictive relationships between engagement with the Marvel, Star Wars and Disney franchises and children's gendered behaviour and weapon play, providing insight in an underexamined area in the literature. Further, the study provided important insights into the gender differences in the relationships between engagement with Disney, Marvel, and Star Wars media and gendered behaviour and weapon play displayed by children. This research is impactful as it provides evidence that engagement with American franchises statistically predicts the behaviour of children in the UK, which was relatively unclear previously. Further research that is not restricted to US samples is therefore warranted. As a result, the findings should be communicated to parents, educators, and children alike, so that the existing relationships between engagement with these franchises and children's behaviour can be widely known, and caregivers can have the opportunity to make informed decisions about their children's engagement with them. Further, children should be made aware of these research findings so that they can become more critical viewers of media that they are likely to be engaging with.

The findings of the current study could also be utilised by the producers of the Marvel and Star Wars franchises in order to facilitate positive change in their gendered portrayals. For example, the results imply that the gendered messages in the Star Wars franchise are the most statistically impactful to young boys, and engagement with this franchise was significantly higher in boys than girls. Therefore, in order for boys' behaviour to be potentially influenced positively, the Star Wars franchise may be the most appropriate franchise to target, whereas this is true for the Marvel franchise and young girls. Therefore, the current study provides insight into how the producers of Marvel and Star Wars content can use their media portrayals to facilitate some potentially positive change, in gender specific ways. Perhaps it will be important for more androgynous male characters to be presented in the Star Wars franchise, for young boys, and more androgynous and genuinely valued female characters to be presented in the Marvel franchise for the benefit of young girls. However, this is not to say that producers of media from these franchises should disregard their impact on all genders, and on children more broadly, particularly when there were significant predictive effects of engagement with the Marvel and Star Wars franchise when the whole sample (not split by gender) was assessed. Therefore, the current study provides evidence that the producers of popular media franchises could aim to potentially influence children in more positive ways in the future.

6.6.6 Limitations

There were several limitations to the current study. Firstly, it was intended to be a replication of Coyne et al., (2014). However, due to very poor retention rates between time one and time two data collection points, longitudinal follow-up analysis was not possible in the current study. This is a limitation as it means that it is not

possible to assess whether the predictive relationships between engagement with the Disney, Marvel and Star Wars franchises and children's gendered behaviour and weapon play will be present long term. It is possible that because the participants were invited to take part in the second wave of data collection approximately three months after they had participated in the first wave of data collection, they may have had low motivation to complete the survey again. Perhaps to minimise the poor retention rates of this study, future research could utilise a longer follow-up period to minimise the potential response fatigue and increase parental motivation to complete the same survey twice. Perhaps a minimum of six months or a year is needed to retain parental involvement. Additionally, future researchers could provide both physical and electronic copies of the surveys as having more than one way to take part in this study may have boosted participant numbers at time one and time two. This was not possible in the current study design as the COVID-19 pandemic meant that there was resistance to face-to-face contact that would have been required when exchanging the questionnaires. Perhaps vouchers could have also been provided as a parental incentive. Although the planned longitudinal element of this study was not possible, it is important to recognise that this study did still address an important gap in knowledge by investigating the predictive nature of engagement with influential children's media franchises on their behaviour, in a UK sample which has, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, not been achieved previously.

A second limitation of the current study is the use of parental report measures. As chapter three of this thesis has already explored, parental report design is vulnerable to response biases (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2018; Gentile, et al., 2012). It is possible that parents reported their children's behaviour, their levels of media engagement, and their own involvement in media monitoring in line with how

they want to be perceived, rather than striving for accuracy (Gentile, et al., 2012), which is a significant limitation. In the future, research could combine parental reports with other methodologies to achieve data triangulation. For example, observational research could obtain more direct assessments of children's gendered behaviour and/or interview methodology could be utilised to directly examine children's understanding how their engagement with the franchises is associated their conceptualisations of gender. However, as previously stated, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not possible to conduct research that required direct contact with participants which severely limited the methodology that could be implemented. Despite the use of parental report measures being a limitation of the current study, it was a practical solution to the unprecedented circumstances.

Although the use of parental report design is a border limitation to this study, there are also more specific limitations to the measures that were implemented. For example, the Pre-School Activities Inventory (Golombok & Rust, 1993) was originally designed to be a measure of gendered behaviour, traits and activities for children aged between approximately two-and-half and five years old, which is lower than the mean age reported within the current sample (M = 6.88). This could mean that the measure did not appropriately capture the nature of children's gendered behaviours within the current study. The measure also asks parents to report their children's behaviour, traits, and activities within the last month. This means that the results capture the nature children's behaviour in a restricted time-period, rather than the behaviour they display more consistently. Although it was important that this study utilised the same measure of gendered traits implemented within Coyne et al., (2014), a more appropriate measure could have been utilised.

Additionally, the survey required parents to report their children's three favourite television shows and films and subsequently identify the level of violence they perceived within them. This approach replicated Coyne et al., (2014), however it is possible that parents would not be explicitly aware of their children's three favourite television shows and films or have adequate knowledge of the violence portrayed within them. This is a limitation as it is possible that the results obtained in this section of the survey could be inaccurate. (It is also possible that parents did not accurately report the violence in the media their children engage with due to social desirability bias, as considered more broadly above). Indeed, several parents dropped-out of the survey at this point, suggesting that they either did not have adequate knowledge to answer these questions, or the questions were too demanding. Further, the Likert scale response for these items was from 'none at all' to 'a very high amount' which may be subjective. Although the decision made to implement these survey items was motivated by the need to largely replicate Coyne et al., (2014), perhaps adaptations could be made to both the Likert scale and the items in future research.

