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The Occurrences, References and Projected Attitudes About LGBT Lifestyles in Children's Media:
A Content Analysis of Animated Films

by

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Abstract: This study included a selection of 5 top-grossing animated children's films looking for hints, references and projected attitudes about LGBT lifestyles. I hypothesized that there would be no out-right gay characters whatsoever, and that mere hints of LGBT characteristics would be apparent through the portrayal of gender transgressions, intense same-sex interactions, and contain a focus on male masculinity. Furthermore, I hypothesized that all categories would be used primarily for humor. Results held true with these predictions where all categories were used for humor 83% of the time, with a focus on male characters. The results also support the noted increase of positive portrayals and hints from the 2000's on, and that this trend is now spreading into programming geared towards younger age groups; albeit in the background and with such subtlety that LGBT lifestyles seem to remain unrealistic to identifying children in the audience. Finally, a new ideal of masculine and feminine expression in protagonist main characters has arisen, giving hope for more inclusion in future years of animated films.

The Occurrences, References and Projected Attitudes About LGBT Lifestyles in Children's Media: A Content Analysis of Animated Films

Mike Caldwell
Portland State University Honors College
06 June 2014

The advent of the 21st century has brought a decade of progress for the Gay Rights Movement that began in 1924 (Gay Marriage Pros and Cons). From the early 2000's to now, the nation has seen a proliferation of change in ideals, from 59% of Americans supporting bills banning same-sex marriage in 2004 to Barack Obama's publicized and historical announcement supporting such unions in 2012, and the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) deemed as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court on June 27th, 2013. The year of 2014 has brought even more change with the Supreme Court legalizing same-gender marriage in 19 states, as of the time when this study was written (States-Freedom to Marry).

The nation's media has paralleled the movement, where lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) characters have been increasingly visible within prime time television and film scripts geared towards general audiences (Fouts & Inch 2005; Evans 2007; Avila-Saavedra 2009). Despite advancements for LGBT rights in the past several years however, fervent legal backlash continues to slow the process of making LGBT lifestyles permissible both legally and socially (Gay Marriage Pros and Cons). This very same reflection can be deduced in the media, where children's television has avoided the issue of outright LGBT representation entirely (Dennis 2009).

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Background

While media geared towards adolescents and adults has become increasingly diverse, children's media has yet to show such diversity in the realm of sexual desire (Dennis 2009). One exception to this trend was discussed by Rowe (2004), where characters 10th grader Marco and Dylan develop a fondness for each other and become one of the first same-sex kisses for adolescent television on "Degrassi: The Next Generation". According to research however, this is the extent towards out-right proclaimed LGBT characters in programming written for the sole viewership of adolescents. While shows like "Will and Grace", "Modern Family", and "Glee" have as-of-late permeated television screens with prominent characters who identify as queer, children have little-to-no chance to see such diversity represented in their age-specified television programs.

In "The Boy Who Would be Queen," the author defines "older children" as ages 9-12 and "younger teenagers" as ages 12-15 when he delineated his sample age spectrum for programs to code (to be further discussed in the literature review) (Dennis 2009 :740). This paper will adopt his coding of ages through inferring "younger children" to be ages 6-9, and will refer to the general term of "children" to mean ages 6-12. All five movies in this sample were rated as PG (Parental Guidance), above G (General Audiences) as they may contain material that is offensive to younger ages, and below PG-13, in which parental guidance is highly advised for children under age 13 due to mild language and nudity of non-sexual nature (Film Ratings-MPAA). The selected age range was also formed to reflect the ratings of the movies, and also to focus in on the realm of children's programming, also discussed in the literature review.

Despite the above shows' progress regarding portrayals of LGBT characters, there is still room for improvement (Fouts & Inch 2005; Avila-Saavedra 2009). Furthermore, the comedies and prime time television shows they investigated served a much broader age bracket and included more adult-

oriented material than programming in which children are their main audience. Dennis (2009)

discusses that television shows intended specifically for children very explicitly leave out declared and

self-identifying LGBT characters. He argues that rather than risk the potential backlash that

encompasses such bold scripting, these shows instead immerse strong hints towards such lifestyles in

an undertone. This study is aimed to delve into this subject more, and look into the possibility of such

censoring as a culture of protecting children from controversial issues in animated films.

   The noted lack of LGBT role models in scripts has the potential to skew children's perceptions

of sexual minorities. According to Fouts & Inch (2005), children and teenagers watch as much as 20-23

hours of television a week; that's equivalent to 20% of their waking hours. They continue, saying that

television shows "offer familiarity and continuous emotional involvement with characters that results

in greater receptivity to various themes, values and information" (Pearl & Pearl 1999 as cited in Fouts

& Inch 2005 :36). In a generation whose unprecedented access to technology allows the media to go

just about anywhere with them, television programming and movies have the potential to significantly

influence children's perceptions of society, including perceptions about social minorities.

   Individuals within the LGBT- identifying community are more than a social minority group;

they are numerical minority in terms of proportion to the general population as well. Approximately

10-13% of the American population today identifies as LGBT (Fouts & Inch 2005:26), while they also

experience more bullying in the school setting than in their heterosexual counterparts (Malley et.al.

2008). As victims of this animosity, identified or perceived sexual minority students suffer from mental

and emotional repercussion that can cultivate self-hate (Malley et.al. 2008).

   Sexual minorities, especially youth, are more likely to suffer depression and attempt suicide. In

fact, that rate is as high as 3 times that of their heterosexual peers (Malley et.al. 2008:14). That statistic

becomes more bleak when sexual minority adolescents experience rejection from their families. Highly

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rejected LGBT youth are eight times more likely to attempt suicide than their counterparts who were accepted by their families (Ryan et.al :2009). In September of 2010, Dan Savage and Tony Miller posted their first video on YouTube to combat the self-hate that caused 3 suicides of young gay students within a 3 month period (It Gets Better Project), including the videotaping and outing of a college student having sex with a partner and being publicized online. Savage and Miller started the "It Gets Better Project" in order to reach out and supply hope to adolescents who are suffering from self-hate. Television shows might be a medium in which such struggles of LGBT- identifying youth can be lessened through early exposure of diversity within the media they view on a day-to-day basis.

This study aimed to investigate whether or not representations of LGBT lifestyles, through hints, references, and even explicitly identifying characters, are more frequent in 5 of the top 25 grossing animated films. Furthermore, this study considered what portrayals of LGBT lifestyles could be inferred by the designated audience, and the accuracy of the information conveyed. Inaccurate portrayals which may misrepresent any of the identities within the LGBT community, making them stereotypical tokens, or heteronormative and asexual beings (Fouts & Inch 2005). This may leave identifying children who watch the movies feeling misunderstood and without perceived role models who they can relate to.

Hypothesis

Based on the protected status of children and literary commentary from previous studies, no declared or identifying LGBT characters were expected for this content analysis. However, similar to Dennis (2009) and Li-Vollmer & LaPointe (2003) I expected to find a significant amount of sly referencing, even strong hinting at, characters identifying as LGBT and a reflection of antagonist-role transgressions from heteronormativity. Furthermore, I predicted that these characters wouldn't be major

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in the story lines, and would be used most for satirical means. Given the findings of Li-Vollmer & LaPointe (2003) and Avila-Saavedra (2009) that found significant themes regarding masculinity, it was expected that most instances of gender transgressions and other queering would consist primarily of male or male-identified characters. Finally, it was expected that film scripts would exhibit overall support of traditional heteronormative structures, despite these bold hints and representations.

