

ADULTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR CHILDHOOD MEDIA ROLE MODELS

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**Title**

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**MASTER OF ARTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The media's effects on children have been frequently discussed, but the effects that childhood media has when individuals reach adulthood is not fully understood. Current research in this area has mostly focused on present day media figures, not past role models. Studying media role models retroactively shows the power of messages that people receive when they are children. This study used data collected from 18 undergraduate students through interviews (6 males, 12 females) to investigate three research questions regarding gender's role in choosing a media role model, the articulation of gender identity during discussion of media role models, and how assessments of childhood media role models change over time. Findings that could lead to potential future research include the underlying hegemonic masculinity, where men are accessing their power in society through fictional characters' masculine traits, and the influence of shared experience of media when choosing a childhood media role model.

Keywords: children, adults, media, gender, Disney, cultivation theory, social cognitive theory, theory of gender performativity, third-person theory.

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Academia and popular media frequently conduct research and publish findings concerning media effects on age groups ranging from young children to adults. While the studies on media effects are vast, these studies generally focus on young people and the ways media messages prime these youths' perceptions of the world and affect their social behavior (Cohen, 2001; Landstedt Asplund, & Gillander Gådin, 2009; Roberts & Foehr, 2004; Tan & Kinner, 1982; Villani, 2001). For instance, Villani (2001) found a positive correlation between media exposure and teens' aggressive behaviors, their alcohol and tobacco use, and early sexually activity. My study on childhood media role models also explores ways in which participants perceived their favorite characters had an influence on their thoughts and behaviors.

One main message subtly communicated to audiences through media is about gender. Observing the actions, interactions, and physical appearance of males and females in media helps form audience members' views of acceptable social behavior, gender roles, and their self-image (Dill, 2013; Graves, 1999; Martin, Ruble, & Szkrybalo, 2002). The mixture of academic (Daniel & Bridges, 2010; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Landstedt et al., 2009; Opplinger, 2007; Rivadeneyra & Ward, 2005; Roberts & Foehr, 2004) and non-academic (Lestor, 2010; Whelan, 2014) publications concerning both media's positive and negative effects on cognitive development tend to linger on its negative influences. One topic of interest is the persistence of the limited array of gender models in children's media (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Smith & Cook, 2008; Whelan, 2014).

Many studies on media effects investigate connections between the influence of media and the formation of gender norms on children in Western society (Dill, 2013; Graves, 1999; Martin, Ruble, & Szkrybalo, 2002). For example, Rivadeneyra and Ward (2005) found that the perception of television as a valid reality prompted high school students to exhibit more

traditional gender roles. Research on gender stereotypes or portrayals in media often focus on female characters and their effect on female viewers' mental processes. Landstedt et al. (2009), for example, discovered that teenage girls' stress increased more than boys' did when negotiating norms of femininity and masculinity. A majority of research in this area focuses on the female experience, rather than the male experience.

In several studies looking at the internalization of media ideals, both men and women who saw stereotypical presentations of males and females experienced lower body satisfaction and were more likely to endorse gender-role stereotypes, suggesting television contributes to stereotypical and traditional attitudes on gender (Daniel & Bridges, 2010; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Landstedt, Asplund, & Gådin, 2009; Oppliger, 2007; Rivadeneyra & Ward, 2005). Groesz, Levine, and Murnen (2002) also observed that the media effect was stronger when the research participants were under the age of 19, which indicates that the present stereotypes in children's media and lack of variety of characteristics for males and females (Smith & Cook, 2008) impacts children to a greater degree than adults.

Landstedt's et al. (2009) study and others emphasize media influence on children rather than their adult counterparts because children lack real-world experience of the situations they view in the media (Dorr, 1986; Rivadeneyra & Ward, 2005; Van Evra, 2004). Very young children have a tendency to pass judgment on a character's "goodness" and "badness" based on their physical appearance (Hoffner & Cantor, 1985; Tversky, 1985), while older children and adults do this to a lesser degree. In Hoffner and Cantor's (1985) study, preschool children judged characters solely on their appearance rather than their actions, although the stereotypes concerning physical appearance still appeared to a certain degree in all age groups. Physical appearance is the most noticeable indicator of gender in children's media, and these findings about children's judgment of physical appearances connect directly to gender. Based on what the

academic world knows about social learning and the media, it can be assumed a viewer is more likely to accept a particular view as a valid interpretation of the world depending on the viewer's amount of exposure to certain media and the viewer's age.

Media teaches and reinforces the culture's normative behavior. Gender is one example of a deeply ingrained set of values reinforced through media (Bourdieu, [1980] 1990; Lorber, 1994). My study explores connections between adults' childhood media role models and the characteristic and physical representations of gender. The unavoidability of gender in media portrayals indicates that gender binaries in Western culture almost certainly play a role when children choose a media role model. Mass media supplements traditional childhood fairy tales and fables in order to provide role models and socialization messages to our children (Bulger, 1988). This presence of recurring storylines and characters in mass media indicates that adults were exposed to very similar traditional narratives and stereotypes and narratives when they were choosing their media role model.

Past studies on the connection between media role models and gender identity have been divided. Some studies see similar personalities as a bigger factor than gender in choosing a role model (Calvert et al., 2001), while others place less emphasis on the actual similarities between the role model and the viewer (Greenwood, 2007; Taylor & Setter, 2011). Greenwood (2007) emphasized the difference between idealizing (defined as "wishful identification," or desiring to be like the character) and identification, in which a viewer explicitly identifies with the role model. Even when a person's gender does not match with a character, personality traits may provide grounds for either idealizing or identification.

Ultimately, research in this area has mostly focused on present day media figures, not past role models. In other words, these studies have focused on who a person looks up to in the present and not who they looked up to in the past. My study on role models in children's media

bridges this gap in research and explores adults' perception of the role gender plays in choosing a character or media figure to look up to during childhood.

## **Rationale**

Media role models may strongly impact people in their childhood, but children are more likely to recognize this influence as adults. While people do see media's influence on others' behavior, they often fail to perceive media's influence on their current behavior and their gender identity. Gender stereotypes permeate every aspect of everyday life in ways that are thought to be natural. Different stereotypes constrain people in western society (e.g., rationalizing the actions or emotions of others by stating "that is how women are," or the unwritten rule that "real" men do not cry). By policing gender identity of people within the society, gender stereotypes constrain and restrict the thoughts and actions of people.

Although their childhood self is part of their current identity, it is a part of their identity in the past, a "different," younger person. Thus, an adult discussing media role models from their childhood has a simultaneous outsider and insider perspective by recalling their thoughts and perspectives as a child and comparing those elements with their current thoughts as an adult. An adult's evolving understanding of media characters from their childhood benefits this research and gives more perspective to an area of research that usually studies the present and neglects the passing of time. Most studies focus on the present when they assess both children and adults' role models in media (e.g., Bricheno & Thornton, 2007; Lockwood, 2006), rather than providing opportunities for adults to reminisce about their admiration for certain media figures when they were children, or capturing narratives of watching or pretending to be the character/person. Reminiscing about a media character allows participants to take a fresh perspective on a media role model they used to look up to as a child. This time gap between childhood and present day allows for participants to think about their relationship with the character and reasons for

admiring the character. Not only did the person have an automatic reaction to the character as a child, but they also identify the character as their childhood role model as an adult, which indicates that the person has retained information about the character through childhood and into their adult years.

Therefore, the media role models people had as children may indicate their formation of gender concepts and the aspects they value in others in ways that the person may not consciously acknowledge. Retention of the media role models characteristics indicate that, to some extent, the person identified with the values and behaviors of this media role model. This identification with the media character involves internalization of the identities of the media characters, which can have some long-term effects on children's behaviors and value systems (Cohen, 2001; Villani, 2001). This retention of the character's information and the strength of memories could have an influence on the way adults continue to behave. Studying media role models retroactively brings an additional element to media studies, showing the staying power of messages that people receive when they are children.

The second chapter of this thesis reviews the literature relevant to gender identity and children's media. Chapter 3 provides an in-depth look at the methods used for this study. The fourth chapter breaks down the major findings of my research into five major themes. Chapter 5 discusses the results' findings at greater length.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter provides a review of pertinent literature on the topic of gender and media. First, I discuss the specifics of children's development of gender identity and how it impacts a child's choice of media role model. Previous studies on children's development of gender identity offer insight into current perceptions of gender in connection to their media role model, which factor into this study. Second, research on the proportion of male to female characters, gender stereotypes, and active female role models highlights past and current gender issues in media. This research illustrates the ways that portrayals of gender have changed over the years and the ways it has stagnated. Then, I discuss the connections between choosing a role model, children's perceptions of physical appearance in media, and the impact that visual representations in media have on the formation of gender identity. Fourth, I connect specific concepts from Bandura's social learning theory and Gerbner's cultivation theory to children's consumption of media. Lastly, specific studies done on media role models for children and adolescents are explored and used to develop the research questions.

### **Development of Gender Identity**

According to Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, children learn to behave in ways that meet expectations for their biological sex in order to integrate themselves into society. This produces the effect of a static gender identity and obscures the performative elements of a person's gender. According to Scarr (1992), children become aware of their own gender around their second year of life. By kindergarten (ages 4-5), they recognize gender as a social category, become interested in gender role information available in their culture, and actively search for meanings about gender and gender-appropriate behavior from different sources, including mass media (Davies, 2003; Stangor & Ruble, 1989). A child's gender is generally revealed through naming, dress, and other gender markers. Gender is used as a basis to

treat a person in certain ways because of their assigned gender. Gender roles change as society changes, but at the time they are in effect, they feel real and unchangeable to the people within the culture. For example, young boys in Western culture are dissuaded from wearing the currently feminine color pink, as boys are supposed to be “tough” and masculine.

From this differential treatment, children learn to behave in a way that aligns with their gender. Throughout this process of gender performance, children learn to think of masculinity or femininity as if it were an unchanging part of their personal and social selves. After recognizing gender as a social category, gender remains a constant presence in a child’s life. Davies (1993) agrees with Butler that people actively take part in the production of their gender identities in everyday life. This internalization of gender as a part of their identity may affect what people choose as a childhood media role model when they are young.

### **Hegemonic masculinity**

Hegemonic masculinity, introduced by Connell (1987), is an ideology that places the masculine worldview as the dominant, and most readily accepted, cultural ideal. This norm is displayed through physical, occupational, and sexual ways. Certain ideas about masculinity have become “common sense” in U.S. media culture; these ideas in turn fuel the maintenance of patriarchy and hegemony. Trujillo (1991) expanded on the definition of hegemonic masculinity by stating that masculinity is hegemonic in U.S. media culture when power is represented through the body, occupational achievement, familial patriarchy, and heterosexually defined and centered around a representation of the phallus, such as a gun (Lorber, 1994). This underlying symbolism and adulation of masculinity within our culture’s media can affect not only gender ideals in children, but the people in media whom they choose to look up to.

Studies on the flexibility of children’s concept of acceptable gendered behaviors are mixed. Some studies found that when children weave narratives, they use cultural products such



as films or television as raw material to formulate their own stories and make their own interpretations (Änggård, 2005; Corsaro, 1985, 1997; Mouritsen, 1996). These children did not passively reenact the stories from these movies, but instead melded them together or made creative interpretations and reinterpreted patterns within traditional stories. Änggård (2005) attested that the traditional narratives from media give children a backdrop not only to reinforce gender, but to reimagine it as well. These studies maintain that children are not completely influenced by the gendered actions and behavior that their media role models partake in, but children also have a great capacity to understand the rigidity of the gender binary that society puts in place (Davies, 2003). In contrast with Änggård's (2005) findings, Davies (2003) discovered that children often ignore deviations of typical gender behaviors or reconstruct the stories so that they fit into the expected frames. In this study, children used gender "deviant" characters created by the researchers to support gender norms, instead of using them as an alternative to break out of typical stories (Davies, 2003). The creation of the gender deviant characters for the study and the children's support of gender norms implies that children's narratives rarely show anything other than traditional gender normative behavior and that this influences children's interpretations of media.

Fairy-tale and "happy-ending" narratives are typical for young children's entertainment. However, as children grow up, they begin to have a clear fragmentation of media tastes. Where one or two content categories account for most viewing among young children, by the adolescent years, preferences spread out over five to seven different genres (Roberts & Foehr, 2004). This indicates that children's media role models expand and change as they grow older and as their gender identity develops over time. Aside from age, gender is the only attribute of young people that consistently differentiates content preferences (Roberts & Foehr, 2004). Therefore, a child's

media preferences are partially determined by the child's gender and the gender of a potential media role model.

### **Portrayal of female characters**

Studies on the number of females in children's media show the need for more females and more diverse representations of both genders in children's entertainment (Smith & Cook, 2008). Speaking characters and narrators in children's films are predominantly male, signifying to children that men are more interesting to watch and are more reliable sources of information. As of 2013, females represented 29.2% of speaking characters in all children's movies released that year (Smith, Choueiti, & Pieper, 2013). This discrepancy has not improved over time – there was no change in terms of representation of women in popular movies across the sample of films from 1990 to 2006 (Smith & Cook, 2008). Comedic films host the greatest number of women (36%), whereas action/adventure (20-23.9%) and animation (24.6%) were the genres that hosted the least number of female characters (Smith et al., 2013). Movies released in this 16-year window provide insight on the mediascape from the time when current undergraduates, the participants in the current study, were children or teenagers.

These sparse instances of female portrayals can undermine the presence of females who do speak or have active roles in film, since stereotypes are apparent in the movies examined in these studies. In children's movies, females are portrayed as traditional, hypersexual, or parental figures. In children's movies, "hypersexual" was defined as "an overemphasis on attractiveness and sexuality by way of clothing (i.e., alluring attire) and body proportions (i.e., uncharacteristically small waist, hourglass figure, thinness)" by Smith & Cook (2008, p. 14). According to Smith et al. (2013), female characters were more likely to be shown in sexually revealing clothing or partially naked in movies released from 2007 to 2013.

In children's movies, the majority of female characters' aspirations were also "short-sighted," either dreaming of romantic love or expressing a desire for one thing and then getting broadsided by romantic love (Smith & Cook, 2008). The rating of the movie also affected the portrayals of female characters. G and PG-rated movies were *more* likely to have these traditional portrayals of women, while R-rated movies showed fewer gender differences in terms of parental status or relational status. Therefore, hyperfeminine female characters are more accessible to children than the less traditional female characters seen in R-rated movies. Since children are usually only allowed to watch G-rated films in their earliest years of life, some of children's earliest media memories and favorite characters can come from G-rated movies (Smith & Cook, 2008). When females are less likely to appear in G-rated movies, the impact of the portrayal of women may be stronger, since there are fewer females to look to for reference.

These findings indicate that if an adult consumed typical children's media when they were young and their media role model was female, this character is most likely to exhibit feminine stereotypes. Other characters in G-rated films verbally reinforce the value of female characters' appearances and tendency to wear attire that accentuates their unrealistic physique (Smith & Cook, 2008). These exaggerated physiques of women may prompt children to internalize the gender ideals of beauty's essential role in forming the female identity.

This ideal is problematic for a number of reasons. Since this praise is being given to characters who adhere to a narrow ideal of beauty (white, thin, etc.), this ideal suggests that these qualities are the only way for a female to be truly beautiful. Prominent feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey (1975) has argued that a majority, if not all media, is shot through the eyes of the male protagonist (male gaze). The male gaze encourages an audience member to take pleasure in seeing oneself in a primary character (white, heterosexual male) and identifying with him. The male gaze denies female viewers a viewpoint of their own by compelling them to take the

viewpoint of the male character. The prominence of male characters in all media, including children's media, encourages audience members of all ages to internalize the male gaze.

