TOXIC MASCULINITY IN CHILDREN’S ANIMATED FILMS: THE IMPORTANCE OF
PORTRAYAL

by

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Thesis directed by Associate Professor Christopher Bell

ABSTRACT

This thesis defines toxic masculinity as social and physical traits that are harmful to not only women, but men as well. It outlines these detrimental traits as racism, homophobia, and sexism, and offers gender constancy, gender schema theory, gender stereotype theory, and social determinism as a way of explaining why these traits persist in 21st century masculinity. It also summarizes and discusses three studies of masculinity in popular culture, before emphasizing the importance of researching children’s media more thoroughly. The researcher then conducts a content analysis on twenty-one, randomly selected films with release dates ranging from 1970 to 2016, limiting the sample by decade and film success. The researcher found that there was no significant difference in the number of toxic masculine behaviors performed between the main male unsympathetic character and main male sympathetic character. Finally, the researcher discusses limitations, implications, and future research that can be done to further the study of toxic masculinity in children’s media.

Keywords: toxic masculinity, communication, children’s media, animation, popular culture, social determinism
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INTRODUCTION

When asked to define the traits that make someone “manly,” many would say things such as “strong,” “stoic,” and “fearless.” When asked to name the manliest characters they can think of, many would answer with Superman, Raleigh Becket from Pacific Rim, and Mel Gibson’s Benjamin Martin in The Patriot. Characters could also be described as “physically fit,” “good leaders,” and “brave.” Now consider characters like Gaston from Disney’s Beauty and the Beast and Clayton from Tarzan. One could argue that traits such as “aggressive” and “insensitive” would better describe these two characters, but are they truly that far removed from their more positive counterparts?

Finally, consider characters like Hiccup from How to Train Your Dragon and Steven from Steven Universe. They are out-of-shape, emotionally compassionate characters who show fear. Should this affect the way audiences perceive these characters? Should either one of them be considered less of a hero—less of a man—due to the lack of certain traits that audiences are told make them such? According to toxic masculinity, the answer to these questions is yes.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Toxic Masculinity

Kupers defines toxic masculinity as “the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence” (2005). To break this definition down even further, it can be described using the more negative traits in masculinity: violent verbal, physical, or sexual acts performed to assert dominance over females or other men, homophobic actions and verbal phrases used to assert dominance over other men, and the “real men don’t cry” mentality. The topic of negative masculine traits has been studied in the communication discipline as far back as 1930 (Dondore, 1930). The criticism of these traits was first published by Dondore (1930), who discusses the boastful nature of mythological and folk heroes. Dondore (1930) references popular heroes such as Hector, who fought for Troy in the Trojan War, and American folk hero Buffalo Bill. Dondore describes this need for “big talk” as the “childishly naïve extolling of one’s own prowess” (1930). This obvious criticism sparked the broad inquiry into the way masculinity is portrayed in popular culture, and what that says about our values as a culture.

The topic of toxic masculinity has been discussed at great length by scholars in many different areas of study. Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2015) discuss toxic masculinity in the context of the “#MasculinitySoFragile trend on Twitter. In this article, toxic masculinity is defined as “a (heterosexual) masculinity that is threatened by
anything associated with femininity,” though the term is referred to more often as “popular misogyny” (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2015). This falls in line with Kuper’s definition on two levels: toxic masculinity is inherently heterosexual and that it devalues anything feminine. The #MasculinitySoFragile trend itself gave proof of “wanton violence” in the form of threatening tweets from those against the hashtag. This hashtag also inspired backlash from the Men’s Rights Activists (MRA) and Pick-Up Artists (PUA), a subculture of “popular misogynists” (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2015).

The wanton violence aspect of toxic masculinity is not only verbal, however. Haider (2016) discusses this and homophobia at great length in relation to the Pulse night club massacre in Orlando. To begin, Haider researches the origins of the term toxic masculinity, informing that it began as a way to look at the relationship between men and their fathers. It was not until later that the relationship between men and women was introduced (Haider, 2016). The researcher later goes on to describe the prevalence of toxic masculinity within patriarchal culture using violence and rage as evidence. Haider (2016) concludes that homosexuality challenges preconceptions of masculinity, and violence is the impulsive reaction to challenges to these preconceptions.

In an article titled “Ask a Feminist,” Kimmel and Wade (2018) discuss toxic masculinity in today’s climate. Kimmel describes discussing this very topic at a sexual assault awareness lecture at West Point. Kimmel (2018) asked the cadets what it meant to be a “good man.” The researcher was given an array of answers, from “honor, duty, and integrity” to “sacrifice” (Kimmel & Wade, 2018). Kimmel then asked the cadets what it meant to be a “real man.” These answers differed greatly. The cadets gave answers such as “tough, strong, never show weakness, win at all costs, suck it up, play
through pain, be competitive, get rich, get laid” (Kimmel & Wade, 2018). The conclusion Kimmel (2018) drew from this is that the act of being a “real man” is performative, while being a “good man” is more abstract. This is evident just by comparing the two types of answers the cadets gave. While being a “good man” was more about being a genuinely good person, being a “real man” was more about proving and policing their own masculinity and the masculinity of others. One can see the difference between toxic and nontoxic masculinity based on these two types of answers as well. Being a “good man” was about treating others with integrity and respect. Being a “real man” was about proving the man’s masculinity to others, no matter the cost.

An important thing to note is that the West Point cadets felt the need to gender the traits that made someone a “good man.” This gendering of traits and actions can be explained through gender stereotype theory, or the belief that men are seen as more masculine and women are seen as more feminine (Kachel, Steffens, & Niedlich, 2016). This theory is supported by two smaller theories: gender constancy and gender schema.

**Gender Constancy**

As defined by Arthur, Bigler, and Ruble (2009), gender constancy is the understanding in children that biological traits such as gender are fixed, no matter how appearance changes. The example given in the article is a boy is still a boy even if he grows his hair long (Arthur, Bigler, & Ruble, 2009). The inverse of this example would be that a girl is still a girl even if she cuts her hair very short. In this study, gender constancy is tied very closely with sex typing, or the stereotyping of certain personal preferences, behaviors, objects, activities, roles, and traits based on gender (Arthur et al.,
An example of sex typing is the belief that dolls are “girl toys.” Children are taught from a young age that it is only appropriate for girls to play with dolls.

The researchers tested the relationship between gender constancy and sex typing by breaking preschoolers into two groups and giving them separate lessons. One group was taught that biological traits are “fixed,” meaning they did not change over time or appearance (Arthur et al., 2009). This comes back to the example of the boy with long hair and the girl with short hair. Just because the boy or girl’s appearance changed did not mean that they were no longer a boy or a girl. The other group of children were taught that these traits are “mutable,” or did change over time (Arthur et al., 2009). For example, if a person stands in the sun too long, their skin will tan, changing its color. The researchers compared this change to that of a chameleon (Arthur et al., 2009).

Arthur et al. (2009) concluded that there was no causal relation between gender constancy and sex typing.

Trautner, Gervai, and Nemeth (2003) discuss this theory using the term “categorical sex.” Categorical sex is defined as

an essential, immutable attribute of people that is maintained (by self and others) independent of changes in physical appearance (e.g., in hairstyle, clothes, or make-up) and of changes in behavior (e.g., cross-sex play behavior or homosexuality) (Trautner et al., 2003).

The researchers exempt those born with ambiguous genitals and transsexual individuals from this definition (Trautner et al., 2003). The researchers’ main concern in this study was the relationship between appearance-reality distinction and gender constancy understanding. Trautner, Gervai, and Nemeth (2003) concluded that there was a close relationship between the two. Appearance-reality distinction is defined as “the ability to
distinguish between appearance and reality” (Trautner et al., 2003). This cycles back to the “boy with long hair is still a boy” example. Having an understanding of appearance-reality distinction would mean having the knowledge that just because a boy has grown out his hair very long, that does not mean that he is no longer a boy.

Gender constancy is brought into the sphere of media by Luecke-Aleska, Anderson, Collins, and Schmidt in 1995. These researchers looked into gender constancy in regards to children and television viewing. A sample of 99 children within three months of their fifth birthday were tested for their level of gender constancy and had their television-viewing habits recorded. These videos were then coded for the amount of attention the children paid characters on the television screen (Luecke-Aleska, Anderson, Collins, & Schmidt, 1995). The results of this study found that girls paid more attention to female characters, while there was no significant difference in the amount of attention boys paid to male and female characters (Luecke-Aleska et al., 1995).

