Present, Perceived as Old, but Not Memorable: Analysis and Perceptions of Older Characters in Animated Disney Films

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Abstract

Disney movies reach a large audience, so understanding their portrayal of older adults, as well as how these portrayals influence audience perceptions is important. Based on ethnolinguistic vitality and cultivation theories, this mixed-method approach supports previous findings that older adults are less visible in the media. A content analysis of older adult characters inanimated Disney movies shows that they exist, lack diversity, and play minor roles in the films. Focus group participants did not remember them without prompting and often used stereotypical cues to identify these characters as older. Sometimes participants compared them to actual older adults with whom they have contact and varied in how influential they believed these portrayals were. Discussed in terms of ethnolinguistic vitality theory and cultivation theory, the mixed-method approach distinguishes between scholarly and lay interpretation of movie messages.

Keywords: Disney movies, Older adult characters, Audience perception, Ethnolinguistic vitality theory, Cultivation theory

There has been a lot of research on the portrayal of older adults in the media, and most of this research reports that older adults are underrepresented and/or portrayed stereotypically (e.g., Harwood & Anderson, 2002; Robinson & Anderson, 2006; Robinson, Callister, & Magoffin, 2009; Robinson & Skill, 1995). Much research has also been done examining messages and/or characters within Disney movies (e.g., Lauzen & Dozier, 2005; Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, & Taylor, 2004), and at least one study has examined older characters in Disney movies (Robinson, Callister, Magoffin, & Moore, 2007). Very little research has focused on audience response to these portrayals. This study not only identified and examined the demographics of older adult characters in twenty animated Disney animated films but also explored young adult responses to these portrayals through focus groups. Grounded in ethnolinguistic vitality theory and cultivation theory, this study extends the current literature on the mediated portrayals of older adults with a mixed method approach.

1. Theoretical Background

Two theoretical frameworks guide this project: ethnolinguistic vitality theory and cultivation theory. Ethnolinguistic vitality theory was introduced by Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor (1977) and initially "provided a conceptual tool to analyze the sociostructual variables affecting the strength of ethnolinguistic communities within intergroup settings" (Harwood, Giles, & Bourhis, 1994, p. 167).More recent research has used the theory to examine any group's strength in society. This strength is often measured by demographic representation, institutional support, and the group's status. Harwood and Anderson (2002) state that "a key element of institutional support is a group's representation in the media" (p. 82).

Being the first scholars to link this theory to content analytic work, Harwood and Anderson argue that media content is "an indicator of group strength and influence" (p. 83). Identifying the presence and demographic features of older adult characters in Disney animated movies provides an additional measure of this group's vitality. While content analysis may point to a level of institutional support, focus groups may further reveal information about a group's strength based on audience response or reaction to the portrayal of that group.If the representation of older adults in animated Disney movies points to a certain level of vitality, then cultivation theory can help us understand whether viewers perceive this vitality.

Although cultivation is often associated with television, it makes sense to use it when looking at animated Disney movies since audience members have probably seen many of these movies numerous times and may easily infer that what they see on the screen is a representation of the real world. In fact, cultivation theory is often employed as a rationale for content analysis precisely for this reason - that the status of a group is often distorted by underrepresentation in the media (Signorielli, 2004). Determining the content of various media can help identify underlying messages. When older adults are underrepresented or negatively portrayed, viewers may have a distorted view of reality. According to Jarrott and McCann (2013), "cultivation theory posits (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002) that more media contact leads to a greater likelihood of accepting the images or ideas portrayed by the media" (p. 294). Furthermore, Robinson, et al. (2009) argued "given the theoretical foundation that the media may ultimately shape the attitudes and beliefs of adolescents, it is important to study the media that teens consume" (p. 691). Not only is it important to study the media content, but it is also an important test of cultivation theory to determine young adults' memories of and reactions to that media. Combining content analysis with focus groups becomes an essential design for furthering our understanding of the media's influence in determining a group's vitality and the media's role in cultivating distorted views of older adults.

Content analysis research into the portrayals of older adult characters provides detailed information about the presence/absence of older characters as well as their characteristics; these studies do not, however, provide any insight into what audiences perceive or remember about these characters and whether or not those perceptions influence people's attitudes toward older adults or the aging process. This study, therefore, seeks to examine the portrayals of older characters as well as the perceptions of audience members. Specifically, the first study explores the portrayal of older characters in twenty randomly selected Disney animated movies, and then, a second study explores young adult perceptions and memories of older characters in Disney animated movies. To cover such territory, it is necessary to discuss research on the portrayal of older adults/characters and then research on Disney movies in particular.