Literature Review

Research in the area of LGBT representations within children's television was very hard to come by. There was plenty of work done, however, on LGBT television personalities for national television stations and shows geared towards more general audiences. A resounding tone with all research found thus far has been that although representations of LGBT lifestyles are indeed growing in number, they simply aren't challenging, *queering*, the very heteronormative structures that perpetuate the stigma that surrounds these marginalized lifestyles (Avila-Saavedra 2009).

LGBT Representations in General Audience-Based Content-Potential Misrepresentations

Fouts & Inch (2005) and Avila-Saavedra (2009) both did content analyses on major network television shows, the former coding for prevalence of LGBT characters in 22 situational comedies, and the latter with a purposive sample of shows that were already determined to have LGBT characters. Evans (2007) did a mixture of content analyses of these shows on major national television and private networks, along with qualitative work asking how these portrayals affect LGBT teenagers and adults. All found that there has been improvement in the past decade, such as main characters whose lives and story lines are main components of the plots. However, they each found a theme of stereotyping, normalizing, and failing to show the extent of diversity that exists with people who identify as LGBT.

Fouts & Inch (2005) found that only 2% of the 125 characters present in the show were coded as queer-identifying. All characters were scripted as homosexual with no bisexual or transgender-identifying characters. They found that this was a "gross under-representation" of the 10-13% prevalence of homosexuality in America. Furthermore, all of the characters were adult males and made significantly more references to their sexuality than did their heterosexual counterparts, indicating male homosexuality as a salient issue, and portraying gay males' sexuality as the center of their lives. This also implied that, according to Kielwasser et.al (1994) "for gay youth, only heterosexual adolescents matter" and homosexual children don't exist (as cited in Fouts & Inch 2005 :40). However, Their analysis of situational comedies is quickly becoming out of date. This study attempted to replicate the efforts of Fouts & Inch (2005) to investigate whether LGBT representations within children's animated films have risen, and portrayed more than masculine-centered variations from the norm of heterosexuality.

Avila-Saavedra cites in their literature review that "The preferred and dominant reading of [their literature] is that gays are being brought into the mainstream" (2009 :11) and that this is a step in the right direction. They continue, however, by taking a critical look at this progress nonetheless, "...and highlight the less optimistic trends." Avila-Saavedra's approach is valuable because they adopt the lens of queer reading, that seek out "hidden and subtle messages of perceived heterosexual narratives and even homophobic ones" (Kanner, 2003 as cited in Avila-Saavedra 2009 :10). A general theme of heterosexual narratives were indeed found, especially in the analysis of "Will and Grace", where Will acts as a male who would otherwise be straight. This in itself isn't the issue, however. The authors continue in their analysis, noting that even when Will has a boyfriend, Grace is literally in the middle of them at one point and shows that his heterosexually-paired friendship with Grace will always be more important.

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Avila-Saavedra (2009) found through using queer theory analysis that their representations of lesbian and gay characters (no bisexual or transgender-identifying characters were shown) fail to break up the inherent heterosexual social order. It is this order that "subordinates gay masculinities as subordinate to hegemonic heterosexual masculinity" (2009 :19). It may very well point to the reason that LGBT characters still fail to be shown in children's television: society has yet to reject the heteronormative and gender-binary based structures that are still very strongly upheld. This paper will attempt to adopt a similarly critical lens in its analysis of the five animated films.

The work of Evans (2007) was another key inspiration for the current study, because it assesses the direct influence media portrayals of LGBT characters has on self-identifying community members. Evans found as well that portrayals are limited in their representation of the diversity within the LGBT identities, showing a narrow array of identifying individuals, who don't relate to all audience members who identify as well. He nonetheless found that 90% of his teenage interviewees turned to television "as acknowledgement of who they were" (2007:12) when they were coming to terms with their identities. Furthermore, the interviewees expressed that they had mixed feelings about the extent of comedic relief "Will and Grace" used Will's lifestyle for, and "Queer as Folk" because it was too sexually explicit and unrealistic in their lifestyles of partying every night.

Evans continues, saying "Yet most teens continued to watch [Queer as Folk] because they said it was one of the few shows on television that featured characters like them" (2007:13). They also worried about the unrealistic portrayals of their lifestyles and how they would affect their loved ones' perceptions of their own lives, as openly identified LGBT people. He argues that his results show the importance of more LGBT characters being portrayed in a variety of intersecting identities, because it would give youth a better chance to come to terms with their identities without having to face stereotypical images as those examples.

The work of Evans (2007) proved to be a key player in this study, because his focus on Lesbian and Gay youth may also be representative of bisexual and transgender-identifying youth as well. Furthermore, it solidifies the urgent and very real need for television programming to change, not only for LGBT youth to identify with, but also for the understanding of these lifestyles for society as a whole.

Queering Children's Television: Strong Hints to LGBT Lifestyles and Queering Animated Films

The following studies, in addition to the work of Evans (2007), had the most influence on the approach of my study. Their research actively assesses the need for LGBT representation in children's television, and how script writers for children's programming subverts otherwise heteronormative values in the background of their plot lines. Dennis (2009) assesses strong hints towards queer-identifying characters in a variety of children's television shows, while Li-Vollmer & LaPointe (2003) and Cheu (2013) turn their scopes to critique Disney's films directly. All of them discuss strong hints towards probable LGBT characters, but also highlight that none are explicitly declared or as so.

In his study, Dennis (2009) adjusted his content analysis to fit television programs targeted at children, as mentioned in the background. He also noted that "programs targeted to children and adolescents remain utterly silent about gay potential…", while programs aimed towards an older or more general audience have grown more inclusive with homosexual characters and commentary (Dennis 2009 :738). He looked for hints of homosexuality in children's programs rather than outright portrayals of it.

In his category of "Intimate Friendships," Dennis (2009) coded "hints" as instances in which intense same-sex friendships/interactions were exhibited in the script, and could be "read or misread as tacit validations of same-sex experience" (Dennis 2009 :741). In one example of such coding, Dennis

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noted that on Disney's "Ned's Declassified," the main character Ned asks a guy out for his female friend. The guy accepted, but made his intentions clear as platonic: he liked Ned, "just not that way." Dennis (2009) considered instances like this as a bold implication that being gay wasn't out of the ordinary in their school community.

Limbach (2013) discussed portrayals of all forms of diversity in a book with various studies and authors. In her chapter of *"You the Man, Well, Sorta,"* Limbach investigates the character of *Mulan*, who is the closest to a transgendered character that Disney has portrayed. However, she also adopts a similarly critical lens to that of Avila-Saavedra (2009) – pointing out the heteronormative nature of the plot.

Limbach discussed that when Mulan is reflecting on herself (2013: 117), she literally sees herself as unable to live up to the gendered expectations of being a woman: marriage, bearing children, etc. The lyrics of the song, "*When will my reflection show who I am inside?"*, combined with the images of heteronormative and gender-specific roles, were significant. The script nonetheless shifts to heteronormativity when Mulan ultimately falls for Shang in a heterosexual coupling. Furthermore, Mulan is ultimately "re-gendered" into her socially acceptable state, when she chooses to go back to her expectations as a woman and daughter despite successfully passing as a male soldier, and saving China. She chooses to go home and please her father rather than accept the powerful role of advisory for the Emperor, making a significant message to young women who watch the movie: to stay in their gendered roles (Limbach 2013 :123).

