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# From 'tiaras and twirls' to 'action and adventure'. Eliciting children's gendered perceptions of Disney characters through participatory visual methodology

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## ABSTRACT

This study, based on interpretative phenomenological methodology, examines the influence Disney media and merchandise may have on children's understandings of gender. Although there are various studies in this area, most focus on the Disney Princesses' effects on girls' gender development and few directly elicit the views of both girls and boys (Golden and Jacoby 2018). The current study attempts to address this gap by investigating how girls and boys, aged five to eight years, interpret messages circulated by Disney to make sense of the gendered norms and roles of its characters. Participatory visual methods used were a draw and talk exercise and an image-values line activity. Critical discourse analysis identified two key gender discourses: *physical appearance* and *gendered behaviours*, with children's exclusionary binary opinions core to both. However, both boys and girls valued the more active traits portrayed by the contemporary princesses. Through adopting a feminist poststructuralist lens, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge that informs of ways to deconstruct stereotypes with children to promote positive gender development in childhood.

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Disney; gender; gender stereotypes; children's media; participatory visual methodology

## Introduction

### *Problematising social developmental theories*

Cultural expectations associated with gender pervade modern life defining masculinity and femininity in opposition through everyday languages, policies, and practices, restricting the lives of some individuals, while privileging others (Hamilton 2021). In many societies gender is the first social identity that children develop 'in guiding preferences and in making spontaneous categorizations of individuals' (Halim et al. 2018, 456). Social developmental theories of gender differentiation posit that children are rendered into masculine and feminine beings through powerful socialisation forces. Bussey and Bandura (1999, 2004) purport how social agents, such as families, teachers, peers, and mass media, communicate and reward models of gender-normative roles and behaviour

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for children to observe and imitate. Gender schema theory (Bem 1981, 1983) offers understanding as to how children make meaning of cultural norms through a system of assessing, organising, and filtering information in terms of what it means to be male or female (Spinner, Cameron and Calogero 2018). Cognitive theories of gender development propose that between 18 and 24 months of age most children label others according to gender (Martin and Ruble 2010). Children continue to draw upon gender categories and stereotypical knowledge to guide decisions about clothing, toys and colours and expectations of others' appearances, until they are 6 years old, after which many start to develop a flexible outlook (Wong and Hines 2015; Spinner, Cameron and Calogero 2018; Diamond 2020).

However, psychological categorical notions of gender and unsophisticated social learning approaches which frame children as passive receivers are increasingly challenged (Diamond 2020; Kostas 2021). Such approaches are problematic as they fail to acknowledge children as competent agents who shape the social contexts in which they function. Although children often adopt traditional notions of masculinity and femininity (Bussey and Bandura 1984, 1999), many negotiate gendered norms in subjective ways (Eaude 2020; Kostas 2021). Some children internalise specific characteristics only, while others reject gender-normative discourses (Porter, Spark and de Kleyn 2021; Kostas 2021). With social media portraying multifaceted notions of gender and educational policy aimed at addressing gender inequality and binaries, many children now hold more fluid concepts of gender (Diamond 2020). The aim of the present study therefore is to elicit children's perceptions of Disney characters to determine how newer characters are being received. This is pertinent because children are increasingly being exposed to more flexible ways of doing gender. Many extant studies in this area have neglected the *direct* experiences of children instead seeking the views of parents or observing children at play. In contrast, this study uses creative participatory methods, an approach that allows for children's voices to be better heard and understood (Burton 2020).

### ***A poststructuralist lens***

Acknowledging complex conceptualisations of gender and children's agency, a poststructuralist lens is useful for understanding gender as 'performative' (Butler 1990) and relative to 'power distribution and dominant discourse' (Foucault 1980). Butler asserts that gendering starts from birth when infants are expected to construct their gender in line with societal expectations. She contends that gender performance is the result of repetitive acts of behaviour and practices conducted under heterosexual regimes of expectation about how gendered bodies behave, which solidify over time, so that it may suggest the idea that gender is biologically determined. However, as discussed, modelling is not a process of direct imitation as children's wider physical interactions and psychological experiences predispose them to different ways of doing gender (Diamond 2020). For instance, Wohlwend (2009) discovered that while many girls use Disney Princesses to recreate storylines in pretend play, some compose new scenarios and expressions for their characters to overcome gendered roles and barriers. Foucault's theory provides understanding as to how social institutions such as family, schools, and mass media, act as a form of social control, by producing and reinforcing certain gendered knowledges or 'discourses' which become normalised. In patriarchal societies, hierarchical

scales of power exist, which position hegemonic masculinity at the top of the hierarchy and emphasised femininity at the bottom of the hierarchy (Kostas 2021). Adults frequently steer children towards gender normative behaviours through the guise of ‘guidance’, which Rantalaa and Heikkilä (2020) contend is a form of power. As all individuals are co-creators of power, guidance cannot be seen as a linear or isolated activity, rather it is a process of constant negotiations (Rantalaa and Heikkilä 2020). However, when children are deprived of agency to discuss and negotiate gendered norms, it prevents understanding any differences in their perceptions of gender (Rantalaa and Heikkilä 2020).