A person’s level of gender constancy is influenced by more than just physical appearance and behavior. Bem (1989) makes the claim that a child’s genital knowledge also plays a part in determining the level of gender constancy they achieve. Another researcher, Piaget, claims that children between the ages of 18 months and 7 years old reside within a “preoperational” stage of cognitive development (Bem, 1989). Relating this to genital knowledge, this means that children in this age range do not yet understand that genitalia is what determines whether someone is a man or a woman. To children at this age, they rely entirely on outward appearance and behavior to determine gender (Bem, 1989). This means that children in this stage have a more difficult time with gender constancy.
An example of this can be found in the Disney animated film *Mulan*. In the film, the titular character (a woman) disguises herself as a man and joins the military in her father’s place (Coats, Cook, & Bancroft, 1998). She cuts her hair, binds her breasts, and assumes a traditionally male name. Mulan even takes direction from her dragon companion, Mushu, in how to act like a man (Coats et al., 1998). To a child in the preoperational stage, Mulan’s gender will have changed from a woman to a man when her appearance and behaviors change, as this is all they have to determine what her gender is. To a child who has a high level of gender constancy, they would understand that just because Mulan cut her hair, started wearing clothing men wear, and started acting like a man, she is still a woman. Children with a high level of gender constancy and genital knowledge would understand that it is Mulan’s genitalia that determine whether she is a man or woman, not her outward appearance or her behavior.

There are many factors that contribute to a child’s level of gender constancy. A child must have genital knowledge, or the knowledge that it is genitalia that determines a person’s gender and not just outward appearance or behavior (Bem, 1989). However, a new question is raised by this statement: how do children know which behaviors and physical traits determine which gender? The answer to this question can be found by looking into gender schema theory.

**Gender Schema**

Bem also discusses a theory that is generally discussed together with gender constancy: gender schema. Before one can discuss gender schema, one must understand what a “schema” is. Bem (1981) defines a “schema” as “a cognitive structure, a net-work of associations that organizes and guides an individual’s perception.” The purpose of
schemas are to process large amounts of information in a small amount of time by placing information into smaller, more easily-managed categories based on similarities. These categories can be based on an individual’s appearance and behavior. Bem (1981) discusses “gender schema,” or “sex-typing that derives from a generalized readiness to process information on the basis of sex-linked associations.” These schemas are based on a society’s preconceived notions of what it means to be a “man” or “woman.” An example provided by the researcher is boys are strong and girls are weak (Bem, 1981). Another example is girls like dolls and boys like cars. These preferences fall into the gender schema, teaching children how to perform their gender.

This is another important aspect of gender schema discussed in Bem’s article: children’s self-conceptualization using gender schema. Children learn what characteristics they are supposed to embody not only by what traits are remarked upon, but by those that are not remarked upon as well. Bem (1981) gives the example that adults rarely mention how strong a girl is or how nurturing a boy is, therefore these traits simply do not exist in their individual schemas. Children learn to not only recognize the desirable characteristics within their individual schemas, but to use these characteristics as a way of measuring their worth as a person (Bem, 1981). Bem (1981) argues that gender schema acts as a standard that children must live up to, or risk destroying their self-esteem. This can be seen in the way that boys and girls police the performance of their gender. Boys tend to be ostracized for playing with dolls or painting their nails, which are seen as predominately feminine actions. A girl is referred to as a “tom-boy” if she enjoys sports or rejects traditionally feminine appearance standards.
Gender schema can also be discussed in relation to stereotyping. Woodington (2010) discusses the role of gender schema and its connection to stereotyping as a way to explain sex discrimination in the legal profession. In this article, schemas are described as cognitive structures formed to efficiently process information presented environments around a person (Woodington, 2010). It is through schemas that people are able to process large amounts of information at one time. For example, a professor stands in front of a classroom full of students. Each student looks, acts, and sounds completely different, however there are small similarities between some of them. A few of them have very long hair, higher-pitched voices, and are discussing their children. The professor instantly attaches the term “woman” to each of these students. Others have shorter hair, deeper voices, and are discussing the previous night’s football game. These students are immediately categorized as “men.” This is how gender schema works. The professor takes in large amounts of information and places it into smaller boxes in order to make it much more manageable.

The development of schemas can lead to stereotyping. A stereotype is defined by Merriam-Webster (2018) as “something conforming to a fixed or general pattern.” While stereotypes tend to be inaccurate, they are used as another means of processing information in order to form social groups (Woodington, 2010). People look for things that they have in common with each other in order to form said groups, giving them a sense of community. An example of this is two strangers studying each other on a train. They look at each other, taking in the style of clothing, haircut, and body language of the other person and develop preconceived notions about that person. One notices that the other has hair dyed three different colors; is wearing torn, dark-colored clothing; and has
applied heavy make-up to her face. The person assumes that the girl probably enjoys loud, screaming music, reads poetry, and has an issue with authority. These are stereotypes conjured in the person’s mind based on the girl’s appearance. The person will never know if these assumptions are correct or not, as they have already assumed that they and this girl have nothing in common. Therefore, the person will not be including the girl in their social group.

These stereotypes can be seen in regards to gender as well. Stereotypes based on gender are commonly referred to as “gender roles.” Woodington (2010) first defines gender stereotypes as “overly broad generalizations of the social, biological, and cognitive differences between men and women.” It is then argued that while gender stereotypes are unchanging, dependent on culture, are easy to observe, and have “genetic components,” they differ greatly from other types of stereotyping (Woodington, 2010). People go as far as to stereotype what type of pets each gender prefers and what social activities they enjoy (Woodington, 2010). Most people could list these stereotypes with little to no prompting. Stereotypically, women love small dogs and shopping. They love spa treatments and prefer cats to dogs. Men love large dogs and watching sports together. They love to play sports together and take their big dogs hunting and hiking. These are just a few examples of the stereotypes that experiences within society have placed in each gender schema. Stereotypes associated with gender have been studied outside of their connection with gender schema theory. The theory that developed from this is aptly named gender stereotype theory.

**Gender Stereotype Theory**
Gender stereotype theory states that “men are perceived as more masculine and women are perceived as more feminine” (Kachel, Steffens, & Niedlich, 2016). This is also discussed by Woodington (2010), who claims that gender stereotypes are “cognitively based on the social perception that women only embody feminine characteristics and men only embody masculine characteristics.” This theory also discusses gender roles, citing “tall, broad-shouldered vs. soft voice, graceful” and “head of household vs. takes care of children” as examples of this (Kachel, Steffens, & Niedlich, 2016). An example discussed in Plant, Hyde, Keltner, and Devine’s (2000) article is that of emotions, and how the expression of them differs between males and females. The article argues that the “experience and expression” of certain emotions can be stereotypically masculine or feminine (Plant, Hyde, Keltner, & Devine, 2000). Masculine emotions are listed as “anger and pride,” while feminine emotions are listed as “happiness, fear, love, sadness, and sympathy” (Plant, et al, 2000).

The majority of the research conducted in the Kachel, Steffens, and Niedlich (2016) article is on the Traditional Masculinity-Femininity Scale (TMF). This scale is used to gauge masculinity and femininity based on self-reported personality traits of the subject (2016). This scale is made up of a Likert-type scale of 1-7, with 1 being “not very masculine” and 7 being “very masculine” (2016). This scale solidifies the existence of perceived gender roles in American culture and gives a visual representation of the traits that are valued by those who navigate it.

**Social Determinism**

Social determinism is defined as “a lay theory that implies that a person’s essential features (reflected in his or her fundamental “social character”’) are shaped
permanently and profoundly by social factors (e.g., upbringing, socialization, social background)” (Rangel & Keller, 2011). Using this definition, it is easy to understand why toxically masculine traits persist, even though scholars accept that they are socially regressive. It becomes a cycle; children watch and learn from their families what roles each person plays. They watch television and see characters that exhibit the same behaviors based on the character’s gender. As they grow, they see friends and strangers alike also falling into these traditional roles. They have children of their own and teach their children these traditional roles, and the cycle starts all over again.

Entertainment media are saturated with examples of “traditional” gender roles. Whether the focus is on the social behaviors, the relationship between men, or how we identify characters as male, audiences of all ages and genders are subjected to these toxic character traits. Any number of films or books could be used to exemplify this. In films, male characters are perceived as tough, angry, and revenge-seeking. In the Harry Potter franchise, all three of these characteristics are seen in the character Sirius Black. When Sirius is first introduced, he has just escaped from Azkaban Wizard Prison after serving twelve years for a murder he did not commit. In the form of a dog, Sirius grabs Ron’s leg and pulls him through the Whomping Willow into the Shrieking Shack, where he corners the main trio. Sirius continuously begs to be allowed to kill Peter Pettigrew, the man who he was accused of killing, and loses control of his temper on more than one occasion (Heyman, Columbus, Radcliffe, & Cuaron, 2004). This is the man that becomes Harry’s father-figure throughout the film franchise. As each film is released, Harry is shown to become angrier and angrier, emulating the behaviors he saw in Sirius. Social determinism states that the reason for this change is Harry developing his social character
based on someone he looked up to. This bleeds over into the children who watch these films. Harry is seen looking up to Sirius, and children look up to Harry, so they also begin to develop their social character around him.

Another example of social determinism in media is Percy Jackson from the *Percy Jackson* novels. *Percy Jackson* is a young adult novel series following the demigod son of Poseidon as he saves the world from monsters, titans, and rogue gods. He trains at a camp for demigods, Camp Halfblood (Riordan, 2005). While not revenge-seeking, Percy is portrayed as angry and bitter toward the world around him. Readers are first introduced to a world of magic and gods and monsters through the eyes of a disillusioned twelve-year-old boy. Due to his ADHD and dyslexia, Percy struggles in school which often causes him to question his own intelligence. His mother is married to an abusive, alcoholic gambler, and he discovers that his father is a god who left his mother before Percy was born, leaving her to raise him alone. He is then accused of stealing his uncle, Zeus’s, object of power, his mighty Master Bolt (Riordan, 2005).

