

PERFORMATIVE GENDER INEQUALITY IN DISNEY ANIMATED PRODUCTIONS

How the LGBTQ+ community has been represented in Disney
animated films?

Abstract

This essay aims to analyse how, in Disney's various animated feature films, issues such as performative gender inequalities, or the representation of the LGBTQ+ community by the characters enacted, have been addressed.

Through the analysis of several articles that dealt with the issues, it was analysed how the representation of the role of women, which is still backward and stereotypical, can influence viewers, very often children, toward a very unrealistic conception of normality.

This kind of representation leaves no room for diversity and possible characters who do not exactly conform to the stereotype, in which case the female characters must need help while the male characters must represent the stronger sex. The LGBTQ+ community is still too often side-lined and hidden, especially in big productions aimed at the big screen.

Key Words

- Gender inequality
- Performative gender representation
- LGBTQ+ community
- LGBTQ+ representation
- Gender-sexuality relation
- Animated film
- Disney animated film

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1. introduction

Disney animated productions have, over time, conveyed performative gender inequality through how the role of women was represented, as we can read in Xu Jiang's article of 2022, and how the image of the traditional family was perpetuated as we can read in Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman and Lunds's article of 2003.

While much attention has rightly been dedicated to the representation of traditional gender norms, an equally critical lens must be shed on the representation of the LGBTQ+ community in Disney animated films.

Indeed, the traditional representation of gender roles has left no room for characters from the LGBTQ+ community, fuelling various criticisms from the community itself in the cinema field (Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman and Lunds 2003).

Very often, the storylines of animated films, and how they are depicted, are based on real life and what a family watching the feature film might be like. But, as a general matter of fact, families are varied and different in various ways from each other; it is, then, natural to wonder why we insist on portraying the woman as needy and weak while the man is the strong component. Furthermore, it is appropriate to think that while the representation of gender roles has not particularly changed, it may have influenced the depiction of the LGBTQ+ community and the different ways an individual can express himself or herself (Toth B. 2023).

This study proposes to answer the following questions:

- How the LGBTQ+ community has been represented in Disney animated films?
- How has the performative representation of gender influenced the representation of the LGBTQ+ community in Disney films?

To answer the above research questions, the objectives of this study are as follows:

- to analyse the messages about performative gender inequality conveyed in Disney animated feature films.
- to identify the rights issues of the LGBTQ+ community in Disney animated feature films.

2. Literature Review

The literature study uncovered numerous intriguing findings. In the first place, children acquire information about how couples and families function by participating in and observing their own families (Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman and Lunds 2003). However, families are not isolated from each other and fortunately, family interactions, are not the only source of information that children have about family relationships (Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman and Lunds 2003). The media may, consequently, be another source where children can actually learn information about the world around them, and in it couples and families. As Corsaro (1997) argued, *‘Children often make use of popular stories, myths, and fairy tales to make sense of themselves and their surroundings’*.

There is an assumption that Disney's animated feature films are part of children's lives; therefore, these animated films are important support while considering the media content that children are exposed to, the stereotypical role models that these classic Disney films portray can play an important role in their lives (Griffin, Harding and Learnmoth 2016). Disney animated films emphasize character development by giving more prominent roles to the main character, particularly in cases where she is seen as female. In Jimenez and Sharik's research, they found that Disney fails to portray women well, particularly when analysing eight of their most successful and popular films. Out of the eight films examined, 63.3% of the characters were male, and 36.6% were female.

A significant number of scientific articles on Disney animated films have been analysed in this study, particularly those that have examined the above films from the perspective of gender inequality representation. Wiersma (2001) examined 16 of them and discovered that the gender representations in these animations have not changed particularly since the production of Snow White in 1937 and found that, usually genders have behaved in stereotypical and not always realistic ways.

Dundes's (2001) review of Pocahontas uncovered similar outcomes, indicating that women's portrayals in recent films have not altered, but have simply been less obvious. Beres (1999) found not only the representation of stereotypical gender images but also the romanticisation of men's controlling behaviour and women's abuse. The Little Mermaid's analysis showed a tendency to overstate the ideal romantic love (Tseelon, 1995).