A final limitation is that the sample was obtained from one federation which means it may not be generalisable to the wider UK population. Specifically, the parents of the children in this study were relatively high earners and the majority of the children were identified as white. This is a significant limitation to the current study, and in psychology more broadly, where "Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic" (Nielsen et al., 2017, p. 31) populations make up a disproportionate number of study samples. However, effort was made to recruit participants from more than one school with the aim of obtaining a more representative sample. This was not possible as several schools were contacted but

were unwilling to support participant recruitment. Perhaps if this research is to be replicated outside of the COVID-19 pandemic, recruitment of schools would be more successful and data could be collected from a more diverse sample, ideally, across several schools. This limitation will be drawn upon and discussed more extensively in chapter seven.

6.6.7 Conclusion

The current study was the first to establish that there are relationships between engagement with Marvel, Disney and Star Wars media and children's gendered behaviour and weapon play, in a UK sample. The initial findings suggested that Marvel and Star Wars engagement were positive predictors of stereotypically masculine behaviour and Disney engagement was a negative predictor of stereotypically masculine behaviour. However, when splitting the sample by child's gender, only Marvel engagement positively (and significantly) predicted young girls' masculine behaviour and only Star Wars engagement positively (and significantly) predicted boys' masculine behaviour. These trends were mirrored with weapon play – only Marvel engagement predicted weapon play in girls, and only Star Wars predicted weapon play in boys. Although since Disney's acquisition of the Marvel and Star Wars franchises there has been more female leading protagonists in both, the current study perhaps provides tentative evidence that the latter has done so less successfully – with lower engagement and no significant effects in female audiences found. However, perhaps the Marvel franchise has been more successful in this regard. Disney engagement being a non-significant predictor of gendered behaviour when the sample was split by child's gender was particularly surprising. Perhaps this reflects the array of 'Disney' media available i.e., there are numerous Disney television channels with both animated and live-action content, and many

animated and non-animated Disney films, which means that it is likely a corporation with diverse gendered messages. However, because much academic focus has been on the gendered messages within the Disney princess franchise, and the animated feature length films more broadly (as discussed in previous chapters of this thesis) it is difficult to comment further.

Overall, that these franchises predict behaviour displayed in both boys and girls provides further evidence that the producers should feel the responsibility of creating content with positive role models, particularly as the current study utilised a UK sample, providing evidence for their impact beyond the US where they are produced. Perhaps, this, along with previous studies (Coyne et al., 2014; Coyne et al., 2016; Hine et al., 2018b; Golden & Jacoby, 2018) should be presented to the Disney corporation, in the hope of inspiring a change in the content it produces and distributes. In the meantime, academics should continue to investigate the relationships between engagement with media containing gendered messages and children's behaviour, as well factors beyond parental mediation, such as peer mediation, that may mitigate them in the hope of better informing parents, educators, and children.

Chapter Seven: Discussion and Conclusions

Overall, this thesis had two broad aims. Firstly, it aimed to examine the gendered portrayal of male and female protagonists in influential media produced and owned by the Walt Disney Corporation, namely, influential Disney animated feature length films, and Marvel and Star Wars television content rated as age appropriate for young children. Secondly, it aimed to examine the relationship between engagement with each of those franchises and children's gendered behaviours and traits. Previous research had found that there were many gender stereotypical messages within the Disney feature length animations, although much of this work had focused predominantly on the Disney princess animations (England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018a; Towbin et al., 2004, Primo, 2018; Dundes, & Streiff, 2016; Streiff & Dundes, 2017a; Streiff & Dundes, 2017b). When compared with the quantity of research investigating the portrayal of gender in Disney animated feature length films, there were far fewer examinations provided in relation to the Marvel and Star Wars franchises, despite them being widely successful, and importantly, recently acquired by the Walt Disney Corporation. Further, some research had established that the portrayal of highly feminine female Disney protagonists seemed to encourage young girls to replicate such behaviour themselves (Coyne et al., 2016; Golden & Jacoby, 2018), in line with social cognitive theory (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). However, much less was known about the relationship between the portrayal of male Disney protagonists and boy's gendered behaviour. Additionally, no studies had considered the relationships between children's engagement with the Marvel and Star Wars franchises and children's gendered behaviour, despite those franchises being more targeted towards boys (Wu, 2021; Koushik & Reed, 2018). Overall, the academic focus on gendered messages within Disney content and its

impact have both been more focused on female targeted media. This led to four research questions being established which were: How is gender portrayed in influential Disney feature length films? How is gender portrayed within a Marvel animated television series? How is gender portrayed within a Star Wars animated television series? Does engagement with the Disney, Marvel and Star Wars franchises predict children's gendered behaviour and weapon play?

Put simply, the current research aimed to address these gaps in existing knowledge by reassessing the portrayal of gender in Disney princess animations with an expansive framework of behaviours and applying such a framework to some Disney animations beyond the princess franchise also, in chapter four. Chapter five aimed to investigate the portrayal of male and female protagonists in Marvel and Star Wars content utilising thematic analysis to obtain a much-needed detailed and nuanced assessment. Chapter six aimed to examine the link between engagement with the Disney, Marvel, and Star Wars franchises and children's gender stereotypical behaviour and weapon play, while considering parental mediation and exposure to television violence as potential moderating variables. The first section of this chapter is a summary of the main findings from the current research, in line with its aims and research questions. The second section of this chapter will explore the implications of the current research, and the final section will consider the limitations and overall conclusions of this thesis.

