A Content Analysis: Gender Roles in Studio Ghibli Films

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ABSTRACT

Gender role portrayal in children's media, especially in animated films, have been studied considerably to understand its possible effects on children's perceptions of gender. Previous studies have shown that characters in these films are usually depicted in traditional and sometimes negative representations of gender roles. However, while Western children's animations have been frequently discussed, little research has been done on gender role portrayal in Studio Ghibli films, despite their popularity both in Japan and internationally. To address this gap in research, the current study analyzed the behaviors of male and female protagonists from five Studio Ghibli films (e.g., *Castle in the Sky, Spirited Away*). The study used a coded content analysis method first developed by England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek in a 2011 study on gender role portrayal in Disney princess movies. During the research process, the frequency of gendered characteristics exhibited by the male and female protagonists of each film was tracked and recorded. Results indicated that while male protagonists exhibited more traditionally masculine characteristics, female protagonists portrayed close to equal levels of masculine and feminine characteristics, suggesting that they were more androgynous than their male counterparts. Examination of the protagonists' most frequently exhibited characteristics as well as their rescuing actions also supported this conclusion. These findings add to the existing discussion on gender portrayal in children's media and to the limited research on Studio Ghibli films in hopes of providing the groundwork for future exploration.

Introduction

Animated movies appeal to audiences of all ages, but are especially popular among children for their relatively simple but engaging plots, and fantastical aspects that stimulate imagination (Bajgrowicz, 2020). They also have educational value, as animations targeting younger audiences often aim to impart moral lessons (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995). However, these cartoons and animations also contain elements that influence children's perception of gender roles. Children's development of gender identities, norms, and stereotypes are thought to be shaped by their interactions and observations, both in the real world and in mass media (Aley & Hahn, 2020, Hine et al., 2018, Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995). As such, scholars say that examining the content of children's media is essential to understanding the media's socializing influence (Aley & Hahn, 2020, p. 499). For this reason, many studies have investigated gender portrayal in children's media, including movies, books, advertising, television programs, and video games (Aley & Hahn, 2020, Harriger et al., 2021).

Literature Review

Gender Roles in Children's Media

Studies focusing on analyzing children's media have found that characters are usually depicted in traditional gender roles. These representations are sometimes negative; according to Hine et al. (2018), male characters are "centered

around traditionally masculine traits," while female characters are often "sexualized and subordinated" (p. 2). In general, gender roles in children's media tend to be stereotypical and limited (Hine et al., 2018; Aley & Hahn, 2020).

Thompson and Zerbinos (1995) examined how gender roles in animated cartoons have changed from the 1970s to the 1990s. After analyzing the characteristics and behaviors of characters in 41 different cartoons, Thompson and Zerbinos found that both male and female characters were stereotypically represented, with male characters given more prominence. However, a comparison of pre-1980s and post-1980 cartoons indicated a change towards a less stereotypical portrayal of gender roles, especially in female characters. After 1980, females were noted to be more "independent, assertive, intelligent" and "less emotional, tentative, affectionate, [and] sensitive" (p. 669).

A 2020 study by Aley and Hahn analyzed gender representation in posters for children's animations, including Disney princess films. Although movie posters may seem to provide a very limited glance of the film's contents, Aley and Hahn argue that they efficiently express the themes of the film, and the portrayal of main characters in these posters "can communicate a whole host of information to audiences about the gendered power dynamics" (pg. 500). At the conclusion of their study, they found that male characters were consistently more prevalent and powerful, while female characters were depicted as weaker and less important. These conclusions align with those of previous studies. Aley and Hahn also acknowledged the limitations of their report; only animated movie posters from American production studios had been analyzed, and other studios that release films in the United States, such as Studio Ghibli, had not been considered.

Harriger et al. (2021) then focused specifically on male representation and masculinity in children's animations. They studied the top 30 movies from IMDb's 2019 list of the top US grossing animations, using the codes for masculinity from previous studies, such as England et al. (2011). Results showed that the most common masculinity themes were "*violence*, *inspires fear*, and *risk-taking*" (p. 5), which indicates the presence of toxic masculinity themes and negative male gender roles in animated movies. However, positive traditional masculinity traits of *assertiveness* and *leadership* were also common themes. Harriger et al. concluded that there are both positive and negative portrayals of masculinity in children's animations, and recommended that future studies also examine female characters for gender stereotypes.