By the final book, Percy is shown as angry and bitter toward the gods. However, when given the opportunity to open Pandora’s box and literally give up hope, he refuses. He teaches children that no matter how many bad things happen, no matter how angry they are, hope is something that they must give up willingly (Riordan, 2009). Social determinism states that children read these novels and connect with Percy, taking on personality traits from him. While Percy is loyal and empathetic, he is also angry and self-deprecating. Little boys read these books and learn that it is acceptable for them to be loyal and empathetic, but they also learn that it is acceptable to put themselves down and to use violence to solve their problems. At times, Percy is very quick to reach for his
sword as opposed to using his words to resolve a conflict. He gives children examples of both toxic and nontoxic masculinity to learn from and emulate.

**Sympathetic vs. Unsympathetic Characters**

The next question that must be addressed is what characters children are supposed to connect with and why. Children look up to Harry Potter because he is considered a “sympathetic” character. Somerset Canyons (2013) defines a sympathetic character as

A character with whom the audience feels a connection, either because the character is beautiful, kind, funny, or otherwise appealing, or because we pity them for their suffering, or because they are like us and we feel like they represent us (Somerset Canyons, 2013).

Harry falls into this category for multiple reasons. Throughout the series, Harry is shown to be very kind to those around him and his sarcastic wit adds a level of humor to his character. Readers and viewers are also meant to feel pity for the many ways in which Harry has suffered, from losing his parents at a young age, to growing up in an abusive household, to finding out that he must die in order to defeat Lord Voldemort (Rowling, 2003).

Another reason Harry is seen as the main sympathetic character within the *Harry Potter* franchise is the entire story is told through his point of view. van Peer and Maat (2001) define point of view as “perceptual or conceptual position in which the narrated situation and events are presented.” To break this definition down, point of view tells a story with a specific narrator. This allows readers and viewers to see the world the way the narrator does. van Peer and Maat (2001) discuss point of view based on first person
vs. third person and internal vs. external. External point of view simply describes the character’s actions, while internal point of view allows the reader to see into the character’s head. This allows readers to understand the character’s motivations, beliefs, emotions, and thoughts (van Peer & Maat, 2001). The *Harry Potter* novels are told from a third person internal point of view, so readers are able to see Harry’s thought processes, his emotions, and his motivations throughout the series. This allows Harry to become a conduit through which the reader experiences the world.

Percy Jackson is considered sympathetic for the same reasons. Again, throughout his novel series, Percy is shown to be very kind in his interactions with other characters, and his sarcastic humor and back talk adds comedy to an otherwise tragic story. Again, readers are meant to feel pity and sympathy for the ways in which Percy has suffered. He also grew up with an abusive step-father, lost his mother, and was accused of stealing Zeus’s symbol of power in the first book (Riordan, 2005). As the series continues and war against Kronos breaks out, Percy must deal with the pain of losing friends in battles and the knowledge that his actions could decide the fate of Mount Olympus and the world (Riordan, 2009). Point of view also plays a major role in Percy’s status as a sympathetic character, as the entire story is told in a first-person internal point of view. The reader, again, experiences the entire world through Percy’s eyes, allowing readers to connect with him further.

**Categories of Masculinity**
The masculine behaviors these characters and others perform, both toxic and non-toxic, can be studied at a deeper level by breaking them up into categories. There is a pattern in the way that masculinity is portrayed in the media. Kimmel breaks this pattern up into four rules that all men should follow if they want to be considered “real men” by society. These rules are

1. No Sissy Stuff. Masculinity is based on the relentless repudiation of the feminine.

2. Be a Big Wheel. Masculinity is measured by the size of your paycheck, and marked by wealth, power, and status. As a U.S. bumper sticker put it: “He who has the most toys when he dies, wins.”

3. Be a Sturdy Oak. What makes a man a man is that he is reliable in a crisis. And what makes him reliable is that he resembles an inanimate object. A rock, a pillar, a tree.


The many scholars who have studied this topic have divided masculinity into three categories: social, sexual, and bodily (Birthisel, 2014). Depending on which category is being focused on, the approach to the research is vastly different. The social aspect focuses on how men treat those around them, the sexual focuses on intimacy and relationships, and the bodily focuses on physical appearance. Problematic traits from all three categories come together to form the larger topic of toxic masculinity. Support for why these traits may persist in American culture can be provided using two theories: gender stereotype theory and social determinism theory.
Social Arguably, the most important part of masculinity is the social aspect. The way it is performed in front of others defines how others see the character. This is discussed at length in Click, Holladay, Lee, and Kristiansen’s (2015) article on the HBO television series *Entourage*. The article makes use of the term “hegemonic masculinity,” which is defined as “the culturally authoritative form of masculinity that supports the dominance of (mostly white) men and the subordination of women” (2015). Many traits can be linked between this term and the term “toxic masculinity,” such as racist thoughts and actions and violent acts toward women and other men. The study focused heavily on audience reactions to certain characters in the show, asking opinion questions about storyline, character attributes, and favorite characters (2015). The reactions to Lloyd Lee, a character’s gay, Chinese-American assistant, were especially notable. Subjects were uncomfortable with discussing Lee’s sexual and racial identity, shown in their lack of mention of him when answering questions. The researchers admit that this could possibly be due to the character’s relatively small role in the show, though they believe that this is only a small part of the subjects’ reactions. The flamboyant, “feminine” behaviors made him appear less masculine to the audience.

These traits are not just seen in live action films. The social aspect of masculinity is studied at length in Gillam and Wooden’s (2008) article on masculinity as it is portrayed in the Pixar film *Cars*. These researchers introduce the term “alpha male” and give examples of traits this character type would have, such as physically powerful, socially dominant, competitive, and a lack of visible or shared emotion (2008). Any character not fitting this archetype is put into the category of “beta male.” Most
characters in the alpha male archetype tend to only express aggressive emotions, such as frustration or anger, as opposed to more submissive emotions, such as sadness.

The social aspect is also discussed in Jane’s (2015) article “Gunter’s a Woman?!: Doing and Undoing Gender in Cartoon Network’s Adventure Time” in regards to the main male lead, Finn the Human. Finn’s relationship priorities (friendship over romantic) are opposite that of the traditional male hero. While Finn does express interest in romantic relationships, his friendships always take precedence over his “girl problems.” Jane also touches very briefly on the physical aspect, taking time to mention Finn’s physical “frailties” in relation to physically powerful male heroes (Jane, 2015).

**Sexual/Intimate** Another large aspect of masculinity is the sexual, or intimate, aspect. This is emphasized using a textual analysis in Durham’s (2011) article on gender violence in the Twilight Saga. Edward’s hostility toward Bella during their first meeting makes use of the traditionally masculine trait of aggression. Bella constantly has to remind Edward that she is aware of the ease of which he could hurt her, but that she knows he never would. Both Edward and Bella accept that violence and aggression is “normal” for men, but she is convinced that he won’t hurt her (2011). Edward, on the other hand, is not. Durham also speaks at great length about how scenes in the Twilight films show this aggressive trait in a relationship. During the two’s conversations about Edward being a vampire, the music playing is “menacing” and Bella is “overshadowed” by Edward (2011). This shows that Edward is the one with most of the power in the relationship, which is a typically masculine role.

Although the intimate aspect can refer to the romantic relationship between two individuals, this can also refer to other types of intimate relationships, such as the deep
friendship between men, otherwise known as the “bromance.” Ciasullo and Magill define this term as “the close, intimate, non-sexual relationship between two straight men” (2015). This film genre came about due to the insecurity caused by the entrance of women into the economic, political, and cultural spaces previously occupied solely by men (Rosin, 2012). This also birthed the “bros before hoes” mentality aspect of the genre (Kimmel, 2008). There are many bromances in American popular culture, the most famous of those being the relationship between Turk and JD in *Scrubs* and that of Wilson and House in *House*. Ciasullo and Magill choose to specifically focus on the relationship between Jonah Hill and Channing Tatum’s characters in the *Jump Street* films. The films prioritize the platonic relationship between Tatum and Hill’s characters over all other relationships, romantic or otherwise. It is because of this that the article makes the argument that the film “attempts to explore and illustrate the relationship between two heterosexual males” (Ciasullo & Magill). This relationship, existing on a different level than social relationships with others, is an important aspect of masculinity to discuss.

**Physical** Masculine identifiers are not just social; they are physical as well, and this is not just demonstrated in live action films. In an article on masculine markers in CGI-animated children’s films, Brithisel (2014) conducts a content analysis of Disney/Pixar films in order to discuss the way masculinity is constructed. She emphasizes the importance of studying masculinity in this context, as it is portrayed more frequently and enforced harsher than femininity, specifically when discussing anthropomorphic characters (2014). The results of her analysis concluded that male characters exhibited certain characteristics that classified them as “masculine.” This included lower vocal pitch and a lack of the “unrealistic hourglass figure.” These were the major physical
markers that classified an anthropomorphic character as male. The fact that these traits are enough to identify a non-human character as male shows the importance of these traits in American culture.