Li-Vollmer & LaPointe (2003) use a similarly critical lens on Disney through assessing the caricatures of villainy in the ten animated films they content-analyzed, showing that there was a consistent representation of the antagonists as "sissies" (2003 :103). As a whole their sample made it evident that the gender transgressions through Physical characteristics (2003 :97), costuming and props

(:99), nonverbal gestures and body position, activities, and dialogue (:100; 101; 102) were used to queer the villains to make them less appealing than the protagonists. This new "archetype" they have identified focuses on males to avoid using females to represent evil and perhaps reflects "cultural enlightenment regarding the role of women in society" (Li-Vollmer & LaPointe 2003 :104), but still is a cause for concern. Furthermore, they hypothesize that the sissy villain is used as a way to protect traditional masculine ideals while allowing for more sensitive and emotionally aware male protagonists (2003 :104).

The authors problematize these portrayals with strong criticism because despite "some element of liberation" for LGBT community members, these representations are based on "derogatory, culturally embedded stereotypes of gay men" that "are not only subordinate to straight men" but "the epitome of deviance in these films" (Li-Vollmer & LaPointe 2003 :105). Li-Vollmer & LaPointe (2003) agree with Limbach (2013) and Avila-Saavedra (2009) that there is a hierarchy of masculinities and identities that is inadvertently formed and supported in the Disney films, and perhaps other forms of children's media. They continue, saying that although sexuality is "not yet pertinent to children's social schemata, they may develop negative associations with sissy traits that could feed into stereotypes of gays later in life" (:105). This very strong claim compliments the commentary of Evans (2007) with LGBT teens' reactions to media portrayals, and indicates the need for further research to investigate if negative portrayals are still occurring.

Little research addresses *why* LGBT representations are almost entirely absent in children's media, but there were some indications with the work of Schieble (2012) and controversy over the small number of LGBT hints with cartoons in national headlines.

Schieble (2012) hosted an online discussion with graduate students training to be teachers, about the permissibility of LGBT literature in elementary education, and the most appropriate ways to immerse such inclusive material. She discusses an interesting point that might explain hesitation to be inclusive with literature: "psychological discourses in education concerning child development have rendered sexuality as extraneous from children's lives and therefore an inappropriate and unmentionable topic to discuss with children" (:208). The same conclusion can be interpreted for the protection of children via the media as well, where social push-back exists from portraying fluid sexual orientation, which "crosses the line of innocence assumed by childhood" and renders a threat due to its controversial nature. Ironically, this reasoning coincides with America becoming desensitized to widespread sexualization that character figures represent, but go unnoticed because their heterosexual identities are seen as the normal status-quo, and as no threat to children (Fouts & Inch 2005, Schieble 2012 Dennis 2009).

The results of Schieble (2012) indicate that educators feel the pull to be non-inclusive with their curricula to avoid conflict and disparagement as educators, just as script writers hesitate to be inclusive in order to maintain the largest audience possible. An undisclosed author wrote about a Christian group's backlash regarding an episode of "Spongebob Squarepants" on Nickelodeon, portraying the potential upheaval that can be ignited with portrayals of sexual desire outside of the norm (Olbermann 2005). The headline read, "*Will Spongebob Make You Gay?"* and the article discussed this group's concern that an episode- featuring Spongebob and his best-pal Patrick raising a baby clam would

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promote gay lifestyles and encourage people to be LGBT. This was sparked specifically by the traditional feminine roles that Spongebob took on at the house while Patrick became the bread winner. Once Patrick and Spongebob have finished raising their child, they tearfully send it off at the end of the episode, and the plot ends with a note of comedy that sparked the most controversy: Patrick turns around to Spongebob and eagerly says, "Let's have another" as Spongebob blushes in reply. While the hinted same-sex desire was intended to be portrayed as humorously possible, Spongebob's atypical masculine persona, combined with his partaking in female roles during the episode, crossed a moral line that the Christian group saw as inappropriate for the young audience.

Children are very much a protected class, and perceived threats to their well-being, especially in the media, are often met with venomous social reprimand. Evans (2007) aptly cites children's television as the final frontier (2007 :2), parallel with the rhetoric of Dennis (2009). This study attempted to assess the culture of protection surrounding children through interpreting if, when, and how LGBT lifestyles are portrayed in children's animated movie plots.

Methodology

As the research showed, studies specifically related to children's television is very limited. However, works related to television-giant Disney, and its hints towards homosexuality were surprisingly numerous. They each found small feats of progress for the LGBT movement, but nonetheless found heteronormativity and gender binaries to be thematically upheld, and existing portrayals of LGBT identities as inaccurate and problematic. However, due to the recent LGBT visibility during the legal campaign for civil rights, an update is needed to see if these phenomena are still occurring in more recent movies. The main agenda for this study was to investigate whether portrayals of LGBT characters, or hints towards such lifestyles in characters of children's animated

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movie plots, are challenging the heteronormative ideals and gender binary-based ideals most children are raised with.

This paper attempts to focus on the coding designs of Dennis (2009), Li-Vollmer & LaPointe (2003), along with considering the rhetoric of Evans (2007) and Limbach (2013) to inspect the more recent movies from the network. The study entailed a purposive sample of 5 animated films from the top 25 of all time, released between 2010 and 2013. These filters were implemented in order to choose the popular movies in which the most children watched in theatre, and maintaining analyses that would update the studies cited above. The five films selected were *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010), *Brave* (2012), *Madagascar 3: Europe's Most Wanted* (2012) , *Despicable Me 2* (2013), and finally *Frozen* (2013) (Animation Movies at the Box Office). The films ranked from *Madagascar 3* at 23rd out of the all-time top grossing animated films, to *Frozen* at 4th place.

The films were purchased in DVD format and watched two times each. As I had not seen any of these films prior to the study, the first viewing was for entertainment reasons, as well as eliminating first-time viewer's bias and make it easier to critically analyze the scripts upon performing the content analysis. For every film, I used English subtitles to follow the script and story line. Any hints of material that fit into my coding scheme were noted with specific times within the movies, in order to track my thoughts and reactions to the material. Sometimes I was pausing and writing as little as every 10 seconds, while others every 2 minutes. Quotes that were relevant were written verbatim to the script, as were descriptions of happenings in the background and foreground at specific times.

Once notes were acquired, I reviewed the influencing literature sources and returned to the notes to further reflect on the commentary, hints, and attitudes about LGBT lifestyles exhibited in the films. I leaned heavily on the lens of Dennis (2009) to search for hints allusions, and whether they were masked by heterosexual identities, while also integrating the lens of Li-Vollmer & LaPointe (2003),

paying attention to body languages, shapes, and stances that challenge gender norms. Furthermore the rhetoric of queer theory was used in tandem with the contributions of Fouts & Inch (2005), Avila-Saavedra (2009), and Cheu (2013) to search for challenges to the heteronormative gender-binary within these popular animated films. Finally, the critical lenses of these authors were adopted to assess what these representations mean for society- whether or not it is ready for characters within children's movies to break the normative, salient, and socially created boxes of gender and sexuality.

Coding Schemes- *Character Description*

If a character falls under any of the inspected categories within the plot, their role within the story line (main character, secondary character, in the background), their name, their overall physique and their gender expression along with their assigned sex were noted before further analysis was implemented. This helped look for relationships and trends with their identities in correlation with all other categories listed below that may have otherwise been overlooked.