Gender Roles in Disney

Among children's media, Disney princess movies in particular have been a powerful influence on gendered messages and perception. Labeled the "Disney princess phenomenon," the negative social effects of Disney's gender portrayal on children, especially young girls, has been well-researched. The characters' physical appearances, behaviors, and importance to the plot, especially in the earlier films, pointed towards a stereotypical representation of gender roles. However, from the first princess movie *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937) to the most recent *Moana* (2016), gender role portrayal in the princess films have changed to follow new societal expectations. More recent studies suggest a progression towards egalitarian and neutral gender portrayals in children's media, including in Disney (Hine et al., 2018). Despite these advancements, however, negative stereotypes persist, as evidenced by Streiff and Dundes's (2017a, 2017b) and Primo's (2018)'s examinations of individual Disney films.

England et al. (2011) investigated nine princess films, starting from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937) to *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). They found that while portrayals have become more egalitarian over the films, strongly gendered messages in the resolutions of the movies, such as climatic rescues and the classic happily-ever-after, point towards a more traditional view of gender roles. The study also revealed that while princesses adopted more masculine traits over the films, princes changed less in characterization and were androgynous throughout. Hine et al. (2018) conducted a later study, similar in content, analysis, and method, which examined five Disney films released from 2009 to 2016. It was concluded that in more recent films, princesses have become more androgynous in characterization, more instrumental in solving problems, and no longer confined to traditional romantic resolutions. Princes, on the other hand, were shown to display increasingly feminine behaviors.

However, a more individual glance into Disney princess films reveals a deeper layer of gender stereotyping. Though the movie *Frozen* touts itself as a modern tale representing a strong heroine, Streiff and Dundes (2017a) argue that its true message still falls into common stereotypes. While Elsa, one of the two female protagonists of *Frozen*, is given more power than princesses before her, the fact that she fails to attain a romantic relationship seems to imply that power and romance cannot coexist in women. This, along with Elsa finding redemption through "gender stereotypical compassion" (p. 2), reveals that for all the changes Disney has made in female characterization, traditional gender roles remain.

This line of discussion is continued by the two researchers in a subsequent article, this time focusing on the film *Moana*. Streiff and Dundes (2017b) conclude that the male protagonist, Maui, exemplifies hypermasculinity through his physical strength and his phallic symbol of a fishhook. Maui's characterization contradicts the trends observed in England et al. (2011) and Hine et al. (2018)'s studies; namely, the increasing androgyny and femininity of male protagonists. Streiff and Dundes also analyzed Te Fiti, the "Mother Island" for gender stereotypes. When Te Fiti, a nurturing goddess of fertility, was robbed of her heart stone (a symbol of virginity), she turned into a "vengeful lava monster" (p. 1). When her stone was returned, she transformed back into a passive, smiling young woman. Streiff and Dundes (2017b) argue that this suggests that "women's worth and well-being are dependent upon their procreative function" (p. 1), thus demonstrating that gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles are still very much present in more recent Disney films.

Primo (2018) further adds on to this conversation by analyzing negative gender stereotypes in Hercules, especially in the association between beauty and power in female characters, and villainy and queerness in males. Primo reports that Hera, a stereotypically feminine figure, "embodies the definition of beautiful", while the Fates "have an unmatched level of power, but are physically repulsive" (p. 4). She concludes that Disney has failed to reconcile beauty and power in female characters. The discussion continues to male villainy and queerness; the main villain Hades and his henchmen Pain and Panic are portrayed as effeminate or of uncertain sexuality. This association, Primo argues, between villainy and effeminacy reinforces the traditional gender stereotypes of masculinity.

Studio Ghibli

Studio Ghibli, specifically director Hayao Miyazaki's animated films also represent an important source of media for children. Co-founded by Miyazaki, Isao Takahata, and Toshio Suzuki, the Japanese animation film studio has produced films that have garnered not only domestic popularity, but international prominence as well. *Spirited Away* (2001) even won an Academy Award for Best Animated Feature (IMDb), and other Ghibli movies have ranked in the top ten highest grossing anime films. Domestically, Miyazaki's films managed to challenge and beat Disney at the Japanese box office. However, despite Ghibli's popularity, few studies have focused on the films holistically.

Napier, Professor of the Japanese Program at Tufts University and anime/manga critic, explores the life and work of Miyazaki in her 2018 book Miyazakiworld: A Life in Art. While Napier reviews many different elements of the films, her examinations of various Ghibli films in each chapter of the book sheds light on the characterizations and behaviors of Ghibli's iconic female protagonists. She notes that the Ghibli heroines display both feminine and masculine traits. In the chapter covering *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, Napier specifically comments that Nausicaä, the fearless protagonist, exhibits both the traditional "female attributes of compassion and nurturing" (p. 79) and the more masculine traits of determination and bravery.

Although Napier's insight is valuable, the fact remains that there is little to no research focusing specifically on gender portrayal in Ghibli films. Although Ghibli films appeal to both young and old (Schilling, 1997) children are still the target audience as evidenced by Miyazaki's statement, "I want to create films through which children can see and experience something new. I want to make that one unforgettable film in everyone's childhood" (Fujimoto, 2008). The importance of examining and understanding gender role portrayal in children's media has unfortunately been neglected regarding the Ghibli films. A great deal of literature exists for gender role portrayal in Disney, but the same is not true for Ghibli.