### ***Gendered marketing***

The gendered marketing of screen entertainment and toys introduces and reinforces gender binaries and promotes internalisation of gender stereotypical expectations in young children. By the age of four or five, children know that girls typically play with dolls, beauty and domestic products and boys play with action figures, construction, and sports (Grossman and D’Augelli 2007). By the age of six, many children will have developed a preference for playing with children of the same gender, further promoting gender-typed behaviour (Spinner, Cameron and Calogero 2018). Traditional toys for boys facilitate the development of visuo-spatial and problem skills, whereas traditional toys for girls promote nurturance, domesticity, social skills, and an appearance-focused orientation (Coyne et al. 2016; Fine and Rush 2018). The toys presented to children warrants attention because they shape different cognitive and social skills (Spinner, Cameron and Calogero 2018), leading to social and economic inequalities between men and women in adulthood.

Children are ardent enforcers of gender-normative behaviour (Kornienko et al. 2016), with the social policing of gender nonconformity commonplace among their peers (Burton 2020). Although there is generally more acceptance for females to engage in traditionally ‘male activities’, males are often less prepared to disrupt traditional representations of masculinity and femininity, perhaps in fear of losing status and the societal privileges they are often afforded. Consequently, they are frequently stigmatised for crossing the gender divide (Spinner, Cameron and Calogero 2018; Reilly and Barry 2020; Kostas 2021). However, greater variation in masculinity across cultures should be noted. Although masculinity in Western culture is typically conveyed through strength and muscular body build, ‘soft masculinities’ (masculinity that incorporates femininity) are increasingly being depicted through mass media in East Asian cultures (Gutierrez et al. 2020)

### ***Disney Princess merchandise***

Prominent cultural norms relating to gendered expectations are communicated through children’s screen entertainment and literature through images and narratives. Messages of heterosexuality are also transmitted through these formats (Kilvington and Wood 2016). Cultivation theory proposes that the repetition of topics in the media leads to individuals acquiring social beliefs that relate with the content they have observed (Gerbner 1998). Research suggests that many children, including pre-schoolers, are aware of

gendered portrayals in characters and storylines (Golden and Jacoby 2018). Disney Princess merchandise is extremely popular among girls and superhero products favourable among boys (Coyne et al. 2016, 2017, 2021; Dinella 2017). Since its first movie 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs' in 1923, Disney has been a prevalent source of international children's media, providing models for gender identification; girls are frequently encouraged to visualise themselves as princesses and boys as heroes. Although Disney may be regarded as an appropriate source of family entertainment, critics argue that traditionally its characters, storylines and song lyrics have been sexist and culturally insensitive (England, Descartes and Collier-Meek 2011). There is particular concern that exposure to Disney Princesses reinforces restrictive female gender stereotypes by introducing young girls to passive roles and unrealistic beauty ideals (Golden and Jacoby 2018); the heroines' small waists, ample breasts and pale skin tones have long been condemned (England, Descartes and Collier-Meek 2011). Guo (2016) reports how in many Disney movies 55% of comments received by the princesses are focused on their appearance and only 11% are about their achievements. Such messages may contribute to societal expectations of females; the pressure to be thin, pretty, and caring (Guo 2016; Golden and Jacoby 2018).

One of the most extensive studies to examine the impact of Disney Princesses on young children is that undertaken by Coyne et al. (2016, 2021). The research, which involved over 300 children and their parents in their preschool years and then five years later, found 96% of girls and 87% of boys had watched Disney Princess movies, and 61% of girls played with princess toys at least once a week, compared to 4% of boys (Coyne et al. 2016). The study suggested that higher engagement with princess merchandise during the preschool years was associated with more female gender stereotypical behaviour for both boys and girls (Coyne et al. 2016). Interestingly, five years later girls who engaged with princess culture were more likely to regard education, relationships, and careers as being equally important for women and men, and the boys to express their emotions more appropriately and subscribe less to attitudes of toxic masculinity (Coyne et al. 2021). However, as princess culture represents a sharp divergence from masculine norms, many boys do not readily connect with Disney Princesses. Instead, Marvel Superheroes are more popular among young males (Coyne et al. 2017). Many superheroes, including leading male characters featured in Disney (Tarzan, Hercules, Maui), are depicted with a muscular body and strength, assets which are often viewed in Western cultures as an appropriate representation of manhood (Coyne et al. 2017; González et al. 2020; Gutierrez et al. 2020).

Disney has started to address such criticism by introducing a new age of independent and strong female heroines (e.g. Mulan, Elsa, Merida, Moana) and male characters which deviate from traditional gender roles. However, Disney's marketing campaign 'The Disney Princess Line', introduced in 2001, has meant that older movies, such as Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937), Cinderella (1950), and Sleeping Beauty (1959), remain popular with children (Coyne et al. 2016; Golden and Jacoby 2018). Thus, these movies risk reinforcing archaic ideas as the older princess are reflective of social expectations over time; historically women have been depicted as physically weak, submissive, domesticated, nurturing and, in need of protection by a man (England, Descartes and Collier-Meek 2011; Golden and Jacoby 2018). Critics assert that although there is greater androgyny in newer Disney characters and superheroes, and females

are portrayed as having traits traditionally associated with men, some merchandise has been highly feminised or sexualised (Coyne et al. 2016, 2021; Hine et al. 2018). For instance, the Merida doll (Brave) was produced with a sash instead of her bow and arrow, some dolls are sold in a dress even if they do not wear one in the movie (Dockterman 2021), and the costumes worn by characters, produced for children's play, often represent an exaggerated form of gendered appearance – from 'frills and tiaras' to 'sewn in muscles' (Coyne et al. 2021). Even Moana, praised for its portrayal of a strong Polynesian heroine and the absence of a romantic subplot, has been criticised for its male character Maui who has a stereotypical masculine figure and demonstrates anxieties about Moana's abilities (Streiff and Dundes 2017).