Many researchers have focused their studies on masculinity in the media. Even though topics such as social masculinity, masculine relationships, and masculine markers have already been studied, they have been studied within limited spheres. In regards to the *Entourage* article, Click, Holladay, Lee, and Kristiansen (2015) make a very solid point about the different forms of masculinity shown in the show. However, this could be expanded upon by conducting analyses on shows of the same genre that aired at the same time. This comparison would strengthen the researchers’ argument. This type of argument was accomplished in the *Jump Street* article. Ciasullo and Magill not only focused on the films *21* and *22 Jump Street*, but compared these films to other films of the genre, highlighting the differences between the films. The article concluded neatly by emphasizing the importance of the “bromance” genre, and how it represents 21st century American masculinity.

A topic that has not been covered enough in the communication discipline is masculinity in children’s media, specifically children’s animated films. It is imperative that children’s programming be studied, as this has become the foundation of learned behavior in our culture. Birthisel made headway into the topic in her anthropomorphic masculinity article, sampling a larger range of films than either of the two previous articles, however she only sampled Disney/Pixar films between 2000-2010. She could have expanded her argument by including other studios, such as Dreamworks, and comparing the way the different studios show masculinity. Also, the animation style
could have been expanded on. The present study examines a sample of the most successful animated film from each of the major animation studios for each decade, starting in 1970 and ending in 2016. A content analysis is performed, coding for the aforementioned socially regressive masculine traits. This covers a larger area of children’s animation and sets a larger sample size to choose from. The generalizability of this research is also greater. This broader study shows the importance of representation in these films, and the importance of families watching together. Toxic masculinity is perpetrated by those who were taught that those traits are “desirable” by the media they have ingested and the lack of intervention from authority figures around them.

**Animation Studios**

These traits are displayed in numerous places, including children’s animated films. Each animation studio that produces a film is born from a different mind, and comes from different humble beginnings. These humble beginnings must be discussed in order to truly understand why masculinity is portrayed within each film the way it is. Each animation studio listed below produced at least one film that was coded for this content analysis.

**Walt Disney Company**  Formerly known as Walt Disney Productions, the Walt Disney Company was founded on October 16th, 1923, under the name the Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio by Walt and Roy Disney (Smith, 2016). It was incorporated on December 16th, 1929 (Smith, 2016). Disney would later pave the way for animated feature films, starting in 1937 with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, and creating a legacy that continues to release films to this day (Smith, 2016).
Pixar  Pixar was started in 1986 when Steve Jobs bought the Computer Division from George Lucas and created an independent company. It was then that they started collaborating with the Walt Disney Company (Pixar, 2016). Between 1986 and 1989, their first set of short films (*Luxo Jr.*, *Red’s Dream*, *Tin Toy*, and *Knick Knack*) were completed and released (Pixar, 2016). Pixar released the first feature length, computer animated film, *Toy Story*, in 1995, and has continued to release this sole type of animated film since.

DreamWorks Animation  DreamWorks Studios was founded in 1994 by Steven Spielberg, Jeffery Katzenberg, and David Geffen. The studio released its first animated feature, *The Prince of Egypt*, in 1998 (Dreamworks, 2015). The DreamWorks animation department, aptly named DreamWorks Animation, branched off of DreamWorks Studios in 2004, with Jeffery Katzenberg moving in to become CEO (DreamWorks, 2015). This studio is responsible for computer animated films such as *Shrek*, *How to Train Your Dragon*, and traditionally animated films such as *Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas* and *Joseph: King of Dreams* (TrueImages, 2013).

Illumination Entertainment  Illumination Entertainment is an animation studio based out of Paris, France (Illumination Mac Guff, 2017). The company was founded by Chris Meledandri in 2007 (Illumination, 2017). It was later bought by Universal Pictures in 2011, and has since released popular films such as *Despicable Me*, *The Lorax*, and *Sing* (Fleming Jr., 2011).

Nickelodeon Studios  Nickelodeon Studios was founded in 1988 (Pfieffer, 2014). The studio itself was used for animating cartoons such as *Doug, Rugrats, Spongebob*
Squarepants, and The Fairly OddParents, as well as filming live-action television shows such as Slime Time Live, Double Dare, Guts, and Figure It Out (Pfieffer, 2014).

**Sullivan Bluth Studios** Sullivan Bluth Studios was founded by Don Bluth and Morrison Sullivan in 1985, after Bluth left Walt Disney Productions during the production of The Fox and the Hound (Academic Dictionaries and Encyclopedias, 2000). The first headquarters was set up in Van Nuys, California, but later expanded to Dublin, Ireland and Burbank, California. Production drew to a standstill in 1995, after producing films such as Secret of NIHM, The Land Before Time, and All Dogs Go to Heaven (Academic Dictionaries and Encyclopedias, 2000).


**Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM)** MGM was founded in 1924 by Marcus Loew, a theater magnate who “orchestrated the merger of Metro Pictures Corp., Goldwyn Pictures, and Louis B. Mayer Productions” (MGM, 2000). Since its inception, MGM has produced Academy Award winning movies such as The Wizard of Oz and Gone with the Wind. The studio now has more than 177 Academy Awards, including Best Picture winners West Side Story, Rain Man, and The Silence of the Lambs (MGM, 2000).

**Rainmaker Entertainment** Rainmaker Entertainment was founded over 19 years ago in Vancouver, Canada. The studio focuses mainly on CGI (computer-generated images)
films and has partnered with companies such as the Weinstein Company, Hasbro, Lionsgate, and Sony (Rainmaker Entertainment, 2017). Since its inception, the studio has released films such as *Escape From Planet Earth, Ratchet and Clank*, and most of the mainstream *Barbie* films.

**Additional Studios** Due to the time frame in which the studios were producing films, and the lack of films produced in recent years, the researcher was unable to find credible information on Cinema Center Films. The film within the sample that is affected by this is *Snoopy Come Home* (1970).
CHAPTER III

METHOD

This content analysis examines the relationship between the type of character (sympathetic vs. unsympathetic) and the way masculinity is portrayed. A sample of 21 films was chosen at random from a population pulled from the highest grossing film per animation studio per year, starting in 1970 and ending in 2016. Intercoder reliability was established by having each coder code the same film pulled from the sample, and then comparing his/her scores with that of the researcher. If a Cronbach’s Alpha of .80 or higher was achieved, the code was considered reliable and the researcher randomly assigned each coder seven films to watch from the sample of 21.

Research Question 1

For children’s animated films, controlling for release year and box office success, what is the relationship between the year the film was released and the way masculinity is portrayed?

Research Question 2

For children’s animated films, controlling for release year and box office success, what is the relationship between the studio that released the film and the way masculinity is portrayed?

Research Question 3
For children’s animated films, controlling for release year and box office success, what is the relationship between the type of character (sympathetic vs. unsympathetic) and how often toxically masculine behavior is portrayed?

Research Question 4

For children’s animated films, controlling for release year and box office success, what is the relationship between the type of character (sympathetic vs. unsympathetic) and how often non-toxically masculine behavior is portrayed?

Sample

A content analysis of children’s animated films was conducted to address the research questions listed above. The highest grossing animated children’s films, per year, per animation studio, from 1970 to 2016 were chosen for the population. A sample of 21 films were chosen by numbering the films in the population from 1 to 178; then a random number generator was used to select the films. In order to be eligible for the sample pool, films were required to be included in the top ten highest-grossing animated children’s films for each year. Animation studios eligible for the sample pool were determined based on how consistently they released films each decade and/or how well their films did per year. Films eligible for the sample pool were animated, successful, had a theatrical release, and were targeted toward children ages 12 or younger.

Levels of Analysis

This content analysis was conducted based on two levels of analysis: children’s animated films and character behaviors.
**Children’s Animated Films.** A film was determined to be a “children’s animated film” only if it fit the following criteria: it must have been completely animated using two-dimensional (2-D) or computer-generated imaging (CGI) methods, must have had an MPAA rating of G or PG (PG-13 or higher were not eligible), must have had a target audience of children 12 years old or younger, and must have been theatrically released between 1970 to 2016. Adhering to these criteria, live-action films and films that were only partially animated were not eligible. An MPAA rating of PG-13 or higher places the target audience of the film at ages 13 or older, therefore those films were also not eligible to be part of the sample. Finally, any films released prior to 1970 or after 2016 were not coded for this analysis.

**Character Behaviors.** This content analysis was coded for specific behaviors displayed by the characters in the sample films. Coders paid close attention to the behaviors of the main sympathetic male character, the main unsympathetic male character, and the reactions of supporting characters to these behaviors. Both toxic and nontoxic masculine behaviors were noted for both the sympathetic and unsympathetic characters, as well as the positive, negative, and neutral reactions that the rest of the cast had toward these behaviors.