### **Gender in Media**

The imbalance of female characters and male characters in children's films has remained consistent, even into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. When females are onscreen, their clothing and other characters' comments about their physical features emphasize these women's often unrealistic appearance. Females in children's media are portrayed in traditionally feminine ways. The Disney princess movies in particular show how the children's media industry markets femininity to young children. These Disney princess movies follow "waves," similar to the feminist movement, with the first-wave princesses (Snow White) displaying docility and passivity and the second-wave princesses (Ariel and Jasmine) retaining some of these traits while embracing more assertiveness. Third-wave princesses, such as *Brave's* Merida and *Frozen's* Elsa and Anna, have only appeared in recent years and have therefore only been present in a few studies (Leavy & Trier-Bieniek, 2014; Whelan, 2014). While these third-wave princesses carry their own movies, they are still few and far between in the history of stereotypical female princesses.

#### **Traditional female stereotypes in Disney**

This section focuses on gender stereotypes in Disney movies for a number of reasons. First, Disney is a popular site of research for scholars looking into gender in children's media, and their work provides background on the current research in this area. Second, the pervasive themes in Disney media also appear in other animated and live-action children's media at the time when current undergraduates were children. Finally, even if undergraduates' media role model did not come from the Disney world, a majority of my participants viewed the Disney movies covered in this section and were familiar with the gender ideals present in these movies.

The Disney princess films illustrate the evolution of gender stereotypes in children's films. One prominent theme interwoven throughout the discourse about children's consumption of media and the possible influence it has on them is the impact of Disney movies, especially the "Disney princess" movies. The gender portrayals in these movies were likely part of current undergraduate adults' childhoods because they were released in the 1990-2006 period when the undergraduates were young children and teenagers. Female children, in a desire to be "special" like these Disney princesses, may internalize the emphasis on physical appearance and the portrayals of these females' relationships with males. Children (especially female children) are encouraged to look up to and desire the lifestyles of these female characters.

The popularity of Disney movies targeted towards children indicates several things. First, popular animated children's movies have stereotypical gender portrayals that children are consuming. Second, women are being put in "main" roles and are popular characters that form children's ideas about gender. In this regard, Disney movies differ from the general landscape of children's media, which prominently features men in main roles. Although Disney is more likely to have a female lead than other children's movies, films with male leads are generally more common. Finally, Disney movies featuring females as main characters, especially female princess characters, are generally the most immediately popular Disney movies, whereas movies with a main male protagonist do not make as much money. Most of the movies marketed as "princess" movies (*The Little Mermaid*, *Pocahontas*, etc.) earned at least \$2 million in their first weekends, whereas two animated Disney movies featuring male protagonists (*Hercules* and *Aladdin*) did more poorly than other animated Disney movies in their first weekends at the box office (*The Numbers*, 2013). This suggests that femininity is Disney's most "marketable" gender, even if women are underrepresented in media as a whole (Smith & Cook, 2008).

As mentioned previously, the Disney princesses and their gendered behaviors came in “waves,” much like the feminist movement. The first wave consisted of three princesses (Snow White, Cinderella, and *Sleeping Beauty’s* Aurora) who exemplify an extremely narrow view of what “special” females look like and how they behave. These princesses exhibit traditional physical and emotional feminine qualities. Physically, these three princesses are young, thin, white, wide-eyed, perfectly groomed, and above all, beautiful. They are merely reactive to their surroundings, not active in forging their destinies. Writers in popular press note that they encompass all that princesshood entails: both as a state of mind and as a signature of ideal girlhood (Whelan, 2012).

The second wave of Disney princesses (starting with Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*, in 1989) shifted the meaning Disney had constructed for “passive princesshood” with “progressive princesshood” characters such as Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan, Tiana, and Rapunzel (Rozario, 2004; Whelan, 2012;). This progressive princesshood subverts traditional female roles by allowing the princesses to exhibit traditionally male characteristics. But these progressive princesses have to balance compassion (a stereotypically feminine trait) with masculine assertiveness (Whelan, 2012). For instance, Pocahontas flouts her father’s ideals for feminine behavior, such as settling down and marrying a brave warrior who promises to care for her, but also shows compassion to animals and the people around her, and literally stops a war, not for the good of her tribe, but because of her love for Englishman John Smith. These female characters are assertive, but only to the point of maintaining their relationship with the male lead.

Many of the decisions of progressive, independent female characters in children’s movies also tend to end in perceived failure, or with the characters blaming themselves for the negative consequence. For instance, when Pocahontas kisses John Smith, it sets off a chain of events that ends with the death of a warrior named Kocoum. Pocahontas’ father blames Kocoum’s death on

his daughter's actions and tells her she should have listened to his advice to stay away from the white settlers. This shows children that females who choose to be autonomous like the progressive princesses may be punished for their assertive actions (Matti, 1999; Sternglanz & Serbin, 1974).

Adults who grew up with first-wave princesses may see these progressive princesses as a step forward and encourage their children to watch these movies and look up to the female characters without realizing that Disney princesses have passed on some of their genes to the next generation. These updated versions of "princesses" have merely masked some of the more negative attributes of animated female characters in children's films instead of creating a new form of strong role models. The second-wave princesses are no longer the passive characters of the first-wave generation, but what audiences receive is merely an updated version of old-fashioned female stereotypes.

Limited scholarly research exists on the most recent Disney princesses (from 2012's Princess Merida in *Brave* to Princess Anna and Queen Elsa in *Frozen* in 2013), who are much more progressive than their previous counterparts (Leavy & Trier-Bieniek, 2014; Whelan, 2014). I argue that the most recent Disney movies showcase "third-wave princesses," who are more active and less dependent on men and patriarchal society. Since these third-wave characters have only appeared in the past several years, they are less likely to have influenced the gender development of current undergraduate students.

Like the Disney princesses, the main male characters in Disney movies also have certain masculine characteristics that are prevalent in Disney media, such as having large or defined muscles and traditional good looks. Disney males are also typically heroic, adventurous, and usually seeking the heart of the main female lead. However, Disney films rarely put these male characters in the center of the story in the way that the Disney princesses are. Ultimately, the

way males are portrayed has not progressed to the same extent that females' portrayals have (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003; Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, & Tanner, 2004).

### **Role Models for Children and Teenagers**

There are many studies that investigate the role models of children and teenagers, both in media and in real-life. Active females in children's movies can help gender norms evolve while providing strong role models for children. Young boys and girls have been found to value different attributes when choosing a role model, with boys choosing more attributes linking to the character's physical abilities and girls valuing beneficent personalities. In order for a woman to be elevated to role model status, she must display both feminine and masculine characteristics, as well as a high level of achievement and an appealing physical appearance (Carrington & Skelton, 2002).

#### **Children and physical appearance in media**

Research on the physical appearance of males and females in children's films reveals the role attractiveness plays in children choosing a role model. According to a study by Hoffner and Cantor (1985), the appearance of a media character is a more important factor to preschool-age children than the behavior of that character. Preschool children generally rated an ugly character as mean and an attractive character as nice, no matter how the character actually behaved. For older children, the behavior of the character was more influential than the character's appearance. This study shows that children become more discerning as they age. Preschool children may choose role models from movies or television shows based on attractive physical attributes, whereas older children recognize the characters' behavior and admire them for their actions. This difference is relevant to the current study because, depending on the age of the participant when he or she had a particular role model, the physical characteristics of the media role model may have been pertinent to the decision to look up to that character.



Tversky (1985) speculates on why younger children focus on looks so intently while older children do not. He argues that strong perceptual cues affect children as they develop, and that it takes time to learn to suppress immediate responses and begin to think about situations and people past the surface level. The realization that actions, rather than physical attributes, are stronger indicators of intent causes this shift in perception. This shift in perception could also cause a shift in media role models, which indicates that children could have different role models at different stages of childhood. In this same vein, the greater emphasis on attractiveness in female characters could also play a part in the way these children learn to perceive gender.

### **Active female role models**

While a majority of female characters in children's media are passive, there are some studies on active females in movies. Active females are women who take an active role in the plot of the movie, instead of merely reacting to others' actions. Active females in children's movies provide stronger role models for children while simultaneously dismantling gender role stereotypes, like the ones that have historically dominated Disney movies. Participants in a study who viewed male heroes in animated children's television as positive role models, for example, were more inclined to agree with conventional sex role stereotypes and offer resistance to the notion of a female lead character as a role model (Bresnahan, Inoue, Karawa, & Jeong, 2003).

In some cases, boys and girls can identify with a media role model of the opposite sex. In terms of opposite-sex role models in media, previous research indicates that it is more common for a girl to identify with a male media figure than it is for a boy to identify with a female media figure (Ragins & McFarlin, 1990). Approximately 26% of children (9% more boys than girls) name an action hero as a role model out of any kind of media figure (Groebel, 1999), so when a boy identifies with a female character, it is most likely to be female main character in an action movie – an action heroine. An action heroine idealizes masculinity in a female body, and uses

the symbolic props of her male counterparts, most prominently guns, making the character easier and more socially acceptable for boys to relate to than a feminine female character.

Previous research has found several different components that come into play before a media character is elevated to “hero” or role model status (Calvert, Kondla, Ertel, & Meisel, 2001; Taylor & Setter, 2011). The ancient archetype of the hero (Hall & Nordby, 1973; Jung, 1954, 1959) embodies both traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics of power and nurturance by rescuing those who are in danger. Power and nurturance are two characteristics of effective social models (Bandura, 1977) and characters who display this mixture of masculine and feminine qualities are likely to be admired and imitated by others (Calvert et al., 2001). While no significant research has been conducted on this question to date, current undergraduates who had a female childhood media role model may be more likely to admire females who have a combination of feminine and masculine qualities, such as the “progressive” princesses or otherwise active female characters (Whelan, 2014).

Calvert et al. (2001) examined how young adult males and females perceive televised depictions of the female action hero, Xena Warrior Princess. The study emphasized a difference between the participants “liking” Xena and seeing her as a role model. For women, there was no difference in the traits that made Xena likeable or a role model (Calvert et al., 2001). Interestingly, men saw Xena as a potential role model only when she appeared less physically attractive and was not a mother figure. Men liked Xena when she was physically attractive, but were less likely to see her as a role model in those cases.

This inconsistency between men and women’s perceptions of Xena appears to indicate that women achieve role model status when men do not view them as potential sex objects or mothers, yet men have also been found to view ruthless masculine characteristics as unappealing in depictions of heroic women (Calvert et al., 2001). Women view Xena as a role model when

they want to be her, which includes being attractive and in charge of one's sexuality. However, participants in other studies claimed that an attractive protagonist is a better role model than a less attractive protagonist (Taylor & Setter, 2011). Female action heroes and their role model status were also explored in Greenwood's (2007) study, where the desire to be like a female action hero outweighed perceptions of similarity to the character, which indicates that someone would not necessarily choose a role model who is similar to their personality or physical build.

Taylor and Setter's (2011) study shows that more aggressive protagonists (such as action heroes) were perceived as better role models than less aggressive protagonists. This finding was true no matter how physically attractive the protagonist was. This newer study runs counter to past findings indicating disapproval of aggression in general, particularly when women are the aggressors (Barber et al., 1999; Campbell, 1994), suggesting a shift in gender norms over time. This change could indicate that audiences perceive an attractive, aggressive protagonist to be more appealing as a role model than her essentially passive, attractive counterpart. Ultimately, an aggressive woman was more likely to have goals, and if the female protagonist is successful with her goals in the story arc, her status as a role model increases (Taylor & Setter, 2011).

Research on adult men viewing female action heroes as role models is mixed. Characters are generally more appealing as role models if they are physically attractive, but men also had trouble viewing women as role models when they were physically attractive. In addition to this paradox, it is uncertain what specific character traits draw a male viewer to a female action hero (Calvert et al., 2001). Also of note, research with child or adult participants has only explored media figures current at the time of the research, not media figures from the participants' pasts (e.g., Bresnahan et al., 2003; Groebel, 1999; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990; Smith & Cook, 2008). Retrospective research concerning media characters that were a part of the person's past instead of the present is lacking. This area of research warrants more investigation.

## **Gender and role models**

The research on whether children and teenagers choose a role model who shares their physical attributes, such as gender or race, is mixed. According to some studies, children and adolescents are most likely to choose a role model who is the same gender (Bricheno & Thornton, 2007; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005), but girls still responded better to a male role model than boys did to a female role model. In a study by Bresnahan et al. (2003), male participants found the male superhero to be a positive role model for children, but neither males nor females viewed the female lead character as a good role model. The most likely reason for these findings is that there are more male characters than female characters, and hegemonic masculinity continues to dominate the Western worldview as the accepted cultural norm, where our society tends to view masculine characteristics as more valuable than feminine ones.

A study by Ochman (1996) examined the effect of non-stereotypical, same-sex role models on the self-esteem of children in third grade, revealing that both girls' and boys' self-esteem increased more with same-sex models than with opposite-sex role models. This finding suggests that the presence of strong female and male role models is very important in children's media and for children's self-esteem.

Although some research suggests that "outstanding" female role models inspire females to a greater degree than male role models (Lockwood, 2006; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990), Allen and Eby (2004) found that gender matching is unimportant when selecting a role model. Meanwhile, it seems that spontaneously occurring role model relationships, such as the ones made with characters or figures in the media, are more beneficial and offer more behavioral guidance than role model dyads synthetically created in formal settings for teenagers (Scandura & Williams, 2001). Overall, most research indicates children choose a same-sex role models.

Regarding the importance of ethnic similarity in choosing a role model, the research is mixed. Some people of color prefer role models who have similar backgrounds and appearances to them because they are inspired by an in-group member or desire to view someone similar to them in order to envision their own success (Carrington, Tymms, & Merrell, 2008; Lester, 2010; Lockwood, 2006). Bonilla-Silva and Ray (2009) claim that social networks are more likely to form within real-life racial groups in our society. In contrast, Lankau, Riordan, and Thomas (2005) found no race differences in role-modeling functions between real-life mentors and protégés. The major difference between real-life role models and media role models is the amount of communication happening between the role model and the people they influence. Real-life role modeling is a two-way street, whereas media role models remain constant and do not adjust their behavior.

### **Attributes of role models**

Not only do male and female children look up to different types of figures in media, they also value different attributes of these role models. Bricheno and Thornton (2007) found that many boys named “physical prowess” attributes such as “athleticism” and “bravery,” while girls named “worker/helper” attributes such as “honesty” and “work ethic.” There were also more references from girls about the importance of their media role model showing “caring,” “trust,” and “kindness” (Bricheno & Thornton, 2007). Additional studies reveal that boys are more likely to look up to athletes, cinema figures, and actors, whereas girls’ celebrity role models are known for their music (Biskup & Pfister, 1999; Brown, 1956; Sternglanz & Serbin, 1974). These findings have remained constant over the past 40 years of research.

Overall, people chose role models in media based on the role model’s level of achievement and success (Carrington & Skelton, 2002). An interesting aspect of the Bricheno and Thornton (2007) study was that there were no significant differences between role models

identified by children from schools in socially advantaged and disadvantaged areas. While there is limited research on the differences between the role models of children from different economic backgrounds, I believe that this observation in Bricheno and Thornton's (2007) study underlines the universality the media role models children choose, despite economic or family background. Non-media role models, such as family or teachers, inhabit the same social and cultural background as the child, whereas role models from the mass media more easily reach children of all economic backgrounds.

### **Theoretical Framework**

My study on role models in children's media combines Bandura's social cognitive theory and Gerbner et al.'s (1986) cultivation theory to explore which characters or figures in media adults looked up to as children and how gender (of both the interviewee and the media figure) fit into their preferences for certain characters.