7.1 Summary of Main Research Questions and Findings

(i) How is gender portrayed in influential Disney feature length films?

Study one addressed the first research question of how gender is portrayed in Disney feature length films both within and beyond the Disney princess franchise.

Specifically, it aimed to examine this in Disney animations with leading human, adult, male protagonists. As well as considering an extensive array of protagonists, study one aimed to assess whether male and female protagonists were portrayed to be stereotypically masculine, feminine, or gender-neutral, by utilising a wide-ranging coding scheme of fifty-two codes, in a quantitative content analysis. Results revealed that both male and female Disney protagonists were higher in feminine than masculine traits overall, and gender-neutral behaviour was much less prevalent than the gender-typed behaviours. Further, female protagonists in animations released between 1937 and 1959 were the most stereotyped, i.e., highest in feminine traits, with the later females being lower comparatively in feminine behaviour in line with previous assessments (Hine et al., 2018a). Although this change is notable, it remained the case that the females in the ‘middle’ and ‘modern’ era of Disney animations (the latter consisting of protagonists in films released between 2009 and 2021) were still higher in feminine traits than masculine or gender-neutral ones. However, the portrayal of male protagonists had remained more stable over time although with some evidence that ‘modern’ men were higher in gender-neutral traits than their earlier counterparts. Overall, the findings suggested that there was some persistent stereotyping of female protagonists, and less stereotyped representations of male protagonists in Disney animated feature length films.

(ii) How is gender portrayed within a Marvel animated television series?

(iii) How is gender portrayed within a Star Wars animated television series?

Study two addressed the second and third research questions by examining the portrayal of male and female protagonists in Marvel’s *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) television series, and Star Wars’ *Star Wars Rebels*

(Filoni et al., 2014-2018) series. The study conducted a thematic analysis based on both Braun and Clarke (2013) and Towbin et al., (2004). The results revealed that the portrayal of gender in *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -2019) was largely in line with traits of stereotypical masculinity (Connell, 2005) and 'lad culture' (Phipps & Young, 2015; Whelenhan, 2000). For example, both the male Avengers and Black Widow (the only female analysed) spoke almost exclusively through banter and tended to avoid sincere or emotionally charged conversations. There were also incredibly high rates of aggression and weapon use shown and male characters were incredibly muscular which reflected their physical performances with them often showing strength and athleticism. However, Widow was physically strong and present in battles but had a remarkably different physical representation with a slim, petite frame. She was also absent for a substantial amount of the series, making her feel like an add-on rather than a genuinely valued teammate. Additionally, characters' flaws were also in line with masculine norms – for example, anger was seen as a highly detrimental emotion when it was not controlled, and characters had to constantly prove their worth to each other, in line with the concept of 'manhood' being earned (Vandello & Bosson, 2012). Further, vulnerabilities were shown when characters were not in 'costume' reinforcing the notion that in order to be super, such vulnerabilities needed to be, quite literally, masked.

The results for *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) showed that although the masculinity could sometimes be 'toxic' (Harrington, 2021), with emotional repression and aggression being common, there was more room for vulnerability. Facing fears and past traumas were seen as an essential strength. The female protagonists in *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) were also more genuinely valued when compared with *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 -

2019). The females in the former were consistently present and had important roles. Hera was the crew's pilot and Sabine was an explosive expert with important knowledge. However, the portrayal of Hera also had stereotyped connotations as she was seen as a mother figure (McGucken, 2020) and the leader of a domestic space. Overall, there was a theme of gender(ed) cooperation established which reflected that although the male and female crewmates work together effectively, there were some gendered representations. For example, only males could utilise The Force and were therefore in more 'important' battles with higher status villains. There were also heteronormative undertones, suggesting romantic pursuits were inevitable in a mixed-gendered team.

The results obtained from study two thus revealed that there was much gender stereotyping prevalent in the Marvel and Star Wars franchises. It was discussed that the portrayal of male protagonists in the Marvel franchise might be particularly detrimental to young boys, considering the stereotypical masculinity portrayed was high in aggression, emotional suppression, and the constant need to earn respect. Alternatively, there was more nuanced representations of male protagonists in *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018). It was notable that the portrayal of male protagonists in Marvel and Star Wars content was remarkably different to that of the more feminine male protagonists in the Disney franchise. This could provide evidence that Disney acquired these franchises due to their inherently different content that presumably, is likely to appeal to a different market as a result – young boys and men (Wu, 2021; Koushik & Reed, 2018).

(iv) Does engagement with the Disney, Marvel and Star Wars franchises predict children's gendered behaviour and weapon play?

Study three utilised studies one and two as background in order to examine whether engagement with the Disney, Marvel and Star Wars franchises predicted gendered stereotypical behaviour and weapon play, as well as whether parental mediation and television violence moderated those relationships. It built on the work conducted by Coyne et al., (2014) who established predictive relationships between superhero media engagement and boys' and girls' masculine traits and weapon play. It was expected that Disney engagement would be related to lower levels of masculine behaviour (Coyne et al., 2016) and that engagement with the Marvel and Star Wars franchises would positively predict masculine behaviour and weapon play (Coyne et al., 2014). It was also expected that the former predictive relationship would be more prominent in females, and the latter would be more prominent in males, considering the target audiences seem to be gendered. The study utilised parent report data to examine the research aims.