**Coding Scheme**

Due to the specific nature of what was being coded for, an entirely new code was created for this content analysis. The behaviors of the main sympathetic and main unsympathetic male characters were coded for both “toxic” and “nontoxic” masculine behaviors. The reactions of the rest of the cast to both types of behaviors were also coded for and split into three categories: positive, negative, and neutral. Coders were each
given a codebook (Appendix 1) and coding sheet (Appendix 2) that clearly defined what behaviors were considered toxic, which were considered nontoxic, and what reactions were positive, negative, and neutral. The following list of behaviors was built based on the literature reviewed for this research.

**Sympathetic vs. Unsympathetic Characters.** For this study, one sympathetic masculine character and one unsympathetic masculine character were chosen per film to be coded. Characters were considered sympathetic if they fit the characteristics defined by Somerset Canyons (2013):

- Funny or witty
- Physically beautiful
- Well-liked by other characters
- Kind to others
- Similar to the intended audience
- Brave
- Victim of fate or the cruelty of other characters.

Characters were considered unsympathetic if they were physically ugly, rejected by other characters, cruel to others, not similar to the intended audience, or cowardly. Due to the use of this definition, a film’s protagonist was not necessarily the main sympathetic character in the film.

**Toxic Masculine Behaviors.** Toxic masculine behaviors were those that oppressed not only the main male character, but characters around him as well. Examples of these behaviors included racist views and actions, homophobic views and
actions, a need for themselves and other men to be physically strong and aggressive, and a negative reaction to traditionally feminine behaviors. These feminine behaviors included, but were not limited to: cooking, cleaning, child rearing (i.e. stay-at-home parenting), shopping, and an interest in the character’s own appearance or the appearance of others. Other behaviors determined to be toxic were physical, verbal, and/or sexual violent acts used by the male character to assert dominance over women and other men. Examples of this kind of behavior included yelling, insults, and physically assaulting other characters. If a character physically or verbally accosted another male character for crying, this was also seen as a toxic behavior.

**Nontoxic Masculine Behaviors.** Nontoxic masculine behaviors were those that did not oppress the male character or other characters around him. These behaviors included open-mindedness to others’ beliefs and preferences, compassion, pacifism, empathy, an appreciation for and/or participation in traditionally feminine roles, and an appreciation of nontraditional behaviors. Examples of these were male characters who did not get upset and violent when another character disagreed with them, an understanding and concern for the wellbeing of other characters, and a lack of interest or an open distaste for violence and war.

**Supporting Characters’ Reactions.** The behaviors of the supporting cast in the films were just as important as the behaviors they were reacting to. The reactions of supporting characters tell the audience how they are supposed to feel about the main character’s words and actions. Coders coded for these reactions under three categories: positive, negative, and neutral. Positive reactions were defined as cheering, smiling, and encouraging comments. Negative reactions were defined as booing, frowning, and
demeaning comments. Neutral reactions were defined as neither approval or disapproval of the character’s words or actions. For example, if a main character pushed another character down and the rest of the cast smiled or cheered, it was considered a positive reaction. If a main character pushed another character down and the rest of the cast frowned or booed, it was considered a negative reaction. If a main character pushed another character down and the supporting cast did not react, it was considered a neutral reaction.

**Training and Reliability**

All three coders were young adults who have completed high school education or higher. Coders received a codebook outlining and defining the behaviors they would be coding for. In order to establish intercoder reliability, all three coders watched one film chosen from the population and were asked to code using only the codebook provided. They were given no verbal prompting or explanation from the researcher. The coders’ results were then compared to the researcher’s results using a Cronbach’s Alpha design. Coders were asked to make a tally mark on the tally sheet provided every time the main sympathetic male character performed a toxically masculine behavior or a non-toxically masculine behavior. The same was asked for the main unsympathetic masculine character. Coders also recorded tally marks for supporting cast reactions to each of these behaviors. Consistent results between coders served as proof of a reliable code. Inconsistent results between coders served as proof of an unreliable code. In the event of an unreliable code, the codebook was revised, and the test was re-administered using a new randomly-selected film. Once a reliable code had been found, the sample films were distributed randomly among the coders and the researcher. The films in the sample were
numbered, then the researcher used a random number generator to select the films for each coder. Fourteen films, corresponding with the numbers chosen, were divided up between the coders. The researcher coded the remaining seven films. After achieving intercoder reliability, none of the coders watched the same film.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

In order to answer the research questions posed above, two-tailed independent sample t-tests were conducted. A two-level variable character type (0 = sympathetic, 1 = unsympathetic) was used as an independent variable, while the dependent variables were toxic behavior conducted by both the main sympathetic male in each film and the main unsympathetic male in each film. Nontoxic behavior was also analyzed. These behaviors, both toxic and nontoxic, were divided into three categories (verbal, physical, and sexual). Supporting character reactions were also analyzed, based on if the reaction was positive, negative, or neutral, and what character they were reacting to.

Research Question 1

Research question 1 asked based on what year a film was released, how is masculinity portrayed? Due to the size and nature of the sample, only one or two films from one or two studios could be chosen from the population. The sample was also limited due to the amount of time the researcher was given to complete the study. Therefore, there was not enough data to accurately answer this question.

Research Question 2

Research question 2 asked what was the relationship between the studio that released a film and the way masculinity was portrayed. Due to the size and nature of the sample, only one or two films from one or two studios could be chosen from the population. The sample was also limited due to the amount of time the researcher was
given to complete the study. Research questions 3 and 4 were added later in order to explain the results of this content analysis.

**Research Question 3**

Research question 3 asked what the relationship was between character type (sympathetic vs. unsympathetic) and how often toxically masculine behaviors were performed. To answer this research question, a two-tailed, independent samples t-test was conducted. There was no significant difference between unsympathetic characters ($M = 13.9, SD = 10.22$) and sympathetic characters ($M = 9.33, SD = 6.48$) in regards to verbally toxic behaviors, $t(40) = -1.73, p = .09$. There was no significant difference between unsympathetic characters ($M = 9.48, SD = 5.56$) and sympathetic characters ($M = 8.57, SD = 8.87$) in regards to physically toxic behaviors, $t(40) = -.396, p = .69$. Furthermore, there was no significant difference between unsympathetic characters ($M = 3.33, SD = 7.9$) and sympathetic characters ($M = 3.14, SD = 4.84$) in regards to sexually toxic behaviors, $t(40) = -.094, p = .93$.

**Research Question 4**

Research question 4 asked what the relationship was between character type (sympathetic vs. unsympathetic) and how often non-toxic masculine behaviors were portrayed. Levene’s test for equality of variances was found to be violated for this analysis, $F(1, 40) = 5.3, p = .03$. Owing to this violated assumption, a t statistic not assuming homogeneity of variance was computed. Sympathetic characters ($M = 8.24, SD = 5.18$) were significantly more likely to perform verbally nontoxic behaviors than unsympathetic characters ($M = 2.95, SD = 3.23$), $t(34.1) = 3.94, p < .001$. Sympathetic
characters ($M = 5.95, SD = 6.38$) were significantly more likely to perform physically nontoxic behaviors than unsympathetic characters ($M = 1.2, SD = 2.4$), $t(25.6) = p < .05$. In addition, sympathetic characters ($M = 6.43, SD = 7.41$) were significantly more likely to perform sexually nontoxic behaviors than unsympathetic characters ($M = 1.52, SD = 5.88$), $t(40) = 3.2, p < .05$. 

CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

Upon analyzing the results of this study, the researcher discovered two things. The first was that there was not enough data to answer the first two research questions posed. Due to the limited size of the sample, most animation studios only had one or two films that were chosen. Therefore, there was no way to accurately answer whether or not there was a relationship between the portrayals of masculinity, the year a film was released, and the studio that released that film, as there were not enough films per studio in order to prove a pattern using a quantitative method. If the researcher had also employed a qualitative research method, there may have been enough data to answer the first and second research questions.

The second thing the researcher found was there was a relationship between the type of character (sympathetic vs. unsympathetic) and how many toxic and non-toxic behaviors were performed. Through all 21 films, there was no significant difference in how many toxic behaviors were performed between the sympathetic male character and the unsympathetic male character. There was, however, a significant difference in how many non-toxic behaviors were performed. Children are meant to relate to and idolize the main sympathetic male character. In having both the sympathetic male and unsympathetic male perform the same amount of toxic behaviors, children are learning that it is acceptable to behave in these ways. The only difference they are seeing between these two types of characters is in the number of nontoxic behaviors performed. This leads to the conclusion that it is acceptable to still perform toxic masculine behaviors as long as one also performs a nontoxic masculine behavior. The films in this sample are
not challenging toxic masculinity in any way, they are masking it. The question that remains is “Why is this still happening?”

The results of this research can be discussed using two theories: gender stereotype theory and social determinism theory. These theories can be expanded upon using Kimmel’s (2004) Four Rules of Masculinity.

**Gender Stereotype Theory**

Gender stereotype theory claims that “men are perceived as more masculine and women are perceived as more feminine” (Kachel, Steffens, & Niedlich, 2016). Within the research of gender portrayal in society, emotions are broken down into “masculine” and “feminine.” Plant, Hyde, Keltner, and Devine (2000) provide “anger and pride” as masculine emotions and “happiness, fear, love, sadness, and sympathy” as feminine emotions. In American culture, women are not only allowed to experience more emotions, but are allowed to express those emotions. Men are allowed to experience only aggressive, negative emotions, and are not allowed to express them.