## Methods

### Design

The study adopted an interpretative phenomenological methodological framework combined with participatory research methods. This combination was considered the most effective for capturing the lived experiences of young children. Interpretative phenomenology seeks to understand the nature of a phenomenon through the individual's personal experiences and opinions. As the search for understanding phenomenon in 'interpretive phenomenology can only be communicated through the researcher's explanation of the participants' experiences' (Bush et al 2019, p.4), criticality and reflexive thinking are fundamental. Thus, it should be noted that the findings presented within this paper are the researcher's own interpretations of the children's experiences based on what was seen and heard. However, key concepts of interpretive phenomenology are that researchers cannot remove themselves from what they are studying, and multiple representations of human experience exist (Bush et al 2019). As capturing young children's voices is not easy to achieve, and participatory research with children is limited in literature (Firth 2020), this study has adopted these methods in attempt to fill this gap and prevent children's lived experiences from being marginalised.

Research design plays a key part in the inclusion of young children (Blaisdell et al. 2019). While conventional methods such as interviews and questionnaires are useful, they may not fully engage children or provide an accurate understanding of their lived experiences (Alderson and Morrow 2011). Moreover, many traditional approaches rely on literacy ability and despite careful design, young children are often left at a deficit to express themselves (Wall 2017; Sanders 2018). Valuing the ideological shift from research on or about children, to recognition that children are experts on their own lives (Palaiologou 2014), a participatory approach, which employed visual and tactile data collection tools, was adopted. Participatory research offers an inclusive and empowering experience as it is more likely to represent children's multimodal literacies (Blaisdell et al. 2019), balance the child–adult researcher power dynamic (Sanders 2018), and utilise familiar and playful activities (Wall 2017), which are effective for exploring issues of identity and understanding childhood landscapes (McLaughlin and Coleman-Fountain 2019). Furthermore, the use of a visual approach can enhance the power of children's voice both through verbal and non-verbal interactions (Firth 2020). The data collection

tools utilised within the present study – a ‘visual opinions game’ and ‘draw and talk exercise’ helped to capture the children’s own unique perspectives.

### ***Context and participants***

The research was undertaken in one urban primary school located in a socio-economically disadvantaged area in North-West England. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of children attending the school was significantly reduced, resulting in small mixed-age classes, which decreased the number of children available to participate. However, this meant that there was greater flexibility in the school timetable and on the time the children had available to engage with the activities. Applying convenience sampling, all nine children in the class, aged five to eight years old, were involved. Five children identified as girls and four children identified as boys; eight children were white British, and one child was mixed race British.

### ***Ethics***

After following both the British Educational Research Association (2018) and university research ethics procedures, and obtaining written consent to undertake the study, children’s assent was gained. Strategies included the use of uncomplicated language to explain the purpose of the study, what the child’s involvement would entail, and during the activities constant checks were made to ensure that the children knew that they could withdraw at any stage and had the right to decline any questions asked. For safeguarding purposes, the activities were conducted in the same room as their teacher, children had ownership of their artwork and were not made to feel under any obligation to leave it with the researcher. The anonymity of the setting and children has been preserved through pseudonyms.

### ***Data collection***

To prevent children from influencing each other, as well as giving reserved children an opportunity to express themselves, the activities were undertaken on an individual rather than group basis. Okada and Ishibashi (2016) suggest that when children are asked to draw on their own, a more subjective piece of work is created, as some children use other’s work as inspiration. This could also apply to opinions shared during the activities, with some children mirroring the answers of others.

Before undertaking the activities, the children were informed that the purpose of the study was to hear their views about their favourite Disney characters, the activities were explained to the children, they were then asked if they had any questions, and whether they still wished to participate. The child-centred activities took the focus away from direct questioning, instead serving as a springboard for informal conversations, allowing children to articulate their thoughts more freely. During data collection the researcher refrained from making any comments that might suggest gender-based approval or disapproval. Interest in children’s perspectives was demonstrated by relating their comments to earlier responses, paraphrasing their responses to seek clarification and,

where appropriate, probing for deeper explanations. Children's responses were manually recorded.

For the 'draw and talk' activity children were provided with paper and pens and asked to draw their favourite Disney character. This open task meant that children had free range to draw any character that they admired. To ensure consistency the following semi-structured questions were asked: why the character was their favourite, what the character does within the story which influences this choice, and how they would feel if the character were the opposite gender. Noonan et al. (2016) assert that the use of 'draw and talk' empowers children by putting them at ease to disclose their opinions. However, it is also possible that this method may intimidate children who lack confidence in their creative abilities (Blaisdell et al. 2019).