The findings revealed that when the whole sample was considered, Disney engagement did negatively predict masculine play, and Star Wars and Marvel engagement did positively predict masculine play. However, when the sample was split by gender, it was found that only the Marvel franchise significantly positively predicted stereotypically masculine play and weapon play in girls, and only Star Wars franchise engagement positively predicted stereotypical play and weapon play in boys. Further, parental mediation did not moderate any of the relationships, against the researcher's expectations. Television violence moderated the relationship between Star Wars engagement and weapon play only. These results were important for several reasons. Firstly, they established that engagement with the particular franchises discussed throughout this thesis are indeed associated with children's behaviour. Previous research had only established that engagement with

Disney princess media (Coyne et al., 2016; Golden & Jacoby, 2018) and superhero media (Coyne et al., 2014) was associated with higher rates of feminine behaviour. Secondly, it established that the franchises were influential to a UK sample. Thirdly, it established that there were some unexpected gender differences in the influence of these franchises which could have theoretical implications that will be discussed below. Lastly, it established that parental mediation may not be the best way to minimise the relationships found between engagement with the Disney, Marvel and Star Wars franchises and children's gendered behaviour and weapon play. Perhaps future research should examine whether peers or educators may be influential in mitigating these relationships.

7.2 Theoretical Implications and New Research Directions

Overall, this thesis has established that taking a broader approach in conceptualising the media included in studies that focus on the gendered portrayals within and the potential influence of 'Disney' media is important. As previously stated, such research has largely been focused on the Disney princess franchise (Coyne et al., 2016; Dundes, & Streiff, 2016; England et al., 2011; Golden & Jacoby, 2018; Hine et al., 2018a; Primo, 2018; Streiff & Dundes, 2017a; Streiff & Dundes, 2017b), making the current understanding of the portrayal of gender within the Disney corporation relatively narrow. By expanding on the media analysed, this thesis has provided evidence that there are some stereotypical depictions of male and female protagonists in other Disney owned franchises. This is important for several reasons. Firstly, the Marvel and Star Wars franchises are particularly attractive to boys and men (Wu, 2021; Koushik & Reed, 2018). Therefore, establishing that the male protagonists within those franchises adhere to masculine gender norms and stereotypes was important in order to understand the messages

that young boys are exposed to from Disney owned content. Additionally, the themes within the Marvel and Star Wars franchises were likely to be different to those of the Disney franchise meaning it was also important to establish the portrayal of their female protagonists. Taking this broader approach in analysing the messages within the Disney corporation also allowed for its impact to be considered more fully. That the messages within the Marvel and Star Wars franchises were seen to predict gendered behaviours and weapon play practiced by children provides evidence that considering these franchises in such research was important and necessary. Therefore, continuing to broaden the scope of 'Disney' research – whether that be investigations of the messages within the media itself, or their association with children's behaviour, will enable the corporation to be understood more completely.

Future researchers should continue to expand the scope of their research, in line with the approach taken in this thesis, to ensure that they are adding to the current understanding of these phenomena. Perhaps conducting a quantitative content analysis that considers the portrayal of leading male and female protagonists within Star Wars and Marvel television series could be conducted for example, possibly utilising the same framework of behaviours established in study one of this thesis so that statistical comparisons could be drawn between the gendered portrayals within those franchises, and Disney feature length animations. This would facilitate a more direct comparison between the messages within the Disney, Marvel and Star Wars franchises and highlight the differences in gendered portrayals within them more fully. If such an approach was to be taken, targeting Marvel and Star Wars media that study two did not analyse may be particularly influential in generating new knowledge, particularly as the franchises span many media and protagonists. Therefore, analysing the portrayal of gender in television series that

this thesis did not focus upon would allow for the gendered portrayals of more protagonists within the franchises to be understood. Perhaps *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* and *Marvel Battle World* could be analysed for example as these are also animated series rated as appropriate for viewers aged six years and above.

Additionally, to build on the current understanding of the link between children's engagement with Disney owned franchises and their behaviours, perhaps different research methodologies could be utilised to capture children's perspectives more directly, such as focus groups. This could be extended to parents to capture their perspectives on how age appropriate they believe Marvel and Star Wars content to be in comparison to Disney content and perhaps how or whether they mediate their children's engagement with these specific franchises. As well as expanding the knowledge of research examining the gendered portrayals within the Disney corporation, such research would contribute to the media effects discipline more generally.

Further, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to analysing media content could also be important for future research. Conducting a quantitative content analysis allowed previous work of England et al., (2011) and Hine et al., (2018a) to be built upon particularly by applying a more expansive framework of behaviours and in particular, including some gender-neutral traits. This provides evidence that quantitative analysis expanding on those already established in previous research can be impactful because previous limitations can be mitigated. Additionally, the qualitative approach in the second study of this thesis allowed for an in-depth appraisal of a relatively unresearched phenomenon. Therefore, this provides evidence that to obtain the knowledge needed, researchers should be flexible in their use of both quantitative and qualitative research methods, as the

mixed methods approach of this thesis is a substantial strength. Further, conducting a thematic analysis on one Marvel and one Star Wars television series allowed a transparent analytic method to be applied to media content which is arguably sometimes not achieved to the same degree in previous studies, as discussed in chapter three of this thesis. Therefore, the current study provides a useful framework, along with the work of Towbin et al., (2004), of how to practically conduct a successful thematic analysis on media. This is a positive implication as thematic analysis is more commonly applied to interview or focus group data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The approach taken in study two could therefore be adopted by future researchers, potentially answering the call for more transparency in qualitative analyses of media content (Krippendorff, 2018). Overall, the current thesis should encourage researchers to apply both quantitative and qualitative approaches when analysing gendered messages in media.

