

Disability in Animated Films: A Study on their Representation and Portrayal

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Abstract

In recent years, animated films have moved towards inclusion of different backgrounds and races in their respective plots. Media production giants like Disney have been lauded for their inclusive storylines and even stood their ground amidst the backlash received from swapping the original white-skinned characters to black-skinned characters, as observed in the films and plays like The Little Mermaid and Romeo and Juliet. However, even though inclusive criteria have increased in terms of races and gender, the representation of disability is still less in animated films and literature, and has an undesirable representation. This study is a qualitative study, which uses thematic content analysis to study ten animated films that contain characters with disabilities. The study analysed these characters through the lens of some theories and studied how they are being represented and portrayed in their respective films.

Keywords: Disability, Animated films, Representation, Media, Disney.

Introduction

The concept of “disability” has existed in society since time immemorial. The term has long been linked to a series of discrimination, hardships, and problems. World Health Organization (2011) has said that defining disability is complicated as it is “complex, dynamic, multidimensional and contested.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) have defined disability as an impairment of any type of condition that is present in a person’s body or mind, which further restricts or prohibits a person from performing activities or interacting with others around them. “Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006).

Many problems associated with disability still need to be solved, so, the study of disability poses a new challenge while already being a challenge. Disability is a broad term that encompasses a wide range of sensory, physical, intellectual, and mental health issues that reflects the diversity of the global population. Hence, the need arises to embrace an inclusive perspective towards disability which is crucial for fostering a society that supports persons with disabilities. They had little to no representation in various fields of society, particularly in the area of entertainment like media, films, theatre shows, and plays. Media plays an important role in shaping the way people

perceive something, and the positive or negative portrayal of disability in different sectors of media can shape the way the general public regards disability. Representation matters and goes a long way in solving various hardships associated with disability. Hence, this study focuses on the representation and portrayal of disability in selected animated films.

Literature review

The social model of disability arises in reaction to the given limitations by scholars, and it sees the issue of disability as a socially created problem. It deals with a matter of the full integration of individuals into society, which is largely favoured by disabled rights advocates (Jensen & Zuber, 2020). Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) has said that,

“Disability is a situation, caused by social conditions, which requires for its elimination, (a) that no one aspect such as income, mobility or institutions is treated in isolation, (b) that disabled people should, with the advice and help of others, assume control over their own lives, and (c) that professionals, experts, and others who seek to help must be committed to promoting such control by disabled people.” (1976)

In this model, disability is not an attribute of an individual, but rather a complex collection of conditions, many of which are created by the social environment. Hence, the management of the problem requires social action and is the collective responsibility of society at large to make the environmental modifications necessary for the full participation of persons with disabilities in all areas of social life. The social model of disability is said to have emerged around the seventies from the works and pressures of various disability activists (Beaudry, 2016). This model states that disability stems from the oppression and exclusion meted out by society, which is inflicted upon persons with disabilities. The model also states that disability is not necessarily the impairment that exists within an individual (Chambers, 2016).

In the field of the social model, the two terms, which are impairment and disability, have different meanings assigned to them, in which impairment stems from the dysfunction of any part of the human body. Disability, on the other hand, is any type of activity restriction that is placed by society and the community on people who have impairments (Forhan, 2009; Goodley, 2010). In the development of the social model, Schipper (2006) has critically explained the importance of the distinction between impairment and disability by stating,

“These definitions provided a theoretical underpinning for the social model by making a clear distinction between social disability and physical impairment. While an impairment is universally constant (e.g., the inability to conceive children), the extent to which this impairment has social/political consequences shifts from culture to culture (i.e., the inability to conceive children may be more ‘disabling’ in ancient Near Eastern cultures than in industrialized Western ones).” (Schipper, 2006)

The issue is both cultural and ideological, requiring individual, community, and large-scale social change. Disability and impairment have raised many concerns among scholars and the social model of disability only stops at understanding the definition of disability. Through a social model of disability, persons with disabilities are marginalized and are therefore burdened with severe hardships.

Mowat (2015) has said that marginalization relates to social exclusion that specifically arise from unequal opportunities and barriers to social participation exerted upon certain sections of the populations like persons with disabilities, women, refugees, gypsies and other minorities. The theory of marginalization denotes that exclusion of the particular sections of the communities is intentional, and they were being shunned actively by the rest of society. The intentional rejection of individuals has deeply affected them more when compared to incidental rejection. Hence, representation matters for marginalized communities, like persons with disabilities and their dominant representation, especially in media and animated films, plays an important role in reinforcing stereotypes directed towards these communities by the rest of society (Krentz & Sanchez, 2021).