This gap in research begs the question: How are gender roles portrayed in Studio Ghibli films? To answer this question, the current study examined the gender role portrayal in five Ghibli films using the coded content analysis approach used by England et al. (2011).

Method

A coded content analysis method was used to examine the five Ghibli films for gender role portrayal. The chosen films were *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, *Castle in the Sky*, *Kiki's Delivery Service*, *Spirited Away*, and *Howl's Moving Castle* (**Table 1**). These five films were written and directed by Hayao Miyazaki. Although *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* was produced before Studio Ghibli was founded, it is commonly included as a Ghibli film as Nausicaä's success was one of the reasons for the studio's founding.

Table 1. Male and female protagonists of the Ghibli films chosen for analysis.

Film	Year	Male Protagonist	Female Protagonist
Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind	1984	Asbel	Nausicaä
Castle in the Sky	1986	Pazu	Sheeta
Kiki's Delivery Service	1989	Tombo	Kiki
Spirited Away	2001	Haku	Chihiro | Sen
Howl's Moving Castle	2004	Howl	Sophie

The current study used aforementioned methodology presented in England et al. (2011)'s study on gender role portrayal in Disney princess films. England et al. (2011)'s method has been used by many other researchers as well, which confirms its validity and reliability. As the methodology was developed specifically for the Disney princess films, it was determined that the Ghibli films chosen for analysis should be the most analogous to the Disney films. The five Ghibli films all featured a clear male and female protagonist so interactions between them could be examined for gender role portrayal. Ghibli films with protagonists younger than ten were also excluded (e.g., *Ponyo*), to best match the age range of the female protagonists of the Disney princess movies. Finally, Ghibli films of the realistic/historical drama genre were excluded (e.g., *Only Yesterday*, *Whisper of the Heart*, *From Up on Poppy Hill*), as films with an action/fantasy-based plot would be more comparable to the Disney princess movies. As such, these five films were chosen for analysis.

England et al. (2011) created a list of masculine/feminine traits based on existing content analysis literature, and characters were assigned a code every time they "were mentioned as possessing a certain characteristic or…exhibited the characteristic in their behavior" (p. 558). Furthermore, a behavior was coded again each time the scene changed (a change in setting or time), "even if that behavior was exhibited in previous scenes" (pp. 558). The aforementioned list of coded traits (**Table 2**) and coding procedure was used in the current study to analyze the behaviors of the male and female protagonists of Ghibli films.

However, as the coder had unconscious biases and subjective understandings of gender that would inevitably affect how a certain behavior was coded, it was determined that it would be impossible to code every behavior in the same exact same way as England et al. (2011). Additionally, as there was only one coder, testing for intercoder reliability was not an option. To achieve consistency within the results, the definitions and criteria (**Table 3**) for each coded characteristic was established. These were heavily influenced by England et al. (2011)'s definitions (pg. 558-560), but some were reworded or modified to better reflect the behaviors of Ghibli characters instead of Disney characters, or to specify what types of behaviors were considered for each code. For example, the code "Collapses crying" was changed to "Crying" because Ghibli female protagonists rarely exhibited such dramatic actions compared to the Disney princesses.

Table 2. Coded characteristics for male and female protagonists of Ghibli films.

Masculine Characteristics	Feminine Characteristics
Assertive	Affectionate
Athletic	Ashamed
Brave	Asks for/accepts advice or help
Curious about female counterpart[1]	Crying
Described as physically attractive (masculine)	Described as physically attractive (feminine)
Gives advice	Gets rescued
Independent	Fearful
Inspires fear	Helpful
Intellectual activity	Nurturing
Leader	Physically weak
Performs rescues	Sensitive
Physically strong	Shows emotion
Unemotional	Submissive
Wants to explore	Tends to physical appearance
	Tentative
	Troublesome
	Victim

[1]Only coded for male protagonists.