Much of the magic that Disney stages is linked to the idea of romance, true love and dream weddings. Although Disney animated films are marketed as stories of adventure, youth rebellion, and personal growth, they focus primarily on traditional love and marriage between a man and a woman (Ingraham 2005). By examining these films, we can discover not only how heterosexuality is inherent in our society, but also how it influences the perception of reality and real couples (Manaworapong and Bowen 2022).

For Ingraham (2005) the way heterosexuality is portrayed serves the interests of patriarchy and male domination and recognises how heterosexuality is learned, especially by children, as well as the interests that have helped keep heterosexuality on its pedestal and continue to consider it 'natural'.

3. Chapter 1

An analysis of Disney animated films reveals a backwardness in the portrayal of traditional gender roles and a surprising lack of representation of the LGBTQ+ community (Ingraham 2005). Scrutinising popular Disney films through the lens of performative gender inequality reveals a skewed gender relationship, with male characters dominating the narrative landscape (Sharik 2022). As shown in Jimenez and Sharik's research, which focuses on eight highly successful films, there is unfortunately a staggering gender imbalance, with 63.3% male characters and only 36.6% female characters. But it is not only the preponderant male presence in feature films that is worrying the way the female figure is portrayed can lead to a normalisation of gender stereotypes.

In the book "Thinking Straight: The Power, the Promise, and the Paradox of Heterosexuality" by Ingraham, C. it is thought that, in recent years, no progress has been made in the representation of the female figure. In my opinion, however, small steps have been taken, starting with Pocahontas (1995), slowly the figure of the girl has passed from the needy princess who is looking for her prince charming to a vision of the woman who does not really need the help of a man and who can solve her problems alone.

It must also be said that as much as these steps have been taken, the idea that a girl needs to find 'true love' to have a happy ending and must get married is still present. For instance, in 'Tangled' (2010), the protagonist is a princess who can reach her goal on her own, she could very well make it alone in this adventure, but it was decided to add a male component to the story, and also the end of the film their wedding was staged, to perpetuate the idea that true love needs to be celebrated with a sacrament.

Nevertheless, we need to underline that there have been, even if very few, some films that have expressed the essence of feminism. Some examples are 'Maleficent' (2014), even though it is not an animated film, and 'The Brave' (2012) where the protagonist rebels against her marriage, or even 'Moana' (2016).

Almost all these films, however, had to face quite a bit of criticism on the date of their release, especially Maleficent, which was criticised because there was not even a shadow of the hero and Prince Charming.

Beres's exploration delves into problematic representations, uncovering not only stereotypical gender images but also the romanticisation of men's control and abuse of women. These themes are particularly evident for instance in *The Little Mermaid*, where romantic love is exaggerated, reinforcing the idea of toxic traditional relationships.

While Disney films profess themes such as adventure or personal growth, the pervasive focus on traditional love and heterosexual marriage overshadows alternative narratives (Ingraham 2005). This perpetuation of heteronormativity is in line with Ingraham's assertion that the representation of heterosexuality in the media serves the interests of patriarchy, contributing to the learned perception of heterosexuality as 'natural'.

4. Conclusion

It is appropriate to close this research with a bitter conclusion since the purpose of this scientific investigation was to understand if the LGBTQ+ community had been represented in Disney animated films and if its representation had been in some way influenced by performative gender inequality.

The findings underscore the persistent reluctance of Disney animated films to break free from traditional gender norms and embrace diverse and inclusive narratives, especially regarding the LGBTQ+ community. The scarcity of LGBTQ+ representations raises questions about the industry's commitment to reflect the true diversity of families and relationships in contemporary society.

No LGBTQ+ community characters have been officially represented in any "Disney animated film yet, although in other respects progress has been made; for example, in some Disney productions but not as principal characters, which, however, cannot be considered sufficient (Onward 2020).

It should also be noted that this lack of representation is almost certainly derived from the continuous representation of the performative stereotypes of gender that are still staged in almost all the films of Disney production animation.

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