In terms of animated films, Disney and Pixar are the two giant media productions which have produced some of the most successful and popular films. Pixar gained notable success after releasing Toy Story in 1995, while Disney has long gained momentum since its inception in the 1920s. These two production houses are the pillars of creating childhood dreams across the world and in recent years, their films have started incorporating the inclusion of persons of colour as the main characters and also challenges gender stereotypes. However, the representation of persons with disabilities in animated films is still limited and the study of their portrayal in these animated films is also found in minimum quantity (Giroux & Pollock, 2010, Holcomb & Dayton, 2022).

Objectives

1. To analyze the portrayal of persons with disabilities in animated films
2. To examine the effectiveness of visual representation of disability in animated films to break stereotypes

Methodology

This study is a qualitative study which uses thematic content analysis to study the representation of disability in animated films. Data for this study were collected through primary and secondary sources, and the case study method was also used. The scope of this study includes ten animated films with disabled characters, which were released by Disney, Pixar, and Warner Bros. Animation, which were all released between 1937 and 2021. These ten animated films were selected through purposeful sampling. The primary sources of data for this study include the selection, review, and analysis of all the ten animated films, while secondary sources of data include all the reviewed literature related to disability and the significance of their representation and portrayal in these films. This study also uses the case study method for in-depth analysis and investigation of how disability and persons with disabilities were being portrayed in all the ten animated films. The main criterion for the selection of these animated films was the presence of disabled characters in the films. These selected animated films include only Western animated films with English as the first language being used in the films, and this study excluded other foreign animated films. After the selection of the films was done, each film was being reviewed, and the scenes including disabled characters were particularly reviewed in-depth.

Findings

The first film analyzed was Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, which was released in the year 1937. The disabled characters were the seven dwarves, and dwarfism is one of the disabilities included under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act 2016. The second film analyzed was a 1953 film titled Peter Pan in which the main antagonist, Captain Hook, was an amputee. The third film analyzed for this study was Batman: The Animated Series released in 1992 where the main antagonist, Joker, is believed to have antisocial personality disorder and a serious mental illness, although his actual diagnosis is not portrayed in the film. The fourth film is a 1996 animated film called The Hunchback of Notre Dame in which, the main character named Quasimodo has a physical deformity. The fifth film, Toy Story 2, released in 1999, had two characters called Woody and Wheezy, both of which had broken parts in their bodies in some part

of the film. The sixth film, Shrek, released in 2001, had an amputee named Gingerbread Man. The seventh film, Finding Nemo, released in 2003, had its main character, Nemo, who had fin length discrepancy, equivalent to limb length discrepancy in a human world. The eight-film reviewed was Monsters Inc., released in 2003, in which the main character Mike had only one eye and a short stature. The ninth film, Fancy Nancy, released in 2020, had an autistic character named Shawn. The tenth film, Luca is a 2021 film in which one of the characters, Massimo Marcovaldo, is an amputee. From the study of the ten animated films, issues arise with regard to their portrayal and how they were represented in the films. Two issues arise from analyzing their portrayal in their respective themes, which are issues of outcast and misunderstanding and strength within their disability.

Issues of Outcast and Misunderstanding

The most common feature and representation among all the disabled characters in the ten animated films is the issue of outcast. The issue of being outcasted and misunderstood by all other characters in the films is a common feature, where all the characters were outcasted and misunderstood by their peers due to their disability and the weakness associated with their disability. From the period of 1937 up to the modern day 2021, this issue is still relevant and still included in all these films. In 1937, the seven dwarves were portrayed to live in a forest located far away from the rest of the kingdom. They were portrayed to be engaged in an undesirable job of mining, which is a job already considered to be difficult even for normal abled persons. Even after Snow White lived with them, she treated and looked after them as small children instead of treating them as adults. This showed the misunderstandings often faced by persons with dwarfism. Captain Hook's representation in the animated film of Peter Pan is rather dark as he was portrayed as a villain. He was segregated from the rest of society and lived an isolated life along with his henchmen. He was the main antagonist of the main character and portrayed largely as someone who was evil. His evil deeds and his evil desires, along with his hideous figure added by the hook in place of his lost hand, led him to be outcast from the rest of the other people and feared by all. Joker was also portrayed as a character with evil desires, and his disturbing mental conditions led him to be feared by all and led him to be an outcast. His actual mental disability is not accurately portrayed, but his uncontrollable laughter seemed to be based on a medical condition known as pseudobulbar affect (PBA), which makes him misfit among others. Quasimodo, with his hideous and deformed figure, led him to be outcasted from all other characters in the movie. He was hiding away for fear of

being labelled as a monster by the public. He was even locked away in a tower by his caretaker for fear of being seen by the public who said,

“...I will look upon you without fear. How can I protect you, boy, unless you always stay in here, away in here...”