1.1 Portrayals of Older Adults

Portrayals of older adults have been examined in a wide variety of genres, including prime time network programs (Harwood & Anderson, 2002; Signorielli, 2004), commercials (e.g., Miller, Leyell, & Mazachek, 2004; Roy & Harwood, 1997), magazines (Lumme-Sandt, 2011), Saturday morning television (Bishop & Krause, 1984), children's animated television shows (Robinson & Anderson, 2006), teen movies (Robinson, et al., 2009), and even Disney animated movies (Robinson, et al., 2007; Towbin, et al., 2004). The studies differ only slightly in their findings. First, older adults are underrepresented, in general, and even more so, when age intersects with gender and race. That is, older adults, especially older women and older minorities, exist much less frequently in mediated environments than in reality. Second, when older adults are present, they typically play minor roles. Finally, there are mixed results regarding how positive or negative the overall portrayals of older adults are.

Most portrayal research concludes that older adults are underrepresented in the media. Signorielli (2004) found that older adults made up less than 3% of all characters on prime time television. She examined the changes over time, concluding that the number of characters according to social age did not vary much across the 10-year span. Robinson and Anderson (2006) identified 107 older characters in animated television shows, accounting for 8% of the total number of characters. Harwood and Anderson (2002) found that those over age 65 were one of the "most strikingly underrepresented age groups" (p. 88) on prime-time television, and Robinson, et al. (2009) found only 7% of the characters in teen movies were coded as old. When comparing age with race and gender, most scholars find even more discrepancies between media and reality. Signorielli found that "television typically casts women and minority characters as younger than men and whites" (p. 289-290). Interestingly, more females (than males) estimated to be between 50 and 64 years of age were also categorized as "elderly."

This suggests women are perceived to be older, even when they are not older, than men. Robinson, et al. (2009) found older women and older minorities to be underrepresented in teen movies; 39% of older characters were female, and 84% were Caucasian. Harwood and Anderson (2002), on the other hand, did not find significant differences for race across age groups or for gender at the oldest age categories, but they also acknowledged the small sample sizes for these groups, making differences "difficult to detect" (p. 89).

Regardless of media type, older adults typically play minor or peripheral roles. In Signorielli's conclusion, she argues, "the message of aging on prime-time television is one that celebrates youth while relegating the elderly to a smaller percentage of available roles" (p. 295). She found especially that women grow older and become less important to the storyline. In teen movies, only 13% of older characters played major roles and 55% were coded as having incidental roles (Robinson, et al., 2009). In another analysis of Disney movies, Robinson, et al. (2007) found that 61% of older characters played minor roles. When older characters did play primary roles, males were mentors, rulers, and members of clergy, whereas "the only role dominated by older females (66.7%) was the role of villain" (p. 207). Robinson and Anderson (2006) found 68% of their older characters were in minor roles, and that equal percentages were depicted as grandparents and villains (13% each).Identifying villains has not been the only way to determine the quality of these portrayals of older characters. The purpose of the mediated message, however, influences the findings; that is, advertisements consistently reveal more positive portrayals of older characters than other forms of media (e.g., Miller, et al., 2004; Roy & Harwood, 1997; Williams, Ylanne, &Wadleigh, 2007). When older adults are not being used to sell products, behaviors, or lifestyles, the portrayals become less positive in their visual and textual descriptions. Top descriptors of older characters found in animated television included intelligent, angry, happy, and senile/crazy (Robinson & Anderson, 2006). Lauzen and Dozier (2005) found older characters less likely to have goals than younger characters. In a complex analysis, Robinson, et al. (2009) found that the portrayal of older adults in teen movies varied by their role.

For example, older characters in major or minor roles were "more likely to have teeth, to be portrayed as intelligent, loving, or eccentric" (p. 696) and to exhibit characteristics associated with positive stereotypes (e.g., golden ager, John Wayne conservative, or perfect grandparent; see Hummert, Garstka, Shaner, &Strahm, 1994). Furthermore, those in incidental roles were "slightly more likely to be portrayed as neutral or negative" (p. 696). Even so, the most common traits assigned to older characters, regardless of role played, included angry/grumpy/stern (35% of all older characters), friendly (25%), intelligent/wise (22%), loving/caring (19%), eccentric (14%), and happy/content (10%). Essentially, the portrayals of older characters vary, and these variations may have differential impacts on audiences. It is one thing for researchers to identify the messages of these portrayals but quite another for researchers to explore what messages audiences actually receive and remember. Signorielli (2004) also studied jobs for the various characters. She cites "data from the National Council on Aging's "Myth and Reality of Aging" survey ... reported in 1980... those who watch more television, particularly younger respondents, were more likely to believe that the elderly are a vanishing breed and that people, especially women, become old earlier in life" (p. 297). From ethnolinguistic vitality theory and cultivation theory perspectives, these under representations may have a huge impact on their audiences; the lack of older adult characters in the media perpetuates a lower status and even invisibility for older adults in reality.