Many media effects studies are grounded in Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 2002; Roberts & Foehr, 2004) and examine how portrayals in media can "prime" perceptions of the world, thus influencing the viewer's behavior (e.g., Berkowitz, 1984; Jo & Berkowitz, 1994; Josephson, 1987; Roberts & Foehr, 2004). These studies demonstrate that exposure to behavior on a screen can influence young viewers and show that media messages can play a significant role in the socialization of children (Eggermont 2006; Landstedt, Asplund, & Gådin, 2009; Morr Serewicz and Gale, 2008; Roberts & Foehr, 2004; Tan & Kinner, 1982). Therefore, media role models are presumably influencing children's behavior. Butler's (1990) performance theory supports this idea by conceptualizing gender as reiterated acting, where a preconceived script is rehearsed by everyone in our society through repetition and reinforcement. Eventually, this performance becomes so ingrained that it is impossible to differentiate from

one's true disposition and the culture's script for gender. In other words, we learn how to perform gender by watching other people, both real and onscreen, perform it.

Cultivation theory offers additional support for the significant role media messages have on the socialization of children (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986). According to cultivation theory, the more a person views television's portrayal of the world, the more likely it is that he or she accepts that viewpoint as a valid interpretation of the world.

Additionally, cultivation theory's concept of the "third-person effect" maintains that people believe that others are more strongly influenced by the media than they themselves are (Gunther & Thorson, 1992; Perloff, 1993). The younger a person consuming media is, the greater impact adults perceive media to have on them (Eveland, Nathanson, Detenber, & McLeod, 1999). This third-person effect is even present between groups of children, with children claiming that only "little kids" imitate actions or behaviors on TV (Buckingham, 2000). Previous research supports the idea that children are more strongly influenced by media, primarily because children have an eagerness to consume and learn from media (Dorr, 1986). Television portrayals have been found to influence the social reality of children and adolescents, especially their internalization of stereotypical gender roles (Rivadeneira & Ward, 2005; Van Evra, 2004).

Children are as open to learning from media as they are from other sources when it comes to situations they have not yet dealt with in person. As children age and sharpen their logical thought process, they can explore increasingly abstract concepts, but children still possess a more limited knowledge base compared to adults, and are not as discerning or experienced when it comes to the situations portrayed onscreen (Dorr, 1986; Roberts & Foehr, 2004). Because of children's lack of knowledge about the real world, they can fail to differentiate between a media message and real life if they lack the background knowledge to make sense of the information

(Dorr, 1986; Rivadeneyra & Ward, 2005; Van Evra, 2004). As a result, the narrow gender portrayals in children's media can be perceived as reality.

With the passage of time, adults can begin to separate the experiences they had as a child from their current experiences. Because of this separation of childhood and adulthood experience, adults may recognize the strong impact media role models had on them when they were children, and may be better equipped to understand more complex ideas surrounding the media characters that influenced their way of thinking of a child. Not only do adults have a better understanding of the actions of their childhood media role model, but they may also be able to see the implications of the stereotypical aspects of these characters.

### **Research Questions**

Most of the previous studies that have assessed both children and adults' role models in media focus on present media role models. None provided opportunities for adults to reminisce about their admiration of certain media figures when they were children, or captured narratives of memories of watching that character and/or pretending to be that character. As previously stated, the time gap between admiration of a childhood media role model and an adult's present day mindset offers several benefits that previous studies have not taken advantage of. This passage of time allows an adult to get past his or her automatic reaction to a character and take a fresh perspective on the subject. The retention of knowledge regarding a character from childhood to adulthood also indicates that aspects of the character stayed in the person's memory. This continual retention of information may reveal evolving perceptions of the character and gender's role in the participant's choice of media role models.

Conducting research on adults' recollections of childhood media role models can add to our understanding of media in several ways. First, it can help illustrate how the media role model shaped their gender identity. It can also show how much and how long people remember what



they watched and admired as children. Lastly, it can reveal what aspects we value in media and which characters are “role model worthy.” The following research questions address these goals:

RQ1: What are the gendered aspects of the characters identified as favorites?

RQ2: How do people articulate gender identity in their discussion of media role models?

Studies such as Calvert et al. (2001) and Taylor and Setter (2011) did not address whether adults’ perceptions of their childhood media role models changed throughout the years. In addition to discovering aspects of a character or person in media someone admired as a child, another major question the research addresses is:

RQ3: How do assessments of childhood media role models change over time?

Again, the retrospective aspect of this study is a great strength and can provide insight into how memories and assessments of a character can change over time. In the next chapter, I will discuss the methods used to investigate these research questions.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Qualitative methods are the primary way to gather data since interviews garner descriptions of specific situations and allow for elaborations past a surface level (Kvale, 2007), which are both major goals of this research. The following sections outline the methodological design of this research, including research participants, procedures, measures and analysis strategies.

### **Participants**

Undergraduate students between the ages of 18 to 25 at North Dakota State University who were exposed to American media (movies and television) as children were invited to participate in this study. Eighteen people who were between the ages of 18-20 participated in the qualitative interviews. The study reached saturation “when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights nor reveals new properties of your core theoretical categories” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 113).

The population at North Dakota State University consists of approximately 14,000 full-time students. 54.4% of the students are male (7956) and 45.6% are female (6673). Estimates of the population ethnicity are as follows: 80.7% “white,” 2.4% “black,” 1.63% “2 or more races,” 1.4% “Asian,” 1.4% “Hispanic,” 0.7% “American Indian,” and 0.05% “Hawaiian.” NDSU also classifies 7.5% as “non-resident aliens.” 4% of people chose not specify their ethnicity (North Dakota University System, 2013). Participants were predominantly white, while one participant identified as black. All participants were heterosexual.

Undergraduates are a prime population for this particular study for several reasons. First, undergraduates are old enough to reflect on childhood media role models with hindsight but are young enough to remember details that older adults may have forgotten. Second, although there is no scholarly research on the subject, staying in touch with favorite characters and television

shows from childhood is a prominent theme in popular press aimed at undergraduates. The popular websites BuzzFeed, Cracked, and College Humor have plenty of videos and articles devoted to childhood shows from the 1990s through the early 2000s. These pages often bring a more adult view to a childhood media product. The abundance of nostalgic cartoons and movies on sites popular with undergraduates indicates that reminiscing about childhood media is still an acceptable and encouraged aspect of college life. One possible reason to embrace childhood media during college is because college is an unfamiliar terrain to students, so turning to something constant and familiar is comforting and enjoyable.

### **Procedure**

The participant pool in the university's introductory public speaking course served as the selection tool for interviewees in this qualitative study. The Department of Communication maintains the targeted research pool, which offers opportunities to participate in research studies. A small portion of the total course grade is dependent on research participation, but the course also offers an alternative assignment. This places the people in the participant pool somewhere between being a volunteer and a required participant in Communication research.

Students enrolled in the course could choose to participate in the study in exchange for 10 points of research participation credit towards their final course grade. Anyone enrolled in this course who met the inclusion criteria (between 18-25 years of age and was exposed to American media as a child) was eligible to participate in the study. Since this introductory public speaking course is a general requirement for students at the university, the research pool includes students from different majors and different ages. However, it should be noted that a majority of the students in the course are first year students. While this narrows the participant pool, freshmen are closer to their childhood media than older undergraduates, and may be able to accurately recall more about their media role models.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in an open-ended, semi-structured format. The physical location and time of the interview was negotiated between the researcher and the participant. Prior to the interview, the participant was given a broad overview of the research study and asked to give their informed consent for participation before the interview process began. Individual interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. A digital audio recorder documented participant responses.

## **Measures**

The measures consisted of two parts: a questionnaire and an interview. Demographic items in the questionnaire included age, gender, sexual identity, ethnicity, college standing, major, if the participant was an international student, and whether the participant had taken a class focusing on gender issues. The addition of this last question helped gauge whether the participant had previous experience in recognizing gender stereotypes in media. The questionnaire was given at the end of the interview so as not to prime the participant's answers in any way. The final research report provides a summary of these demographics from the questionnaire pertaining to the participant's academic experience discussing gender issues.

The interview portion consisted of questions about the participants' media role models. Since the in-depth interviews allowed for follow-up questions and requests for elaboration, data collected from this method were rich and descriptive. Interview questions elicited information about which media characters the participant liked the most (role model, favorite character) and each participant's perceptions of and experiences regarding the media figure they most admired as a child. Both live-action and animated media role models were considered in this study. While animation is a popular format of children's media, children in a study by Cantor (1998) showed the same amount of interest in both live-action and animated television shows. The affection the viewer has for the character predicts their perceptions of that character's "realness" rather than

whether the character is animated or live action. Characters who were not favorites were not perceived as anthropomorphic or as a “real” character. Therefore, a media role model, whether animated or played by an actor, is real to the child (Gardner & Knowles, 2008).

Initial questions gathered information about memorable television shows and movies from the participant’s childhood, the types of media they generally used as children, and how they selected the shows or movies they watched. After this, the participants were asked to select the character who was their favorite when they were a child. Intermediate questions elicited information about why this character stood out to the participant, memories of watching this character and collecting/playing with toys related to the character or pretending to be the character, and aspects of the character that were most memorable. Intermediate questions inquired about other characters that were on the TV show or movie, what characteristics these other characters had, and why the participant liked their favorite character better, in order to establish differentiating features of childhood media role models.

At the conclusion of the interview, participants were encouraged to share additional information about their experiences and memories of the character with the ending question: “What else do you think I should know to better understand your experiences and memories of this character/person or the television show they were on?” To view the interview protocol in its entirety, see Appendix A.

## **Analysis**

Throughout the process of data collection and before analysis commenced, interviews were transcribed. After this, interview text files and qualitative survey text responses were read thoroughly. Analysis commenced after interviews began and continued throughout the process of collecting data, until theoretical saturation. After analysis, a comparison of interview results was used to answer the research questions. The use of inductive, constant-comparison method on

qualitative data allowed for thematic analysis. A theme is “a pattern found in the information that at the minimum describes and organizes possible observations or at the maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon,” generally key words and phrases in the context of the qualitative data (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 7). The combination of newly gathered data and coding of previously collected data improves the development of theoretical categories (Gibbs, 2007). Data analysis consisted of three major stages—open coding, axial coding and selective coding.

The first stage of coding included thorough reading of interview text files, followed by open coding. During open coding, data were broken down into separate sections, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences with other data from the interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The use of line-by-line analysis during coding involves “close examination of data, phrase by phrase and sometimes word by word” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 119). Thematic analysis in this study involved identification, labeling, and grouping of categories for themes and concepts. Categories represent phenomena including problems, issues, events, or happenings (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Some categories used during coding, for example, included “Disney princesses,” “Physical ability,” and “Prince Charming.”

In the axial stage of coding, I searched for connections between categories and subcategories “to form more precise and complete explanations about phenomena” than the open coding can reveal (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124). Axial coding further develops categories and subcategories in terms of properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Selective coding was conducted in the third stage of analysis, and involved refining categories into adequate definitions that were neither too broad or too narrow (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 143), and seemed to be central to the study. The processes of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding overlapped throughout the project. Theoretical saturation indicated the completion of data analysis. A selection of analyzed texts are used to illustrate findings in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESULTS**

When reflecting on the relationship between role models in media and gender roles, I found five prominent themes emerging from participants' descriptions of their media role models: the specific traits of the role model, the participants' shared experience, nostalgia, rationalization of media viewed and role model's behavior, and consciousness of gender norms (see Table 1). These five themes were prominent aspects in almost all of the interviews. The first major theme found was the cornerstone of this research: how influential, relatable, and realistic the participants' favorite media characters were perceived to be.

Table 1: Theme Breakdown

Themes	Subthemes
Traits of Media Role Models	
	Influence
	Appearance
	Main Character Status
	Selflessness and “Goodness”
	Relatability
Realism	
Media as Shared Experience	
	Shared Experience with Parents
	Shared Experience with Siblings
	Shared Experience with Friends
Nostalgia	
	Desired Shared Experience with Future Children
Rationalization	
	Rationalization of Bad Behavior
Consciousness of Gender Norms	
	Consciousness of Gender and Appearance
	Consciousness of Gender Stereotypes
	Consciousness of Gender and Behavior
	Gender Norms
	Gender Norms in Romantic Relationships
	Mulan
	Men and Women’s Consciousness of Gender

**Traits of Media Role Models**

The category of “media role model” was coded as “the way media or specific characters influenced or inspired the participant or others to think or act a certain way.” There were six subthemes related to the effect the character had on the respondents: how the media character inspired action or thought (influence), their appearance, their main character status, their selflessness, the ability of the participant to relate to the character (relatability), and how realistic they or their show/movie were perceived to be (realism). The breakdown of the respondents,



their own gender, their experience with gender in a classroom setting, and their childhood media role models are in the table below.

Table 2: Media Role Model Breakdown

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Gender Class</b>	<b>Media Role Model(s)</b>
Ella	Female	No	Indiana Jones; Mulan
Oliver	Male	No	Dwight Shrute, action heroes
Rachel	Female	No	Disney princesses
Amanda	Female	No	Cinderella
Vanessa	Female	No	Emma from Degrassi
Amy	Female	Yes	Cinderella
Megan	Female	No	Pocahontas, Cinderella
Jacob	Male	No	Bo and Luke Duke
Andy	Male	Yes	Bernard from The Rescuers
Mark	Male	Yes	Simba, Jim and Dwight from The Office
Allen	Male	No	Simba, Spiderman, Spongebob
Melissa	Female	No	Cinderella, Belle
Courtney	Female	No	Disney princesses
Kathy	Female	No	Disney princesses, Ariel
Stacy	Female	No	Sarabi (Lion King), Disney princesses
Hannah	Female	No	Scooby-Doo, Velma, Indiana Jones
Kelly	Female	No	Mulan
Greg	Male	No	Dr. Miranda Bailey, Captain Reynolds

### **Influence**

Statements that involved the perceived effect of the favorite character on the participant's or others' thoughts and actions were included coded as "influence." In some cases, participants stated that their media role models did not inspire them, but followed this statement with an instance of the media role model influencing their thoughts or behavior:

I can't even link it [my behavior] to a movie. I just do certain things and probably one day I saw the movie, like "Oh hey!" Unconsciously doing it, or subconsciously. There's stuff I do, I just can't connect it to a movie [Mark, 188-189].

Although participants did sometimes comment that they could not measure exactly how they had been influenced by the media, they did cite several characteristics of characters that they admired and strived to emulate. One such characteristic that participants' admired was the vague concept of being a "good" or "nice" person, especially in animated Disney movies, and how the participant applied this philosophy to his or her own life. One male participant responded: "The underlying good values for what they [favorite characters] do, that's definitely transferred to what I do now in my everyday life" [Mark, 181-182].

While Jacob mostly talked about the car chases and crashes from *Dukes of Hazzard*, he also expressed admiration for the way main characters Bo and Luke Duke treated others: "I thought that was kind of cool that they tried to help everybody in the whole county and they were always nice to everybody. Be a good way to live your live, helping everybody" [Jacob, 154-156]. A female respondent also voiced a similar sentiment: "Maybe watching Disney movies with the good, nice characters has taught me if I want to get somewhere in life, I need to be nice to people...work hard in order to get my happily ever after" [Amy, 226-228].

Not only were participants influenced by the character being "good" or "nice," they also expressed ways they were inspired to behave in their own lives, especially at the time when they were children. Every participant was able to recall a time when he or she imitated the characters in a movie they watched. Allen recalled, "We'd pretend to be [Pokemon] trainers at our daycare" [Allen, 110-111], whereas Megan remembered, "I never wore shoes because of [Pocahontas]" [17-19]. Kathy said, "I wanted to be Mulan. I remember as a kid, taking a bunch of combs and sticking them in my hair and saying I was Mulan. I figured five [combs] would make me Mulan if one made her Mulan [181-184].