Table 3. Criteria for Coded Characteristics

Masculine Characteristics	
Assertive	Strong, direct verbal assertion of a position or idea. *Assertiveness* included polite assertiveness with a hint of aggression.
Athletic	A specific movement, such as a jump or kick, which was large enough to require some athleticism. Running was coded as *athletic*.
Brave	Courageous, daring, intrepid. *Bravery* often involved a rescue, or leadership in the face of danger. This was coded for a character's specific actions.
Curious about female counterpart	Exhibiting a studious, puzzled, or concerned expression when looking at the female protagonist. This was coded only for male characters.
Described as physically attractive (masculine)	Another character's verbal expression about the physical beauty of the male character.
Gives advice	Providing suggestions, recommendation, or consultation. This was coded regardless of whether the advice was asked for or whether it was warranted, appreciated, or helpful.
Independent	Not depending on the authority of another; autonomous. A character was considered *independent* when performing an independent action against many, being alone when it was not the norm, or not participating in the expected culture.
Inspires fear	Causing someone to respond with fear, which is defined as uneasiness caused by the sense of impending danger. This includes employing violence, aggression, and intimidation, or unintentionally inspiring fear as well.
Engaging in intellectual activity	Showing the use of complex or deep thought. This required a specific action that made clear the intellectual nature of an activity; a thoughtful facial expression

	was not counted. This was also coded when the character was described as smart by other characters, or when their intellect was otherwise made obvious.
Leader	One who leads, a commander. *Leader* was only coded if the character was leading other characters (not animals). It was only coded for physical leadership in which the character was seen in front and/or directing people.
Performs rescues	Rescuing another character of animal from imminent physical danger.
Physically strong	Hitting, throwing, or moving something; providing evidence that the character has a strong physical effect on a person or object. This was a separate code from *athletic* and the codes were mutually exclusive.
Unemotional	Repression of emotion, indifference to pleasure or pain. A character was *unemotional* in response to something that might seem to warrant an emotional response. This was shown in a character's facial expression.
Wants to explore	To search for or investigate, to want to find out or explore the unknown. This was expressed by a character's speech and/or actions.
Feminine Characteristics	
Affectionate	Having warm regard or love for a person on animal. This required direct interaction and a physical display of love, such as embracing.
Ashamed	Feeling embarrassed or guilty of one's actions or characteristics. Shown through speech or facial expression.
Asks for/accepts advice or help	The character asks directly for help, or needs assistance and is open to receiving assistance such that it is clear the character wants and accepts it. Assistance could be physical, mental, or emotional.
Crying	The character shows tears. Moisture in the eyes was not counted, *crying* required tears to flow down the face. If the character's face was hidden from view, it had to be clear that the character was crying through the sounds of crying and/or shaking of the body.
Described as physically attractive (feminine)	Another character's verbal expression about the physical beauty of the female character.
Fearful	An instance of emotion; a particular apprehension of some future danger, state of alarm or dread. Shown though a physical response, facial expression, or a verbal confirmation of fear.
Gets rescued	Rescued by another character from imminent physical danger. It must be clear that the rescue was necessary for the character's continued health and survival.
Helpful	Rendering or affording help when assistance is needed. This required a specific action performed that gave another person or animal direct assistance. It was not used in a broader way to describe a character's role in a scene.
Nurturing	To care for and encourage the growth or development of; to foster or to mother. This required direct interaction with the object of the nurturing, and involved prolonged touching/attention in a soothing manner, or lending care/help to animals or people. This was a separate code from *affectionate*.
Physically weak	Not being able to succeed in something that requires physical strength. Often involved the character needing help or otherwise failing.
Sensitive	Perceptive, empathetic' aware of another person or animal's issues without direct interaction.

Shows emotion	The expression of both positive and negative representation of feeling. This was coded only when a specific emotion could be identified by the character's behavior, or when it was verbally confirmed.
Submissive	Yielding to power or authority; obedient. Usually in response to another character's assertiveness.
Tends to physical appearance	Adjusting one's physical appearance for the purpose of improving it or to draw attention to it.
Tentative	In an experimental manner; uncertain, cautious. Shown in a character's behavior or speech.
Troublesome	Causing trouble, turmoil, or disturbance. This was recorded when the character was being discussed by other characters in a way that made it clear that the character had caused trouble.
Victim	Subjected to harm or abuse by another; one who suffers severely in body or property through cruel or oppressive treatment. Physical harm and abuse were used as a defining factor. Victimization was coded even if it was voluntary.

The male and female protagonists of each film was assessed for all characteristics, both masculine and feminine. During the viewing, coded characteristics exhibited by the male and female protagonists were tracked and tallied, and the data was compiled and organized into a data table (**Appendix A** and **B**). Percentages of each characteristic out of the character's total behavior were also calculated. Each film was watched twice, focusing on the male protagonist the first time and the female protagonist the second. The films were watched in the original Japanese dub, with English subtitles. This coded content analysis approach allowed for the gathering of quantitative data on the frequency of the types of behaviors or qualities exhibited by the main characters (England et al., 2011).

Results

Numerical data on the frequency of these coded traits displayed by each character was recorded, and the percentage of that trait out of the character's total behavior was calculated using simple division (# of times a specific trait was exhibited by a character / sum of all traits exhibited by the character). However, for the sake of analyzing general trends in the data that would more effectively address the research question, this data was simplified. Instead of focusing on each characteristic exhibited by each protagonist, all the male protagonists and all the female protagonists were separately grouped. The same was done for masculine and feminine characteristics, so only four variables would be in effect (male, female, masculine, feminine). The process of finding the percentage out of the total behavior was repeated using the new variables.