1.2 Portrayals in Disney

"Disney films have been an integral part of United States culture for 70 years, with scores of animated movies aimed specifically at young children. The Disney animated classics are well known to millions of children across the world" (Robinson, et al., 2007, p. 203). Disney is more than just a producer of movies, however, and people flock to their products because they trust the family focus of the company (Ryan &Hoerrner, 2004). Although the public thinks they know what they are getting when they buy a Disney product or attend a Disney movie, many scholars are concerned about the content of these movies targeting children. Studies have examined intimate partner violence (Olson, 2013), use of alcohol and tobacco (Ryan &Hoerrner, 2004; Thompson &Yokoto, 2001), gender stereotypes (Dundes, 2001; Hoerrner, 1996), and the intersection of gender and race stereotypes (Lacroix, 2004). Results of these studies suggest that Disney might not have the wholesome content its reputation suggests. For example, Ryan and Hoerrner (2004) found 381 incidents of substance use with "virtually no antiuse messages" (p. 261). Lacroix argued it was disturbing to find "the continued use of sexual stereotypes of women of color to exoticize female characters" (p. 227). Although many studies have examined problematic portrayals in relation to these variables, only two studies have examined the portrayal of age in detail (Robinson, et al., 2007; Towbin, et al., 2004).

Considering how often Disney movies are viewed by individuals, these movies deserve more scholarly attention. Towbin, et al., conducted a qualitative analysis of 26 Disney animated movies to examine gender, age, race, and sexual orientation. Consistent with the research cited earlier, they found gender was portrayed stereotypically, that most characters were white, and that there were no same sex couples. Age was limited in its number of portrayals, but they found that six movies portrayed older adults as forgetful and stupid, four movies portrayed older adults as crotchety, grumpy, and mean, and that two other movies portrayed older adults as ugly and mean.

Only three movies contained positive portrayals of older adults providing wisdom and guidance to other characters. Basically, negative portrayals of age dominated their findings, and they argued for the need to conduct focus groups to determine what messages children may be receiving. Robinson and colleagues (2007) identified and described older characters in 34 Disney animated films. Ninety-three characters aged 55 and over were found, and the average number of older adults per film increased over the decades from one in the 1940s to 3.8 in the current decade. The majority of older characters were human (74.2%), male (67%), Caucasian (83%), and in minor roles (61%). When examining personality features, 25% of the characters were identified as friendly, 25% as angry/grumpy/stern, and 22% as loving. Physically, 80% were moderate looking or attractive, 38.7% as overweight or obese, 73% in good health, 89% as physically active, and 93% having gray or white hair. Finally, when considering an overall portrayal, 58% were considered to be positive. Only older characters were examined by Robinson, et al. (2007); thus, no comparisons across age groups are possible. Nor can we determine how aware audiences are of these portrayals or messages about what older characters are like. The following two studies seek to address limitations of past research by examining the portrayals of older adult characters and the audience response to older adult characters in Disney movies.

2. Study 1

The first study focused on the portrayals of older adult characters in animated Disney movies. Based on the aforementioned literature, two hypotheses are proposed for the first study. First, there will be fewer older character than younger characters in Disney's animated films, and second, older characters in Disney's animated films will be predominately male, white, and play minor roles in the movies. Because past research has focused on one age group, this study seeks to compare the demographic breakdown of characters across age groups. This requires addressing the following research question: How will the demographic profile (ie, sex, being type, race, role) of younger characters compare to the demographic profile of older characters?

2.1 Sample

The films selected for this study were randomly chosen from the Disney Canon of Animated Movies as noted on Wikipedia.org. To be part of the population, the film had to be completely animated (no live-action sequences), non-Pixar, released into theaters, and have a running time of over an hour. The twenty movies randomly selected were: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Pinocchio* (1940), *Dumbo* (1941), *Cinderella* (1950), *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1961), *The Sword and the Stone* (1963), *The Jungle Book* (1967), *The Aristocats* (1970), *Robin Hood* (1973), *The Fox and the Hound* (1981), *The Great Mouse Detective* (1986), *Oliver & Company* (1988), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Tarzan* (1999), *The Emperor's New Groove* (2000), *Home on the Range* (2004), and *Chicken Little* (2005).

2.2 Coding Procedures

Coders first identified speaking characters; to be considered a speaking character, one had to speak more than two words as an individual. Characters who only spoke as part of a crowd were not included. This resulted in 460 total speaking characters. Next, coders assessed each speaking character for his/her age group, sex, race, role in the film, and being type. Age groups included four categories, similar to those used by Signorielli (2004): child/adolescent (any character who spoke or behaved as if he/she was 19 years old or younger); young adult (any character who spoke or behaved as if he/she was between 20-29 years old); mature adult (any character who spoke or behaved as though he/she was between 30-49 years old); and older adult (any character who spoke or behaved as if he/she was 50 years old or older). The sex variable included the character being male, female, or unknown. Categories for race mimicked U.S. Census categories and included European (white), Asian, African (black), Hispanic/Latino, Native American, and unknown.