This gendering of emotions brings one back to two of the Four Rules of Masculinity: “No Sissy Stuff” and “Be a Sturdy Oak.” “No Sissy Stuff” tells men to reject anything and everything considered “feminine,” while “Be a Sturdy Oak” requires men to be calm, cool, and collected at all times (Kimmel, 2004). If men are told to reject the feminine and are only given aggressive emotions to experience, it makes sense how toxic masculinity is still so prevalent in American culture. Not only are they only given aggressive emotions that they are allowed to experience, American culture tells them they are not allowed to express those emotions.
Kachel, Steffens, and Niedlich (2016) further expand on gender stereotype theory by discussing gender roles in society. According to these researchers, “being the breadwinner” is a traditionally masculine role and “child-rearing” is a traditionally feminine role (Kachel, Steffens, & Niedlich, 2016). If men are supposed to reject anything and everything feminine, that includes having a major hand in raising their children. An example of this can be found in the Rainmaker Entertainment film *Escape from Planet Earth*. The main character, an alien named Gary Supernova, is married with a young son. Throughout the film, the audience does not see Gary interact with his son, Kip, nearly as often as they see his wife, Kira, interact with him (Gigliotti, Winder, Carroll, Leech, & Brunker, 2013). This follows the “No Sissy Stuff” rule.

The opposite example can be found in the 2006 Disney film *The Wild*. The main character, a lion named Sampson, is a single father trying to raise his young son Ryan. The entire plot of the film revolves around Sampson trying to rescue Ryan after he is accidentally shipped off to a jungle island from the New York zoo where he lives (Goldman, Flynn, Vinton, & Williams, 2006). Sampson is highly involved in the rearing of his child and shows absolutely no shame in it. This goes in direct opposition of the “No Sissy Stuff” rule. Sampson also has multiple instances in which he shows fear, which is a decidedly feminine emotion. Throughout most of the film, however, Sampson is shown to be quick-witted and reliable in a crisis, following the “Be a Sturdy Oak” rule (Goldman et al, 2006).

A third example of this is seen in the 1970 Disney film *The Aristocats*. In the film, the pet cat of an elderly aristocrat, Duchess, and her kittens are abandoned in the countryside by the family butler, Edgar (Hibler & Reitherman, 1970). The family of cats
is found by an alley cat named Thomas O’Malley. Throughout the film, although O’Malley shows a clear interest in becoming a love interest for Duchess, he has more interactions with the kittens. When O’Malley is first introduced, he shows immediate interest in Duchess. Shortly thereafter, her three kittens are revealed to him (Hibler & Reitherman, 1970). Instead of rejecting all of them or continuing to show interest only in Duchess, he shows interest in the kittens themselves. They jump out of the basket they had been hiding in and all three begin to question him at the same time. Toulouse, the orange kitten, is extremely excited to meet an alley cat and offers to show O’Malley his impression of one. O’Malley, though taken off-guard, not only gives Toulouse his full attention, but praises Toulouse on his impression. It is after this interaction that O’Malley decides to help them make their home to Paris (Hibler & Reitherman, 1970).

In order to get the family back to Paris, O’Malley stops a milk truck heading into the city. As the kittens are scared, O’Malley makes it a game by telling them the truck is a magic carpet (a callback to an earlier conversation they overheard him have with Duchess) and shows them the milk in the back for them to drink. He then says his goodbyes as the truck starts. As the truck pulls away, Marie, the white kitten, falls off. Without thinking, O’Malley grabs Marie and jumps onto the truck, making sure she did not get left behind. Due to this, the truck driver sees the cats and they have to find another way back to Paris. This time, O’Malley decides to go with them. These examples show a solid interest in being highly involved in the raising of the children, coming into direct opposition of the “No Sissy Stuff” rule. In showing more interest in the children than in his love interest throughout the film, O’Malley puts himself in the
same role of care-taker that Duchess inhabits. It is in this way that O’Malley is stepping out of his gender stereotype.

Shrek, the titular character of the *Shrek* film franchise, also steps out of this gender stereotype and takes a hands-on approach to raising his children. In the fourth installment of the series, *Shrek Forever After*, Shrek is feeling overwhelmed and makes a deal with Rumpelstiltskin to have one day to be the ogre he used to be. The price of this contract is one day of Shrek’s life, which turns out to be the day he was born. The only way to break the curse is with true love’s kiss, so Shrek spends the film looking for and then courting his wife, Fiona, in order to break the contract (Shay, Cheng, & Mitchell, 2010). In the beginning of the film, the audience sees Shrek right beside Fiona changing diapers, feeding and burping the babies, and putting them to bed (Shay et al., 2010). Traditionally, fathers do not participate in this aspect of raising children, so Shrek is stepping out of his traditional role as father in order to actively help Fiona. This is further evident over the course of the rest of the film, as Shrek’s main motivation for breaking the contract is his children. Shrek breaks the “No Sissy Stuff” rule by not only performing, but respecting the traditionally feminine role of raising children.

Further contradiction of the “No Sissy Stuff” rule in the context of child-rearing can be found in Chaz Finster, Chuckie Finster’s father in *Rugrats in Paris: The Movie* (2000). Chaz is a bureaucrat raising his young son alone after his wife dies. In the film, he and Chuckie are invited to tag along to Paris so Chaz’s friend, Stu Pickles, can fix malfunctions to an animatronic dinosaur he built being used in EuroReptarLand. A large plot point in the film is Chaz being wooed by the CEO of the theme park, Coco LaBouche, so she can receive a promotion in the Reptar company (Klasky, Csupo, &
Bergqvist, 2000). Despite having a love interest, Chaz’s main focus throughout the entire film is Chuckie. Coco invites Chaz out on a date at the theme park in order to get to know each other better, and Chaz’s immediate reaction is to invite the children along (Klasky et al., 2000). Later in the film, the cast go to see a play starring Reptar and a Princess to make sure Stu’s repairs held up. Coco, hearing from Angelica that Chuckie wanted the Princess to be his new mother, dressed up as the Princess and participated in the play, pulling Chuckie onstage with her (Klasky et al., 2000).

It is in this moment that Chaz believes that he is in love with Coco and decides to marry her. During the wedding, Chaz constantly asks where Chuckie is, commenting that he cannot get married without his son there. When Coco shows her true colors and is cruel to the children, Chaz immediately refuses to marry her (Klasky et al., 2000). His concern and love for his son supersedes everything else in Chaz’s life. It is traditionally a feminine plot line to be a caretaker and mother figure to a child. That Chaz is given this character arc is highly untraditional and allows him to move within a different, healthier space in regards to masculinity.

The characters discussed above give example to the nontoxic behaviors that were seen in the sympathetic characters within the sample films, however both sympathetic and unsympathetic characters also performed a high amount of toxic behaviors derived from gender stereotypes. One major gender role for men is to be the breadwinner of the family. Men are expected to have a steady job and provide for their families, tying in to the “Be a Big Wheel” rule. This rule states that the more money a man has, the more power he has. The best example of this within children’s animated films is the Once-ler from the 2012 film The Lorax.
The plot of *The Lorax* revolves around a boy named Ted who, in attempting to impress his crush, seeks out the Once-ler in order to learn what happened to all of the trees in the world (Meledandri, Healy, & Renaud, 2012). The Once-ler, a once proud industrialist, cut down all of the trees called Truffula trees, in order to provide material for his invention, the Thneed. At the beginning of the film, the Once-ler is a broke inventor just trying to sell this invention (Meledandri et al., 2012). His family is shown to view him as a disappointment due to his financial failure, which follows the “Be a Big Wheel” rule. Men are expected to be financially stable. The Once-ler failing to do so comes into direct opposition of this rule, thus calling his masculinity into question. When the Thneed takes off and the Once-ler becomes a millionaire, his family showers him with affection (Meledandri et al., 2012). In becoming extremely wealthy, the Once-ler proves himself able to provide for his family and thus worthy as a man. This allows him to fill his role as breadwinner of the family. When the Once-ler cuts down all of the trees and runs out of material for his Thneeds, his business plummets and he loses all of his money (Meledandri et al., 2012). In losing his money, the Once-ler also loses all of his power in Thneedville. The moment this happens, his family revokes their affection for him and leaves him to isolate himself in shame over his actions. This brings the Once-ler back to the space he inhabited in the beginning of the film. In losing his money and power, he no longer fits the requirements for the “Be a Big Wheel” rule, and therefore becomes less of a man.