His disability was even compared by his caretaker as a crime by saying,

“...you are deformed and you are ugly and these are crimes for which the world shows little pity...”

In Toy Story 2, Woody and Wheezy did not originally have any disability, but having their parts broken placed them in the category of disabled characters. After their body parts were broken, it makes them become undesirable to be played with by children and their owner even refused to play with them after discovering their broken parts. The owner of Andy, upon seeing his broken arm, had said,

“Oh, I forgot, you’re broken. I don’t want to play with you anymore.”

They were both put away after having broken parts and were both outcasted. Wheezy even told Woody that there was no point in having their broken parts fixed because there was no escaping the inevitable, which was being sold off at a yard sale after being broken, which is equivalent to disability in the real world.

Gingerbread Man from Shrek was given only a limited screen time, and after having his legs broken by the antagonist in the movie, he was mocked and teased relentlessly by the antagonist who said,

“...run, run, run, as fast as you can...”

In one part of the clip, the Gingerbread Man was even labelled as a “monster” by the evil antagonist. He received less screen time after his legs were broken. In Finding Nemo, Nemo was overprotected by his father because of his medical conditions. He was weaker than the others and did not have many friends. On the first day of his school, his classmates had mocked him by saying,

“...what’s wrong with his fin? He looks funny!”

His disability worried his father and even when Nemo tried to swim out on his own, he faced a heated argument with his father which led him to be scolded harshly by his father by saying,

“...you think you can do this, Nemo, but you just can’t Nemo!”

This statement alone indicates how the other characters viewed Nemo’s disability as strange and something which is unusual. In Monsters Inc., Mike was always outcasted by his peers and nobody

wanted to interact with him. He was alone for the most part of his childhood and had no actual friends growing up. His uniqueness repelled others and was made fun of. When the time came to choose partners for their school trip, he was left alone without any partners, leading to his teacher pairing him with him and saying,

“...well Michael, it looks like it’s you and me again...”

Even on the day of the final Scare Competition, his main rival mocked his ability to win the contest by saying,

“Don’t take the loss too hard, you never belong here anyway.”

The short-animated film called Fancy Nancy had a character named Shawn who had autism spectrum disorder. He had a limited screen time, and even in his limited screen time, he was portrayed as having no real friends and was left off to be alone. He was also represented as someone who liked to be left alone and did not like the company of others. His disability was not understood by the other characters. His brother had to interfere and exclaimed that his brother,

“...does things differently...”

Massimo Marcovaldo from Luca was only having one arm and spoke little, which intimidated others to have a formal connection and communication with him. This led many characters in the movie to fear him and misunderstand him to a great extent.

Hence, the issues of outcast and misunderstandings are common features in all the ten animated movies. As stated by the social model of disability, all the characters with disabilities were not disabled by their physical inabilities but were all disabled by the nature of society towards them. They were initially considered as weak and weird, which led other characters to misunderstand them, which in turn led them to be in a state of “outcast.” Lack of awareness with regard to disability is what restricts the full capabilities of persons with disabilities in the real world, and similarly, the lack of awareness with regard to the issue of disability among the characters in these animated films is what propels the characters with disabilities to be outcasted by their peers.

Strength within their disability

Even though most of the films portrayed disability in a negative light, there arose strength from the disabled characters, which were all shown towards the end of the respective films. When the evil queen, in disguise as an old woman, killed Snow White, the seven dwarves gathered their strength and courage and chased the old woman to seek revenge. Their unwavering courage led to the death of the evil queen, and even after, they did not stop caring for Snow White by putting her

corpse inside a glass coffin and staying by her side till her recovery from death. Captain Hook also showed immense courage and strength, even if for the dark side, by fighting everyone who went against his way. His amputee did not hide away his evil desires but he made the best use of the hook placed in his lost hand by fighting off against his enemies, particularly Peter Pan. Joker showed incredible resilience against the policy makers and even Batman himself after being defeated and caught by them countless times. His strength and resilience, even though it was directed towards evil, seemed incredible coming from someone with frail mental conditions.

Quasimodo was laughed at by the general public when they saw his deformed figure, but in spite of the hatred and mockery directed towards him, he still gathered his strength and courage to save one of the main characters, Esmerelda, from being killed by the clutches of evil. He did not let himself succumb to his disability. His courage and timely actions saved the lady from being murdered and he was hailed as a hero towards the end of the movie.