Role in the film involved determining how important characters were to the plot of the movie and included four categories: (a)first leads were defined as a character who played a prominent role in the movie, had an active part in the storyline, and had lots of lines; (b)second leads were defined as integral to the plot, but on the screen less than the first leads; (c)supporting characters could have names, were helpful with plot development, but not directly in the middle of the main plot; and (d)minor characters had only a few lines and may have only been present in one or two scenes. Being type was the most complicated demographic to code. This variable began as a simple measure of whether the characters were human, animals, or inanimate objects, but as the coding training progressed, this category quickly expanded. Due to the nature of animated films, characters change form frequently; therefore, to keep the categories mutually exclusive and exhaustive, coders utilized eight categories for being type. The first four categories refer to characters who stayed the same throughout the movie, and these included: human; humanlike (looks like a person but has special power, such as fairies); animal; non-animal but living thing (an inanimate object brought to life, such as a candlestick or a doorknob). The second four categories combine the original categories for characters who changed form during the movies: human + humanlike, human + animal, human + non animal but living thing, and other.

Coders were trained using animated Disney movies not selected for this sample. Two coders overlapped on 14% of the sample (66 speaking characters) to determine the reliability of these demographic categories. All intercoder reliabilities met the required levels for both percentage agreement and Scott's Pi: age group (90.9% agreement, Scott's Pi = .87), sex (100% agreement, Scott's Pi = 1), race (84.8% agreement, Scott's Pi = .52), role in the film (84.8% agreement, Scott's Pi = .77), and being type (81.8% agreement, Scott's Pi = .59). Since reliabilities exceeded the minimum standard identified by Holsti (1969), each coder proceeded to code half the movies in the sample.

2.3 Study 1 Results

The first hypothesis predicted that there would be fewer older, than younger, characters in Disney's animated movies. To test this hypothesis, the age variable was recorded so that any character coded as child/adolescent, young adult, or mature adult became part of the younger category. The characters coded as older adult became part of the older category. When comparing the younger and older categories, a chi square analysis found that there were significantly fewer older adults (n = 105) (χ (1) = 135.87, p< .000), thereby supporting the first hypothesis. The second hypothesis predicted that the older characters in Disney's animated films would be predominately male, white, and play minor roles in the movie. To test this hypothesis, only the 105 older adult characters were analyzed. The race variable was recorded so that characters coded as Indian, African, South East Asian, Latina(o), and Native American became part of the non-white category and those coded as European became the white category. The role category was recorded so that characters who were originally coded as first leads, second leads, and supporting characters became part of the non-minor role category and those coded as playing a minor role became the minor role category. The sex variable was left as a dichotomous variable – male or female. Three chi square analyses were conducted to test each part of the hypothesis. The hypothesis was partially supported. The analysis found that there were significantly more white characters in the older adult category (n = 64) (χ (1) = 5.038, p< .025) and there were significantly more males in this category (n = 69) (χ (1) = 10.37, p< .001). There was no significant difference in the type of role the older adults played in the films (χ (1) = 2.14, p = .143, n.s.)

Table 1 Demographic Profile of Younger Characters versus Older Characters

Demographic Characteristic		Younger Characters(n=350)	Older Characters(n=105)
Sex	Male	72%	65.7%
	Female	27%	34.3%
	Unknown	1%	--
Race	*European (White)	32%	61%
	Asian	1.1%	--
	African (Black)	.3%	1%
	Hispanic/Latino	.3%	--
	Native American	2.0%	2%
	*Unknown	64.5%	36%
Role	First Lead	12.6%	12.4%
	*Second Lead	10.6%	19%
	Supporting	34.3%	25.7%
	Minor	42.5%	42.9%
Being Type	*Human	36%	59%
	Humanlike	2.3%	4.8%
	*Animal	55%	23.8%
	*Non-animal/Living	2.6%	9.5%
	Human + Animal	1.4%	1%
	Human + Non-animal/Living	1.7%	1.9%
	Unknown	.6%	--

* denotes statistically significantly different ratio by age group, $p<.05$

The first research question sought to compare the demographic profile for younger speaking characters with the demographic profile of all older characters. Table 1 displays these results, and there is a very similar pattern for younger characters compared with older characters. The majority of all characters are male, white, and in minor roles. Statistically significant age differences arise, however, in three of these demographic categories. First,there are significantly higher ratios for older characters being white, second leads, human, non-animal but living. Furthermore, older characters had significantly lower ratios for having unknown race and for being animals. Together, these results suggest that less diversity is available to older characters than to younger characters; they are more likely to be white humans and less likely to be animals. On the other hand, they are more likely to be non-animal but living. Older characters are apparently easier to categorize racially than younger characters.