A few days after the draw and talk activity, the same children were invited to engage with the image-values line. They were presented with twelve Disney character images: six females (Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Mulan, Merida from *Brave*, Moana) and six males (Aladdin, Tarzan, Hercules, Wreck-it-Ralph, Kristoff from *Frozen*, Lightning McQueen from *Cars*), from traditional to recent movies. The children were asked to place the characters on a number line to indicate their favourite character (number 1) to their least favourite character (number 12). This was followed with a conversation to explore the ordering of characters. The children appeared immersed in this activity and spoke in detail about their favourite and least favourite characters. Nyumba et al. (2018) also report how visual, interactive techniques significantly promote interest, resulting in rich conversations.

### **Analysis**

The method generated two sources of verbatim data (i) children's draw and talk images and narratives and (ii) children's narratives accompanying the image-values line. Both data sets were analysed through a feminist poststructuralist lens. As explained by Blaise (2005), this approach utilises critical discourse analysis to explore how concepts of heterosexuality, specifically gender and power, might be manifested in children's everyday conversations. Adopting a similar process to Blaise (2005), the first stage of analysis involved multiple readings of data to discover critical incidents (all dialogue and performances of gender). Reoccurring incidents were summarised to produce frequency counts; powerful outlier narratives were also noted. Marks were used to categorise codes. In most cases children's responses involved more than one code and thus more than one mark (e.g. Boy 1: I like him because he's 'really strong' and 'saves people' – two frequency counts given by one child relating to gendered behaviour). The next stage of analysis involved a critical examination of coded data to identify broad patterns of gender meanings, contradictions, and inconsistencies, analysing them as discourses of heterosexuality (Blaise 2005). Blaise (2005) describes how this process identifies the language and action that individuals use to establish gendered subjectivities. However, she warns that such processes are not static and fixed, rather they are fragmented and variable. Multiple iterations of examination of the children's data have led to the emergence of two key themes – 'appearance' and 'behaviour'. The final stage of analysis involved examining the discourses of heterosexuality which run across and within these themes against gender related theories and empirical research.

## Results

The findings represent the views of nine children (five girls and four boys, aged five to eight years old) who engaged in two activities. [Table 1](#) outlines the children's favourite and least favourite Disney characters, as observed by both their artwork and the image-values line. From analysing data two key gender discourses emerged: physical appearance (beauty, clothing, and accessories) and gendered behaviours (strength, humour, bravery, and rescuing), suggesting that specific heterosexual discourses were operating ([Table 2](#)). The findings support Halim et al.'s research (2014, 2018) which found that children's stereotypes about girls are largely defined by appearance and clothing, whereas children's stereotypes about boys are often defined by behaviour (action or activity-based themes). However, the current study suggests that both the boys and girls involved valued the active traits of the contemporary princesses, who have also maintained their beauty. A feminist poststructuralist lens might suggest that although bombarded by traditional gender norms, many children select traits they admire or associate with irrespective of gender. Although this demonstrates the agency children have in the construction of their own gendered identities, the heterosexual matrix appears to continue to have a powerful impact (Blaise 2005), with many children regulating emphasised femininity and hegemonic masculinity ([Figures 1–4](#)).

Both activities, and the accompanying discussions, suggest the children held gender binaries. With regards to the artwork, all the boys drew a male character, and all the girls drew a female character. A similar pattern emerged with the image-values line; all but one child (Girl 1) chose their favourite characters according to their own gender and their last character of the opposite gender (other than Boy 1 who placed Aladdin last on the image-values line). Although showing preference for characters associated with one's own gender is perhaps not unusual among young children, it is interesting that all the boys positioned a contemporary Disney Princesses before Aladdin, Kristoff, and the traditional princesses on the image-values line. The girls were mixed in their placing of the princesses; two appeared to prefer traditional princesses, two appeared to have a stronger preference for contemporary princesses, while Girl 1 selected a male character and a contemporary princess.

### Theme 1 – appearance

The most observable forms of femininity displayed by the girls related to the discourse of physical beauty. Throughout both activities the girls made repeated references to the

**Table 1.** Children's favourite and least favourite characters.

Child	Artwork	Image-values line (top two favourites)	Image-values line (least favourite)
Girl 1	Rapunzel	Wreck-it-Ralph, Moana	Lighting McQueen
Girl 2	Ariel	Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty	Lighting McQueen
Girl 3	Elsa	Brave, Cinderella	Lighting McQueen
Girl 4	Belle	Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella	Wreck-it-Ralph
Girl 5	Moana	Moana, Brave	Lighting McQueen
Boy 1	Mickey Mouse	Wreck-it-Ralph, Moana	Aladdin
Boy 2	Woody	Wreck-it-Ralph, Lighting McQueen	Snow White
Boy 3	Spiderman	Wreck-it-Ralph, Lighting McQueen	Sleeping Beauty
Boy 4	Spiderman	Wreck-it-Ralph, Hercules	Cinderella