In the scenes of Toy Story 2, Woody was the one who saved his friends, Jessie and Bullseye, towards the end of the movie, even though he himself faced certain turmoil towards the beginning of the movie. Gingerbread Man from Shrek also displayed his incredible spirit even though he had a limited screen time. He became the best supporter for his friends even while using his ginger cane to assist his disability. Nemo, despite having a disability feature, did not lose hope in his attempt to escape from the aquarium where he was being held captive by a dentist. Through his incredible courage, he managed to block the filter of the aquarium, which played an incredible role in helping him escape back into the ocean.

Mike from Monsters Inc. also showed incredible leadership in transforming his friends into a better version of themselves, which eventually led them to win the prestigious scare competition of their university. Shawn from Fancy Nancy also had a limited screen time, but the character played an important role in educating the public about the awareness of autism spectrum disorder. Massimo Marcovaldo, even though he was an amputee, was patient and transformed Alberto into a better version by teaching him certain skills and forgiving his mistakes.

So, the strength witnessed among the characters with disabilities did not directly equal physical strength but leaned more towards mental strength. They are not the best physically built characters, but they all displayed immovable courage within them. Their courage and endurance set a great example not only to the other characters but even for the viewers who watched the movies from the comfort of their own houses. These characters showed that the physical disability is not what

stopped them from pursuing their dreams, but rather, the attitude and roadblock from the society are what kill their aspirations. However, the strength they gathered from their inner-self can push them forward and help them to contribute in uplifting others around them.

Discussion

In analyzing the portrayal of disabled characters in the ten animated films, all the disabled characters faced the issue of “outcast” and “misunderstanding” in all their respective films, wherein towards the beginning of the film, they were misunderstood and were mostly left alone. Their impairments were rejected by the society and their peers and were initially not included in most of the events happening around them. In this manner, their disabilities were further increased as has been stated under the social model of disability. Their disability is generated by the society, which restricts their ability and functions and creates an unjust environment for them.

The relevance of marginalization theory towards this study is also observed, wherein the disabled characters in the animated films did not have equal opportunities with the rest of the society, and they have all faced tremendous barriers in freely participating in several social activities. As per the theory, the marginalization exerted towards the disabled characters was intentional, as has been observed when all the students refused to pair up with Mike on their school trip in Monsters Inc. As stated by Krentz & Sanchez (2021) in their study, representation matters for marginalized communities like persons with disabilities, as the representation of the hardships faced by them through these animated films shows in details the real-life struggles and hardships faced by them and the importance of providing safe space for them to improve their skills. Their representation in these animated films also showed that they were more than what society labelled them. They were also just as talented and strong but were differently abled and skilled in different ways. This calls for society to place trust in them instead of intentionally rejecting them merely because of their disability. The films showed that they were also capable of following their dreams and were also capable of displaying great leadership skills, and transformed others around them in a positive way. Hence, this representation reinforces stereotypes directed against persons with disabilities and shattered the limitations often directed towards their path.

Limitations and Scope for future research

This study has only explored ten animated films, which have all initially portrayed disability as something negative in the first half of their movies. However, the strength that lies within the characters with disabilities was also all represented in these animated films, and even though the

plot and storyline were all different, the issue of outcast, misunderstanding, and strength within disability were all present in these films. Disability is an evolving concept and there are many other stories and cinematic plots with regard to films with disabled characters that can be studied. The study also includes only English films and excludes foreign films with non-English languages, and so, the study did not focus on how disability is being portrayed in foreign animated films. Finally, this study did not include the technical aspect of film review, such as the uses of screen close-up to increase or decrease the sympathy of the disabled characters and the uses of dramatic music to further increase the struggles and hardships faced by disabled characters.

The limitations left a wide room for future research towards the portrayal of disability and disabled characters so as to have a deeper analysis in the topic. Future research can also study not only animated films but real-life action films with disabled characters to study about their representation and portrayal in these movies. Comparative analysis can also be conducted between older films with newer release movies to study how much disability has evolved in recent years.

Conclusion

This study moved beyond the limitations of stereotypes directed towards persons with disabilities and sow the seeds of sympathy and empathy among the viewers who were typically children and young adults. The study has celebrated the strength and intelligence beyond disabilities and captured the resilience and courage that blossom in the disabled characters. These animated films have great power and platforms to reflect and shape reality through the plots and characters in their respective films. The viewers who saw these films can thus have a sense of understanding of the term “disability” and also inculcate a sense of understanding of the hardships associated with their disabilities. Thus, this representation and portrayal of disability in animated films can create a society that empathizes and cherishes all persons with disabilities in society.

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