Physical Characteristics, Non-Verbal Gestures & Body Position, and Dialogue

Adopting the design of Li-Vollmer & LaPointe (2003)'s study, I added further coding of characters looking for any transgressions of gender or other queering in the physical characteristics of said characters, especially those who fall under the previous criteria. In addition, I looked for slighter and more feminine jawlines, shoulder structure, and hands on male antagonists (Li-Vollmer & LaPointe 2003 :97).

I also looked at aspects such as non-verbal gestures(Li-Vollmer & LaPointe 2003 :100). These can be small hints pointing towards queer characters, in addition to very common references for humor and satire within the text. Examples include Scar's waving of his paws and feminine gate throughout

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the film, *Lion King* (Li-Vollmer & LaPointe 2003 :101). These factors helped test the extent of how much character traits in the movies challenged the traditional status quo for gender and sexuality.

Gender Role Transgression

Under gender role transgression, the gender of the given character acting out of role was tallied, followed by general support of the group/audience with the possible outcomes of being "yes" (y), "no" (n) or "unsure" (n/a). A "yes" constituted other characters in the script embracing the gender role transgression. What constituted a marked "n" was a negative reaction of the characters, as in making fun of the transgression. What constituted an unsure was if the characters a were relatively nonchalant about the incident; neither embracing nor rebuking the action, or the gender transgression was ignored and brushed by within the plot.

Also tallied was whether or not the transgression from gender roles was corrected (also y, n, or n/a). A "yes" was marked not if the character changed their actions, but only when the character's counterparts policed them. A marked "no" meant no corrections were suggested and an unsure was marked upon any ambiguous situations for clarity. Finally, I kept tally of if the gender role transgression was used as humor as an indicator of how often homosexuality was used as comic relief.

Intense Same-Gender Friendships/Interactions

I utilized this category from Dennis' (2009) study. The extent to which these interactions are intimate and infer the possibility of homosexual desire could indicate whether homosexual feelings could be portrayed as legitimate to the audience. The gender of the given duo (m/m or f/f) was tallied. Like Dennis' model, the hint of desire was coded as (y, n, n/a). A "yes" was marked if one or both of the characters showed a hint of enjoying the interaction, a "no" for lack of desire, and "unsure" for

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ambiguous situations.

I included the subcategories of "reaction to involved characters" and "reaction to counterparts" to see if this phenomenon is exemplified in the scripts of the films as well. A marked "positive" (p) indicated that one or both participants in the interaction *and* the other characters supported the interaction in some way. A marked "negative" (n) indicated that one or both participants in the interaction showing discomfort towards the situation, or that their counterparts showed being uncomfortable. Ambiguous or mixed situations exhibited would be marked as "m". I also included the subcategory "assumed possible?" from Dennis (2009)'s study with yes (y), no (n), or n/a for ambiguous situations. A "yes" constituted an affirmation of the existence of LGBT identities existing, while a "no" showed any form of rejection to the idea of any identity outside of heterosexuality and the gender binary. An "unsure" constituted neither an affirmation nor rejection to such fluidity of gender and sexuality.

Finally, the subcategory of humor was implemented to investigate how many of these interactions are used for comic relief. A "yes" (y) was marked for live audience laughter or character laugher, a "no" (n) was marked for serious situations in the script, and "unsure" (u) for ambiguous situations. I chose this category because using intense same-gender relations as humor can have benign intentions but also portray homosexual desire as an absurdity, or a socially impermissible option (Dennis 2009).

For all of the coding categories, "unsure" (n/a) was used in situations that were either outside the binary coding scheme for each section, or to help eliminate bias as much as possible. Because I alone coded these films, it was recognized that my personal objective would be a limiting factor in my coding scheme. Thus, situations in which I was inclined to assume as queer hints, or weren't universally apparent to challenge social norms, an "unsure" was coded to eliminate as much bias as possible.

Results

Table 1: Gender-Role Transgression Percent Occurrences

Outcome	Supported	Corrected	Used as Humor
Yes	51.06%	17.02%	89.36%
No	14.89%	70.21%	8.51%
Unsure	12.77%	2.13%	2.13%
Not Applicable	21.28%	10.64%	0.00%
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

*n=47

Results supported both the hypotheses and the findings of the literature as shown in **Tables 1 –
2C**. Gender role transgressions were supported most of the time at 51.06% (**Table 1**), but "not
applicable" was second just over 1/5 gender role transgressions that took place with the character in
question on their own, or in the background of a scene from the main story lines where no other
characters took notice. Also surprisingly, scripted transgressions were by a large majority unchallenged,
corrected just over 17% of the time, and left alone 7 times out of ten. This was a better result than
originally predicted, and may indicate a shift in attitudes surrounding performance of gender as fixed
roles in society.

It came as no big surprise that gender-role transgressions were by a large margin used for humor
in the scripts of the five movies, albeit slightly less of a majority than expected. This phenomenon can
nonetheless be seen as problematic, because the instructions for young audience members might
portray more fluid expressions of gender as illegitimate and even undesirable. What may be an
indication of progress however, is the higher than expected proportion of supported transgressions,
even if used as humor, that potentially gives direction towards social permissibility of fluid gender
expression and sexual desire.

Table 2A: Intense Same-Sex Interactions—Gender Combinations

Gender Combination	Percent
Male/Male	100.00%
Female/Female	0.00%
Total	100.00%

*n=18

With intense same-gender interactions, all of them included male-to-male pairings. This is an indication of a focus on masculine expression as a salient issue in contemporary society. A full proportion of male transgressors within the movie scripts may indicate that boys are receiving strong and explicit instructions for how to be men the "right way" based on their role models of their favorite television and movie programs. On the other hand however, this can also indicate a focus on rejecting the forced-upon masculine ideals of society in order to promote individualized definitions of being a masculine figure.

Surprisingly, an abundance of these interactions that were strong hints of desire (70.77%) similar to what Dennis (2009) found in his study (**Table 2B**). Furthermore, these interactions also included positive relations between the characters involved, and their counterparts (**Table 2C**). However, there was a trend of mixed reactions to intensely intimate situations from involved characters, at 33.33% prevalence, and 22% those instances were with no other characters around. This indicates an ambivalent attitude about homosexual desire that may send a message of reluctant tolerance, or even quiet disapproval of such lifestyles. While this attitude can be interpreted as better than full exclusion of any desire outside of established norms, it can also be interpreted as similar to a "don't ask, don't tell" policy in children's movies that gives LGBT identifying viewers an impression that nobody wants to know about or support their identities. This is an indication of some progress to be made with LGBT-identified character portrayals, despite noted improvements.