Table 4. Number of masculine and feminine characteristics exhibited by Ghibli protagonists.

Film	Male Protagonist					Female Protagonist				
	Masc.	%	Fem.	%	Total	Masc.	%	Fem.	%	Total
Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind	28	**58.33**	20	**41.67**	48	114	**65.52**	60	**34.48**	174
Castle in the Sky	92	**65.25**	49	**34.75**	141	42	**37.50**	70	**62.50**	112
Kiki's Delivery Service	23	**58.97**	16	**41.03**	39	36	**36.73**	62	**63.27**	98
Spirited Away	30	**61.22**	19	**38.78**	49	41	**42.71**	55	**57.29**	96
Howl's Moving Castle	40	**63.49**	23	**36.51**	63	58	**48.74**	61	**51.26**	119
Total	213	**62.65**	127	**37.35**	340	291	**48.58**	308	**51.42**	599

Hypothesis I: Gender Role Portrayal

In addition to applying England et al. (2011)'s methodology, several of the hypotheses laid out in their study were modified and addressed by the current study as well. The first hypothesis was that the male and female protagonists' gender role portrayals would vary according to gender. It was predicted that male protagonists would exhibit more masculine characteristics, and that female protagonists would exhibit more feminine characteristics.

The results of this study proved this hypothesis half-true. The male protagonists' total behaviors were 62.65% masculine and 37.35% feminine, strongly suggesting that the male characters leaned more towards traditionally masculine traits. However, the female protagonists' total behaviors were 51.42% feminine and 48.58% masculine (**Table 3**) with a difference of only 2.84%. The difference was small enough to indicate that female characters were much more androgynous and egalitarian in portrayal.
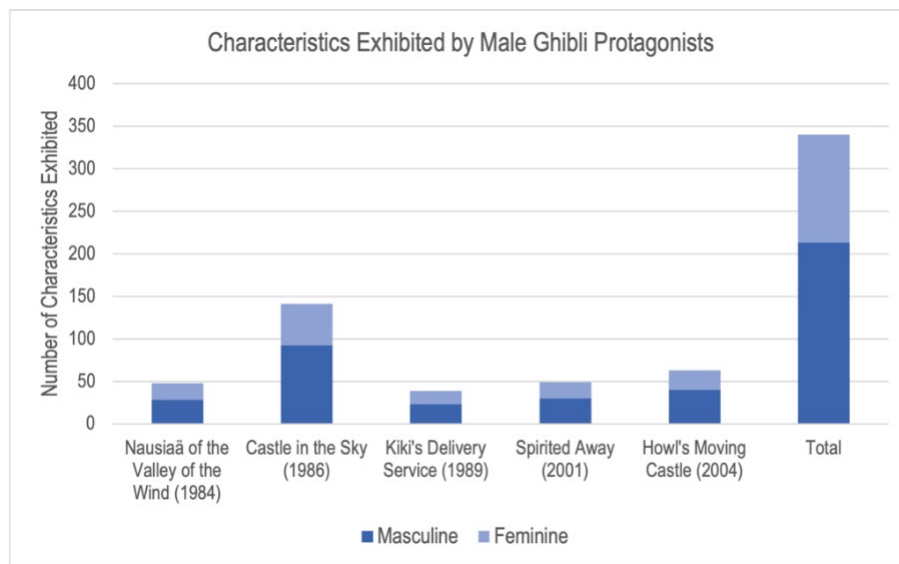

Figure 1. Masculine and feminine characteristics exhibited by male Ghibli protagonists. The light blue represents the ratio of feminine characteristics expressed out of the male protagonist's total behavior for each film. The dark blue represents the ratio of masculine characteristics. Overall, male Ghibli protagonists exhibited more masculine characteristics than feminine characteristics.