The third study of this thesis contributed to the literature by assessing how engagement with the Disney, Marvel and Star Wars franchises influences children's behaviour, which had not been achieved previously. That such findings had statistically significant results suggests that such research was warranted and necessary as relationships exist between engagement with these franchises, and children's gendered behaviours and weapon play. Further, the study revealed that parental mediation was not a moderating factor in the predictive relationships established, which was also an important finding as it suggests that researchers should perhaps consider other potential moderators. For example, the potential impact of peer mediation should be explored (Nathanson, 2001) as peers are influential social agents to young children and it is possible that peer influence is particularly impactful in how engagement with media influences children's play, given

it is peers that children are likely to be predominately playing with. Additionally, previous research has found that embedded mediation, that is, messages within the media children are consuming itself, can also reduce the potential impact of violent media (Shany & Yablon, 2021). Investigating this further would also provide substantial insight into how the producers of Disney, Marvel and Star Wars could improve the portrayals of their protagonists. This concept leads into a consideration of some of the broad practical implications of this thesis.

7.3 Practical implications

The findings of this thesis suggest that producers of Disney, Marvel and Star Wars media and children's media more broadly should feel a social responsibility to create content for children that is likely to encourage positive behaviour (Giroux & Pollock, 2010). The association between children's engagement with the Marvel and Star Wars franchises and their levels of weapon play (which is supported by previous work such as Coyne et al., 2014 and Huesmann et al., 2021) is a potentially problematic outcome and this alone suggests that the producers of such content should be more aware of the link between the messages within their media and children's behaviour, and perhaps change the content of future media they produce as a result. For example, the levels of aggression and weapon use in Marvel and Star Wars media that is specifically targeted towards young children should be reduced. Although the narratives depend on resolving conflicts between heroes and villains, perhaps for the animated content targeted towards young children, this should be presented less violently, and less prevalently. Perhaps if violence and weapon use were to be presented in the Marvel and Star Wars franchises at as high rates as they are currently, the producers could be educated on how to utilise embedded mediation (Shany & Yablon, 2021) within the narratives to articulate in the

media itself that violence and weapon use are not acceptable in ‘everyday’ life. This would potentially allow for the narratives to undergo less change, but act as a buffer between the media and children’s behaviour. For this to be achieved, future research should more fully assess the concept of embedded mediation and examine more precisely how it can be successfully implemented into children’s media. For example, investigating the language and phrases that may be utilised would allow this to be communicated to, and implemented by, media producers effectively. Additionally, such research would create an even stronger case to present to media companies as it would provide further insight into how and what messages they can incorporate into the media they produce, to reduce potentially problematic relationships with children’s behaviour.

Additionally, guidelines could be created that specify the appropriate level of violence and weapon use that can be presented in children’s media. Such guidelines could quantify the amount of violence that can be shown per episode, perhaps suggesting that only one fight scene should be included, and the use of weapons should be removed or kept minimal, possibly with each character utilising a weapon only once per violent scene. Although the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) provides age ratings for television and film content, they do not quantify the expected levels of violence and aggression or refer to the perpetration of gender stereotypes in their definitions. The rating of Universal (U), as the name implies, suggests that the content is suitable for all ages. It states that “potentially dangerous or anti-social behaviour which young children may copy must be clearly disapproved of. No emphasis on realistic or easily accessible weapons” (British Board of Film Classification, rating U, p.x). Additionally, “violence will generally be very mild. Mild violence may be acceptable if it is justified by context (for example, comedic,

animated, wholly unrealistic)" (British Board of Film Classification, rating U, p.x). For the PG rating, which suggests that content is suitable for ages eight and above, it is stated that "violence will usually be mild. However, there may be moderate violence, without detail, if justified by its context (for example, history, comedy or fantasy)" (British Board of Film Classification, rating PG, p.x). These ratings based on 'mild' or 'very mild' violence are vague, and in the future, more detailed guidance about the quantity of aggression that can be shown in children's media rated as U and PG should be implemented as this would be more beneficial to children and parents when identifying age appropriate media to consume. It would also encourage media producers to be more mindful about the quantity of violence their media contains.

Further, the ratings of U and PG guidelines should be applied across media platforms. Disney+ for example rates *Avengers Assemble* (Buckley et al., 2012 - 2019) and *Star Wars Rebels* (Filoni et al., 2014-2018) as suitable for ages six and above making the expected level of violence in such media potentially unclear if children and parents usually make their media viewing decisions based on the ratings of U and PG (and interestingly, Disney+ is not listed as one of the media streaming platforms that the BBFC works with, while Amazon Prime and Netflix are explicitly mentioned; British Board of Film Classification, 2020). For example, will media rated as 6+ have 'very mild violence' and 'no emphasis on realistic or easily accessible weapons' or 'mild violence…. Justified by context'? To make this clear, the version of Disney+ available in the UK should comply to the standards of the U and PG rating systems.