**Table 2.** Themes, codes, frequencies and binary comments.

Attribute	Princesses	Male characters	If opposite gender?
<i>Theme: physical appearance</i>			
Hair	11F (long x8, blonde x3)		3M (would have long hair)
Dresses	9F (colours x8, patterns x1)		1F (would wear dirty clothes)
Pretty	5F (face x3, hair x1, dress x1)		
Big	5M (muscles x4, body x1)		1F (would have big hands)
Eyelashes			1F (boys don't have long ones)
Crown			1F (boys don't wear them)
High heels			1F (boys can't wear them)
Eyes			1M (would be brown not green)
Moustache			1F (would have a moustache)
Voice (accent)			1M (would sound different)
Lipstick			1F (would not wear lipstick)
<i>Example exclusionary binary statements</i>			
Girls wear dresses and boys wear pants (Girl 1)			
Boys can't wear high heels (Girl 3)			
I don't like Wreck-it-Ralph because wears dirty clothes but if he was a girl, he'd be a princess and would have a crown and dress, so I'd like him (Girl 4)			
If Woody was a girl he'd have a different accent, longer hair and his outfit might change (Boy 2)			
If Wreck-it-Ralph were a girl he'd look way different – he'd be tiny and small (Boy 4)			
<i>Theme: gendered behaviours</i>			
Strong		6M, 1F	1F (too strong), 2M (not as strong)
Cars	6F (are for boys)	1M (are for boys)	
Funny	2M (princesses aren't funny)	3M	
Songs/singing	5F		
Saves people		3M	
Brave	1F	4M	
Are rescued	3F		
Annoying	2M	1F	
Smashes things		1M,1F	
Fast		2M	
Boring	2M		
Dancing	1F		
Clumsy	1M		
Dozy	1M		
Climbing			1M (would be able to climb)
Polite			1M (would be polite)
Survival			1M (would not survive)
<i>Exclusionary binary comments</i>			
I don't like Lightning McQueen because it's about cars but if he was a girl, I would like him because he would be girly (Girl 2)			

(Continued)

**Table 2.** Continued.

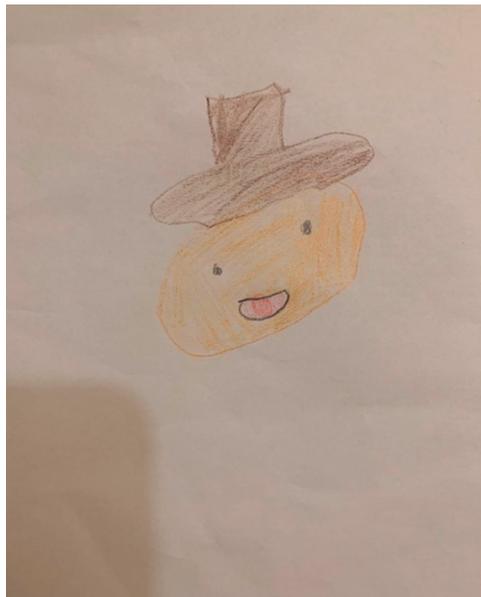
Attribute	Princesses	Male characters	If opposite gender?
If Wreck-it-Ralph were a girl I wouldn't like him because he'd be a strong girl with big hands (Girl 1)			
If Wreck-it-Ralph were a girl, he would be polite and not as strong (Boy 2)			
Princesses and all girls are annoying (Boy 3)			
Spiderman is very brave, there's lots of action, he gets all the baddies and saves lots of people. But if he was a girl, it just wouldn't happen as she wouldn't survive (Boy 4)			
There are too many princesses, the things that happen to them are the same, boring (Boy 4)			

**Figure 1.** Ariel (Girl 2).

physical features of Disney Princesses. Hair (colour and length) was mentioned by all girls and cited 11 times. This is demonstrated by Girl 1, who while drawing her favourite character Rapunzel (from *Tangled* 2010), expressed ‘The witch cut off her beautiful long blonde hair. She looked better when she had long magical hair and was really sad when it was cut off as it turns brown and short’. Similarly, short hair was the justification Girl 2 gave to her low placement of Snow White on the image-values line. She stated ‘I don’t like Snow White. She’s got short hair. The other princesses have long pretty hair’. Girl 1 had also drawn Pascal, Rapunzel’s pet chameleon. Referring to the eyelashes drawn on Rapunzel, the researcher asked, ‘Will Pascal have eyelashes?’, to which Girl 1 laughed and replied, ‘No, because he’s a boy. Boys can’t have long eye lashes’. In contrast, hair and eyelashes were absent from all boys’ artwork. The boys discussed ‘big muscles or bodies’ but in relation to physical strength, so these attributes are explored further in Theme 2.

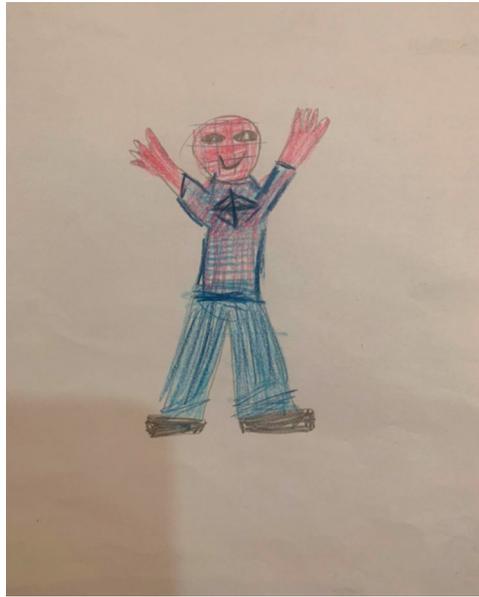


**Figure 2.** Belle (Girl 4).



**Figure 3.** Woody (Boy 2).

The girls also gave considerable weighting to clothing, make-up, and accessories. All referred to pretty dresses, colours or patterns and paid much attention to detail when designing dresses for the draw and tell exercise, whereas clothing was not discussed by the boys and only included on one boy's artwork (Boy 3, [figure 4](#)). When ranking Snow White towards the end of the image-values line, two girls explained that the