Examining the most frequently exhibited characteristics of the male and female protagonists gives a closer look at the similarities and differences between the genders. The five most common characteristics for male protagonists were "Athletic", "Shows emotion", "Assertive", "Physically strong", and "Unemotional". Four out of the five were traditionally masculine traits, with the exception being "Shows emotion". For female protagonists, the five most common were "Shows emotion", "Athletic", "Assertive", "Affectionate", and "Unemotional". Only two out of the five were traditionally feminine traits. Interestingly, four of these most common characteristics were shared by both the male and the female protagonists—only "Physically strong" and "Affectionate" were not in both categories. Furthermore, "Assertive" and "Unemotional" were ranked third and fifth most common respectively for both male and female protagonists. This further supports the conclusion that while male protagonists were more traditionally masculine, female protagonists were not more traditionally feminine.
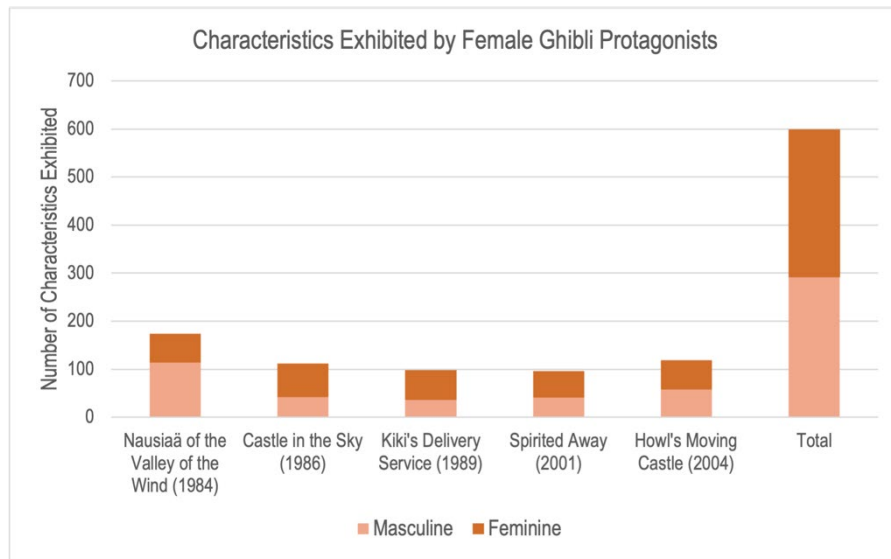
Figure 2. Masculine and feminine characteristics exhibited by female Ghibli protagonists. The light orange represents the ratio of masculine characteristics expressed out of the female protagonist's total behavior for each film. The dark orange represents the ratio of feminine characteristics. Overall, female Ghibli protagonists exhibited close to equal levels of masculine and feminine characteristics.

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Table 5. Most exhibited characteristics by Ghibli protagonists by gender

Male Protagonist	Female Protagonist
Athletic	Shows emotion
Shows emotion	Athletic
Assertive	Assertive
Physically strong	Affectionate
Unemotional	Unemotional

There was an undisputed first place for each gender category of characteristics. For feminine characteristics, "Shows emotion" was the most frequently exhibited across all the protagonists, with the exception of Haku and Chihiro from *Spirited Away*. In general, though, "Shows emotion" was the most common feminine characteristic (**Table 5**). For masculine characteristics, "Athletic" was the most frequently exhibited for both male and female protagonists (**Table 6**). While thought-provoking, the possibility must be acknowledged that this data may simply suggest that Miyazaki was fond of creating athletic and emotional characters, regardless of gender.

Table 6. Masculine characteristics portrayed by Ghibli protagonists from most to least common

Male Protagonist	Female Protagonist
Athletic	Athletic
Assertive	Assertive
Physically strong	Unemotional
Unemotional	Independent
Gives advice	Brave
Leader	Physically strong
Brave	Leader
Curious about female counterpart	Gives advice
Independent	Wants to explore
Inspires fear	Performs rescues
Performs rescues	Inspires fear
Wants to explore	Intellectual activity
Intellectual activity / Physically attractive (masculine)	Curious about female counterpart / Physically attractive (masculine) [2]

[3]Not coded for female protagonists.

Table 7. Feminine characteristics portrayed by Ghibli protagonists from most to least common

Male Protagonist	Female Protagonist
Shows emotion	Shows emotion
Helpful	Affectionate
Affectionate	Fearful
Submissive / Tentative	Asks for/accepts advice or help
Asks for/accepts advice or help / Fearful	Submissive
Gets rescued	Helpful
Physically weak	Tentative
Nurturing	Physically weak
Ashamed / Sensitive / Tends to physical appearance / Victim	Crying
Crying / Troublesome	Physically attractive (feminine) / Sensitive / Troublesome
Physically attractive (feminine) [3]	Ashamed / Victim
	Gets rescued / Nurturing / Tends to physical appearance

[3]Not coded for male protagonists.