Table 2B: Intense Same-Gender Interactions—Desire and Humor

Outcome	Desire	Used as Humor
Yes	77.77%	83.33%
No	0.00%	16.67%
Unsure	22.23%	0.00%
Not Applicable	0.00%	0.00%
Total	100.00%	100.00%

*n=18

Table 2C: Intense Same-Gender Interactions—Reactions

Outcome	Reaction of Involved Characters	Reaction of Counterparts
Positive	66.67%	66.67%
Negative	0.00%	0.00%
Mixed	33.33%	11.11%
N/A	0.00%	22.22%
Total	100.00%	100.00%

*n=18

Every one of the categories in my coding scheme upheld the hypothesis even more with instances hinting at LGBT culture or desire coded to be for humorous means least 80% of the time. This may indicate that alternative lifestyles and expressions of gender are still seen as "inappropriate" for the protected class of children. While it is indeed an improvement that these alternative realities for sexuality and expression of gender and gender roles even *exist* within the plots, the message may still be that LGBT lifestyles and expressions are ludicrous, not realistic for children, or a reason for being focuses of satire themselves. On the other hand, giving light to a difficult situation may alleviate the taboo of the subject for children. Based on the scholastic rhetoric however, the former is more of a concern and possibility.

Themes and Ramifications

There was a large array of trends that were coded regarding gender, role of given character in plot, physique and body gestures, and hints to homosexual identities and desire. All five films were more heteronormative than inclusive, and proved to have only minute chances for LGBT-identifying viewers to see examples of themselves, let alone portraying the diversity of people who identify as such, as Evans (2007) highlighted as an issue for his adolescent interviewees. This included physical aspects of characters, in which main character protagonists were by a large margin gendered in their appearances, and a couple of antagonists supporting findings of Li-Vollmer & LaPointe (2003), to be discussed later.

In the background: Secondary Characters and Hints Towards Homosexual Desire & Gender Fluidity

One consistent trend was that secondary characters more often showed gender fluidity, such as cross-dressing, having personalities less parallel with the traditional gender roles than the primary characters, whose differing roles are less visible than their prominent counterparts. The most numerous and surprising was that of *Despicable Me 2* and the main character Gru's minions. The minions were responsible for a total of 10 of the 18 incidents intense same-gender interactions recorded. Minions are small yellow creatures that have a rather androgynous appearance. They have blue suspenders, gloves and goggles on, and speak their own language, "minionese." Because there were just as many incidents of minions dressing in feminine forms of clothing as their standard laboratory clothing, I was careful to listen for any gender-identifying labels for the minions and each of their names. Throughout the film Gru mentioned only male names, so I changed the coding from "N/A" for their gender under intense interactions, to male.

Exactly parallel with Dennis (2009)'s findings, I found *very* strong hints towards homosexual desire with each of the comedic and adorable transitions that encompass the minions' lives; the reason they are so popular in today's culture. However, all it takes is one closer look of their happenings to see the adorable creatures through a strongly queered lens. During one of their parties, the minions are downstairs in Gru's laboratory, drinking ice cream which is portrayed as their equivalent to alcohol. As the camera moves we see them dancing in a conga line and right on beat the all leap forward bend over and let the minion behind them slap their behind in a sexual manner, as the one in front enjoys the sensation. As the camera is backing away, it passes a risen round podium with a disco ball and a pole in the middle of it, resembling the typical gay club and poles for strip clubs. A minion is at first sight dancing innocently around the pole as the others cheer with him, but as the podium begins to pan out of the picture, that minion bends over and starts dancing what only resembles pop-culture's newly coined dance: the "twerk".

That is only the beginning. On the beach where the minions are being held captive by "El Macho" another very queer scene unfolds in the background. As the newest abducted minion wakes up on the beach, he sees the rest of his comrades enjoying their vacation. In the background the audience can see several "couples" of minions laying on blankets, flirting with the other or even intimately rubbing sunscreen on the other's back. Most every minion has at least one banana in his hand—a phallic symbol—and as the newest addition is given his, another in the background has two unpeeled bananas in his hands, not knowing what to do. He then stuffs both of them in his mouth, symbolizing a much-less-than- innocent double-entendre that only young adults and adults would get.

Yet another potential hint towards LGBT culture specifically was regarding the minions and a new character who becomes Gru's boss when he is hired to join an anti-villain task force that is similar to the American CIA. The man is a typical caricature of what a fat capitalist CEO of a company might

look like in the comics section of a newspaper: small head with very little neck, and a balloon-like, yet built, masculine form dressed in a business suit with feet that appear smaller than the man's fingers of his gigantic hands. The scene plays out where he emphatically introduces himself to Gru and two minions who are with him. His name? "Silas Ramsbottom." His introduction then cues the camera to focus on the minions, who look at each other and say "bottom" in their minionese accent, followed by chattering laughter at the inside joke.

My coding for this instance was neutral, in that the satirical name of the man along with the commentary of the minions could be for the sole and innocent means of entertainment for children who watch the plot. However, there is also room for the interpretation of "Ramsbottom" as two separate words that can indicate the sexual nature of male-on-male intimacy. It is not clear enough to declare with confidence, but if it were a reference, it is ingeniously sly and exactly parallel with the rhetoric of Dennis (2009).

Characters in *Madagascar 3* showed plenty of cross-dressing, gender-role-defying actions, with just as many instances of gender role transgressions as the "Despicable Me 2," and the closest second with same-gender interactions. In the plot, the zoo animals are on a quest to find their way back to their home in New York City from Africa. In the process, they pose as circus animals and join an actual group of such animals, where their shenanigans continue.

The most prominent cross-dressing moments included a group of masculine dogs with deep voices (assumed masculine pronouns) who were dressing up as ballerinas for most of the movie. Each of the dogs were fully accepted in their attire by their counterparts, though their hyper masculine personas and tendencies to punch each other in disagreements were vividly different from their ballerina appearance. The sense of routine with these crossings of the gender expression binary give a hint of subtle progress towards a tolerance of sorts that is beginning to form, while also keeping such

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instances as satirical additions to the plot.

However, the down side to this potential for progress is limited by two factors that cover up its queering of the gender binary within the plot. First of all, the dogs are quite literally a spectacle for the audience of the circus, and are only in drag when the circus is failing, unbeknownst to the main characters when they join them. Once the main characters help the circus to realize its potential, the ballerina dogs also realize that their hearts and talent aren't in drag, and instead become macho, traditionally masculine acrobats. The wrong message may be interpreted for gender queer or transgender identifying audience members: that their identities aren't valid, or cannot lead them to success. One would hope however, that they feel validation in that the ballerina dogs existed at all without being reprimanded by their counterparts.

The penguins and lemurs were the majority of intense same-gender interactions from "Madagascar 3." One lemur in particular appears to be enthralled with King Julian, the rather feminine-acting and metrosexual equivalent of what a lemur could be as human. His tendencies to stalk Julian and have pleasure in doing so throughout not only this plot but even more extensively in the previous two, were among the strongest hints at homosexual desire. However, the problem of such desires being shown with the negative connotation of being mildly creepy could mean that the famous cute and fuzzy character might also be inhibiting the ability for LGBT viewers to interpret a positive message.

Finally, the penguins which otherwise show relatively asexual tendencies reveal a potential enjoyment of an intense interaction between two of the all-male group. In the plot, main character Marty the zebra is preparing to save Stefano, one of the circus animals who is perilously stuck on a cliff wall after attempting to be a "seal cannonball." As Marty climbs into the cannon to fly to the rescue, one of the penguins strikes a match on the other's behind to light the wick that will send Marty airborne. The camera is only chest-high on the penguin as he is used to strike the match, and only the

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noise of the match can be noticed followed by a surprised, yet gleeful expression on the penguin's face. Given that the penguins were not coded to exhibit any other sexual desire (in this movie at least, the previous two weren't included in the sample), this is a strong and bold hint that the otherwise asexual penguins hinted interest in each other.