**Figure 4.** Spiderman (Boy 3).

other princesses have 'prettier dresses' 'nicer colours' and 'better patterns'. The value given to such emphasised femininity creates and sustains heterosexual discourses (Blaise 2005).

When asked if their favourite character would look the same if they were the opposite sex, most children made binary comments. The boys said that their character would look different as a girl because they would have 'long hair' (Boy 1, 2, 3), Girl 2 said Cinderella would no longer be her favourite character if she were a man because 'she wouldn't have a dress, long hair, lipstick', and Girl 3 would not like Elsa because 'she wouldn't wear high heels as boys can't do that'. Wreck-it Ralph was the main character that binaries were applied to. Boy 4 would not like him as a girl because he would be 'tiny and small', Girl 1 disapproved because he would be 'a strong girl, with big hands', and Girl 4 who did not like Wreck-it Ralph because he wears 'dirty clothes' would like him as a girl because he would be a 'princess and wear a crown and a dress'. This may suggest that although children may have different ways of doing gender, many want to get their gender 'right' with little room for negotiation (Blaise 2005). Children's ideas about women with muscular bodies or larger features looking unusual or unattractive is worth highlighting. Research suggests that muscular athletic women within the sports industry are often the target of harassment or homophobic bullying because they do not physically conform to traditional feminine gender expectations (Brown and Stone 2016; Kavoura and Kokkonen 2021).

Previous studies have also reported how young children often have rigid gendered expectations related to appearance. For example, Birner (2016) found that children were confused when shown a character with short hair wearing a dress, with some colouring longer hair onto the picture. Butler's (2004) theory of recognisability might help to explain why some children may be unable to recognise non-conforming gender

performance. Through the lens of dominant discourses, gender performances of masculinity (for boys) and femininity (for girls) are recognised as ‘a normative ideal’ (Butler 2004, 133). For many individuals’ recognition is the norm towards which they strive (Butler 2004). Therefore, some children may fail to connect to Disney characters who contravene the boundaries of normative gender performativity. However, with children’s evolved understanding of gender fluidity (Diamond 2020), children may be more accepting of non-binary appearances and behaviours.

The fact that girls exhibited more ‘appearance rigidity’ and intergroup bias than boys has been evidenced in other studies. Golden and Jacoby (2018), discuss how girls dressed in princess costumes behaved highly feminised and excluded boys from princess play. Butler’s (1990) theory suggests that children’s gender expression is partly defined by, and made recognisable, through symbolic objects (such as clothing and accessories) on or near their bodies. The significance of these markers is socio-culturally derived, with objects often representing gendered traits that children are socialised to perform (Burton 2020). The fact that clothing is often used to signal group membership (Halim et al. 2014) may explain why many young children express a strong desire to wear gender stereotypical clothing (Gutierrez et al. 2020). Dresses are an example of a gendered marker with feminine association (Burton 2020); many young girls are keen to show their group membership by wearing dresses, often of pinks and soft purples (Karniol 2011; Halim et al. 2014; 2018). In contrast, boys’ appearance rigidity often revolves around avoiding appearances and clothing that resemble anything female (Gutierrez et al. 2020; Halim et al. 2018; Reilly and Barry 2020).

A high level of homogeneity has been found to exist across diverse cultures with regards to femininity; a social construction, frequently reinforced through social media, that is typically linked to the importance of physical appearance and the quest for a perfect body (Gutierrez et al. 2020). The current study suggests that Disney can have a powerful impact on children’s gendered perceptions of body image. The girls’ placed significant emphasis on the physical attractiveness of female characters. Such focus on the beauty of Disney Princesses may be an early context in which girls become aware of the importance for women to be beautiful (Coyne et al. 2016). Golden and Jacoby (2018) also noted how in dress-up play, many girls associated physical appearance with internal qualities such as niceness, compared their own bodies against those of the princesses and, manifested in high levels of personal grooming and arguments about securing the most stylish dress and matching accessories. Children’s constant exposure to images of idealised bodies and faces through mass media may lead to high levels of self-objectification. Thornborrow et al. (2020) claim how ‘ideal’ women are frequently portrayed as ‘curvaceously thin but with full breasts’, while ‘ideal’ men have bodies with ‘worked-out muscles and “v” shaped torsos’. Internalisation of such ideals can lead to low psychological wellbeing and poor lifestyle choices. Girlguiding (2018) found only 51% of seven-to ten-year-olds to be ‘very happy’ with their appearance. Mental Health Foundation [MHF] (2021) report that 46% of girls and 25% of boys (11–16 years-old) are concerned about their body image, with 37% of girls and 13% of boys saying that celebrities have caused them to worry about their body. Furthermore, 36% of young people claimed they would do ‘whatever it took’ to look good, including extreme dieting, surgery, and using steroids (MHF 2021).