Kathy was not the only woman who was inspired by Mulan; many of the female respondents discussed Mulan as someone who had influenced them. Sometimes participants

would take their admiration for characters to new lengths: “Literally my mom bought Scooby Snacks, the ones for dogs, and I tried to eat them when I was a kid. That’s how dedicated I was to *Scooby Doo*” [Hannah, 253-254]. Jacob recalled a time when imitating the Dukes of Hazzard did not turn out the way he and his cousin had intended: “We had a Polaris Ranger our dads got...we took it and we wanted to play Duke Boys. We tried jumping it, we rolled it, got kind of hurt, but it was kind of funny” [Jacob].

Not only did they inspire the participants at the time they were watching the show, but some believed a character’s influence carried over into their adult life. One woman discussed her admiration for Mulan, a woman posing as a male soldier and how she may have been influenced in her own life:

Interviewer: “How has Mulan influenced you?”

Kathy: “Right now I’m in the engineering field, that’s a male-dominated field, but I want to do it” [Kathy, 200-201].

Andy chose favorite characters who would create or build things: “It taught me to be creative ‘cause in my architecture class if you go along with the crowd, that’s not good. You have to stand out, you can’t be plain. Especially with designs in architecture” [Andy, 403-404].

Andy’s appreciation for characters who create fit in with his childhood media role model:

Bernard the mouse from *The Rescuers*, who would use household objects in inventive ways.

Other participants were inspired to stand up for more serious issues. Vanessa discussed her reaction to someone using a derogatory racial term on Facebook:

I feel like normally I would have just not even said anything, I would have just put down my head. “He’s so stupid, he just thinks he can use this word” but I actually said something. [...] I feel like in a way Emma [favorite character from *Degrassi*]...has been

an influence, just the fact that she fights for what she believes in. And I'm starting to do that now [254-260].

Respondents also cited movies and their favorite characters as the reason they expected positive endings in movies and their own lives. For instance, this expectation of a happy ending in a movie affected Rachel's expectations of her own life: "I think what I retained from them [Disney movies], that was the fact that in the end, everything was gonna be okay. Everything was kind of meant to be" [304-305].

### **Appearance**

In some cases, the choice of the media role model character was because they were similar in appearance to the participant. Female participants like Megan expressed the desire to look like Disney characters: "I liked [Rapunzel's] hair. I was always jealous of her hair" [Megan, 167-169]. Amanda's favorite character was Cinderella because they both had blonde hair, but expressed a growing realization that they did not look alike: "When I was younger, I had blonde hair, so [I looked similar to her] in my little kid eyes, which was not true. I thought so. I thought one day..." [Amanda, 74-76].

Only one mention was made of similarities in physical appearance with male respondents. Jacob and his cousin, who enjoyed the Dukes of Hazzard, decided who would be which Duke boy by the color of their hair: "I was Luke. Cuz of my [blonde] hair." [Jacob]

Although female participants in particular noticed the beauty of the Disney princesses, they also tended to appreciate changes in typical designs of female characters. For instance, Ella noticed the difference in Mulan and the other Disney characters: "I think that's why I latched onto that character because I liked that she was a pretty character obviously, but she wasn't the typical kind of Disney princess" [Ella, 204-206].

### **Main character status**

One recurring reason male and female participants gave for rationalizing their choice in favorite character was their main character status in a movie or show.

I feel like ‘cause Emma was the main character and she was also in *Degrassi Junior* already...so she was a little girl...they devote one episode to [other characters] with their storyline, but I thought with Emma they did a lot more [Vanessa].

Vanessa chose Emma as her favorite character because the show followed her from her junior high years through her college years. Vanessa stated that not many other characters, aside from Emma’s stepfather, lasted as long. This also associates back with Vanessa’s ability to relate and empathize with Emma through her additional screentime. Amy expanded on why people tend to like main characters the best: “Disney...is kind of clear cut [with] who you should [like] and who you shouldn’t. Other more modern movies it’s kind of hard to tell who you should like and who you shouldn’t” [Amy, 137-138].

Mark initially had trouble picking a favorite character, but said, “I guess I’ve always been attracted to the hero in the story, or the good guy” [81]. After being asked more questions, Mark chose Simba from *The Lion King*, but had difficulty backing up his choice with reasons, “He just stands out. I don’t know how to explain that much more. [...] I usually don’t watch movies in that much detail.” [13; 30] Mark finally was able to explain why he remembered the character of Simba fondly: “He stands up to other people. [...] I guess the end where he’s fighting Scar. It’s the biggest showing of that, I think” [66-68]. Allen also chose Simba as his favorite character, “He was always a good guy. You kind of felt bad for him in the beginning. And he battled through it and ended up being top dog again” [Allen, 76-77].

Both Allen and Mark refer to Simba’s final fight with the villainous Scar, where the main hero takes control of his deceased father’s kingdom back from the evil lion. The physicality of

the confrontation is a metaphor for Simba's journey towards his responsibilities as king, but as young male children, the participants appreciated the character for the action itself being a means to assert dominance.

*The Lion King* was also a popular movie with the female participants. Kathy also chose Simba as a favorite character and referenced the character's decision to return to his childhood home to fight his uncle for the kingdom: "I always liked the part where he decided to go back to the Pride Lands after he left because he was kind of facing his fears" [24-25].

Stacy also chose *The Lion King* as a favorite film because of the complexity of the plot, "There's death of the dad, there's disputes between family, there's kind of like finding yourself [in] what Simba does. A lot of learning how to take responsibility for your actions, that kind of thing [30-33].

Participants also appreciated the duality of their favorite characters, where they were not pigeonholed into one role. Ella chose both Mulan and Indiana Jones as her favorite character because of their variability as characters:

"I think the fact that [Indiana Jones] was a smart character but yet still adventurous and...just a bookworm...it was kind of fun to see someone playing both roles" [Ella, 96-98]. Ella discussed how movies usually have the adventurer and the "nerdy sidekick" as two separate characters: "But it's like [Indiana Jones] got to be both. And you can be both and that was kind of nice to see" [Ella, 103-105]. Greg also appreciated the flexibility of Tom Hanks' character from *Saving Private Ryan*: [Captain Miller] was outgoing, more, kind of bossy. But then he was almost serious funny as well." Both Ella and Greg appreciated seeing additional aspects to Captain Miller and Indiana Jones' personalities and actions, which indicates that the flexibility of a media character is important.

### **Selflessness and “goodness”**

Another major way participants rationalized their choice of media role model was by discussing the “goodness” of the character, usually despite bad things happening to them. The concept of being a “good” person was usually left relatively vague, often listing off ways a character helped others if questioned about it. For instance, Amanda loved Cinderella because “she ended up being able to do what she wanted to because she was a good person” and “she liked to hide just how well of a person she was, I guess...even though her stepsisters and stepmom treated her poorly, she wasn’t too fazed by it. She didn’t let it bring her down” [Amanda, 67-69]. According to Amanda, Cinderella quietly suffers with her goodness, but ends up having a happy ending by the time the film finishes. In other words, her “goodness” pays off.

Both old and newer Disney princesses were generally thought to fit into the category of being a “good” person. Courtney said, “I think a lot of Disney princesses are very selfless and kind and just the ideal generous heart. And that’s kind of something that everyone should try to live up to. Everything...that they do is admirable” [Courtney, 191-193].

Mulan also made a reappearance as a “good” character who was wronged by others in the movie. Kelly discussed Mulan’s behavior after she had been abandoned by her regiment when they found out she was a woman: “She still went to save them even though they betrayed her and left her in the snow” [79-80].

This admiration of the relative concept of “good” did not stop with the female participants. Andy’s admiration of the Power Rangers was rationalized because “They saved the day and they were so cool...they always got rewarded for their actions...people patting them on the back” [Andy, 66-68]. In Andy’s case, the Power Rangers’ righteous actions led to the public’s acknowledgement of the team’s ability to protect them from villains. He admired the

Power Rangers not only doing good for other people, but having other people recognize their success.

### **Relatability**

In addition to discussing how their favorite characters could inspire or influence their thoughts or actions, respondents also touched on the relatability of the character adding to their status as a role model. Relatability was coded as “the perceived similarities between media characters and the participant or others and the extent to which they empathized with a character.” Often, respondents would compare the character’s situation or actions with their own, such as Stacy: “Maybe it’s just me, but I always think when I watch a movie, “What if that happened to me?” [250-251].

Disney movies were a prominent topic among undergrads and tied closely in with discussions about relating with characters. Megan discussed why most of her favorite movies were 90s Disney movies:

I’m pretty sure why I like Disney movies so much... [is] ‘cause I can relate to them. So I kind of felt like the fairy godmother [from Cinderella] was my older sister. She always helped me with whatever. If I lost my shoe, she’d help me look for it [Megan, 196-199].

The direct ties Megan was able to make to her own life, such as envisioning her sister as her own fairy godmother, gave her a connection to the movie. Like Megan, Amy saw herself as the hero of the story and made strong connections with Disney movies: “You more associate yourself with the good people and the good things that happen to them more than the bad people” [Amy, 200-203].

Amy and Megan both saw themselves as the heroes of their own stories and therefore associated with the heroes rather than the villain. Every female candidate was able to name a specific media character that they related with, whereas male participants focused more on



specific movie genres, while still feeling a sense of relatability with the characters. Allen discussed how he began to care about what happens to characters in movies he watches: “I’d watch them do everything and then, I don’t know, [it] just grows on me. It takes a little bit to grow on me and as I’m watching it, [it gets] stronger and stronger” [Allen, 190-191]. Often, empathizing with the character like Allen did connected to a participant’s direct relation with the character, but in some cases, participants also empathized with circumstances that they had not experienced first-hand. “You get to know them, their values. The more you watch someone, even watching people go through changes, you really see their true personality. [...] Like automatically just watching someone go through something...you root for them” [Ella, 376-381].

Emotionally connecting with a character, like Ella did, was a major factor in choosing a media role model. The female respondents in particular empathized with certain characters because of perceived similarities in their own lives and their relationships with other people. Stacy expanded on her admiration of Mulan, “I like that [Mulan] is independent. I’m not one to sit around and let other people do stuff for me, either” [158-159]. Melissa also mentioned several Disney princesses and how she relates to them:

I feel like I connected with them just because there were certain characteristics that they had that I had. How Belle liked to learn and how I have a sister and...in Cinderella, I kind of connected with her because sometimes I call my sister an evil stepsister. That kind of connecting [Melissa, 163-166].

When asked if her aforementioned sister was a stepsister, Melissa responded that she was not, yet she still relegated her biological sister to the role of an antagonist opposite her Cinderella. Megan also drew specific examples of her similarities to a couple Disney characters: “She kind of reminds me of me. [...] Since I have two older brothers, I can relate to [Rapunzel

from Tangled]. I feel like I'm kind of overprotected, like how she was with her stepmother” [Megan, 172; 177-179].

Like Melissa, Megan also visualized her brothers in the roles of an antagonist from a Disney movie. This tendency for women to relate with Disney princesses because of the way others treat them was a common aspect in terms of relating with that character. However, 90s Disney princesses weren't the only princesses that female participants related to. Courtney mentioned her adoration for newly initiated Disney princess Princess Leia of the original *Star Wars* films. “I was an only girl in my family. All my other siblings are boys. She's literally the only woman there, I swear. She kind of taught me how to get along with men [Courtney, 169-170].

Rather than assigning others in her life the role of the antagonist opposite Princess Leia, Courtney latched on to Leia because she is “literally” the only woman in the galaxy who is not a prostitute or a walk-on role. Whether picking out a 90s Disney princess because of her strained relationships with others or relating with Princess Leia because of her exclusive femininity in the *Star Wars* universe, female participants appeared to relate with aspects of a character that caused conflict in the movie.

Male participants also mentioned similarities between people in media and themselves, though with less frequency than women did. Jacob drew parallels between the expectation that he take over his father's farm and his favorite NASCAR driver, Dale Earnheart Jr.

I liked how he had a great dad...he lost his dad and then he had to carry on his dad's momentum, which I kind of feel like I've had to do. Not that my dad's dead or anything, but I kind of have to carry on what he did, too, starting through the farm and everything [Jacob].

While emotionally reserved through the rest of his interview, Jacob allows some of his concern for the future to show in his nonverbal cues and tone of voice. Like the women who connected with the relationships their favorite media characters had, Jacob also saw similarities between himself and Dale Earnheart Jr. Interestingly, Jacob's concern didn't rest with the dynamics of the relationship with his father, but his father's legacy. Besides relating with the media character, participants also tended to detect a sense of realism in their media role models.

### **Realism**

Realism was coded as the believability of media and the comparison of the movie's world to the participant's reality, often previously thought to be realistic or believable as a child. The judgment of realistic aspects in media shows the progression of the logical thought process of the participant as they grew older. Respondents were more judgmental of reality within the movie in current day, as well as how the movie's message translates to their life today.

First, participants were more critical of movie-making choices than they were at a young age. Andy, who found himself fascinated with the more technical aspects of movies as a child, such as the architecture and the buildings in movies, was more critical when he recently rewatched movies with a group of women from his dorm floor: "These girls were... coloring pictures from the movie they just watched and I did look at one animal and it was all one color. Winnie the Pooh, he's all yellow. Why is he yellow? A bear's not yellow" [Andy, 349-352].

Andy latched onto the more technical realism of the movie, such as the coloring choices for Winnie the Pooh. As an architecture major, Andy has been taught to be more critical of aesthetics. Like Andy, Stacy was also concerned with the logistics of movie realism when discussing Disney movies. She mentioned why she liked *The Lion King's* plot: "It's realistic besides the fact that lions are talking" [33-34], and then discussed her dislike for Snow White: "I

don't like her voice and animals won't help you clean. It didn't really click with me at all" [84-85].

Instead of noticing the colors or buildings in movies, Stacy noticed the realism of the animal characters in *The Lion King* and Snow White's animal helpers. Like Andy, Stacy's former zoology major and interests matched what she noticed in terms of realism. Kathy also enjoyed *The Lion King*, which she found more enjoyable than other Disney movies: "I liked that...it kind of had kind of a complicated plot and there was actual death and stuff going on and it wasn't just happy people running around all the time. It seemed kind of real" [Kathy, 12-14].

In some cases, the level of realism of the movie or character was a source of contention for some participants and for others, it was a major reason for citing the movie or character as a favorite. Several respondents (n=5) also mentioned noticing the behavior of the characters or the believability of the acting in the movie. Oliver discussed his experience when watching good acting in fictional shows: "I feel like I'm pretty much watching a reality thing. That makes all the suspense way more enjoyable [125].

Hannah also believed good acting helped her envision the characters as realistic: "They could have just picked a bad bunch of actors [for *Remember the Titans*]. But...when you watch that movie, it's just like, "This is real." So it just means something" [Hannah, 37-39]. Hannah's choice of words sums up the believability, or realism, of a media product paralleling the perceived meaningfulness of the product, which was an underlying theme in responses. If a media product previously thought credible as a child was not perceived as believable, it was often criticized by the participants.

Disney held a niche in the discussion of realism in children's movies. Many of the women coveted the status of "princess" because of the many Disney princess movies from the

1990s, while still understanding as a child that this was a title they were not likely to attain: “You could dream you could be a princess, even though that’s not realistic” [Amanda, 128-129].

Not only did some of the technical aspects of the movie, such as the plot, fall under more scrutiny as they grew older, but respondents also noticed contradiction with the reality in the movies they consumed as a child and their current reality. Kathy grew up near a Native American reservation and noticed some differences between the tribe from *Pocahontas* and the Sioux reservation she lived near: “They’re the eastern coast, whereas I live by the Sioux reservation. So it’s like a whole different culture there, too. In the movie they seemed a lot more noble than they do in real life. More earth conscious” [Kathy, 159-161]. When Kathy noticed these differences between Pocahontas’ tribe from the 17<sup>th</sup> century and a present-day neighboring tribe as a child, but still liked the movie. After she read about the history of the American Indians as an adult, the Disney-fied story of Pocahontas “irked” her because of all the historical inaccuracies.