Inevitably, even if new content was produced in line with more rigid guidelines, older (Star Wars and Marvel) media would still be widely available and could continue to be consumed by children. Perhaps the research findings of this

thesis could initiate a change in the advertising and descriptions of children's media. For example, Marvel and Star Wars content targeted towards children could come with a warning that it contains high levels of violence and weapon use. Additionally, based on the findings of this thesis and other research (England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018a; Towbin et al., 2004, Primo, 2018; Dundes, & Streiff, 2016; Giroux & Pollock, 2010; Streiff & Dundes, 2017a; Streiff & Dundes, 2017b) this could be implemented for content that is high in gender stereotypical messages (such as Disney, Star Wars and Marvel media). This would be an efficient way to inform parents of the messages in the media their children are engaging with and enable them to make informed decisions about whether they would like their child to be exposed to such messages. Currently, there do not seem to be any such messages associated with children's content on Disney+, the streaming service where Marvel, Star Wars, and of course, Disney content is widely accessible for viewers. Implementing warnings could also be extended to television channels that show Marvel, Star Wars and Disney content, as well as other children's media channels that show content with similar themes.

Additionally, an educative programme should be designed and implemented into primary schools whereby children are trained to be more critical viewers of media content they consume. The BBFC currently has materials that are utilised in Personal, Social, Health and Economics (PSHE) lessons that provide children information about the age rating system of television and film content. These sessions provide detail about what children should expect from media rated as PG or U. Perhaps the current research could be utilised by the BBFC to develop an additional lesson that facilitates more critical viewing of media. For example, the lesson could inform children that Disney, Marvel, and Star Wars media seems to

predict gendered behaviour and weapon play based on the findings of this thesis and other research in the area. Then, to foster critical thinking, perhaps clips of content that is particularly stereotyped or aggressive could be shown to children participating in the programme and they could be encouraged to discuss other behaviours that could have been shown by the protagonists in those scenarios. For older primary school children, perhaps this could be more developed, and ask them to discuss why gendered and aggressive messages are being perpetrated in media, and why this could be problematic. Parents should be informed by the schools that these sessions are taking place, and the information provided to the children should be adapted and made available to parents perhaps in physical form (handouts or leaflets could be provided to parents through their children) as well as online. An online portal could be created where parents are able to view the content their children are utilising in the sessions and have a more developed and detailed section that is designed for their use and guidance. This could include links and/or QR codes that direct parents to the BBFC website so that they can read the content at their own leisure. Such a programme would increase awareness of the predictive effects found in this thesis and provide the opportunity for them to be utilised to initiate positive change.

7.4 Theoretical Implications

7.4.1 Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development

The expected findings of study three; that the Marvel and Star Wars franchises would be the strongest predictors of boys gendered behaviours and weapon play, and that Disney engagement would be the strongest predictor of gendered behaviours in girls were supported by social cognitive theory of gender development (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). However, this was not supported as girls' gendered behaviour was not predicted by Disney engagement, and boys' gendered

behaviour was predicted only by Star Wars engagement (and not Marvel engagement). This could have implications for the concept of gendered modelling the theory posits. The concept of modelling suggests that children attend to and replicate the behaviours displayed by same sex models more than they do other-sex models. Specifically, the theory states that:

> "When exposed to multiple male and female models who command power or not, children model their behavior after social power and same-sex status of the model (Bussey & Bandura, 1984). However, when instructed to reenact the various behaviors displayed by the male and female models, there were no gender differences in acquisition as a function of either sex status of the model or power differential" (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 688).

This implies that children acquire information from models of both genders but suggests that they would be more likely to be influenced by a model of the same sex and higher status in spontaneous settings, i.e., where they are not instructed to display certain behaviours. However, boys' gendered behaviours were not predicted by engagement with the Marvel franchise which suggests that they did not perceive the superheroes to be appropriate models even though most of them are males with high status. This is also true of the non-significant predictive relationship between Disney engagement and young girls' behaviour. Perhaps this theory over-emphasises the same-sex modelling that takes place. Alternatively, perhaps children attend to gendered information from media portrayals of male and female protagonists in different, less gender specific ways, than they do for models in their direct environment. However, the theory assumes that modelling from media portrayals and the child's direct environment occur in the same way, yet it is plausible that children attend to media and 'real-life' models differently, particularly as cognitive capabilities are required to process information from media, including abilities to follow story lines.

Research conducted by Kibbe et al., (2018) suggested that children as young as four years old perceive stories from several genres as fictional even when they are based on possible and realistic events. Further, children rated fantasy narratives as less possible than realistic ones. Perhaps then, the fact that there was no relationship between Marvel engagement and gendered behaviours displayed by boys suggests that children are less likely to identify with characters in stories that they perceive to be unrealistic and unlikely to represent their reality. Although this would account for some of the non-significant results of study three, it still fails to explain why narratives with a higher number of males in unrealistic settings would influence young girls and not young boys. Perhaps the results of this thesis provide evidence that more research is needed to understand how children attend to models in mass media more broadly, and whether this is related to their understandings of genres.