2.4 Study 1 Conclusions

Older adult characters are definitely a minority of the characters found in Disney movies, as well as in other media portrayals (Robinson & Anderson, 2006; Robinson, et al., 2009; Robinson et al., 2007; Signorielli, 2004). This study, however, did find that 22.8% of speaking characters were older adults, a much higher percentage than the 3-7% found in many other studies (mostly examining television). One explanation is that scholars have employed various measures of age in this portrayal research. Chronological ages for "older" have varied from 65 years and older (Harwood & Anderson, 2002) to 60 years of age and older (Lauzen & Dozier, 2005) to 55 years of age and older (Robinson, et al., 2009). Other scholars have determined chronological age with the presence of a variety of characteristics, such as "(1) appearance of retirement, (2) extensive gray hair, (3) wrinkles of the skin, (4) extensive loss of hair or balding, (5) cracking voice, (6) use of an aid such as a cane or wheelchair, (7) the parent of a son or daughter who is middle-aged or older, and (8) evidence of grandchildren or great-grandchildren" (Robinson, et al., 2007, p. 205).Most of the older characters in this study were white males in minor roles, another finding similar to Robinson, et al. (2007); however, an important difference in the two studies emerges from the role of the character. This study found older characters more likely to be second leads than younger characters, and this is an important indication of the group's strength or vitality in these movies. Specifically, although older characters are not main characters, they are still integral to the plot and on the screen a lot (i.e., high visibility). The race and being type results also suggest less diversity may be available to older characters; they are more likely to be white (and more easily identified as such), human, and less likely to be animals. But being type may offer some diversity in that older characters were more likely to be non-animal but living things.

This may be an interesting way animated movies add diversity to character demographics, but this could also be a limitation of the sample. Particular movies, such as *Alice in Wonderland*, may have impacted these results; a larger study would determine what being types are most typically found in all of Disney's animated movies (a variable not included by Robinson, et al., 2007).These trends have been found in other research examining the portrayals of older adults, finding more older, white male characters than older female characters or older minority characters (Harwood & Anderson, 2002; Robinson, et al., 2009; Signorielli, 2004). Since there may be older characters in Disney movies than in other media, it may be even more critical to discover what viewers experience when watching these movies. A second study sought to determine the vitality of the older age group by seeking audience input.

3. Study 2

A major limitation of all content analytical research is that the results can say nothing about the audience reaction to the content. The focus is on the message itself rather than its impact. Towbin, et al. (2004) recommended focus groups with children to determine what messages audiences receive from Disney movies. This second study applied this recommendation to young adults in order to determine how audiences respond to Disney animated movies. Talking to audiences of Disney movies enables direct links to ethnolinguistic vitality theory and cultivation theory. For example, older adults are present in these films but to what extent then are they memorable? Ethnolinguistic vitality theory suggests a group's status is partially based on institutional support, or as Harwood and Anderson (2002) argue, presence in the media. Do audiences recognize their presence? Since older characters were more likely to play an integral role in the plot of these movies, they should also then be memorable to the audience.

In this way, focus group data could corroborate results from the content analysis. Therefore, the second study addresses two research questions. First, what Disney animated movies and characters do young adults remember the most and why? Second, can young adults recognize older adult characters provided? Much research has been conducted examining the portrayals of older adults in the media, but with such diversity in how age is measured (see earlier discussion), it may be difficult to determine who the older characters really are, or more importantly, who audiences perceive as being older. Despite the variation of cues used by scholars to determine the ages of media characters, scholars have not studied what cues audiences use to determine ages of characters. A third research question addressed by this study: How do young adult audiences determine if a character is old or young? Cultivation theory suggests that media portrayals influence audience's views of reality and that those views may be distorted by the quantity and quality of the portrayals found in the media. Audiences may not be aware of this long-term influence, but in a time of such media saturation, it becomes important to engage audiences critically. This study sought to determine audience members' perspective on the quality of these portrayals and their potential influence. Specifically, how realistic and influential do young adult audiences believe Disney's portrayals of older characters are?

3.1 Participants and Procedures

Three focus groups addressed these research questions. Two of these focus groups included college students (N=8 and N=11 for 19 students total); the students were recruited from a basic communication course and included 11 females and eight males. For racial/ethnic background, 10 were white, six African American, one Asian, and one Unidentified. The third focus group included nine high school students: two Hispanic and the rest were white; five females and four males. All were 17 years of age or under, thus requiring their assent and parental consent to participate. Once consent was obtained, the first author proceeded to ask general questions about animated Disney movies, the characters in these movies (who they remember and why), and then questions about four groups of older characters in particular. To discuss these older characters, the researcher presented a large image of the character(s), and these included: (a) Maleficent (the evil antagonist in *Sleeping Beauty*); (b) Flora, Fauna, and Merry weather, (the good fairies in *Sleeping Beauty*); (c) Maurice (Belle's father in *Beauty and the Beast*); and (d) the dwarfs (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*).