The discussion of magic in children’s movies was also a point of discussion. Amanda reminisced about a turning point in her love for Disney movies: “I still like them. But the magical aspect is gone ‘cause I don’t believe in that, I don’t have as much of an imagination. [...] I guess when I was little I *believed* in it more, that it could actually happen or that the characters were real...and then I got to 7th grade and I knew they weren’t. It wasn’t as exciting [Amanda, 185-186; 248-249].

Stacy discussed the magical aspects of other Disney movies: “I’ve never been much into the magic sort of setup, ‘cause it’s kind of hard for me to buy a little bit, even though you’re not supposed to think it’s real” [42-44]. Courtney discusses a reason for why magic in kids’ movies is so prominent:

Adventures and fantasies are fun...but it's better to be educated and know what's going on around you now that you're participating in the world. Watching more realistic things will kind of help you, give you an idea of how you're supposed to do that [Courtney, 20-22].

Courtney's belief that media does and should play a part in informing viewers about the world is paired with her understanding that it is just a "good story" and "fun." Rachel makes an observation about the media's effect on her as a child:

When I was little I thought there was no problems in the world, and there was no worries and no bills and no jobs I had to worry about because my parents always took care of that. No one was there, especially in a movie or something, like "hey, when you grow up you'll have to deal with this" [200-203].

Both Rachel and Courtney note that media plays a role in forming a certain reality as a child. In Rachel's case, as well as many other respondents, she had to reform her idea of reality as she grew older. Not only did these role models make an impact on the participants, but they were often a shared point of connection with someone from the participant's life.

### **Media as Shared Experience**

Shared experience was coded as "specific memories of watching media, reenacting media scenes, or sharing some aspect of media with others." Disney movies in particular helped the undergraduate respondents find a common ground with their new peers in college. Kelly discussed why Disney movies are such a common theme in American undergraduates' lives: "For people...around my age, everyone's seen them and knows what you're talking about. [...] Even if you're not completely in love with [Disney movies], you still know what they're talking about" [Kelly, 118-123].

Judging from Kathy and Amy's responses, Disney movies are used as a basis for a shared experience among college undergraduates as a way to connect with other students. These Disney movies connected people despite where their gender or geographic location. Andy speculated on why so many people his age would watch Disney movies together: "When I was little, if you watched Disney that was the thing to do. If you ask someone, "Oh, you haven't seen *Cinderella*?" It's kind of like "Oh, what's wrong with you? You should watch that" [Andy, 368-370].

Oliver concurred, "[Disney 90s shows are] just the most connectable time period of shows that I've ever seen" [216-217]. He even gave an example of how people pull in previous movie content into current day, such as the character of male model Zoolander's infamous facial expression: "Like Blue Steel, his look. And even on Snapchat nowadays you can send a picture of you doing the face. Just little things like that" [134-135]. Besides using childhood media to relate to current peers, respondents also had memories of watching with their parents and watching and playing with siblings and friends.

### **Shared experience with parents**

Often when respondents would discuss their favorite characters, they were from a movie that they watched regularly as a child with their parents. Ella remembered her favorite hero, Indiana Jones, and the reasons she liked his character:

I think mostly because it was something that my mom and I shared. [The *Indiana Jones* movies were] her favorites and then we kind of watched them together. So I feel that a lot of the TV that I remembered the most is what I shared with other people [Ella, 92-94].

Ella latches onto an important concept with her last statement. Participants chose media characters from movies that they shared with others in their life, but were they childhood favorites because they liked the qualities of the media characters or because of their relationship

with the person they shared the media with? In many of the participants' cases, these two reasons for choosing a media role model were intertwined. Although Hannah's favorite character was Scooby Doo, she also discussed why she watched a lot of Disney movies and action movies.

I think it was what was available...I got a lot of the Disney movies from the aunts and uncles on that side, like "Oh, we finally have someone to spoil!" but then on my mom's side...the action movies are what I remember, 'cause they didn't have to spoil me with Disney movies [Hannah].

Greg would watch Grey's Anatomy with his mother and sister: "I remember we'd always watch it when we were younger. That was one of our favorite shows" [Greg, 6-7]. Jacob preferred older shows, such as *Dukes of Hazzard*, over popular children's shows at the time when he was growing up: "It just always seemed like [older shows] were funnier and more actiony. My dad, my uncle got me started on 'em so we'd always watch 'em together [Jacob, 195-196].

### **Shared experience with siblings**

The memories that immediately came to the minds of the participants while watching a movie or acting out parts of a movie were when participants were with their siblings. Stacy remembers watching *The Lion King* with her siblings numerous times, "We almost broke the tape because it would be played over so much" [12-13]. As a child, Megan would have trouble choosing a movie with her brothers: "A lot of times we would argue over which one we'd want to watch too. I guess it's always part of being a sibling" [34-35]. Jacob and his cousin would spend time watching television together when their fathers were working on the farm all day: "Our dads would go work and then we'd be in charge of entertaining ourselves all day. But we'd always have fun doing stuff" [Jacob].



Besides recollecting specific times where they watched a movie or television show with their siblings, participants would often pretend to be movie characters with their siblings. Each respondent was able to recall a time they spent with their siblings or others their age, imitating behaviors that media characters had shown or recreating movies entirely. Kathy reenacted moments from Disney movies with her sibling:

All the time in the winter my sister and I would go out and there'd be those big snow piles. We'd go and build Pride Rock and go play our mini-version of *The Lion King*. [...] I'm sure we did little mini versions of every movie there was. That's what I remember most vividly [130-134].

Kathy's shared experience with her sister added to the viewing experience of a movie. One major way that female participants shared an experience with their siblings and friends was dressing up like Disney princesses, whereas Rachel and her siblings dressed up like other Disney characters: "My brother was Mickey and me and my sisters were Minnie and we even had dress up things for it...we were kind of three peas in a pod" [267-269].

Sometimes participants expressed frustration when playing with their siblings. Greg would try to reenact the D-Day scene from *Saving Private Ryan* with his brother: "I was usually with my brother or by myself. Well, my brother didn't really like playing it. But then he'd play for 10 minutes and get bored and leave" [Greg, 154-155]. Melissa would pretend to be a combination of the Disney princesses while giving her younger sister a less desirable role in their games: "My sister would always be the evil one. [...] I'd make her!" [Melissa, 212-214]. In some cases, such as Andy and his sister, their shared experience could potentially be dangerous: "Mary Poppins, with the umbrella, I would jump off my bunk bed with a paper bag with my sister. We'd try to fly" [Andy, 211-212].

### **Shared experiences with friends**

While siblings and close relatives, such as cousins, were the majority of shared experiences, friends also played a major part in media experiences. Both Andy and Allen had memories of playing with other children at their daycare. Allen remembered the kids at his daycare playing Pokemon together: “We had a couple friends that would act out, they would be our Pokemon. They’d go and they’d fight each other with their moves” [Allen, 121-123].

Andy and his friends at daycare would find a way to play Power Rangers: “In the sandbox in the back we would play Power Rangers with each other. [...] Kind of like cops and robbers. There’d be a couple bad guys and we had to arrest them [Andy, 88-90].

Rachel remembered dressing up like Disney princesses with some of her sister and her friend: “I would go over to my friend’s house and they had the actual costumes so we’d play with that and then my mom also made wands and crowns and so we’d always play with those kinds of toys [107-108].

Male participants had more instances of playing or watching with others than females did. While there were fewer men (6 out of 18 participants), 60% of the total shared experiences were from men. The stories that these men told were more action-based than the women’s stories, whose were more likely to be passive, such as dressing up as a character.

### **Nostalgia**

Nostalgia was coded as “positive associations with the past, often in relation with a comparison with the present or sentiment and affection for a character, movie, or a personal experience.” Sometimes this nostalgia was explicit, and at other times it was more implicit in the way participants talked about the media characters. These more implicit ways included the use of nonverbal communication and paralinguistics. Common nonverbal communication included smiling and relaxation of facial muscles when talking about favorite media characters from their

past. The most common paralinguistic was using a genuine, emotional tone of voice that reminisced of a “homesick” feeling or someone talking about an old friend. Almost every participant expressed desire to watch these movies again, most notably when asked the last question on the protocol list: “Were you reminded of anything else as we were talking?”

Overall, nostalgic reminiscing and nonverbal communication permeated the interviews. Hannah had good memories of Scooby Doo, “I really, really like Scooby Doo. I think that my opinion just grown fonder for Scooby Doo as I’ve grown up” [Hannah, 250-251]. Rachel also expressed nostalgia because of the familiarity with characters: “I think that I like watching the movies that I had when I was growing up because seeing them and they’re familiar [156-157]. Amanda said, “I don’t know why I like [my favorite childhood movies] now. I still like them. I guess ‘cause it brings you back to your childhood” [Amanda, 86-87].

This sense of familiarity that Rachel and Amanda experience when rewatching childhood media hinges on the very definition of nostalgia, which is the mixture of pleasure and sadness that is caused by remembering something from the past and wishing to experience it again. In most cases, participants were not able to recapture the feelings they had when they watched their childhood favorites. Oliver was one participant who sought to evoke the feelings he experienced when viewing his childhood media and was very focused on the perceived higher caliber of past media compared with current media: “I’ve had multiple discussions of this with my peers and they all say that that [the 90s] was the best and those were the best series that came out” [216-217].

Not only did Oliver fail to see merit in current media, his current anticipation for upcoming movies was influenced by the media he watched as a child. For instance, he remembered being excited for new *Batman* and *Anchorman* movies in order to “connect to what I had, my liking them in the past” [237-238].

Kelly concurred with Oliver, “I kind of like the traditional, older [Disney movies]. I don’t really have any desire to see [the newer ones]” [112-113]. Jacob also perceived newer shows negatively, while seeing Bo and Luke from *The Dukes of Hazzard* in a positive light.

Watching it now, I liked how nice they always are and they’re always respectful of each other and it seems like the right thing always gets done and I think that’s really cool. It’s not like today’s TV shows where there’s complete bad guys [Jacob].

Although these participants are now outside of the targeted age range for these shows, they still enjoy them and think back on them positively, while condemning newer children’s movies and shows. The continued positive perception of children’s media indicates that these shows hold positive memories for the participants and influenced their media taste, such as Oliver seeking out sequels to his childhood favorites or women watching new Disney princess movies.

### **Desired shared experience with future children**

In addition to reminiscing about sharing media with others in the past, over half the participants expressed a desire to share their favorite media with their future children. Hannah planned to pass on her love for old *Scooby Doo* cartoons, “My kids one day will know *Scooby Doo*. Like classic *Scooby Doo*. It will be continued on” [Hannah, 265-267]. In most of the cases, the movies that both male and female respondents planned to share were Disney movies:

I think every kid should watch Disney movies because they’re entertaining. And if you don’t, you miss out [on] a lot. And there’s a lot of lessons in them too. If I have kids, I will let them watch Disney movies. I won’t take that away from them [Andy, 364-369].

Andy chooses an interesting way of phrasing his last couple sentences by claiming that Disney movies have “lessons” that should not be withheld from children. This implies that

Disney movies somehow teach children acceptable ways to think and act, and that Andy believes he can help pass on good lessons and morals to his children by sharing Disney movies with them.

Andy's hope that his children will form a good moral center by watching movies with good lessons implies that he feels he learned some of his own morals from the media he consumed as a child. In addition to recalling memories of media they shared other people, participants generally had positive memories of their past and sentimental associations with their favorite characters and their shared experiences. After reminiscing about the positive aspects of their childhood media, participants would then move past initial questions and start explaining their choice of characters and in some cases, justifying the character's negative behavior.

### **Rationalization**

Rationalization is coded as a participant's "justification of a choice of movie/character they watched or a character's negative behavior." A majority of the stories about shared experiences were a chance for the respondents to rationalize their viewing of a movie that was targeted at the opposite gender, indicating the need to distance themselves from anything that was not associated with their gender. In the responses I received, it was obvious that certain movies were for "girls." For example, Greg emphasized his dislike for the *Twilight* movies that his stepsisters asked him to watch with them: "There was nothing else to do. They're like "Okay, you're going to watch a movie with me." And I was like "Okay, whatever." The whole vampire, the werewolf fighting over this one girl...it was kind of dumb" [Greg, 226-229].

Andy disliked most of the movies his sister chose for him to watch, including *Cinderella*: "A lot of people, even guys have seen it too, 'cause I remember growing up with a sister, "Oh Christina wants to watch it. It's her turn to pick the movie" [Andy, 372-373]. Jacob insisted he disliked all Disney movies and remembered his sister wanting to watch them: "My sister would always make us watch *Mulan* and those kind of movies and I didn't really like those. Those

Cinderella movies, those were just girl movies, I thought. They weren't very fun at all" [Jacob]. Even Andy chose to distance himself from a movie his sister chose: "*Matilda*, I hated it. It was my sister's favorite and that's why we'd always watch it. And I'd hide behind the Laz-E-Boy when we'd watch it, 'cause I'd get so scared of that principal. The butch one."

The female participants also remembered making their brothers watch these movies. Rachel had vivid memories of Saturday mornings and having designated "TV days" each week, alternating between her, her sister, and her brother: "Growing up we all ended up watching the same shows... what would happen is he'd end up watching [our shows] anyways. He'd get mad, "Well, I wanna watch my shows!" But he'd watch what we watched."

When asked if her brother enjoyed watching the shows Rachel and her sister chose, she replied:

I think he did. He used to say he didn't like [*Secret Life of the American Teenager*], but eventually... "Guess what's on?!" He would be the one watching it, so I think we kind of rubbed off on him, just like he rubbed off on us [15-18].

Rachel makes the observation that her brother initially viewed the shows his sisters watched as media reserved for girls. After exposure to the show, Rachel and her brother began to "rub off on" each other, where they began to enjoy the programming that was thought to be for the opposite gender. Amy directly addresses this, "I think that's a guy thing maybe. 'Cause [Disney movies] were all about princesses so he has to say he hated them 'cause guys can't admit they like princess movies [Amy, 269-270].

### **Rationalization of bad behavior**

Lastly, the participants would not only rationalize watching a movie targeted to the opposite gender, but in some cases, they rationalized a characters' bad behavior. While discussing Ella's favorite Disney characters, she listed the street urchin Aladdin, who is

introduced as he is stealing bread: “Yeah, he had to do it to survive. So it was kind of like you can’t pin him for that really. Like his character or anything. I think it’s fun watching, you kind of root for the underdog” [Ella, 363-364]. Vanessa’s favorite character from *Degrassi*, Emma, would often fight with her mom and stepdad: “I feel like sometimes she was a little hard on her mom. [...] And sometimes I just feel like she’s a little harsh on her words but...I guess that’s just who she is” [66-70]. Jacob did not try to rationalize the antics of the Duke boys from *Dukes of Hazzard*, but still listed bad behavior as something that attracted him to their characters: “I liked how they were breaking the law in it. That was kind of cool. And they’re still driving cars fast and everything.” [Jacob] However, Jacob did rationalize the villainous Boss Hogg’s behavior on the same show: “He wouldn’t run the Duke boys’ farm into the ground. He’d still save them...at the end of the show. Even when he’d work towards destroying their farm he’d still help them at the end” [Jacob].

When discussing influence, shared experiences, nostalgia for past films, and unusual choices, participants frequently invoked gender norms in varying degrees to which participants were aware of gender roles in the media they liked as a child and how they chose to discuss them.

### **Consciousness of Gender Norms**

Consciousness was defined as the participants’ exhibition of some degree of knowledge about gender in society. Consciousness of gender norms was coded when “a participant mentions and/or discusses gender roles with varying degrees to which the participant is conscious of gender in society.”

#### **Consciousness of gender and appearance**

Ella was one female participant who had not taken a class focusing on gender, yet was very perceptive of the way children’s media enforces gender, from the design of characters to the

actual message of a character's actions. She compares the main female characters from *The Little Mermaid* and *Mulan*.