The other movies had much fewer gender transgressions and intense same-gender interactions, but still were parallel with the theme of showing any variations from traditional heteronormalized and gendered culture to be in the background. Ruffnut, one of the twins in "*How to Train Your Dragon,"* has a physique that is nearly identical to her twin brother Tuffnut's, except for slightly less bushy eyebrows, skinnier arms, a smaller nose and rounder, bigger eyes. Nonetheless, Ruffnut's image is reminiscent of a feminized Neanderthal, and her demeanor is actually more "ruff and tuff" from their name-sakes than her brother. She proved to be a source of the majority of the gender-transgressions coded in the film.

While Ruffnut was a source of most gender transgressions in "How to Train Your Dragon", it should also be noted that there was a different social stratification that was portrayed on their island called Burke. The women in the society of Burke appear to be complete equals and just as able to fight dragons as any man. Because their society is so much in the background throughout the film, it was hard to see how egalitarian women's roles in society are portrayed within the plot. Nonetheless, gruff, masculine gender expression seemed to extend into the realm of womanhood for Burke, but just like the rest of the films only showed minor hints of LGBT lifestyles and were otherwise strongly heteronormative. *Brave* and *Frozen* were the two most normalizing films with respect to hints towards homosexual pairings, but still showed non-conforming characters such as the sons of fellow clansmen who were candidates to be Merida's betrothed husbands in the former, and Olaf the snowman whose feminine demeanor has grasped the hearts of millions, in the latter.

Perhaps because of their visibility, another noted theme was a need to either cast the main characters themselves or their peers as preoccupied with getting a partner of the opposite sex. This was clearly exhibited in *How to Train Your Dragon* with Hiccup and *Despicable Me 2,* with Gru. Furthermore, if the characters' sexual preferences weren't directly represented in the script, they were shown as asexual presences within the central plot line, exhibited by the stories of Elsa in "Frozen," Marty in *Madagascar 3*, and Gru in *Despicable Me 2*

From the beginning of his story, Hiccup is very obviously different from his Viking community members: tall, lanky build, thin chest and shoulders, a similarly long neck and, arms that are one fifth that of his father's, lead Viking of the clan. Hiccup is literally the epitome of how *not* to perform masculinity. Thus, to compensate the script is very centered on his obsession with killing dragons like the rest of the clan to be "man enough" for his peers and his father. Among his discontent with his scrawny body and inability to pick up even the most rudimentary of his clan's weapons for combating the dragons, Hiccup appears to be obsessed with getting a girlfriend.

During the first combat against the dragons, Hiccup is begging his mentor Gobber to let him fight with everyone else: "...my life will instantly get better. I might even land a date." Gobber then reminds Hiccup that he can't lift hammers and shields, or the smallest weapon that the Vikings use. Because of his size and weakness, it is obvious that Hiccup has spent his childhood feeling inadequate.

Throughout the movie, there is a theme of returning to Hiccup's shortcomings of masculine identity: "If you want to get out there and fight dragons," says Gobber, "you need to stop all...this." He gestures at Hiccup up and down and he responds, "but you just pointed to all of me." Gobber responds with, "Yes, that's it! Stop being all of you." This kind of dialogue exhibits the true issue that masculinity is in society today. Even though Hiccup ultimately expresses his usefulness and

masculinity to his community in an innovative way, the message may still be that being "man enough" is a must to be happy.

Hiccup wasn't the only character whose expression of gender varied from traditional ideals. Hiccup's crush throughout the story, Astrid, is the dragon hunter prodigy of her generation. Her visual appearance is much more traditionally feminine and beautiful, especially compared to her previously mentioned counterpart, Ruffnut. However, her self-assured gait, exquisite skill in dragon hunting sporting events, and unparallelled athleticism overshadows every one of her peers, male and female. Once again, heterosexuality became the theme with Astrid as she showed a soft spot for Hiccup, showing appreciation for his newly defined masculinity, and becoming yet another heterosexual pairing.

While only a co-star instead of main character, Astrid resembles a new trend in children's movies that has arisen. This trend includes female characters who are empowered to take the lead over the males, and the males are empowered to be comfortable enough in their identities to become in touch with their emotions, as well as letting women take the lead. This will be further discussed later on in the paper.

A similar story is with Gru, in *Despicable Me 2*. Like Hiccup, Gru's masculinity is different from the rest of his peers and comrades. However, Gru has a masculine physique that includes a bald head, strong nose and facial features, the typical V-Shave torso, broad shoulders and arms tapering to a thin waist. However, his physique quickly changes to long, spindly and feminine legs that enhance his often feminine body positions of knocking knees together when embarrassed or scared, being excessively expressive with his hands (even snapping like the stereotypical gay man when discussing an unpleasant man's attitude). His attire on top of that resembles today's "metro-sexual" man: an all black, form-fitting leather jacket pants and heeled boots with an omnipresent scarf, to top it all off.

Unlike Hiccup, Gru is seemingly asexual, not showing any sign of sexual desire either direction from the previous movie. However, his friends have him covered instead, as in the instance of Jillian who is obsessed with landing Gru with a date. During one of his daughters' birthday party in the beginning of the movie, Jillian leans against Gru (dressed in a fairy-princess dress and with a feminine stance to add to the irony) who then leans away in apparent discomfort from the physical contact:

Jillian: "So... I'm gonna go out on a limb here, but my Natalie is recently single, and... oop!"

Natalie, a woman wearing a blue-green tutu-like dress with sagging breasts, a large overbite, protuberant nose, unruly hair and one lazy eye leans against a table of condiments, awkwardly posing before falling over.

Gru: "No, no, o get off the limb right now, no limb!"

Jillian, laughing: "Oh come on! She's a riot! She sings karaoke, she has a lot of free time, looks aren't that important to her..." *looking Gru up and down in fairy costume.*

Gru, rolling eyes: "No, Jills, that is not happening. Seriously, I'm fine."

Jillian, persistently: "Well, forget about her then. How about my cousin Linda?

Gru: "NO!"

Jillian: "Oh! Oh! I know someone's husband who just died[...]"

The conversation abruptly ends with Gru spraying her away with the hose. In addition to the obvious focus on heterosexually partnering Gru with someone, this is the closest that any of the main characters got to hinting towards homosexuality, in that Gru appears completely nonchalant about offers from women. We then later find out that he's just afraid of dating from a bad experience from a grade school crush (who was female), and he suddenly falls for Lucy, a detective who becomes his forced-upon partner to fight evil in the world.

Like the findings of Li-Vollmer & La Pointe (2003), Gru and Hiccup both show that the

protagonists in animated stories are becoming less and less stereotypically masculine (to be discussed in full below). However, this a strong social pull to heterosexually partner main characters in movie scripts to balance for a "unit-loss of masculinity," so to speak.

With "*Frozen*", there are a multitude of articles that mention the potential for main character Elsa—who tries to hide her troublesome and abnormal ice powers throughout the plot—to be coded as queer (Greydanus 2014). While the potential for the theme of a coming out story to be drawn from Elsa's story was noted, the tendency to portray her as asexual was more prevalent in this content analysis. Elsa shows no hint of interest in either men or women throughout the film, coming closest to becoming sexualized during her hit number "Let it Go" after her powers are discovered and her body moves in a sexualized, self-confident gait. Elsa's story has the potential to be coded as a hint to the queer journey of coming out and growing into one's identity, especially with the words of "*Let it Go*":

> *"Don't let them in, don't let them see, be the good girl that I was meant to be , conceal don't feel, don't let them know.... Well now they know. Let it go, let it go, no holding back anymore […] I don't care what they're going to say. Let the storm rage on. The cold never bothered me anyway."*

One can definitely see the themes of a coming out story from Elsa's situation of being different from everyone else and isolating herself in order to hide it at all costs. However, from analyzing the verse of her song, the content is word-for-word recitation of the plot line. Combined with Elsa's complete nonchalance about desire for intimacy for any gender, there weren't enough out right hints to give her the coding of queer instances.