These particular characters were selected based on the previous content analysis, as they were considered "older" and included good, evil, and neutral characters with a variety of physical characteristics. Each character or group of characters was presented one at a time followed by questions, such as "Does anyone know these people? Their names?

What movie were they in? What do you remember about them in that movie? Do you think they are old? Why or why not?" The researcher paused and probed with additional questions as necessary. All conversations were audio-recorded and later transcribed for detailed analysis.

3.2 Study 2 Results

3.2.1 RQ1: Memorable Movies and Characters.

Participants in all three focus groups identified many of the same memorable movies, and these movies included some of the original Disney movies (e.g., *Cinderella*, 1950, and *Lady and the Tramp*, 1955) as well as more recent movies (*The Little Mermaid*, 1989, *Aladdin*, 1992, and *The Lion King*, 1994). Additional movies were mentioned in two of the three focus groups: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *The Fox and the Hound* (1981), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), and *Mulan* (1998).Participants explained these movies were memorable because of connections they made with the characters, the music, and the number of times they have seen the movies. For example, one participant said she "liked Lady and the Tramp because I had a cocker spaniel" and another stated, "all the little girls want to be princesses." Others commented that the characters made them cry or gave them hope ("made me think there was a Prince Charming"). Participants also enjoyed the songs from Disney movies, especially the "songs from the ones in the 90s."

Another stated emphatically, "I like the music because it was pure gold." Finally, the participants found these movies memorable because they have seen them numerous times – themselves, with siblings, cousins, and other relatives. One participant said "[I] can't tell you how many times I saw them … over and over and over" and another mentioned "watching them a million times."Nonverbally, too, participants clearly indicated how much they agreed with these statements; they vigorously nodded, smiled, and laughed. Clearly, these movies are not seen once and forgotten; most participants enjoyed seeing the movies multiple times. When asked to identify Disney characters, the respondents mentioned a great number of different characters with very little overlap across the three focus groups.

Their character lists(e.g., dwarfs, Dumbo, Beast, Simba), however, did have similarities in that they focused on the main characters, not minor ones (even using names from movie titles such as Little Mermaid, Aladdin, Beast, Cinderella, and Mulan).Respondents included more male characters overall, though female participants mentioned princesses in general (i.e., not always mentioning specific princesses). The characters mentioned were almost exclusively young; the only older adult characters spontaneously discussed by participants included the dwarfs (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*), Cruella de Vil (*101 Dalmatians*), Sebastian (*The Little Mermaid*), and Maleficent (*Sleeping Beauty*).

3.2.2 RQs 2: Recognition of Older Characters.

As characters were shown to the participants, they eagerly raced to identify them and when there were disagreements, they enjoyed debating and discussing who the characters were. The dwarfs, of course, were the most easily recognized, though conversation quickly turned toward identifying the particular dwarfs by name. Every other character or character group presented was also fairly easily recognized but did have other possible identities. For example, the good fairies from *Sleeping Beauty* were confused with the Fairy Godmother from *Cinderella*, despite there being three instead of one. Maurice was confused with Gepetto, Pinocchio's father, and Maleficent was confused with Cruella de Vil (*101 Dalmatians*) and the Snow Queen (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*). Participants in all groups did reach accurate consensus on the identities of these characters.

3.2.2 RQ 3: Age Determination.

Participants did not reach consensus, however, on whether or not all of these characters were old. For each character, participants were asked if the character was young or old and how did they know. Their discussions revolved around age cues that were physical, stylistic, relational, and vocal. Physical age cues included body type, hair color, and facial features. The fairies were considered old because of their round figures and "heavy bust lines."According to one respondent, older characters are "thousands of years old and either they're really frail or they're really big." Another argued that "short and fat is visual of old people." Further support was found in the comment that Maurice was old because he was "not chiseled." Since Merry weather has brown hair, instead of gray, the participants suggested that she was definitely younger than the other two fairies but still old.

A similar conversation explained the ages for the dwarfs; Dopey was clearly younger because he was bald but has a smooth face. Doc was the declared the oldest because he wore reading glasses. All except Dopey have white hair (beards or eyebrows), baggie eyes, and/or jowls.

Participants discussed the lack of wrinkles as slightly confusing, but one participant claimed "[you] feel like they have wrinkles but can't see them, just something about them."Maurice was clearly old because of his physical characteristics (white hair, round figure) and because of a stylistic issue: his socks do not match. Many comments indicated the "way he's dressed" was indicative of being old, including that his clothes were ragged and that "all young men are usually well-dressed … he's just wearing shorts and vest, looks like a slob." The fairies wore their hair in buns which was also considered unfashionable, and therefore, old. Another feature participants used to determine if a character was old was the relationship between that character and others. The dwarfs, Maurice, and the fairies were nurturing toward younger women, spending much of their time taking care of Snow White, Belle, and Briar Rose; to the participants, this nurturing aspect made the age difference clear. These princesses were young, and their caregivers were old. Others agreed that the older characters were caring and compassionate. Furthermore, the relationships were emphasized by reactions when things go awry. Maurice was "stressed by his daughter being taken away" and the dwarfs cried when Snow White was poisoned. One participant wondered if Maleficent's decision to kill the princess was because she was not invited to the party, a relational slight. Relational actions were further supported by vocal tone as an age cue. According to one participant, the fairies sounded "motherly," and many other participants nodded in agreement. Another suggested that Maleficent's voice had a low pitch, indicating that she was older than other characters.