You think of Ariel and she's [a] very traditional-like girl. Mulan's really pretty too, though. It's hard to say. They make all the women pretty obviously. But again, the whole dainty, weak kind of thing. I feel that Ariel's really frail. Just the way she looked even. She was just designed looking frail [Ella, 390-393].

Ella expresses exceptional insight into the purposeful design choices of Disney animators who create thin, waiflike female characters. Andy also made observations about female appearance, when he recalled his confusion while watching *Mulan* as a child and not understanding that Mulan was pretending to be a man:

I remember her washing her hair and putting in a pin. How she could be really girly or she could be really manly. I remember...being confused, like "Oh, that's not right...she should have that bow in her hair that she took out. I don't know why she did that. I don't understand what she's doing. I don't know she's pretending to be a guy [Andy, 331-335].

When Andy reflected on his memories as a child, he remembered implicitly noticing gender roles in *Mulan*, when the title character stopped conforming to gendered appearances and dressed in a soldier's uniform. As a child, Andy was acutely aware of details in movies, including the design of buildings and characters, yet unaware of Mulan's major plotpoint, which potentially added to his reflection here.

Mulan's more masculine character design also revealed some discontent with the way female characters were typically drawn. Kelly said of Mulan, "Yeah, they [Mulan's family] wanted her to just be pretty and that's about it." On the male side of stereotyped appearance, Andy made some detailed observations with the way children's animated movies idealize a body norm for both genders when he took a drawing class for his architecture degree:



I took this drawing class, intensive drawing and we did a lot of study on how to draw people, proportions. [...] It made me realize that popular media cartoons...proportion things incorrectly to communicate a message...that thin is better and that buff is great [Andy, 423-430].

Andy states that the combination of his drawing class and his sociology class helped him connect these dots and made him more aware of gender norms. Amy also noticed gender in movies:

I wore my brother's clothes, I played with my brother [and his friends] a lot so that sense I was tomboyish, but I still did the girly things. I just didn't necessarily dress like it or act like it, but I still knew I was a girl, so I still kind of identified with the princesses in movies [Amy, 41-44].

Despite Amy's tendency to dress in boy's clothes and play with other boys as a child, she still makes a very clear connection with her identity as a girl.

### **Consciousness of gender stereotypes**

Courtney expressed her consciousness of gender being a series of taught behaviors while holding these standards as an ideal and part of a person's nature. When asked if the notion of a Prince Charming rescuing a princess in movies affected her as a child, Courtney responded:

I'm sure it did, somehow...social norms... you're taught how to think. Part of it is gender based and who you are, in that sense, but a lot of it is: do you learn based on what you watch and what you hear and see? [118-120]

Courtney was also aware of the differences that Disney injected into the gender roles, "Men are oftentimes strong and they're able to do everything. Women are just kind of like, "La di da. I'm a girl and [I] plant flowers and make food." It's kind of the basic setup" [Courtney, 138-139].

### **Consciousness of gender and behavior**

Some of the participants who had not taken a class focusing on gender issues were accepting of the gendered behaviors that television portrayed. Rachel commented: “I was hoping to be like a princess or something like that...starting from the bottom, Cinderella did cleaning and taking care of everything and then finding that Prince Charming” [10-102].

Cinderella’s role as caretaker for her wealthy stepmother and stepsisters before marrying into a privileged life was accepted and not questioned by women who looked up to her. When asked if her brother watched princess movies with her, Rachel replied, “He did once in a while but he definitely didn’t play with us when we were dressing up and stuff. That wasn’t for him” [112-113]. Rachel categorizes her brother according to his gender and notes that dressing up like a Disney princess was “not for him,” meaning not acceptable behavior for a young boy, despite being a self-described “tomboy” who did not fit the mold of a typical young girl.

Kelly became frustrated with this narrow ideal of princesshood and female behavior. She found a release in the character Mulan: “She wanted to go out and do something and work for it. I didn’t want to just sit around and be pretty. I wanted to run around and play with the animals” [129-131].

Kelly and other women expressed relief when discussing how Mulan showed a different side of femininity and how the movie humorously tackled the idea of gender being performed: first with Mulan pretending to be a man, then male soldiers pretending to be women when infiltrating the emperor’s palace.

### **Gender norms**

Hannah was one female respondent who displayed consciousness of gender norms in children’s shows. A large chunk of our conversation rooted around the portrayals of Daphne and Velma from *Scooby Doo* and the way their characters have evolved over the years.

Hannah noticed that Daphne often received more attention as the “pretty” one, while Velma often faded into the background, despite finding clues integral to solving the case. Hannah reflected on whether the time period the show was produced in could have had an effect on the characters:

In the 60s... all guys were probably writing and they probably weren't thinking of the girls being lead roles. Not trying to discredit the girls, because they were giving Velma these [smart lines], but they weren't seeing that they were discrediting it. [...] 'Cause even Fred didn't have much of a character...he was just the leader, and “I'm gonna drive the van!” It was just a simple kid cartoon... and I don't think they steered it purposely to be a sexist cartoon [99-109].

Hannah provides excellent insight into the differences in children's television over the past decades. She believes that men were the ones writing the show, which caused them to take a male viewpoint with all the characters, “discrediting” women without intentionally doing so. Hannah implies this is because they do not understand how to write female characters and states that even Fred did not have much of a personality beyond being the group's leader. While Hannah's ideas about the definition of feminist movement are a little off, she does latch onto the shift in social equality that women have started to experience in recent decades.

Definitive gender norms present themselves in the Disney movies. When asked what Disney movies typically are about, Jacob replied:

Most of the time it was about the princess trying to find her Prince Charming and then saving her town or something. It seemed like all the movies were pretty much the same. I thought it's probably an all right portrayal, I wasn't too offended or anything with the princesses. [Jacob]

Jacob demonstrates a certain level of awareness of the gender norms in Disney princess movies, but remains apathetic towards what this portrayal means. In addition, the men disregarded Disney's portrayal of a "perfect male" in the form of a prince that women held in high regard. According to Courtney and other female respondents, Disney princes are "chivalrous and gentleman... [this] is the picture it draws for men. And trying to find his princess, wherever she is" [Courtney, 124-125]. However, the men appeared to connect to a rowdier form of masculinity in the form of the male action hero or comedic male characters. While five of the male participants were indifferent to female stereotypes and disliked male stereotypes in Disney movies, they appeared to embrace male stereotypes in the action hero archetype, such as the emphasis on the value of physical strength and humor.

All the men who discussed action centered movies as their favorite genre had difficulty choosing a single favorite action hero. When Mark was asked if he pretended to be a specific action hero when playing with his brother, he responded: "We would always have wars outside, act out scenes in movies and action stuff. So I guess not really a character, but just that persona" [144-145].

Unlike the women, who latched onto specific characteristics, these men noticed the personification of ideal masculinity in the form of the male action hero. The "persona" that Mark and other males grew attached to was a way of reinforcing the male ideal: a mixture of violent and funny. The admiration of physical feats was extremely apparent in male participants' responses. Allen said, "I always loved athletics. Sports were my thing. So someone who was super-fast or super strong, I just thought it was pretty cool." [Allen, 19-20] Greg also admired the physicality of the Hulk, a Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde type superhero powered by his rage, "He's strong. He's big. He can jump far. He can fall from heights and not die" [Greg, 190]. Knowing the

Hulk's interesting backstory in the comics, I asked if there was anything else about the character Greg liked: "No. Just [that] he was strong" [Greg, 192].

Greg saw a big difference in action movies or romantic/Disney movies: "When it had a lot of action it would become my favorite movie or one of my favorite movies. Either that or a comedy. I don't really care for romantic...movies." [...] The girly Disney movies I didn't really like but more the funnier action ones I liked for the Disney ones [207-208; 252-253]. Mark also maintained that action movies were something intended for males:

When I got older, I was more into the action, the violent...stuff. Stuff guys like. [...] Just the thrill of watching it. Some guys in Die Hard doing crazy stuff, jumping through windows, shooting people, all that stuff. Just the sheer thrill, I'd say [Mark 7-8; 118-120].

Mark connects hyperviolence to our culture's masculinity ideal throughout this quote. The actions he describes as typical action movie fare stand in stark contrast to the tame violence in Disney movies.

Greg also links his connection to movies with the level of violence present. While Greg was trying to explain why he did not enjoy the *Harry Potter* movies as a child yet enjoyed superhero movies "Harry Potter was a little outgoing with the magic. But I guess you should say I shouldn't have liked the superheroes, 'cause superheroes, they're not really real either. But superheroes had more action than Harry Potter" [Greg, 214-216].

Greg makes an astute observation when trying to pinpoint his dislike for one form of fantasy and his love of another: the level of action. Overall, these men saw action movies as more exciting than romantic Disney movies. With the release of the more progressive Disney film, *Frozen*, occurring at the time of these interviews, some of the participants had a few ideas as to why men were more open to newer Disney movies and not older films:

Amanda: I would say it was because the old princes were more towards romance and doing everything for the girl, whereas now it's more off to the side, let her do her own thing.

Interviewer: Not so much having to take care of the girl.

Amanda: Right [119-121].

Amanda's comments lead to an insightful observation; that perhaps men were not against having a main female character, but instead disliked the men in the story doing everything for the woman when she was the focus of the story. At the time the interviews took place, Disney's *Frozen* had just been released for home consumption. The men who took part in this study had not seen *Frozen*, but spoke of their desire to watch it after hearing it recommended by others. Women in the study found that their male friends enjoyed the movie. Amanda continued her discussion of men enjoying *Frozen*:

With my guy friends, they watched *Frozen* and they liked *Frozen*. I guess 'cause they still have guys in them, there's still male characters that are strong and fight but they don't necessarily win. Maybe they just relate to them in a way [Amanda, 109-112].

In addition to taking the pressure of being an active character off of the male characters, Amanda believes that the fallibility of newer male characters is a trait that men can relate to, including the "regular guy" ending up with the princess at the end: "The princes are usually the ideal guy, there's nothing wrong with them, so she ends up kind of falling in love with someone who wasn't a prince, someone you didn't think anyone would end up with. It was just different [Amy, 79-81].

### **Gender norms in romantic relationships**

There were also certain levels of gender consciousness when it came to expectations in romantic relationships. Gender consciousness was defined as the level of awareness a participant

had about gender issues and the way their own gendered identity may have been influenced by the culture they were raised in. In this case, the character's onscreen relationships affected real-life romantic expectations. In almost all cases, the women were more willing to discuss how this had affected their viewpoints than the men were.

I guess I always saw the [Disney] prince is coming in to save [them], and then I assumed that the guy was always going to be there and that they were supposed to ask you on a date, or they were always supposed to pay or that sort of thing where it's their job, not necessarily yours. Which is skewed, but...that's how I saw it [Amanda, 206-211].

Amanda draws connections with the roles of the princes in Disney movies and her expectations for men to be the romantic instigator and financially responsible for dating scenarios. She ends her statement by implying her views on this have changed since she was a child. Rachel also expanded on this when asked if the gender roles in Disney movies affect people's perceptions:

One of my friends is like: "I have this plan where I want to have a house and I want to get a boyfriend and then I want to do this and that and find my Prince Charming." [...] I don't think they get it from their parents. That girl is really big onto fairytales and stuff like that. So I think that it does rub off on people [183-187].

Rachel believes her friend's desires in life were affected by the fairytales she consumed as a child and still idolizes as an adult. Again, the use of the term "Prince Charming" points to Disney's influence in Rachel's friend's present day romantic expectations. In fact, the title of "Prince Charming" was used by 10 different respondents in regards to an ideal male romantic partner. Melissa discussed Disney's influence on her as a child: "It definitely did set expectations high when I watched them when I was younger. I just expected a guy to come and sweep me off my feet" [Melissa, 97-99].

Melissa directly addresses Disney's portrayal of masculinity in a relationship and how it influenced her expectations of how men were supposed to treat her. When asked if she still liked the princesses in movies, Courtney responded: "Yeah. I still do. But I think every little girl, it's kind of instilled...you want to find Prince Charming and have somebody rescue you. It's just part of being a girl" [Courtney, 113-114].

Courtney eloquently summarizes how these romantic expectations fuse with the concept of femininity and gender. The passivity of the princesses in romantic relationships becomes a gender role that these women felt pressured to adhere to, at least during childhood. There was also pressure to be in a romantic relationship because others were: "You see people in relationships..." "Oh, they're getting engaged, they're breaking up." It's like "Oh, gosh, I need to get going on that" [Stacy, 152-153].

Only one male participant discussed his desire for a romantic relationship like the one in his favorite show *The Office*: "I guess I get all sappy...you know [Jim's] whole thing with Pam? I kind of want something like that maybe someday. I'm sure anyone who watches it is like "Oh! I wanna be Jim!" That's awesome" [Mark, 39-41].

Mark prefaces his statement by acknowledging that the rest of his statement hinges on something "sappy," or not masculine. The difference between the women looking towards childhood media for romantic expectations and Mark is that while *The Office* is an ensemble show, most of the main characters are male. The character of Jim is not an alpha male like the action hero persona that male participants were citing as a favorite. Rather, Jim is a balance of the masculine and the sensitive, and his major character storyline is his friendship and quiet attraction to Pam the receptionist, which Mark appears to have latched onto.



## **Mulan**

One movie in particular appeared to affect participants' consciousness of gender norms due to the nature of its plot: Disney's 1998 movie *Mulan*. This was often the movie that pointed conversations towards gender norms and the respondent's thoughts on the subject. Stacy explains her thoughts on the gender roles in *Mulan* and how male and female characters learn to inhabit characteristics of the opposite gender:

They wouldn't allow [Mulan] to take her father's place [in the war draft] because she was a woman, but later down the road when [her fellow soldiers] find her actual identity of being a woman, [Captain] Shang decides to save her life instead of executing her for breaking the law just because he knew she was a good warrior, that she saved his life. Or when the guys at the end are dressing up as girls to fight against the Huns, it shows that either one can do either thing [165-169].

For Stacy, seeing this flexibility in characters' masculinity and femininity allowed for a broader and more open viewpoint on gender. Ella also took note of the exploration of gender roles in *Mulan*. Ella believed the discussion of gender in *Mulan* played a big part in her admiration of the movie and main character.

I probably didn't think of it as a child thinking but the gender issue thing, she kind of wasn't afraid to just do [the] gender bender thing. Like take a role [of] a man or traditional roles of men and do what it takes to protect her family. It wasn't always about getting the guy in the end. It was about her family. Which I really loved because I'm really close to my family [Ella, 175-179].

Like Stacy, Ella also draws deeper conclusions from *Mulan*, discussing how *Mulan*'s "gender bender" experience allows her to protect her family—something that she could not have done if she had accepted her role as a woman in society. Ella also takes note of the inversion of

the “Prince Charming” happy ending and praises the film for focusing on the theme of family instead, which she places high importance on. One man, Andy, spoke about the gender roles in *Mulan* and the evolution of his understanding of the plot:

I was a kid, I didn't get that she was pretending to be a man. I watched it as a kid, I didn't get what she was doing. I was like “Oh, she's going to join the army. She doesn't look like a man. She's a girl.” ‘Cause in my head, she's a girl, she's just wearing a guy's uniform. She's not pretending [Andy, 318-321].

Andy's reaction to his misunderstanding of an integral plot point in *Mulan* indicates that he did not perceive Mulan's behavior or entrance into the army as strange when he was a child, but he still believes he should have realized Mulan was pretending to be a man. He rationalizes his inability to understand this as a child by distancing his own culture from what he viewed: “I didn't understand the whole Chinese problems or the problems they have with how they think men are superior and how nobody wants baby girls because they want the men to carry on the last name and take care of them.”