Another character whose sexuality was ambiguous was Marty the zebra from *Madagascar 3*, side-kick of Alex the lion. Many of his comrades, such as King Julian, who courts with a female

grizzly bear, Melman (the giraffe) and Gloria (the hippopotamus) who resemble a married heterosexual couple, and finally Alex and Gia (a leopard), are all presented as entirely heterosexual and are coupled as such. Marty remains to be the quirky, humorous character but with no apparent direct references to sexual preference whatsoever. That being said, there was just one hint of Marty's attachment to Stefano (discussed previously), when the circus crew and main characters are briefly separated, Stefano cries, lamenting that, "it will never be the same without Marty!" and sobbing. However, just like the above discussion with Elsa, this author coded Marty as majority asexual as the above described instance was the only subtle hint for even the smallest amount of desire.

These results indicate that society is not yet ready for its first LGBT character, just yet. Main-characters such as Gru, Merida, Hiccup, and Anna were all normalizing in a multitude of ways—more so than the small changes from the status quo that have begun (to be discussed below). Merida and Anna both dressed, and acted like the parts of princesses, despite being scripted as rebels, and Anna herself was especially normalizing through the intense sexualization of her desire for a happily ever-after of being with a man. In instances where main characters' sexual preference could not be inferred or was even leaning away from the heterosexual status-quo, there were strong efforts to make clear their heterosexuality, with Hiccup's obsession with getting a girlfriend and Gru's sudden and unrealistic falling for Lucy at an unexpected rate. In other instances, if the character was or couldn't be shown as heterosexual, then they were quietly pushed off as asexual beings who pulled the plot along. Very little room for LGBT interpretations were left (if at all) with the characters in the direct spotlight, which indicates progress to be made in this final frontier of children's films.

There were only two villains coded in *Madagascar 3* and *Frozen* which was slightly less than expected. In Madagascar 3, Captain Chantal Depois, a decidedly unattractive woman based on traditional feminine standards, has a deep voice, severe dark eyeliner with just as severe eyebrows, a long pointed nose, strong jaw line, broad shoulders and chest with huge hips and skinny legs; all combined with a substantial mole on the right side of her face.

The above description is parallel with the rhetoric of Li-Vollmer and LaPointe (2003) regarding the transgression of villains, and Depois as a villainess fits this too. On top of that, secondary female characters were also much less attractive physically (eyes, waist size, facial shape etc) than their primary female counterparts. This phenomenon made it even easier within all of the movies for the audience to miss background transgressions and hints for sexual and gender diversity.

Another character who is a very good example of the sissy villain was the Duke of Weselton from *Frozen*, who is ultimately trying to steal goods from Arendale, Elsa and Anna's home village. He looks like a weasel like his comical namesake, and has a much smaller, much more feminine physique and stance than his masculine peers around him. His arms are long, skinny and with no muscular appearance, along with a lanky body that is well-dressed, and pointy heeled boots. His masculinity is neither salient nor apparent, despite representing an entire kingdom and bossing around two muscular body guards throughout the movie.

The Duke of Weselton's attempts to be a truly respected masculine force are portrayed as humorous, unrealistic, and pathetic, because of his scripted inability to impress Elsa and Anna when they're first introduced. Furthermore, he made one of two intense same-gender interactions (other than Olaf, intensely paired with Sven) when Elsa first runs away from Arendale after her powers have been discovered. He reaches up to his burly guard's ears at tip-toe, with a plea, "She must be stopped!" and

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leaning into his face, "You have to go after her!" When the film was paused at this precise moment, the pose looks as if the villain is going to kiss the flabbergasted guard, in which this instance was coded as a mixed reaction between the involved characters.

Chantal Depois and the Duke of Weselton both portray problematic themes that might be picked up from the young audience members: that queer is potentially bad, but instead of as pure evil as Li-Vollmer & LaPointe (2003) found, these two are shown as weird, pathetic, and not to be taken seriously. Depois as a main source of conflict and the Duke as a side-story of conflict became comic relief in the scripts because of their respective failures in their pursuits, but also because of their emphasized eccentric tendencies. Even though only two non-conforming villains were coded in this small sample, it could be inferred however that more would be found in a larger pool of animated films.

New Forms of Feminine and Masculine Gender Identity: A Marker of Social Progress

While hesitation to openly portray LGBT lifestyles indicated limited progress for these animated films, there has been a large and resounding change in both main character and protagonist expressions of gendered ideals. A refreshing trend has emerged where less rigid boundaries for male and female role models' gender expressions has been established.

In the story of *"How to Train Your Dragon,"* Hiccup's obsession to become the stereotypical masculine figure in his society becomes obviously half-hearted. Hiccup is dissatisfied with what his father requires to earn his pride. In an instant where he could have killed what becomes his companion and best friend, "Toothless," Hiccup is shown to have complete inability to end the life of another living creature because of his compassion for it. Rather than learn how to love the facade of hegemonic masculinity, Hiccup treads on new territory, working with and training dragons instead of killing.

Although heterosexually coupled and normative in many ways, Hiccup chooses to defy the confines of hegemonic masculine ideals and literally define his own masculine identity instead, one that fits his personality. That is a radical idea to be portrayed in comparison to the days of "Gaston" and the typical manly-man whose lack of emotion is inferred to be the proper and upheld masculine identity.

Hiccup's story can also be identified with that of Gru, Marty, Alex, Kristoph from "*Frozen*," and the majority of masculine characters, in which being aware of emotions and the need to express them became themes amongst heteronormative rhetoric. This is a reflection of society rejecting, even laughing at, the former ideals of how to be a man like John Wayne, which have become to be seen as undesirable and foolish to go after such unrealistic ideals. Modern times call for more egalitarian relationships, more compassion from the men involved with family units, and that reflection has even made it to the final frontier.

A new empowered woman has been the major theme of the decade for Disney, that made "*Brave*" and "*Frozen*" sensations for the country, and making the latter number four in the all-time top grossing animated films for the United States, with *Toy Story 3, The Lion King,* and *Shrek 2* ahead of it (Animation Movies at the Box Office). The two movies were praised as pro-feminist victories for the final frontier by some (Watson 2012; Luttrell 2014), but in the case of *Brave* there were just as many claims to its shortfalls for representing the empowerment of women (Pols 2012). Whether or not these scripts are pro-feminist enough for critics, these movies do something very important for young girls: they show the boundaries of their expression as less restricting than ever before.

In *Brave*, Merida is the very first Disney princess to ever be the leading role in a film, and is quite different from previous Disney princesses. Rather than focusing on becoming a home maker and finding a prince to complete her, Merida likes to be outdoors, exploring the wonderful landscape of the lands her people reside in. She would much rather be practicing archery rather than learning how to be

a subordinate, polite and "proper" princess. While Pols (2012) makes the point that Merida's story could have been even more ground breaking that it already was, it began a shift in the accepted expression of feminine figures.