The last of Kimmel’s (2004) Four Rules of Masculinity is “Give ‘Em Hell.” This rule states that to be a man, one must be aggressive and daring, take risks, and be competitive (Kimmel, 2004). A character that personifies this rule is Cale from the 2000
Don Bluth film *Titan AE*. The film follows main character Cale, one of the last remaining humans in existence, as he attempts to find a secret weapon his father invented after the Earth is destroyed by an enemy alien species known as the Drej (Bluth, Goldman, & Kirschner, 2000). On multiple occasions, Cale is seen to be impulsive and aggressive. Fifteen years after the Earth is destroyed when he is a young boy, Cale is grown and working as a construction worker on a space station. While working out in space cutting broken space ships into more manageable sections, an alien uses one of these pieces to knock Cale in the head, causing him to fall forward. Instead of letting it go, Cale takes the laser gun he has been using to cut the ships and shoots at the alien in revenge. The alien turns around to glare at Cale, but he only shoots him a smirk and a mocking kiss (Bluth et al., 2000). Cale’s act of revenge proves to the aliens and other humans that he will not put up with being pushed around, and therefore follows the “Give ‘Em Hell” rule. Cale uses aggression in this scene to ensure that the aliens recognize that he is strong and not an easy target. This refusal to show weakness follows the stereotype that men must be always ready for a fight in order to defend themselves and others.

A second example of this rule happens in the very next scene. Due to fantastic racism, Cale and other humans are forced to wait for aliens of other races to clock out for lunch before they can. He attempts to get in line with the aliens but is quickly forced back in line with others of his species. Getting tired of waiting, Cale decides to take a shortcut through the loading dock for large ships. The other humans warn him that he could be killed, but he ignores them. Cale is then almost run over by a docking ship (Bluth et al., 2000). Despite the obvious threat of bodily harm, Cale takes a massive risk in order to get to the cafeteria for lunch quicker. This recklessness follows the “Give
‘Em Hell” rule perfectly. Men use this reckless behavior in an effort to prove their bravery, a stereotypical trait for their gender.

**Social Determinism**

While gender stereotype theory explains why characters are portrayed the way they are, it does not explain why these portrayals are still prevalent in films today. That explanation can be found in the theory of social determinism. Social determinism is defined as “a lay theory that implies that a person’s essential features (reflected in his or her fundamental “social character”) are shaped permanently and profoundly by social factors (e.g., upbringing, socialization, social background)” (Rangel & Keller, 2011). To break this definition down, social determinism claims that people develop their personality and learn how to exist within their culture by watching those around them. This is especially true in the early years of their lives. In today’s social climate, children are first learning how to interact with the world around them mainly through the cartoons they watch. As previously stated, this means that children’s cartoons have become the foundation of learned behavior.

Kimmel’s (2004) Four Rules of Masculinity play an even bigger part in expanding upon social determinism than they did with gender stereotype theory. All four rules can be applied in relation to social determinism. Gillam and Wooden (2008) introduce the idea of the “alpha male” in children’s cartoons such as the Pixar film *Cars*. Alpha males are defined as males who are “physically powerful, socially dominant, competitive, and have a lack of visible or shared emotion” (Gillam & Wooden, 2008). This definition plays on three of the four rules of masculinity: “Be a Sturdy Oak,” “Be a Big Wheel,” and “Give ‘Em Hell.” Being socially dominant and physically powerful are
important factors in adhering to the “Be a Big Wheel” rule. Competitiveness follows the “Give ‘Em Hell” rule, as men are expected to “exude an aura of aggression” and “take risks.” Finally, the lack of visible or shared emotion lends to the stoicism that is expected of men in order to adhere to the “Be a Sturdy Oak” rule (Kimmel, 2004).

Examples of these rules can be found in the films that were coded for this thesis. In an article discussing relationship violence in the Twilight Saga, Durham (2011) discusses how Edward and Bella both accept that it is “normal” for men to be aggressive. Audiences see this in the 1991 Disney film Beauty and the Beast. Both Gaston and the Beast exhibit highly aggressive behaviors. Early in the film, Gaston muscles his way into Belle’s home in order to propose to her (Hahn, Trousdale, & Wise, 1991). Belle is obviously uncomfortable with this display, and it shows Gaston’s dominance over Belle that she cannot simply ask him to leave. Later in the film, after the Beast has let Belle take her father’s place as his captive, he discovers Belle exploring a part of the castle he forbade her to enter. The Beast flies into a rage, throwing objects at Belle and roaring at her to “Get Out!” This frightens Belle enough to break her promise to not run away (Hahn, Trousdale, & Wise, 1991). Despite this obvious display of physical aggression, Belle and the Beast (who turns back into a prince thanks to Belle’s love) are together at the end of the film. This tells the little boys that watch this film that it is okay to treat someone they “love” this way. It teaches little girls that as long as she loves him enough, she can “fix” a man.

Both of these examples fall into the “No Sissy Stuff” rule. Both characters reject more “feminine” emotions such as sympathy, compassion, and understanding. When the Beast allows Belle to take her father’s place, he immediately grabs the elderly man and
drags him outside, not giving Belle a chance to say goodbye. When Belle falls to the ground, holding her head in her hands and sobbing and informs the Beast of this fact, he offers no form of comfort and changes the subject (Hahn et al., 1991). Compassion is traditionally a feminine emotion, so in offering no comfort to Belle and avoiding the subject altogether, the Beast stays within the parameters of the “No Sissy Stuff” rule and the “Be a Sturdy Oak” rule.

The Beast, however, breaks the “Be a Sturdy Oak” rule by expressing his anger, one of the few emotions American culture allows him. Numerous times within the film, the Beast loses his temper when things do not go his way. After Belle is shown to her room in the castle, she locks herself away. The Beast invites her to have dinner with him, but she does not accept. When Belle outright refuses to share a meal with him, the Beast storms up to her room, pounds a fist on her door, and roars at her to join him (Hahn et al., 1991). In that moment, he takes the choice away from her. While he does attempt to calm down and ask her politely, when she yet again refuses him he informs the servants that if Belle “does not eat with [him], she does not eat at all” (Hahn et al., 1991). The Beast uses physically and verbally toxic behaviors in order to assert dominance over Belle. Again, despite all of these behaviors, Belle falls in love with and marries the Beast at the end of the film. This shows children that it is acceptable to treat someone who they love in these ways.

These rules can be applied to physical characteristics as well. Brithisel (2014) defines a male as a character who has a “lower vocal pitch” and “lacks the unrealistic hourglass figure.” Gaston and the Beast also exhibit these traits. Both characters have low-pitched, deep voices and highly “buff” figures. Even when the Beast turns back into
a prince at the end of the film, he is still shown as physically fit and strong. Characters that are not perceived as physically fit, such as Gaston’s sidekick Le Fou, are not seen as desirable. Le Fou also speaks in a squeaky, higher-pitched voice. Little boys are not supposed to want to be like Le Fou, they are supposed to want to be like the Beast. This tells little boys that this is what men look like, therefore this is what they must look like. Boys learn that they are less of a man if their bodies do not look like this.

Many of these toxic traits can also be found in the titular character of the 2003 DreamWorks film *Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas.* *Sinbad* tells the story of the pirate Sinbad, who is framed by the goddess of chaos, Eris, for stealing the Book of Peace, an artifact that is a literal stand-in for peace throughout all kingdoms. Sinbad’s best friend, Prince Proteus of Syracuse, puts his life up as collateral to give Sinbad the opportunity to clear his name and get the book back from the monster realm, Tartaros (Katzenberg, Soria, Johnson, & Gilmore, 2003).

Sinbad, although he is the main protagonist, is highly unsympathetic for the majority of the film. He also performed the most amount of toxic behaviors out of any other character coded for in this study. Sinbad constantly rejects anything and everything feminine, including emotions. When Sinbad’s crew sets sail after Proteus has taken Sinbad’s place in prison, his first mate Kale approaches Sinbad to see what he has planned to retrieve the Book of Peace. Sinbad informs Kale that they are not going to Tartaros, they are “retiring” and going to Fiji. Kale argues with him over this decision, but instead of discussing the subject, Sinbad insults Kale and ends the conversation (Katzenberg et al., 2003). As Sinbad is the captain of the ship, he holds a position of power over Kale, and Sinbad uses verbally toxic behavior to assert his dominance over
him. Not only does this tell children that it is normal to use anger as a way to avoid talking about things that make them uncomfortable, but Kale is portrayed as Sinbad’s friend. Therefore, children are also learning that it is appropriate to insult their friends when they do not want to talk about a subject that makes them uncomfortable. This also plays into the “No Sissy Stuff” rule, as Sinbad rejects emotions such as compassion and sympathy and expresses aggressive emotions such as anger.

This is seen again just a few moments later when it is revealed that Marina, Proteus’s fiancée and later Sinbad’s love interest, has stowed away on Sinbad’s ship to make sure Sinbad keeps his word. Marina, like Kale, argues with Sinbad over his decision to leave Proteus to die. During this conversation, Sinbad not only insults Marina, but he forcibly lifts her, carries her below-decks in front of his entire crew, and locks her away (Katzenberg et al., 2003). Sinbad uses both verbally and physically toxic behavior to assert his dominance over Marina. Not only does this solidify the message to children that it is appropriate to use anger and physical violence to assert dominance over their friends, but that it is appropriate to assert dominance over someone they love this way.