### **Men and women's consciousness of gender**

Only three participants claimed to have taken a class that took time to focus on issues of gender, two men (Andy and Mark) and one woman (Amy). Both Amy and Andy illustrated a certain degree of consciousness of gender norms. There was a difference in the way Andy and Amy perceived gender when they were children and after they took their class.

Andy noticed designs and details in movies and thus picked up on some differences in male and female characters in children's movies. As an engineering major, Andy began to notice the purposeful way that animated movies designed characters to communicate a gendered message and create an ideal image for both genders. Andy was also the only man who appeared to be comfortable and knowledgeable discussing the different ways genders are portrayed in

movies and would often discuss them at length, with little to no prompting questions. Andy first broached the subject of gender norms when he was discussing how Disney movies have changed throughout the years.

Andy: I remember how Snow White would always be bossed around by her boyfriend, husband...a guy that wanted to be with her. He'd like push her up against a wall and sing to her...

Interviewer: A little threatening?

Andy: Gender roles, too. Stereotyped... [where] guys had more options in life and the women would stay home and clean. That was really stressed in pretty much every movie that I watched as a kid [Andy, 277-287].

Not only does Andy pick up on the macro message of gender norms in children's animation, he also noticed some aggressive behaviors in what was supposed to be a romantic first meeting of Snow White and the prince who falls in love with her. Andy and Amy's gender consciousness were apparent in their responses, but Mark's responses did not necessarily reflect this. Mark's background with gender issues surfaced one time, when he was discussing *The Lion King* and why he liked male lion Simba over the female lioness Nala.

Mark: I guess that going back to the kid mentality back when I guess I was attracted to the hero and she wasn't. And then maybe again it could be a little unconscious sexism...Simba's a guy and Nala's a girl. So that whole thing I'm more attracted to.

Interviewer: So since you were a little boy you liked him better as the guy?

Mark: Yeah [85-89].

Mark showed some knowledge of the gender issues he learned about in a classroom setting but expressed an attitude similar to men who had not taken a gender course with his use of the present tense when he says "That whole thing I'm more attracted to."

Only one of the six male participants had taken a class focusing on gender issues. When the remaining five male respondents mentioned male and female gender stereotypes, they were not as critical of the stereotypes as the women were. For instance, when Oliver tries to explain why he finds *The Office* character Dwight so appealing, he says:

Michael asked Dwight, “What’s your opinion on girls in the workroom?” and he’s like “I don’t know, Michael, what’s the WNBA or NBA? I like jokes, I like sports.” He was referring to jokes as being the WNBA and sports being the NBA. So I found this really funny [67-71].

The national basketball associations in the United States are divided into men’s basketball (NBA) and women’s basketball (WNBA). While the episode in question is intended to draw attention to gender inequality in the work room, Oliver’s discussion of the issues indicates that Dwight’s sexist attitude was part of the reason he enjoyed the character.

Greg, another man who had not taken a class on gender issues, also appeared very uncomfortable when asked about watching *Twilight* with his stepsisters. He explained that people would ask him which of the two love interests of the main female character he found appealing.

Greg: When everyone was like “Which side are you, Team Edward or Team Jacob?” They kept asking me. I’m like, “They’re guys. I’m not going to pick a guy.” [...] Yeah, I think it was made more for girls.

Interviewer: Why would girls like *Twilight*?

Greg: ‘Cause apparently they’re all hot. So they all said. Plus, I think they get more off of them fighting over a girl. I can’t really say too much about that. I’ve never done that. [229-237].

In explaining why *Twilight* was a movie intended for women, Greg's discomfort led to generalizations about the women *Twilight* was intended for and simultaneously distancing himself from this target audience. Jacob shares this sentiment of distancing himself from movies intended for women, but takes it one step further when he talks about watching Disney movies.

Jacob: My sister would always make us watch *Mulan* and those kind of movies and I didn't really like those. Those Cinderella movies, those were just girl movies, I thought.

Interviewer: What about them made them girl movies?

Jacob: *Mulan* is about a princess and all those other ones are about princesses and I don't like to watch princesses, I guess.

Jacob's reasoning for labelling *Mulan* as a "girl movie" appears to be because the main characters are women, or princesses. Interestingly, Jacob's statement is at odds with female respondents' statements citing *Mulan* as a character who was not a princess.

Ella was a woman who had not taken a class on gender issues who demonstrated knowledge of relevant issues in feminist theory and was able to tie examples in with the movies she had watched as a child: "I think they did probably want us to see [*Mulan's* story] as "women can do things men can do." She was still...feminine in her own way yet she could still be...masculine" [Ella, 223-227]. Ella discusses how *Mulan* combined her femininity and masculinity to express herself in a way she felt comfortable. While *Mulan* did learn masculine behaviors, these were tempered with the more feminine aspects of her personality.

Hannah also great insight to the gender dynamics of *Scooby Doo*, in which she described the characters as one-dimensional. According to Hannah, the character of Daphne changed throughout the years, from merely being the "pretty one."

*Scooby Doo on Zombie Island* is basically about her being this reporter and she has this career. Where she's like actually "being" somebody outside of the Mystery Gang. [...]

She's pushing for her career so it shows that she is a person and she's not just a pretty face [Hannah, 73-77].

Hannah notes the importance of Daphne finding an identity outside of her group of friends and forwarding her career as a journalist. Across the board, women were praiseworthy of female characters' abilities to overcome obstacles and to be accepted for not conforming to her environment's ideal. Kathy said, "[Mulan] wasn't...afraid to go out of her comfort zone. Because this was a guy's only world and she was like "No! I can do it. I can do this just as well as they can" [Kathy, 197-198]. Stacy also praised Mulan as having "a little more open-mindedness and just equality all around because after that they saw her as a hero instead of just a woman that was in war [172-173].

One reason for this level of criticism for gender norms may be because of how these women gauged their own sense of worth as a woman. In older movies, the emphasis of a female character was on her physical appearance and her position as a love interest. In *Mulan* and newer children's movies, the emphasis moves beyond this to the woman's ability to explore her own self. Hannah expresses her frustration with Disney movies: "I [don't] expect [my boyfriend] to do everything for me...have your own life outside of that. Write a song besides love" [165-167].

Like Hannah, the women did not necessarily oppose romantic storylines for female driven movies, but just craved variation. Overall, men and women were frustrated with the storyline of a princess being saved by a man.

### **Summary of Results**

Five overall categories emerged from the data collected in this study, including 1) specific traits of a role model, 2) media as a shared experience, 3) nostalgia, 4) rationalization of certain types of media viewed or a role model's bad behavior, and 5) the consciousness of gender norms. These five major themes emerged throughout the participants' discussion of their

childhood media role models and were prominent in each of the interviews. Each category included a number of major themes.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore gender as a factor in choosing and evaluating childhood media role models. This study offers interesting insight into social learning theory in terms of young children using media as a reference and template for their own gender identity. The third-person effect, part of cultivation theory, was also a factor in this study, although the respondents were discussing their own experiences. The time gap between their childhood media and the interview allowed the participants to think of their younger selves as someone who was more impressionable than they currently are, and to speculate on how they were affected by this media in their lives.

The impact of the childhood media role model can be subtle and go unnoticed by the person who was influenced, even after the passing of time. In some cases, participants in this research explicitly stated that they had not thought about how they may have adopted certain behaviors or ideas from media characters until they were asked questions about it. For instance, Mark said:

I can't even link it [my behavior] to a movie. I just do certain things and probably one day I saw the movie, like "Oh hey!" Unconsciously doing it, or subconsciously. There's stuff I do, I just can't connect it to a movie [Mark, 188-189].

Participants' current consciousness of gender norms was also a major factor in the way that the participants approached the discussion of their childhood media role models.

To situate the research questions in the broader context of gender in children's media, a summary of results is discussed first for the purpose of building a foundation for answering the three research questions. After this, the research questions are answered and discussed. Finally, at the end of this discussion chapter, future areas for research are outlined as they relate to the limitations of this study.



## Summary of Results

Female respondents were very aware of the power of gender in media. Every woman mentioned Disney princesses as a major part of the media they watched, and most mentioned the influence these female characters had on them as children. The “princess” characters from these Disney movies served as a source of femininity that these women noticed and aspired to imitate. One woman even mentioned that she wanted to be beautiful like Cinderella, but realized this was not attainable as she became older. Female respondents using the Disney princess as an ideal form of femininity fits in with Smith and Cook’s (2008) study, where beauty is seen as a major part of a woman’s identity in children’s media.

Smith and Cook (2008) also maintain that viewers internalize the belief that women should aspire to fit this form of beauty. This aspiration to be beautiful was something female respondents noticed, whether they agreed with it or not. Women with higher levels of gender consciousness acknowledged that having rigid ideals about a female character’s beauty was frustrating to them. However, this frustration made female participants more interested in finding alternative same-sex role models, rather than already-present male characters in children’s films, which indicates the desire to identify with someone of the same sex, even when other role models are available.

The frustration with non-active female characters often led women to cite Disney’s *Mulan*, a story about a woman disguising herself as a man and becoming a soldier in China’s army. In my study, female respondents valued the concept of progressive princesshood and active females. *Mulan* was a popular choice because she was a product of the same time period and company that brought them more passive princesses like Ariel, Belle, and Pocahontas. *Frozen* was also referenced as having progressive princesshood, as it had just been released for

home viewing, but its characters weren't identified as childhood media role models, due to timing.

All of the female participants (12) appreciated active females more as an adult, by stating that they were more aware of the implications of female children viewing female characters who drove the plot. Five of the 12 female respondents still harbored affection for more traditional female characters, but six women remembered having issues with female stereotypes as a child, such as a woman being delegated to the background or being someone who spent a majority of her time cleaning. Female Participants admired other female characters for breaking out of society's expectations and finding a balance of feminine and masculine traits. This finding illustrates women's awareness of gender roles and norms, even when they were not overly critical of traditional stereotypes.

Women who had not taken classes expressed more conscious attitudes of gender than men who had also not taken a class focusing on gender. The women who participated appeared to have thought more deeply about what portrayals of women in their childhood media meant for their own identity. A majority of female respondents used the movie *Mulan* as a way to explore the gendered behavior of the Disney princess movies and a more flexible gender identity that *Mulan* offers.

One reason for the women having more gender conscious attitudes than men with the same level of gender education is that the women have experienced more visible, rigid gender expectations in their own lives. When asked about her changing opinion of Disney movies, Amanda replied: "I guess like earlier it's more that they're saved by the man, that they can't do things themselves and that kind of irritates me now that I'm older" [Amanda, 184-185]. Courtney also reflected on the changing elements of Disney movies, such as *Frozen* and *Brave*, "There's a

growing trend of more independent, being proud of who you are, and taking your own life and doing what you want to do rather than doing what people expect you to do” [Courtney, 81-82].

In addition to progressive princesshood, the concept of “Prince Charming” as the ideal romantic partner for a woman was prominent. Seven female respondents saw Prince Charming as someone they wanted to marry as a child, and in some cases, still wanted as an adult. Men were more critical of the Prince Charming trope. Whereas some women were frustrated with the behaviors of the women in these situations, men were either disinterested or irritated with portrayals of men whose lives centered on the female protagonist. Men also looked up to male characters who offered a narrow view on masculinity, such as the action hero persona, but were not frustrated by it like the women were with narrow female roles. Andy was the only man who was critical of narrow portrayals of masculinity.

Other men, such as Jacob, demonstrated a certain level of awareness of gender norms, but remained apathetic toward what this portrayal meant:

Most of the time it was about the princess trying to find her Prince Charming and then saving her town or something. It seemed like all the movies were pretty much the same. I thought it’s probably an all right portrayal, I wasn’t too offended or anything with the princesses [Jacob].

This attitude and the choices and explanation of men’s childhood media role models is reflective of male privilege. First of all, all the men except for Andy did not expand on their answers unless asked specific questions. One reason for this may be because they have not had to justify why they admired a certain character before. In addition, the character traits they tended to admire were masculine and men were hesitant to list off any feminine traits for their role models. This indicates that admiration of traits outside of the masculine spectrum will somehow negatively impact the power that men (especially white men) have in society.

There was also a clear difference between the strengths attributed to male and female characters. For instance, when I asked Greg if he liked anything else about the character of the Hulk, a superhero powered by rage, besides the fact that he was physically strong, he said, “No. Just [that] he was strong” [Greg, 192]. Greg’s choice of words also draws an interesting parallel between female respondents’ describing female characters as “strong,” as in a woman of strong character, whereas male characters are described as strong when they are physically strong. One reason for this could be that male characters are much more common and the strength of male characters is assumed, with women, it’s a rarity. At one point, four respondents (two male, two female) were discussing the same character and the same point of the movie *The Lion King*. Interestingly, the women were able to make the psychological connection to the character and rationalize their choice of a favorite character on an emotional level, whereas the males chose Simba’s physical superiority as a reason for his ability to “win” by story’s end.

Overall, women were more likely to explicitly rationalize their choice of role model than men were. When men rationalized their favorite character, it usually involved the character partaking in sort of physical action, whereas women rationalized their choice with examples of the way that a character behaved or “who they were.” Additionally, women would tell entire storylines without being prompted, whereas men would explain only when encouraged with questions. When describing what a typical Disney princess would do, men and women both mentioned how a female character is often rescued by her love interest. However, men tended to sound annoyed when relaying this typical plotline, whereas women tended to state it as a fact.

In my study, women and men valued different characteristics when choosing their media role model, although both genders admired masculine traits without feeling the need to rationalize their choice. Men were also more likely to rationalize watching a media product intended for females than women who watched something intended for males. This fits in with

hegemonic masculinity, our culture's acceptance of masculinity as something that is acceptable to be for both genders, whereas femininity is only acceptable for women.

My research is consistent with the results of Carrington and Skelton's (2002) study, which found that men and women valued different attributes when choosing a role model. In my research and the Carrington and Skelton (2002) study, women were more likely to value beneficent personalities while men were more likely to choose attributes linked to a character's physical abilities. The women in my study were more likely to value the personality of a character, whereas all the men chose characters who performed an action that they found enjoyable, whether it was developing inventions or engaging in violence. Six female characters chosen as role models in my study displayed a combination of feminine and masculine characteristics, which coincides with the findings of Whelan's (2012) article on progressive princesshood. For the female respondents, this combination of masculine and feminine characteristics was desirable because they were not pigeonholed into one particular gender type.

### **RQ1: What Are the Gendered Aspects of the Characters Identified as Favorites?**

Gender played a major role in the decision making process associated with choosing a media role model. Every participant reported choosing a media role model who was the same gender as her or himself. This is consistent with previous studies in which gender was the one of the major attributes that consistently differentiated content preferences in young people (Roberts & Foehr, 2004). In three cases, when people chose various role models, they mentioned someone of the opposite gender. These three people (one man, two women) mentioned an opposite gender character as a "favorite character," but did not solely focus on these characters during their interviews. Everyone else focused exclusively on characters of the same sex when asked whom they admired. One male participant, Michael, referred to this tendency as "unconscious sexism" when asked why he liked a male character more than a female character. Michael recognized that

his preference for a male character had something to do with his own gender identity, and he did not believe he could relate to a female character.

Female participants also tended to notice and admire the female characters' relationship with a man (the "Prince Charming" character). Five female participants noticed these characters' dependence on "Prince Charming," but were not critical about it as children. As adults, they thought more about the implications of this dependence. One woman said she did not like this portrayal, even though she believed a man should take charge in a relationship, while the other four expressed outright discontent with this portrayal when they considered it as adults. These latter four women rejected the notion that Prince Charming will magically appear one day as a realistic view.