7.4.2 Gender Schema Theory

The findings of study three may also have implications for gender schema theory (GST). The theory posits that as children gain information from their environment related to gender differences and roles, they develop internal cognitive structures to organise and retain such information (Bem, 1981). Children will develop a schema relating to boys and men, and a schema relating to girls and women. For example, if a child repeatedly sees and hears females being nurturing towards others, this is likely to be assimilated as a trait appropriate for females and ‘nurturing’ will be a quality omitted from the child’s male gender schema. However, GST is more concerned with theorising the process of information assimilation rather than content that might be assimilated. According to the theory, “sex-typed individuals are seen as processing information in terms of and conforming to whatever definitions of

masculinity and femininity the culture happens to provide" (Bem, 1981, p. 356). Therefore, individuals with developed gender schemas are considered to be sex-typed and are likely to behave in accordance with the schemas they have developed:

> "links between gender schemas and the child's own behaviour are presumed to occur *through selective attention to and memory for own-sex relevant information and through motivation* to be like same-sex others" (Leman et al., 2019, p. 402, emphasis added).

Therefore, it is implied that the sample of children in study three were sex-typed because boys were higher in masculine traits than girls, suggesting they would have been likely candidates for being influenced by media portrayals that were, presumably reinforcing their existing masculine and feminine, or male and female schemas. Research has established that both Disney characters (Hine et al., 2018a) and superhero media are sex-typed by children (Dinella, 2017), i.e., the former are considered to be 'for girls' and the latter is considered to be 'for boys'. GST would suggest that because Marvel protagonists are masculine, engagement with such media would have led boys to behave in accordance with this information. Similarly, that the Disney protagonists are highly feminine, and this would presumably fit with girls' understanding of their female gender schema, they would be likely to portray more feminine behaviour as a result. However, such predictive effects were not established. This theory also fails to explain why Marvel media predicted masculine behaviour in girls as it is highly likely that the messages obtained from this media were against the content of their female gender schema.

It is possible that despite the children in the sample being 'sex-typed' i.e., males being higher in masculinity than females, they were from households or families that aim to reduce their child's exposure to gender stereotypes more broadly. The theory states that

> "not everyone becomes equally sex typed, of course, and individual differences presumably derive from the extent to which one's particular socialization history has stressed the functional importance of the gender dichotomy" (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 362).

Perhaps the parents in the current sample actively socialise their children to be exposed to less stereotyped portrayals of males and females. Although this is possible, it is potentially incongruent with the notion that the boys in the current sample were higher in masculine traits than girls. Perhaps that there were no predictive effects of boys' engagement with the Marvel franchise and girls' engagement with the Disney franchise reflects that there is a lack of motivation or attention paid to the media portrayals in these franchises. However, further investigation would be necessary to establish whether this is the case. Overall, the results of the current thesis cannot be clearly explained by GST and seems to raise questions about its assumptions.

7.5 Limitations of the Current Research

There are a number of methodological limitations to the current research. Many of these reflect the adaptation of this research programme due to the national lockdowns imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, the programme had to become more focused on the gendered messages in the franchises examined rather than their impact on children more directly due to school closures and social distancing measures which were in place during dedicated data collection time. More specifically, as discussed in chapters three and six, this impacted the methods utilised in study three of the thesis. Study three utilised parent report which is a substantial limitation as other-report designs are vulnerable to social desirability bias, meaning that the results obtained may reflect how parents desire themselves and their children to be perceived. Before the pandemic had taken hold, the current research programme had planned to conduct focus groups with children, providing

them the opportunity to discuss their perspectives of the representations of male and female protagonists in Disney, Marvel, and Star Wars media. Further, play observations had been planned whereby children were to be provided with an array of Disney, Marvel and Star Wars dressing-up outfits and toys, and their gendered interactions would be objectively measured. Such research was simply not possible, however, should be conducted in the future.

Additionally, the sample obtained in study three consisted of predominantly middle-class, high earning parents who identified their children as white (over 90%). All the participants were recruited through one federation, consisting of two schools (one infant school, and one junior school). The attempts made to recruit more schools were discussed in chapter six, however, the sample obtained is a significant limitation as it is unlikely that it is generalisable to the broader UK population. Future researchers should aim to obtain a more diverse sample. Particularly, data should be obtained from children of families with more varied socioeconomic backgrounds by considering the educational level of parents as well as their household income as potential indicators of this. In the current sample, a substantial number of participants reported their annual household income was above £80,000 which reflects a high socioeconomic status. However, children from families with lower socioeconomic status (SES) may engage with more media due to a lack of parental resources to facilitate other activities that may come with a financial cost. This seems to be the case for adolescent males but not females (Chowhan & Stewart, 2007), a curious result, but one that suggests that SES may be an important consideration in examining the impact of media, and one that is likely to be applicable to children. More specifically, it is possible that statistically significant predictive relationships between children’s media engagement and their weapon use would have been

established if a diverse sample was obtained as although “higher family income increases the likelihood of an adolescent often watching violent television shows, the effect of often watching violent television is stronger in the bottom income quartiles” (Chowhan & Stewart, p. 1334).

Additionally, sampling from families that had more diverse educational experiences may also have yielded different results. 64.8% of parents who participated in study three had a bachelor’s degree or a higher degree. However, research from the Netherlands has found that children of mothers with low education levels had higher levels of media use from the age of two, and “by age 9 years, children of low-educated mothers were four times more likely to be exceeding entertainment-media guidelines (<1 hour/day)” (Yang-Huang et al., 2017, p. 9). This is also supported in a U.S. sample – more preschoolers of parents with low education levels had higher levels of media engagement and exceeded the recommended “less than or equal to 2 h[ours] a day of electronic media use” (Loprinzi et al., 2013, p. 57) than parents with higher educational backgrounds (Loprinzi et al., 2013). The research considered above therefore suggests that parental education and household income are important factors to consider in obtaining representative samples in media effects research, and the current study should be replicated with a more diverse sample.