Maleficent's age caused the most debate in all three focus groups. Her body type was sleek and slim so it did not fit their idea of an older woman ("she does look young"). She has no gray hair and "her face is like not old, there are no wrinkles" which made another participant remark, "she had a bit of plastic surgery." So while arguing that she looked young, participants sought other reasons to suggest she was old. Specifically, instead of focusing on her as a nurturing older person, participants discussed her magical skill and suggested that her skill was much better than any younger character's skill might be. Also, one participant added, "nobody that young could have that much anger and resentment."Another argued that audiences "picture evil characters as older."

3.2.3 RQ4: Realism and Influence of Portrayals.

Participants were asked if they thought the older characters in Disney movies were similar to or different from real older adults and whether or not these portrayals influenced people's beliefs about older people. Diverse opinions emerged, and conversations got complicated as realism and influence became intertwined. Those who found the portrayals unrelated to reality seemed to argue they had no influence on audience beliefs, yet many argued they could "name someone who matches with every character" and thus debated whether the influence was on themselves or only on others. For those who claimed there was no influence, participants stated "characteristics are very exaggerated, might associate to people but not going to generalize to all old people" or that the features were "over-exaggerated - I don't connect them to real people" and an open acknowledgement, "it's animated, not real." Another participant argued specifically that "[I] don't think you're going to watch Maleficent and go, 'all the old people want to kill all the princesses!'"Other participants argued that there was an influence but differed on whether they were influenced personally. Some suggested "we watch at a young age and make decisions" about what it means to be old while another was a bit more hesitant by stating, "we might associate to [real] people." Other participants were very clear that these portrayals "could affect kids" or "small children," and although they had been watching these movies since they were small children, they were very clear that the influence was on other children. The reality of the characters was in their connection to people they knew in real life; for example, one participant said that "Maurice kinda reminds me of my grandfather," while others stated that more broadly that "fairy godmothers are like really nice grandmothers."Another participant pointed to the diversity of personality found in the seven dwarfs as an example of the diversity found in real older adults. Their personal experiences influenced how they interpreted the realism and the influence of these portrayals.

4. Discussion of Both Studies

Pairing the content analysis with the focus group results in a more rich understanding of these portrayals and how they are perceived by members of the audience. The content analysis provided basic demographic information about characters of all ages, and the focus groups provided details on how these portrayals are remembered and interpreted.

4.1 Present but Not Remembered

This content analysis, as well as the study by Robinson, et al. (2007) found a fairly large proportion of older adult characters: 22.8% here compared to other media studies finding less than 10% and often ranging between 1 and 3% (Harwood & Anderson, 2002; Robinson & Anderson, 2006; Signorielli, 2004). Despite this high proportion, participants in the focus groups rarely named any older character spontaneously. Older characters are not memorable for several reasons. First, most older characters are minor characters, and most characters named by participants were the main characters. In fact, those identified (before and after discussing images) corresponded with the demographic content analysis results. The characters named by participants were mostly male, human, and animals. This finding has implications for ethnolinguistic vitality theory because, despite institutional support or existence in the media, the relative status of older characters continues to make them invisible, unmemorable to young adult audiences. This is especially important when compared with the content analysis results regarding role; even though older characters were determined to be integral to the plot and on screen a lot, they are easily forgettable. Bishop and Krause (1984) stated "one way to symbolize the status of a social category is to portray it in trivial terms" (p. 93). Thus, older adult characters exist in Disney animated movies but still in seemingly trivial ways from the audience's perspective, thus perpetuating their lack of visibility. This type of representation, then, impacts the distorted view of reality explained by cultivation theory (Signorielli, 2004).

4.2 Lack of Diversity in Portrayals

There was one important distinction between these two studies; characters mentioned were more racially diverse than the coded sample. This may be related to the diverse nature of our focus group participants; audiences are more aware of characters more similar to themselves, even choosing to watch television shows based on social categories such as age (Harwood, 1997). Their discussion of characters from movies like *Aladdin*, *Mulan*, and *The Princess and the Frog* is a clear example of participants identifying with characters reflective of their own racial/ethnic backgrounds. The random sampling process employed for the content analysis study left out these particular movies. Still, the lack of diversity in older characters found in this study parallels that of many other studies of older adults.