In five cases, women chose a female character that exhibited very feminine characteristics, such as helping others, being kind, and being a traditionally "good" person. These five women's role model choices did not match up with Carrington and Skelton's (2002) study, which found that female role models tended to display both feminine and masculine characteristics, but the other seven women in my study were more likely to choose a character as a role model if they had a combination of masculine and feminine characteristics. Calvert et al. (2001) and Taylor and Setter (2011) both found that characters were more likely to be admired and imitated by others if they displayed a mixture of masculine and feminine qualities.

This tendency was true for the female participants, but not necessarily for the male participants in my study. When women chose a media role model, even when it was a "typical" Disney princess, they were able to list more assertive traits, such as a character being independent or getting herself out of a bad situation. Ten women mentioned independence as a positive character trait for women they admired, but they also mentioned the female characters' dependence on men.

Male participants also had definite patterns in the qualities they admired. All six men admired characters who were action-oriented in some way, and five of the six men also listed having a good sense of humor as a major reason for choosing a character as a childhood media role model. Men were more likely to admire hypermasculine character traits, as evidenced by five of the six men mentioning typical action heroes as someone they admired. They described these heroes as someone who helps or rescues others, displaying both power and nurturance by rescuing those who are in danger, a finding that fits with the ancient archetype of the hero (Hall & Nordby, 1973; Jung, 1954, 1959) and is also consistent with Bandura's (1977) characteristics of effective social models. In children's movies, male characters typically propel the action and frequently serve as comic relief, which means that action and humor tend to be associated with masculinity.

Men and women were both more likely to identify with a same-sex media role model, but, as mentioned above, there were three cases where an opposite-sex media role model was chosen. In terms of opposite-sex role models in media, Ragins and McFarlin (1990) indicate that it is more common for a girl to identify with a male media figure than it is for a boy to identify with a female media figure. This finding was only partially confirmed by my interviews with participants who listed an opposite-sex character, as one of these participants was a man who cited a female character. Ella and Hannah chose two male characters as role models; Ella named Indiana Jones and Hannah chose Scooby Doo. Greg mentioned Dr. Miranda Bailey from Grey's Anatomy as one of his favorite characters because she was "bossy in a funny way." Interestingly, Greg chose a woman who was a leader in her profession and would "tell the nurses what to do." Greg's assessment is similar to what Calvert et al. (2001) found when studying the female action hero Xena – that men were more likely to perceive Xena as a role model when she was less physically attractive and was not a mother figure. Dr. Bailey fits this mold of female role model

potential, in that she is not conventionally attractive and is typically not a mother figure to the doctors and nurses who work under her. While Dr. Bailey does have a young son on the show, her interactions with the hospital staff indicate her power over them rather than nurturance.

The gender of the media role model was a factor when choosing a favorite character. Same-sex media characters also allowed people to articulate their own gender identity.

### **RQ2: How Do People Articulate Gender Identity in Their Discussion of Media Role Models?**

Participants explored their own gender identity through their media role models in several ways: how they perceived their respective gender should behave, how those beliefs matched up with what they viewed on the screen, and whether or not they agreed with these norms and media portrayals. According to cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 1986), the frequency of a behavior or action in the media can cause it to be perceived as a legitimate interpretation of the world. In other words, the actions of media characters can socialize children to identify strongly with their gender and to behave according to gender stereotypes.

In my study, both men and women referenced their own childhood identity as a “boy” or “girl” when observing how their same-sex media role model behaved. This early recognition of gender differences is consistent with studies by Davies (2003) and Stangor and Ruble (1989), who found that kindergarten-aged children recognize gender as a social category and become interested in the gender role information available. At this age, children actively search for meanings about gender and gender-appropriate behavior, with mass media being an important source of this information.

The internalization of gender as a part of their identity affected whom participants chose as media role models. Participants noticed both differences and similarities between themselves and their media role models. For instance, one woman said that she dressed like a boy and played



with boys, but knew she was a girl, and therefore liked princesses. Women in particular appeared to internalize the unrealistic appearance of animated female characters. Most mentioned the physical attractiveness of the typical Disney princess, even if they listed other characteristics as the reason for choosing them as a media role model. While not definite proof of the internalization of beauty ideals, physical attractiveness was perceived as an integral part of a princess' identity.

While women admired the lifestyles of these female characters, five of the six men admired an extreme form of masculinity in the form of the action hero, especially their action scenes and tendency to destroy property and buildings. Another way that gender identity emerged was in men's responses to watching "girly" movies. Women were more likely to report liking males in media than men were to report liking women in media. Men were hesitant to say they watched "girly" movies and would rationalize watching these movies because a female (usually a sister) "made" them. Men also appeared more embarrassed when they relayed stories of watching romantic movies. This social stigma fits with Western culture's acceptance of masculinity as an acceptable mindset for both men and women, and femininity as "weak." As one of my participants summed it up: "Guys can't admit they watch princess movies" [Amy, 270].

The men's role models were either stereotypically masculine or, in some cases, a funny "beta male," such as Jim from *The Office*. The beta male idea of masculinity focuses more on humor in lieu of physical strength (Gillam & Wooden, 2008). The men in my study adulated both physicality and humor; however, it was more common for participants to list an action hero character than a beta male character, and a media role model's physical prowess was a major theme in men's responses. Andy chose Bernard, the mouse in *The Rescuers* because he built inventions, so there was also an aspect of creativity linked with the physical ability to build. This

shows that, at a young age, men were aware of what was appropriate for them to watch and what types of media role models were appropriate for them to choose. Two participants referred to these movies as “stuff guys like.”

The dismissal of traditionally feminine movies and female role models by male participants indicates the persistence of hegemonic masculinity, the domination of the masculine worldview as an accepted cultural norm and ideal (Trujillo, 1991). In this same vein of thought, there was a notable difference in women and men’s descriptions of the “strength” of characters. When referring to a male character as “strong,” it was about his physical strength. “Strong” women were assigned this description because of their inner strength and fortitude. Using the same word to describe people in different ways depending on their gender is indicative of gender issues at play. For instance, the assumption that “strong” men are physically strong and “strong” women have inner strength indicates that physical strength is a valued masculine trait, while women should strive to develop their personality and temperament instead.

When it came to consciousness of how gender identity affects the selection of media role models, male participants were generally less aware of these issues. Andy was the only man who was critical of stereotyped masculine roles, for a number of possible reasons. First, he had previously taken a class focusing on gender issues and had also taken a drawing class where they studied proper human proportions, allowing him to better recognize unrealistic proportions in animated characters. Andy was also detail-oriented and thoughtful about the media, which allowed him to see gender norms in children’s movies that other men missed.

In my study, men were more likely to rationalize watching something intended for the opposite sex than women were. This finding fits in with our culture’s view of masculine things as something that is acceptable for both genders, while feminine things are seen as only acceptable for women.

The female participants in my study were often frustrated by limited gender portrayals when they looked to media for women to identify with. This frustration often came through in their discussion of these limited gender roles, their tone of voice, and their nonverbal communication. When women became frustrated with the passive female archetype in the early 90s Disney movies, they looked for alternative female identifications past their initial childhood media. This sentiment about females' passive behaviors was prevalent in the responses of women who discussed Disney movies and may also explain why Mulan was a character who came up in many of the interviews, as she offered a blended identity, with feminine and masculine traits, and was a more active and assertive female character.

### **RQ3: How Do Assessments of Childhood Media Role Models Change Over Time?**

The gap between the time when study participants looked up to their respective characters and the time of the interview allowed for the third-person effect to come into play. The third-person effect explains most people's belief that others are more strongly influenced by the media than they themselves are (Gunther & Thorson, 1992; Perloff, 1993), and the belief that the younger a person consuming media is, the greater the impact of media on their thought processes (Eveland, Nathanson, Detenber, & McLeod, 1999). Due to the time gap between their childhood and the present day, participants were able to distance themselves from their previous media viewing experiences and offer insight into the way media influenced them as children.

Although they may not have seen the media as influencing them when they were children, participants now saw ways that the media had influenced them, and could see how this influence carried over into their adult lives. As an adult looking back at media role models, they were able to better understand the implications of a media character's gendered behaviors. Some of these adult participants not only had a better understanding of the actions of their childhood media role models, but they were also able to understand the implications of the stereotypical

physical appearance of the character. Some participants gained more awareness of gender norms as they grew into adulthood. Although only three of the participants had taken classes focusing on gender issues, most of the women expressed a degree of consciousness regarding gender norms, and seemed to be particularly attuned to the portrayal of female characters in media.

Nostalgia also played a key role in the shifting perceptions of a media role model over time. In almost every case, the participant did not change their overall feelings toward the character, even when they saw their actions from a different perspective. This discrepancy created an interesting paradox, where participants, especially women, were more critical of gender issues, but were still nostalgic for the media they had watched as children. This paradox was evident when participants noted that it was hard to recapture the feelings they had as a child when watching their childhood media role models. All six of the men and one of the 12 women still retained their affection for their childhood media role models and were not critical of them. However, six women expressed discontent with the narrow roles of females, and five women expressed their happiness at the “revamped” princess formula. This finding indicates that nostalgia extends to particular childhood media role models, but not to gender stereotypes.

To explain these findings, it is important to note how our culture experienced a shift in feminist discourse during the time the participants in this study were children. The 1990s were a turning point for women achieving political power, and were also dominated by pop culture’s “girl power” concept. Girl power manifested itself in several different formats, including the musical and a zine-based movement known as Riot Grrrl. In terms of being exposed to the popular version of feminism that was marketed to young girls, participants had the Spice Girls, a UK musical group of five women who promoted female friendship and used “girl power!” as their catch phrase (Douglas, 2010; Roberts, 2002). In this sense, the experience of the participants in this study differs from women in earlier studies, in that they were consuming

media along with the marketing of female empowerment directed at their age group. This historical context could account for differences between my study and older studies in the literature (e.g., Calvert et al., 2001; Davies, 2003; Stangor & Ruble, 1989; Villani, 2001).

The third wave of feminism may have contributed to the female participants' greater awareness of gender throughout their lives, their feelings of being restricted by the narrow roles for women in children's films, and their appreciation for alternative female characters who step outside the "Disney princess" role. However, it should also be noted that, although women expressed discontent with female stereotypes in children's media characters, they still conceded to traditional romantic expectations or expressed a desire for their own "Prince Charming."

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This study had several limitations that create opportunities for future research on adults' childhood media role models. First, the study did not have an equal number of men (six) and women (12) participating in the interviews. Adding more men to the study might reveal more from the men's standpoint and should be embraced in future research.

Another limitation of study is its reliance on the participants' memory, creating a potential lapse in respondents' recall. The passage of time and subsequent experiences could affect memory recall, causing participants to forget media characters who were significant to them when they were children. In order to address this limitation while still exploring memories, researchers could ask similar questions of children of different ages. Or they could approach the topic longitudinally, using this protocol to talk to the same children at different points in their lives. This approach would allow researchers to see a linear progression of which media role models children looked up to at different ages.

One last limitation is the possibility of social desirability bias affecting the male participants' responses, in that they might not have felt comfortable saying that they looked up to

a female character, or discussing what they liked about women in media. Procedures that afford more anonymity, such as open-ended surveys, may help to address this limitation in future research.

### **Summary of Contribution**

Overall, women were much more critical of gender stereotypes in the media, despite the majority of the sample not having taken a course on gender issues. This finding suggests that women are more aware of imbalances or inequalities in the way genders are portrayed in media than men are. This awareness may be connected with the popular version of feminism in 1990s mass media, such as the Spice Girls or the broader “girl power” marketing campaigns. Female participants also latched onto assertive, active female character options in children’s media, while the men in my study were content with stereotypically masculine characters who were either strong or funny. Male participants were also more likely to rationalize watching what they classified as “girly” media, such as a romantic or Disney princess film.

Interestingly, only the men felt the need to rationalize watching movies targeted at the opposite gender and expressed their dislike for such movies in present day. Several women listed action movies as some of their favorites, but did not give a disclaimer or hedge an answer by saying someone else made them watch it. Even when Ella chose Indiana Jones as one of her favorite characters because her mom watched it with her, her word choice is telling: Ella’s choice of words is similar to the rationalizations of the men watching “girl” movies, but unlike other responses, she admits to liking Indiana Jones in present day and her body language indicated that she was not embarrassed, whereas the male respondents acted defensively.

One reason that the men I spoke to retained an admiration for the masculine was because they are accessing males’ power in society from these characteristics. By associating with femininity, they believe they are withdrawing their masculine power. Thus, there appeared to be

an underlying sense of hegemonic masculinity throughout all the interviews, even when questions were not specifically targeting gendered answers.

When considering the average length of each interview by gender of participant, it was also interesting how women went into much more detail about their childhood media role models without being prompted, whereas men gave shorter answers. This suggests that women either thought more about what aspects of a character they enjoyed, or were better able to communicate their reasons for choosing a particular character.

A final contribution of this study is the power of the shared experience in relation to choosing a media role model. This was an important aspect of choosing a childhood media role model that I did not initially account for, but it was something that wove into many of the participants' narratives as they recalled stories of their role model. Many participants remembered sharing a movie with their parents, siblings, or friends, adding to their affection for the character they chose as a media role model during childhood. This indicates that there may be external emotional factors when deciding on a favorite movie or character. Learning more about the shared experience in relation to admiration of a media role model could prove enlightening for future research.

My study contributes to the overall literature in several ways. It gives a more recent viewpoint on the role models children choose in media, and highlights the value of having adults recall their childhood media experiences. Using a retrospective framework to aid the discussion of gender in media allowed participants to more deeply reflect on how they had been affected by media they watched when they were children. In addition, my research led to several unexpected themes, such as the power of the shared experience and an underlying sense of hegemonic masculinity in our culture that would prove a valuable addition to any future research. My research provided valuable insight to the area of gender and media and hopefully can provide a

foundation for others in the field looking to do research on adults looking back on their childhood media.



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## APPENDIX A

### Interview Protocol

Questions are framed to discover which media personality/character participant liked the most as a child (role model, favorite character) and the perceptions and experiences surrounding this media role model

### Initial Questions

1. What television shows do you remember watching as a child?
2. Which television shows were your favorite as a child?
3. What movies do you remember watching as a child?
4. Which movies were your favorite as a child?
5. How did you choose which shows or movies you would watch as a child?
6. Which character from these television shows or movies were your favorite as a child?

### Intermediate questions

1. Which characters from these television shows or movies were your favorites as a child?
2. Who were some other characters/people who were on the TV show/movie?
  - a. Why did you not like them as much?
3. Who was your favorite overall character/person in media as a child?
4. What aspects of this character were most memorable to you?
5. Why were they your favorite character/person in media?
6. How old were you during this time that you are describing?
7. Can you tell me about a time you collected or played with toys or merchandise from the TV show or movie?

8. Can you tell me about a time when you acted like or pretended to be that character/person? (Example: When I was little, my entire swimming group would do karate moves off the edge of the pool to act just like Mulan.)
9. How has your opinion of this character changed?

#### Ending questions

1. How might you have personally been influenced by this actor or character?
2. Was there anything else this reminded you of as we were talking?

## APPENDIX B

Your answers to the following questions will help us to better understand characters or people in media from your childhood. To protect the confidentiality of this information, do not write your name on this form. We will use a number to link your questionnaire and responses.

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
  - Man
  - Woman
  - Transgender
  - Other
3. What is your sexual identity?
  - Bisexual
  - Gay
  - Heterosexual
  - Lesbian
  - Questioning
4. What is your race or ethnicity?
  - African American/Black
  - African
  - American Indian
  - Asian/Pacific Islander
  - Latino(a)/Hispanic/Chicano(a)
  - Middle Eastern
  - White/Caucasian
  - Other (please specify)\_\_\_\_\_
5. What year are you in college?
  - First year
  - Sophomore
  - Junior
  - Senior
  - Super senior
6. Are you an international student?
  - Yes
  - No
7. What is/are your major(s)?

8. Have you ever taken a class that focuses on the issues of gender?
- Yes
  - No