Further, there were also challenges with participant recruitment in the school that did take part particularly in retention between times one and two. This was a challenge that was likely exacerbated by the pandemic. It would have been beneficial for the researcher to have been physically in Green Oaks Federation to cultivate interest. Presentations could have been conducted for the potential participants so the researcher could have explained the purpose of the study, and

why it was important in a broader context, i.e., to inform the parents directly about the relationships that were to be studied. It could have been highlighted that such information would have been beneficial both in an academic sense but also in a practical sense for the parents themselves. Such presentations could have also further iterated the importance of the intended follow-up by explaining that understanding the long-term impact of the franchises on children's behaviour would have been particularly insightful. This would have likely cultivated further interest in the parents, and perhaps, enhanced the motivation of parents who had taken part in the data collection at time one to participate again at time two. However, due to the pandemic, survey links were provided to parents via the Deputy of the school. Although every effort was made to provide all the information that has been discussed here, it would likely have been much more impactful if this information was provided directly to prospective participants.

Another significant limitation of this thesis more broadly is that the media analysed in studies one and two were inevitably limited, due to time constraints. Although seventeen Disney animations were analysed in study one and Star Wars and Marvel television series were analysed in study two, and both were purposefully sampled, inevitably such samples do not represent the entirety of each of the franchises. There are many animated Disney feature length films, live-action films, and television content that were not considered for analysis in this thesis. Perhaps a future study could examine the portrayal of male and female protagonists across the multiple television channels that Disney own such as 'Disney Channel', 'Disney Junior' and 'Disney XD' and select the most popular shows across those channels to provide a varied sample of television media that is produced by the Disney corporation. Further, Disney feature length animations that have leading child or

animal protagonists should be analysed to broaden the understanding of the portrayal of gender in such content. Similarly, Marvel and Star Wars are both also large franchises with films, television shows, and comic books that could be influential to children. Analysing Marvel comic books would provide further insight into the array of behavioural profiles displayed by its protagonists. Additionally, as discussed in study three, analysing the *Marvel Rising* series that has mainly female protagonists would also be insightful, as it has been suggested that such content has a more progressive portrayal of female heroes. Additionally, to obtain a more complete understanding of the portrayal of gender in the Star Wars franchise, perhaps analysing Star Wars LEGO animated television content would be beneficial. The collaboration of Star Wars and LEGO has consisted of several television series that are rated as suitable for viewers aged six and above on Disney+. There are also many Star Wars LEGO toys available to purchase suggesting that the collaboration could be particularly influential to children as merchandise and media content is available. This is comparable to the Disney princess franchise which also consists of not just the films, but an extensive array of merchandise which leads scholars to assume that the franchise is important to analyse as it can be a significant part of children's lives. Overall, it should be acknowledged that although the current thesis has provided insight into the portrayal of gender within the Disney, Marvel, and Star Wars franchises, it considered a relatively small proportion of available content. Future research should consider analysing the portrayal of gender in additional content that was not analysed within the scope of this work.

7.6 General Conclusions

This thesis has provided evidence that Disney feature length animations portray female and male protagonists as more feminine than masculine. Additionally, male and female protagonists in the Marvel and Star Wars franchises appear to be more masculine – although the females in these franchises do subtly adhere to some feminine norms. This was important to establish because previous investigations of gendered representations in Disney feature length animations (England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018a) had some limitations and research investigating the latter two franchises was rare. Therefore, the current thesis addressed substantial gaps in knowledge. It has also, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, been the first body of work to consider the representation of gender in Disney feature length animations and in franchises that Disney has acquired, meaning it captures more of a complete picture of gendered portrayals within the corporation. The thesis has also established that children's gender stereotypical behaviour and weapon play are statistically predicted by the messages in the Disney, Marvel, and Star Wars content, however, there were unexpected gender differences.

This chapter has considered the implications this may have for theories that suggest children will replicate the behaviour that they are exposed to based on an attentional bias towards same-sex models and models that display behaviours that reinforce the information they have already obtained from their environment (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Bem, 1981). The current findings could suggest that such theories over-emphasise the importance of same-sex models. Alternatively, it could suggest that children attend to models in media differently than 'real-life' models. Perhaps the results of this thesis imply that children's attainment of gendered information from media they are exposed to is perhaps more nuanced than these theories suggest. This research also has important practical implications. Overall, it suggests that

media producers should take their roles in children's lives seriously, as the content they produce does have predictive relationships with their behaviours. Ideally, this thesis, along with other research in the field (Coyne et al., 2014) should be presented to such producers to make the case that future protagonists should be less stereotyped and should also display less aggression and weapon use. Additionally, warning messages should be introduced for the content currently in circulation, so that parents can be more accurately informed about the messages their children are likely to be receiving from such media.

Overall, this thesis has suggested that the portrayal of gender within the Walt Disney corporation adheres to some stereotypes, however, the impact of this on children's behaviour is in some ways, unexpected. To understand more about this phenomenon, future researchers should continue to expand the scope of their research to include the Star Wars and Marvel franchises in their investigations of 'Disney' content. As Disney acquires widely successful and much-loved franchises, our understanding of the messages prevalent in them, as well as their association with children's behaviour, needs to be examined, as the perceived 'Disney innocence' (Giroux & Pollock, 2010) could extend to these franchises.

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