## **Theme 2 – behaviours**

Essentialist language was used by the children when discussing Disney characters. [Table 2](#) suggests that the most explicit ways in which boys identified themselves as gendered beings was through behavioural attributes. Qualities held in high regard were ‘physical strength, humour, bravery and the ability to save people’, traits they attached to Wreck-it-Ralph, Lightning McQueen, Hercules (and Spiderman – Marvel productions). In comparison, the boys used deficit labels ‘boring, annoying, clumsy and dozy’ to describe the characters that they placed at the end of the image-values line; other than Aladdin and Kristoff, these characters were traditional princesses.

As discussed in Theme 1, the girls paid more attention to the physical attributes of characters; the few behavioural traits that the girls referred to include the way the Princesses used their bodies ‘to sing well and dance’ and to wait to be ‘rescued’. The girls were divided in their ranking of the Disney Princess. They seemed to favour the traditional princesses for their ability to sing and dance while expressing admiration for the newer princesses (Mulan, Merida, and Moana), whose stories are about adventure but also incorporate music. For example, Girl 5 preferred Moana because she ‘sings really well’ and ‘dances with her grandma’ and that ‘Moana, Merida and Mulan are better than the rest of the princesses because they go on adventures and there’s oceans, boats and bears’. Dockterman (2021) claims that as girls get older it becomes less about the dress and more about what the princess is ‘doing’.

It is notable that three boys positioned Mulan, Merida, and Moana above two of the male characters (Aladdin and Kristoff) on the image-values line. They justified their decision by stating that these princesses are ‘better and different from the other princesses’ because there is ‘more action’ and ‘they go on adventures and on boats’, whereas Aladdin ‘lives in a castle like the princesses’ and ‘falls off a magic carpet’.

The boys seemed to prefer the action involved in the newer princess movies above some of the storylines involving male characters and the older princess which they found ‘boring’ and ‘annoying’. Not only do storylines in films such as Frozen, Brave and Moana, present female characters as strong, independent women who have interesting active roles, they also show egalitarian males who support female heroines. Kostas (2021) argues that constant exposure to such representations of gender may have a gender-equalising impact, by helping girls to realise that they do not have to be constrained by reductionist stereotypes, and presenting boys with softer portrayals of masculinity, compared to superheroes which are often hyper-masculinised.

The boys’ discourse framed masculinity as ‘active, brave and strong’, qualities boys often perceive ‘as being an integral part of normal for proper men’ (Hamilton and Roberts 2017, 127). Physical strength was referred to nearly as many times as a pretty dress was mentioned by the girls ([Table 2](#)). Strength and bravery are typical gender performances expected of boys and males, which might explain why Boy 4 felt that a female Spiderman would not be successful in ‘saving people’ and, a female Wreck-it-Ralph would be ‘polite’ but ‘not as strong’. Such talk illustrates the powerful way in which ‘strength’ may be used to represent the power and politics of masculinity.

Although there is a close link between the internalisation of media ‘body ideals’ with detrimental effects on body image and well-being among females, there is less evidence of this relationship among men (Thornborrow et al. 2020). However, the increasing occurrence of

muscle enhancing behaviours among young men (Thornborrow et al. 2020) and that 10% of secondary school boys would consider taking steroids (MHF 2021), may suggest that exposure to strong, muscular male characters in children's media could be influential.

Humour was also an important trait to the boys, as they compared funny male characters, such as Wreck-it Ralph and Mickey Mouse, to 'boring' traditional princesses. Research suggests how humour has a significant influence on the construction of masculinities, with the status of a school-aged male often defined by the value of his humour among his peer group (Huuki, Sari Manninen and Sunnari 2010). Humour has also been identified as being an essential form of cultural capital for equipping male teachers to manage their relationships with boys (Paechter 2007), as well as being one of the most popular types of reading material for young males (McFann 2004).

Recognition theory may help to examine children's binary comments. As there are many sociological and psychological theories relating to this concept, this paper will continue to draw on the work of Judith Butler (1990, 2004) to explore the children's narratives. Butler (2004) proposes that when a person [child] sees a difference in another person [child] but refuses to accept or respect the difference, it is often a fear-based response; perhaps due to conflict the new meaning has caused to one's current understanding of the world. This might cause the individual [child] to avoid, reject or become hostile to what they perceive as unnatural or irrelevant to their own identity. This concept could partly explain the boys' disapproval of Aladdin's gendered performance (clumsy, lives in a castle, fancy clothing) and the lack of connection with Kristoff (boring, silly) demonstrated by two boys and, the girls' lack of interest in male characters (other than Wreck-it Ralph) and their perception that 'cars are for boys'. Butler (2004) advises that the shift to recognition from a previous lack of recognition is reliant on the individual [child] understanding that the difference is a distinguishing feature of the Other, that the Other is separate so the difference does not impact on the self and, that there are commonalities which unite the Other and the self.