Toxic masculine behaviors are not only seen in male characters, however. Female characters also exhibit these behaviors at times. Lucy from Peanuts fame is a perfect example of a female character who performs toxic masculine behaviors. In the 1970 film Snoopy, Come Home, Lucy is seen performing many verbally and physically toxic behaviors. She constantly insults Snoopy and his owner Charlie Brown as a way of proving that she is better than them. At one point during the film, Snoopy attempts to steal another character, Linus’s, blanket. After failing to do so, Snoopy storms off and
comes across Lucy practicing boxing. After some taunting, Lucy convinces Snoopy to box with her. What ensues is a ten-minute sequence where both Snoopy and Lucy use their fists to prove who is better at boxing (Melendez, Mendelson, & Schultz, 1970).

Using brute force is traditionally a masculine way of asserting dominance. Lucy, in using boxing as a way of asserting dominance over Snoopy, performs a toxically masculine behavior despite the fact that she is female. This sends a different message, however, as Lucy is an unsympathetic character. Children who watch Charlie Brown and Snoopy movies are not supposed to want to be like Lucy. This sends the message to little girls that performing masculine behaviors such as boxing are not acceptable in society. It is acceptable for Snoopy to like boxing because he is male, and risk-taking and physical violence are masculine behaviors.

While the majority of behaviors coded were toxic, there were several characters that exhibited non-toxic behaviors within the films in the sample. One such character is Proteus from the 2003 DreamWorks film Sinbad. In the beginning of the film, Sinbad is introduced in the process of attacking Proteus’s ship in order to steal the Book of Peace. When Proteus confronts him, instead of pulling his sword and attacking Sinbad immediately, he attempts to talk Sinbad out of stealing the book. He sticks exclusively to emotional appeals; visibly showing excitement at seeing Sinbad after so long, asking where he had been for the last ten years, and appealing to their past friendship (Katzenberg, Soria, Johnson, & Gilmore, 2003). Proteus actively avoids fighting Sinbad directly, and emphasizes the importance of peace. Proteus’s pacifist nature comes into direct opposition with the “Give Em’ Hell” rule. Society expects men to treat opposition with aggression and violence. Proteus, on the other hand, solves most of the problems he
encounters in the most diplomatic way possible. His main role is to literally protect Peace, and he does so by using pacifist methods as opposed to violence. As Proteus is the main sympathetic male character in the film, he is the character children are supposed to want to emulate. The portrayal of a pacifist in a sympathetic role teaches boys that it is acceptable to try diplomacy before resorting to violence to solve problems.

Another sympathetic character who performs many nontoxic behaviors within his film is the titular character in the 1997 Disney film *Hercules*. *Hercules* tells the story of the son of Zeus and Hera who is kidnapped as an infant and turned mortal by his evil uncle, the god of the underworld, Hades. Hercules must prove that he is a true hero in order to regain his godhood and be reunited with his family on Mount Olympus (Dewey, Clements, & Musker, 1997). Although Hercules, by virtue of his super strength, is a highly physically toxic character, he balances this out with a large amount of verbally and sexually nontoxic traits. Hercules is shown to be highly compassionate and understanding, which are traditionally feminine traits. When his love interest, Megara, begins to reveal her beliefs about how “petty and dishonest” people are to him, he immediately offers her physical contact and comforts her with his assurance that he does not believe that she is petty or dishonest (Dewey et al., 1997). Hercules embodies the traditionally masculine figure by being portrayed as physically strong, however it is the strength of his heart that is shown to be more important throughout the film. His love and compassion are the traits most viewed as desirable within this film, teaching young boys that physical and emotional strength are not mutually exclusive. Young boys learn that while physical strength can be used to protect those around them, it is also important to be understanding and compassionate. Hercules is allowed to openly express non-
aggressive emotions, such as love and compassion, which sends the message to young boys that they are allowed to openly express these emotions, too.

**Limitations**

All research is not without limitations, particularly in sampling. For this content analysis, twenty-one of the highest grossing children’s animated films were chosen from 1970 to 2016. Due to the specificity of this sample, the films could not be chosen randomly from the population. However, out of the 172 films gathered for the population, the twenty-one films for the sample were chosen at random. To hopefully prevent further threats and coder bias, films were randomly assigned to coders.

The coders themselves also posed limitations to the study. Three individuals were chosen to code for this study. Not including the film that was used for intercoder reliability, each coder had to code seven films each. Each of these films were between an hour and a half to two hours long. This made the coding process incredibly time consuming. The final limitation is the intercoder reliability test itself. Each coder coded the same animated film and turned in their results to the researcher. These results were then compared to that of the researcher. If the results were inconsistent, the codebook was revised and the test was re-administered. This process also required a lot of time, and the researcher only had, at most, twelve months to complete the study.

**Implications/Future Research**

While research into masculinity in media has been conducted, little has been done focusing on children’s media. If a pattern of portrayal can be found with sympathetic and unsympathetic male characters, it could prove a connection between toxic masculinity,
gender stereotype theory, and social determinism theory. Proof of this connection could open the door for future psychological, sociological, and communication studies into the topic.

Future research could be conducted to better understand how exactly these portrayals affect children and the way they function in society. Psychological studies could be done to investigate how children define masculinity based on what cartoons they watch. Communication research could follow this to study how these portrayals affect the way children interact with others in society. Finally, this study could be reproduced using a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods. In employing both types, a future researcher could develop a better understanding of not just how often behaviors were performed, but what behaviors were performed. In time, hopefully this research could convince television producers that more inclusive portrayals of masculinity are needed in children’s media. This change in children’s media could then spark a change in the way men are portrayed in other facets of media, ultimately resulting in a new definition of masculinity in American culture.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

For this study, the researcher and two coders watched 21 children’s animated films and coded for toxic and nontoxic masculine behaviors in the main sympathetic male character and the main unsympathetic male character. These films were randomly selected from a list of the top-grossing children’s animated films released from 1970 through 2016 and divided up between the coders, having each person code seven films. The coders also coded for reactions in the supporting characters, breaking these reactions down into three categories: positive, negative, and neutral.

The results of this study concluded that, statistically, there was no significant difference in toxic behavior between the sympathetic male and the unsympathetic male over all 21 of the films. Both the sympathetic and unsympathetic males were equally toxic. There was a significant difference, however, in nontoxic behavior. Statistically, sympathetic males performed more nontoxic behaviors than unsympathetic males did. This shows that the films that children are watching are not reducing toxic masculinity or challenging it in any way. If sympathetic male characters are only preforming more nontoxic behaviors, and not performing less toxic behaviors, these children’s films are only masking the problem. An explanation for these results was found in the gender stereotype and social determinism theories.

It is through these films that children learn how to navigate social situations and relationships. In not decreasing the amount of toxic behaviors the sympathetic character of the film is performing, studios are teaching children that it is still acceptable to behave
this way. They are isolating men who do not fit into the small box that American culture has created for them. Men who are not physically strong, aggressive, and domineering are considered less masculine than men who do exhibit these traits. When men do not conform to the traditional roles and behaviors society places upon them, their masculinity is policed by both other men and women, and they are ostracized. Multiple forms of masculinity can be found not only across different cultures, but within one culture. These differences between people encourage growth and acceptance. In limiting the way men are allowed to perform masculinity, cultures limit the amount of progress and growth they can achieve. Children’s animated films have become the foundation of learned behavior. It then stands to reason that this is where the changes in portrayal must begin. In order to cause a snowball effect, one must find the beginning and start there. Here is the first domino in the line. It is time to knock it down.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX B

Coding Sheet

Sympathetic and Unsympathetic Male Character

The main sympathetic male character will be determined by who is the main male protagonist of the film. The main male antagonist will be considered the “main male unsympathetic” character. A character will be considered male based on the following auditory and visual characteristics, as defined by Birthisel (2014): lower vocal pitch, use of the masculine pronoun, the lack of an hour-glass figure, a lack of make-up, and shorter eyelashes. A lack of, or addition of, these characteristics will automatically result in a character being classified as female.

Toxic Masculine Behaviors

Toxic Masculine behaviors will fall into three different categories: verbal, physical, and sexual.

**Verbal.** Verbally toxic behaviors are as follows: racist comments, homophobic comments, verbal insults, a negative verbal reaction to traditionally feminine behaviors, and yelling.

**Physical.** Physically toxic behaviors are as follows: a need to be physically stronger that other men and physically aggressive or intimidating actions.

**Sexual.** Verbally and physically toxic behaviors that are directed at a love interest will automatically be considered sexual in nature.
Nontoxic Masculine Behaviors

Nontoxic masculine behaviors are as follows: open-mindedness to other’s beliefs and preferences, compassion, pacifism, empathy, an appreciation for and/or participation in traditionally feminine roles, and an appreciation of nontraditional behaviors. These will also be broken down into the previously mentioned three categories. Behaviors directed at a love interest will automatically be considered sexual in nature.

Supporting Characters’ Reactions

Supporting characters’ reactions will be divided into three categories: positive, negative, and neutral.

Positive Reactions. Positive reactions are as follows: cheering, smiling, applauding, and encouraging comments.

Negative Reactions. Negative reactions are as follows: booing, frowning, and demeaning comments.

Neutral Reactions. Neutral reactions are defined as neither approval or disapproval for a character’s behavior. A lack of a reaction to a behavior classified as toxic or nontoxic will automatically be considered a neutral reaction.