

The Representation of Disability in Disney Animated Films: Using Models of Disability as Pedagogical Tools For Analysis

Jessica Gibson

Department of Education, University of York

Introduction

- As one of the largest global conglomerates and ubiquitous with children's entertainment, Disney has the potential to shape audience's understanding of the world.
- Through the lens of disability studies and the models of disability, this study raises awareness of the wide range of representations in Disney films and the importance of critically analysing these.

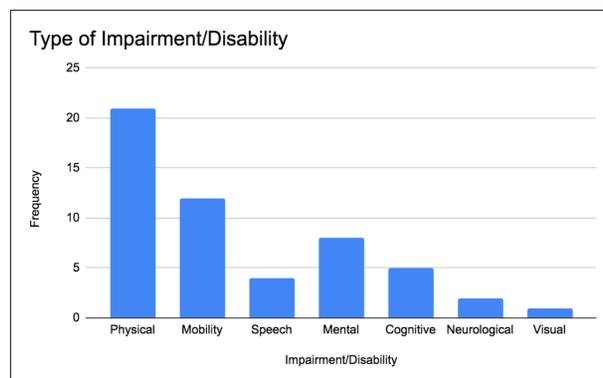


Research Questions

- How many characters have impairments/disability in Disney animated films?
- In what ways are impairment/disability represented in Disney animated films?
- Have these representations of impairment/disability changed over time? If so, how?

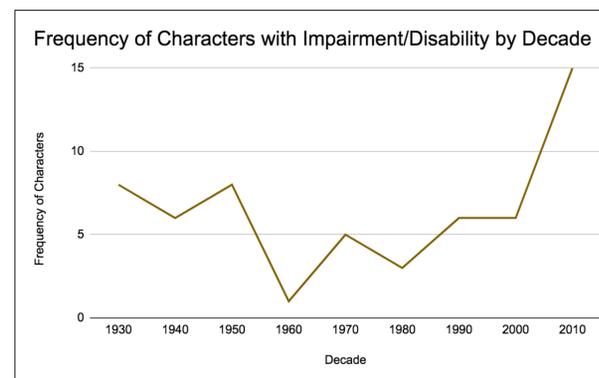
Method

- Content analysis of 58 Disney animated films from Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs 1937 to Frozen II 2019.
- Characters were coded to analyse how disability is represented.



Why Study Disney?

“The education relevance of animated films makes it all the more necessary to move beyond treating these films as transparent entertainment and to question the diverse, often contradictory, messages that constitute Disney's worldview”
(Giroux & Pollock, 2010, p. 92)



Models of Disability

Medical Model

- Views disability as an individual problem in need of a cure.
- Disability is caused by impairments.
- Focused on fixing the impairment to regain access to society.

Social Model

- View disability as a social problem.
- Disability is caused by barriers in society such as inaccessible buildings and discrimination.
- Focused on removing barriers, changing attitudes, disability rights. Inclusion and equality.

Affirmation Model

- Views disability as a positive social identity.
- Disability is caused by barriers in society and negative attitudes towards impairments.
- Focused on positive identity, disability pride and rejecting negative attributes linked with impairment and disability.



Conclusion

- Disney animated films feature a wide range of characters with diverse characteristics and impairments.
- Older films contain several outdated tropes of disability including the use of disability as a sign of evil (such as Captain Hook in *Peter Pan* and Scar in *The Lion King*).
- Recent films depict differences encoded as magical powers which often require a disability studies lens or lived experience of disability to identify (such as Elsa in *Frozen* and Vanellope in *Wreck-It Ralph*).