The girls made various comments to suggest their pride in female group membership; that Disney Princesses, dresses, and accessories are for girls and, being 'girly' is a positive asset. This is powerful social construct as 'girly girls' have been found to be under significant pressure to conform to gender-typed expectations held by their female peers, especially with regards to extensive aesthetics and grooming practices (Francis et al. 2017). Children's binary perceptions regarding toys, activities and character role models warrant considerable attention as play choices shape early cognitive and skill development, affecting children's future aspirations (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2021). It is essential therefore to continue to identify ways to deconstruct gender stereotypes in children's social and learning spaces, or their aspirations risk being limited, and their wellbeing impacted by conventional gender norms (OECD 2021). Practitioners can take on this challenge by adopting critical reflective pedagogy, where children examine the construction and limitations of gendered binaries, and their own reaction to individuals they encounter who might express gender in non-conforming ways.

## Conclusion

Many existing studies suggest that Disney culture risks introducing and reinforcing gender stereotypes in childhood. It is important to acknowledge that the precise impact of the

gendered messages children receive through Disney is difficult to determine because of the wider cultural context in which children function. That said, some interesting observations have emerged from the children's narratives captured through this participatory study.

A complex picture has emerged. Older Disney movies and merchandise continue to expose children to the heterosexual matrix of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity. This aligns with many of the children's narratives presented within this paper which suggest that gender performances of masculinity (for boys) and femininity (for girls) continue to be a normative ideal (Butler, 2004). However, all children seemed to value the new age princesses who are challenging gender binaries. The boys admired the behaviours and skills demonstrated by these independent, courageous, and active princesses. In contrast, they did not seem to connect with the egalitarian personas and softer masculinities of male characters Aladdin and Kristoff; the former is portrayed as 'slyph-like and dressed in flamboyant clothing' and the latter 'a submissive damsel in distress'. This might indicate that for boys that the behavioural traits (active, brave, strong) of a character have a higher priority than the character's gender. Yet, characteristics which represent 'hyper-femininity' might be met with disapproval because of the perceived threat to masculinity. And, although the girls enjoyed the action and adventure of the modern princesses, they had high expectations for their female characters to remain attractive, well-groomed and to sing. Thus, despite the progressive shift in understanding the fluidity of gender, it seems that children are still at risk of restrictive gender binaries and expectations which may impact on their self-esteem, wellbeing, and life opportunities.

Previous research implies that modifying children's gendered preferences is not easy to accomplish due to the fear of peer rejection associated with breaking gender norms (Spinner, Cameron and Calogero 2018). However, this may be becoming easier as social media increasingly exposes children to diverse ways of doing gender. Many children now regard gender as existing on a spectrum, that there are various ways of being a girl and a boy (Halim et al 2018), which will empower them to challenge gendered norms and adopt traits to which they relate, without fear of backlash (Diamond 2020). There will always be children who succumb to dominant gender discourses as meeting such expectations gives many individuals a sense of identity, acceptance and belonging, an important aspect of self-esteem. However, gender conformity 'is not the only, nor the most valid, way to perform one's gender identity', making it essential that practitioners respond to children's curiosities about gender nonconformity with care (Burton 2020, 46). With the increased realisation that many children are becoming more evolved in terms of understanding diverse genders, it is important to move beyond developmental theories. Feminist poststructuralist pedagogy provides early years practitioners a critical framework to explore the complexity of gender and the agency children have in constructing their own identities.

Rather than avoiding antiquated Disney merchandise, adults can use such material to help children to become critical receivers of gendered messages. Adults can counteract restrictive binaries by creating spaces for discussion and debate with children around the sociocultural construction of gender and restrictive meanings attached to gendered markers; gender nonconformity and how gender identities are expressed differently in different situations (Burton 2020); helping children to understand and cope with the power of peer culture and conflict; and through promoting mixed-gender play. This will help young children to respect different ways of being gendered beings and

prevent negative behaviour towards others perceived to be different. Due to increasing complexity regarding gender identity, it makes it even more essential children that learn how their identities are constructed, and reshaped, so that they can make sense of the many different messages, expectations, and experiences encountered (Eaude 2020).

### Limitations and future investigation

A limitation of this study is the small number of children involved, meaning its findings cannot be generalised. Rather it should be viewed as a pilot study, which will help to inform a larger project, involving a significantly higher number of participants who are reflective of wider cultural and socio-economic groups. There may also be criticism regarding the data collection methods utilised, for despite the increased acceptance of creative research, there remains scepticism regarding the validity of knowledge obtained through art and play (Coyne and Carter 2018). The fact that both researchers were female might have meant that femininities were more noticeable during data collection and data analysis. As the pre-selection of Disney characters for the image-values line might have influenced the children's narratives, any future study will involve children in the choice of any images used. Another shortcoming could be the lack of understanding regarding the children's first-hand experience and exposure to Disney merchandise. A follow-up study could triangulate children's narratives, with those of parents and peers to provide a more comprehensive insight. However, the study intended to focus solely on children's perceptions using creative participatory methods as previous studies in this area are predominantly based on the views of parents or on observations of children at play. Finally, to promote validity of participatory research it is essential that interpretations made about children's play-based images are accompanied by their personal narratives, any meaning deduced be viewed as suggestive rather than fixed (Elden 2012), and the difficulty in accurately representing children's voice be acknowledged (Zhang 2015).

### Disclosure statement

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