Hypothesis II: Rescuing Actions

The second hypothesis was that rescuing actions would vary according to gender as well. In line with the existing dialogue on gender roles in animation, it was hypothesized that Ghibli male protagonists would exhibit more rescuing actions. This was also proven to be false, as out of the 15 rescuing actions performed by the protagonists, 11 were performed by the female protagonist and 4 by the male protagonist. Additionally, male protagonists were rescued 6 times, whereas female protagonists were rescued 4 times.
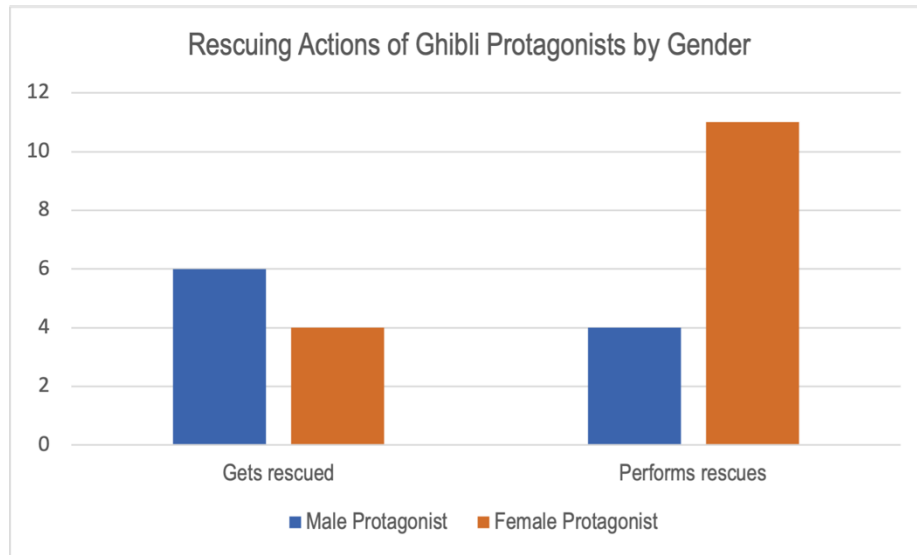
Figure 3. Rescuing actions of Ghibli protagonists by gender. Female protagonists were rescued less and performed rescues more than the male protagonists.

England et al. (2011)'s third hypothesis, "gender role portrayals…would become more egalitarian over time" (p. 561), was not considered in the current study. While the Disney princess films were created by different directors and were released across a period of nearly 80 years, (the first one being *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and the latest being *Moana*, (2016)), the Ghibli films analyzed in the current study were created by one director, Hayao Miyazaki, and only spanned two decades. As such, Ghibli films does not particularly reflect changing societal views on gender roles, and the changes in gender role portrayal across the five Ghibli films were not evaluated.

Discussion

Comparison to Disney Princess Films

These findings have interesting comparisons with England et al. (2011)'s study on gender role portrayal in Disney princess films. As the current study used England et al. (2011)'s methodology and purposefully chose films that would best reflect elements of the Disney films, the results are congruent enough to warrant comparison.

England et al. (2011) found that in the nine Disney princess films they studied, the male protagonists were more androgynous throughout, and while the characterization of female protagonists became more egalitarian over time, they rarely exhibited masculine characteristics in response to male characters. The current study, however, found that the female protagonists were more androgynous than their male counterparts, while the male protagonists leaned more towards traditional depictions. Moreover, there were many cases in which the female protagonist rescued, lead, and was assertive to the male protagonist.

However, other studies on the Disney films, such as Streiff and Dundes (2017a, 2017b) and Primo (2018) analyzed individual films and found that they disagreed with the general trends across the films. As the current study also focused on trends rather than details in each individual film, taking a closer look at each Ghibli film may reveal different perspectives on gender role portrayal. For example, the female protagonist of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* exhibited more masculine characteristics than feminine (65.52% to 34.48%), but these intriguing details were not elaborated on by the current study.

Japanese Gender Roles

It is also important to understand that Japanese cultural norms and traditional gender roles were not reflected in the current study, which may hinder the effectiveness of these analyses. Studies have shown that Japanese gender roles differ from American or western perceptions, and this awareness may call into question the accuracy of the findings in this study.

A study by Sugihara and Katsurada (2002) investigated gender roles in Japanese culture through several surveys. They surveyed 549 Japanese people about "socially desirable characteristics of men and women in Japanese society" (p. 446). The results showed that there was minimal gender difference in personality traits, and that differences in gender role had diminished. About a third of men and women were shown to possess gender-typed personalities, whereas the other two thirds were non-gender-typed and therefore androgynous. Sugihara and Katsurada also pointed out that Japanese society abides by a rigid hierarchical structure based on age, and Japanese men "learn and acquire the ideal level of masculine and feminine characteristics" (p. 451) that is desirable in the framework of hierarchical relationships. This characteristic of Japanese culture may be reflected in Ghibli's male characters. For example, in *Castle in the Sky*, the male protagonist Pazu was "Submissive" several times throughout the film—as he was one of the younger protagonists, he may have been submissive to older characters as that would be the expectation in Japanese society.