Robinson and Anderson (2006) found that 75% of their older characters were white and "their only non-Caucasian characters were nonhuman" (p. 293). These results suggest clearly that older adults are not diverse on other demographics, a definite distortion from older adults in reality. This finding, however, supports other research on Disney movies, as these feature films are not known for their diversity and/or for their non-stereotypical portrayals of various racial/ethnic groups (Lacroix, 2004; Towbin, et al., 2004).

4.3 Corroboration of Age Cues

Content analyses employ various measures for age in these studies on the portrayals of older adults, and this study provided a first step in determining how young adult audiences determine ages of characters. Focus group discussions indicate that people use similar age cues to determine ages of mediated characters as they do in interpersonal contexts and in content analysis coding procedures. Specifically, there are very similar categories of age cues (e.g., physical, stylistic, relational, and vocal) though some of the descriptors within these categories are different. Physical cues of age have been studied extensively in interpersonal communication research (see Hummert, 1994), and several content analyses focus on these features to define older characters (Robinson, et al., 2007; Robinson, et al., 2009). Focus group participants acknowledged using gray/white hair and balding as age cues but also suggested that jowls and rounder body types were indicative of older adulthood. Rounder body types were found by Robinson, et al. (2007); in that study, 30% of older characters were deemed to be overweight. In contrast with Robinson, et al.'s (2007) finding that 73% of older characters had wrinkles, participants in this study argued that wrinkles were not visible yet "you had the feeling of wrinkles." The characters actually shown to participants lacked wrinkles, but the discussion suggests that once audiences decide a character is old, they assume wrinkles exist.The physical cues of age may cause more debate than the other cues for age. Specifically, stylistic and relational cues are documented in past research and supported by those in these focus groups. For example, Hummert (1994) includes stylistic features such as grooming and being fashionable in her model of Age Stereotypes in Interaction. These features are supported by the focus group participants in this study; being fashionable is not associated with older adults. Relational cues have been used by Robinson and colleagues (2006; 2007; 2009) to identify older adult characters, and these cues were also referenced by young adult participants in the second study presented here. Stylistic and relational cues appear to be stable cues for age.

Finally, vocal cues for age may also be stable or predictable. Robinson, et al. (2007) used "cracking voice" as one of their indicators that a character should be coded as older. Patronizing speech research discussed by Hummert (1994) also suggests there are certain vocal features associated with age, and Mulac and Giles (1996) found that participants could identify a person's age fairly successfully by only hearing the person's voice.

Participants in this study linked vocal tone to relationships (e.g., fairies sounding motherly) but also acknowledge the low pitch of Maleficent's voice.

4.4 Reality and Influence

The demographic profile in the content analysis does not fit the reality of the older adult population, and audiences vary in their beliefs about the reality and the influence of these portrayals. Many scholars studying the portrayals argue that older characters are easily identified because their features are exaggerated and not subtle (Bishop & Krause, 1984; Robinson, et al., 2007). Participants in the focus group verified that ages of characters could be determined even if some older characters seemed interchangeable. The majority of participants indicated not knowing too many older adults, and the lack of quality contact has been found to be connected to the types of stereotypes triggered in interactions (Hummert, 1984). In these situations, the mediated contact may become more influential (Donlon, Ashman, & Levy, 2005; Jarrot& McCann, 2013). Furthermore, participants suggested the portrayals may influence others, clearly connecting to the "third person phenomena" (Davison, 1983). This finding and others deserve further and more specific scholarly attention.

4.5 Limitations and Future Research

This study offers an excellent example of mixed methods research, but even so, it still has limitations. First, this study focused on the perceptions of young adult audience members. Having similar discussions across generations may provide greater understanding of a lifespan perspective. Disney animated features are watched repeatedly and with various family members, including grandparents. Intergenerational focus groups could provide a locale for an intervention similar to the one tested by Donlon et al., (2005). Second, this study did not compare the quality of the portrayals, as has been done in past research. Combining a content analysis of the positivity/negativity of the portrayal with the audience reaction would be an important comparison to make. This would further highlight any schisms between scholarly analysis and lay audience reception of messages.

Harwood and Anderson (2002) found more negative portrayals of older adults than young adults; do audiences perceive these messages, too? Third, and building on the second limitation, this analysis failed to code particular features of older adults. Past research has coded this information only for older adults (e.g., Robinson, et al., 2007), but future research should compare these features across age groups. This would enable a more thorough discussion of how particular features (whether physical, stylistic, relational or vocal) indicate age. This study is one of the few to combine content analysis and audience response. The strength of this project is determining the similarities and differences between scholarly and lay perspectives on these animated films. From an ethnolinguistic vitality theory perspective, the status of older adults remains unclear; while scholars find them present in these films, young adult audiences do not find them memorable. Scholars should continue to identify messages found in the portrayals of various social groups, and these messages should then be examined from the audience's perspective. Only by combining these approaches can scholars both advance the theoretical explanations for and the practical implications of mediated messages.

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