In a heated fight against a betrothal she doesn't want, Merida takes matters into her own hands, out-performing the candidates competing to be her husband and literally claiming her own hand, her own destiny. She ultimately shows her disapproving mother that her "tomboyish" ways and resourcefulness outdoors can come in handy, along with her striking ability to be a leader for the kingdom.

Frozen was praised by Luttrell (2014) for its forward-movement in social rhetoric through its bold portrayals of Anna and Elsa as independent, confident, and strong women who take initiative and even hold more agency than their casted male counterparts; they run the show. This is exhibited when Anna, although awkwardly, calls a man gorgeous—speaking her mind openly without hesitation. Furthermore, Anna (and eventually Elsa) are comfortable in their own identities, not caring how "princess-like" they are, and unafraid to take the lead when the storyline calls for it. What's even more refreshing about this plot is that the male character Kristoph, who follows Anna in her journey to bring Elsa back to Arendale after she flees, is content with being an equal, working alongside her both as support and a wake-up call for when she is about to make a mistake: "Who marries a man they just met?" (Luttrell 2014).

It should be noted as well that in every one of the movies, there has been a concerted shift in the ideals of what desirable women look and act like. The female characters in *How to Train Your Dragon* all followed the same suit, each much better at slaughtering dragons than Hiccup could have ever hoped, and were portrayed as definitive equals in their Viking society. Lucy in *Despicable Me 2* was similarly independent, confident, cunning, and comfortable with her being single before she and Gru

courted.

The idea of a man and woman, prince and princess are beginning to change in children's films and are becoming a direct reflection of where society is heading with gender expression, women's rights, and the LGBT campaign for equality. The characters' respective gender expressions are less restricting, accepted and seen as positive & better than those before. They show that women can take charge and men can let them take the spotlight. Furthermore, the five movies in this sample have exhibited that even in the final frontier, male characters can reject traditional ideals for what it means to be masculine and make their own definition. Most of all, the male characters showed that they can be comfortable in their own skin with making that decision.

The progress that needs to be made for LGBT representation in animated movies and rights in the real world cannot be denied. Their absence in children's programming is most likely noted by identifying viewers, and was definitely noted in this content analysis. However, there is room for hope with the shift in gender expression ideals in that as heterosexual expressions within the status quo become accepted and upheld in more fluid forms, it will make room for truly fluid gender expression and sexual desire, to catch up with the huge progress equal rights have made as of late.

Discussion & Conclusions

The combination of the transgressions, gender fluidity and homosexual desires hinted at were very surprising and met the hypotheses more than ever expected. While the strongly hinted at homosexuality of the beloved minions may mean children have the chance to process other realities possible for themselves when it comes to gender expression and sexuality, the limitation of their being non-human and constantly in the background inhibits these steps forward. Their decidedly heterosexual primary counterparts overshadow the small efforts to queer the oppressive binary systems of beauty

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and masculine expectations that have proved to be harmful to youth in the long run. However, that doesn't mean that there hasn't still been progress in the short years since the sources cited in the literature review of this study.

Just as Dennis (2009) cited, the minions signify a very bold and strong hint towards homosexuality and desire; it is even treated as possible and normal for the minions. Their desire is even portrayed in serious undertones (albeit still a vast majority as humor), giving some leeway towards a perceived legitimation of these desires. This was also the case with many of the instances coded in "*Madagascar 3*" with the animals cross-dressing from their expressed gender roles. Each of them seemed comfortable in their alternative expressions, as if it were normal and perhaps preferential to following the norms.

However, there is still an issue with this apparent bold inclusive plot line. Minions and other transgressing characters are not only secondary characters whose lives are meant to be in the background and unnoticed, but they are definitively *not human*. Although it is an improvement from the previous literature's findings, there is potential to give young viewers the idea that homosexual desire is not possible for them, because they're human and the minions aren't, and furthermore major characters like Gru and Lucy are all heterosexual while the minions nearly invisibly live in the background.

On the other hand, the minions mark a very large step in the process of opening the "final frontier" of children's media to LGBT inclusiveness has been taken because of the icon that the minions have become with the proliferation in popularity that *Despicable Me* and *Despicable Me 2* has achieved, along with the penguins in the *Madagascar* movies. Arguably, quite near every child has heard of or seen minion in the United States, if not a friend of theirs has. These gender-fluid, sexual-desire-fluid beings have stolen the hearts of many through their cuteness and ability to make anyone

smile on a bad day. On top of that, their quirkiness is just odd enough that their individuality is embraced. While it isn't the same as having a primary character openly having fluid desire or gender expression, it does signify a significant shift that has begun in the past decade away from gender and sexuality binaries. Especially with shows like "Glee" on prime time, that has a transgender character central to the plot, this is yet another signifier of that shift.

Unfortunately, the plots were otherwise fairly heteronormative and ambiguous in their attitudes directly related to LGBT lifestyles and expressions, signifying that neither good or bad messages are being sent about them. The sissy villain and macho villainess are both cause for concern, giving potential to portray the same queer hints that are given in a positive light to be associated with negativity. It is simply left for children to make the interpretations themselves, which has the potential to still leave them excluded from the equation. However, there is much hope in the forms of gender expression that have recently emerged, giving much less fixation on a specified ideal of masculine or feminine. They have decidedly become more fluid, individualized, and have started a shift towards complete fluidity and acceptance that might warrant an LGBT character in the not-so-distant future.

Limitations and Further Research

This study was very limited in time and resources. A sample of more than 5 animated films might paint a more representative picture of how children's films are reflecting society today. However, choosing from the top 25 grossing animated films of all time, and from the past four years minimized that limitation of sample size just the same. The movies analyzed in this content analysis were the most popular of the popular, and viewed by the most children.

Another limitation was that I was the sole coder in this content analysis, and thus my individual objective by itself may have skewed the interpreted results, despite the extensive measures taken to

minimize it. Research of this nature must continue to keep checking the progress of scripts in children's media towards being more inclusive with LGBT portrayals. One perspective that may have been overlooked with these scripts is perhaps the concerted effort to reject femininity in the cases of humor that were coded, which if confirmed, may be less of a bleak outlook. If there really is a culture of rejecting femininity the same way masculinity has been in the media recently, it would provide valuable insight into further efforts to bring in an era of sexual-desire and gender fluidity.

Perhaps the final frontier Evans (2007) refers to is finally moving towards being attained. Small notes of progress were noted time and time again, with a sample size of just 5 films. Perhaps in the next 10 years, even as soon as 5 years, society will prove itself to be ready for its first openly declared and identifying queer children's role model. This research brings hope that the socially created and restricting slots of masculine and feminine, heterosexual identities will eventually dwindle into a world where gender expression and sexuality will be seen as fluid, and naturally so, for all; including the protected class of children.

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<u>Coding Sheet:</u>

Movie:_____

Brief Character Description/ Physical Characteristics, Non-Verbal Gestures & Body Position, and Dialogue:

Gender-Role Transgression	*Notes*
Supported? Y N U	
Corrected? Y N U	
Used as humor? Y N U	

Intense Same-gender interactions	Notes
Gender: MM FF	
Desire? Y N U	
Reaction of involved characters: P N M	
Reaction of Counterparts: P N M	
Used as humor? Y N U	