However, the findings of Belarmino and Roberts (2019) contradicts the idea that gender role differences have lessened. They interviewed young Japanese women to better understand the experiences of the marginalized, and to examine gender roles and the treatment of women in Japanese society. Results showed that Japanese women were expected to quit their job to get married and raise children, and to support and submit to men. As Belarmino and Roberts only interviewed middle-class female college students, the views expressed did not represent the views of all Japanese women. In general, however, this study concluded that Japanese society still pressures women to conform to traditional gender roles. Smirles et al. (2020) also focused on Japanese women's perception of gender roles with an emphasis on leadership conceptions and experiences. The researchers found that while Japanese attitudes towards gender roles have become increasingly progressive and egalitarian, women are still culturally pressured to get married, have children, and housekeep, much like what Belarmino and Roberts (2019) had found. Participants noted that traditional gender roles are reflected and perpetuated by popular media, especially through television programs. Smirles et al. also discovered that two significant barriers to women assuming leadership positions exist: the lack of confidence, and the fear of conflict. Participants expressed their discomfort with displaying confidence as Japanese society expects women to be modest and "lady-like". Additionally, participants mentioned that they wanted to avoid conflicts and criticism, which they would have to face as a leader. Smirles et al. reason that these concerns reflect the Japanese culture's emphasis on conflict avoidance and conformity.

Belarmino and Roberts (2019) and Smirles et al. (2020)'s conclusions seem to contradict the portrayal of female Ghibli protagonists, as "Assertive" was one of the most common characteristics. It would be well worth analyzing the Ghibli films with respect to Japanese gender roles, as such research may reveal interesting or significant connections.

Conclusion

Analyzing gender role portrayal in the five Ghibli films has shown that while male protagonists adhered to traditionally masculine characteristics, female protagonists tended to be more androgynous. In fact, female protagonists exhibited more masculine characteristics in some specific cases—not only did they perform more rescues and get rescued less, but there were more masculine traits than feminine in their top five most common characteristics.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. Some were inherent to this type of research—content analysis—while others were specific to the current research done.

The methodology used in this study was created by England et al. (2011) for the purpose of analyzing Disney films, and was based on literature on western animations. However, as the present research was on Japanese films, and the method may not best reflect Japanese or Eastern views of gender roles. As discussed earlier, Japanese cultural norms may affect what behaviors are seen as masculine or feminine, and therefore the conclusions may be a misrepresentation of the Ghibli films. Also, as the Ghibli films were watched in the original Japanese dubbing with English subtitles, some of the dialogue was lost in translation. The subtitles were not exact translations and were sometimes unfaithful to the original meaning, so coding based on dialogue may be incorrect.

Additionally, the subjective nature of this type of research lends itself to implicit bias, which can affect the results of the study. Although this is usually neutralized by testing and establishing intercoder reliability, as there was only one coder, it was impossible check for this consistency. Definitions and criterions for each coded characteristics were established, but this may not have been enough to mitigate the influence of implicit bias. Therefore, the coder's perceptions of gender roles and interpretations of the characters' behaviors may have impacted the data and the analysis.

The significance of the conclusions drawn may be up for debate as well. Unlike the diverse range of directors for Disney films, the five Ghibli films studied were all directed by one person, Hayao Miyazaki. Therefore, the evidence generated from the five films may reflect more so Miyazaki's perception of gender roles rather than of Studio Ghibli, or even of the greater Japanese animation industry. It should be noted, however, that the only other notable director of the studio is Isao Takahata, so Studio Ghibli and Disney is not comparable in this regard.

Implications and Future Research

The findings of the current study add to the existing discussion on gender role portrayal in children's animation, and to the relative lack of literature on Ghibli films. Children's media has often been the object of analysis because of the importance of media in children's development. Viewing portrayals of gender roles contributes to children's understanding of gender and social norms (Martin et al. 2002), so many researchers have examined the content of children's media. By this reasoning, the possible effects of Ghibli films on children cannot be overlooked. The trends noted and conclusions drawn in this study provides much needed assessment on this topic.

For better discussion on gender role portrayal in Ghibli films, it is recommended that future research focus on examining a larger range of Ghibli films, as the current study only analyzed five films specifically chosen to be comparable to Disney princess films. Including works by other Ghibli directors may add complexity to the discussion as well, as the five films analyzed in this study may reflect more so Miyazaki's perception of gender roles rather than Studio Ghibli itself.

To accomplish this, however, a different methodology may have to be adopted or developed to better reflect Japanese gender roles. England et al. (2011) determined masculine and feminine characteristics based on existing content analysis literature on western animated films/cartoons. Although time and resource limitations prevented the current study from doing so, it is recommended that a new set of gendered characteristics based on analyses of Eastern or Japanese animations be made so that Ghibli and other Japanese films may be analyzed with a more appropriate measure.

The gap in research cannot be filled with the current study alone, but it is hoped and expected that the findings made here will provide direction for future studies on Studio Ghibli films and gender role portrayal in children's animation.

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