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“Little Freak...Yes, Him with Those Ears Only a Mother Could Love”: Representation of Physical Disability in Disney Across Three Eras

Abstract

This study compared the portrayal of physical disability in Disney animated films across its Classical (1937-1959), Renaissance (1989-1999), and Revival (2009-2022) eras. A textual analysis was conducted on six selected films from these eras that depict characters with physical disability: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Dumbo* (1941), *Peter Pan* (1953), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), *Brave* (2012), and *Luca* (2021). The study found that Disney films from the Classical Era (1937-1959) and the Renaissance Era (1989-1999) often depicted characters with disabilities as outsiders struggling for acceptance. However, starting from the Renaissance Era (1989-1999), the films began to portray these characters as multi-dimensional individuals. Recent films emphasize empowerment and self-discovery, depicting characters like Massimo in *Luca* as capable and independent, with their disabilities minimally mentioned and not defining their entire plotline. The study concludes that recent positive and nuanced portrayals of disability in Disney films reflect current societal calls for inclusivity.

Keywords: Animated films, Disability, Disney portrayals, inclusivity

1. Introduction

Disney has been credited with creating some of the most well-known animated films, such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *The Lion King* and *Frozen*. Scholars such as Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo (2009), Uzuegbunam and Ononiwu (2018), and Ononiwu and Uzuegbunam (2025), suggest that Disney's popularity has attracted research into its portrayals in various aspects including race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, and disability. The primary objective of this study is to examine how characters with physical disabilities are represented in Disney animated films produced between 1989 and 2022. This analysis encompasses three distinct periods in the company's history: the Classical Era (1937-1959), the Renaissance Era (1989-1999), and the Revival Era (2009-2022) (Cowling, 2024; Tyner-Mullings, 2023; Zemler, 2022). Through the investigation of films from each of these eras, the study seeks to identify both changes and continuities in the portrayal of physical disability

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within Disney's animated works overtime. This study is conducted against the backdrop of arguments that Disney portrays disabilities stereotypically (Greenberg, 2023).

Moreover, this study is significant because animated storytelling can significantly influence societal attitudes and norms (Dundes, 2019; Uzuegbunam & Ononiwu, 2018). As a major cultural influencer, Disney has a unique position to disseminate stories that enhance awareness of diverse human experiences (Uzuegbunam & Ononiwu, 2018). Films serve as significant agents of socialization, influencing the emotional, social, and cognitive development of individuals (Alareifi, 2024). The views of Abu-Obeid and Abuhassan (2024) suggest that films offer viewers opportunities to broaden their perspectives, explore new ideas, and understand experiences different from their own. Research also indicates that watching films can foster compassion and understanding for others (Gibson, 2023). Positive depictions of disabilities can boost self-esteem and reduce stigma in young people with disabilities. Animated films not only mirror culture but can challenge myths, foster empathy, and support inclusivity.

Disney's acquisitions, including Pixar Animation Studio in 2006, Marvel Studios in 2009, Lucasfilm in 2012, and 20th Century Studios in 2019, along with the launch of Disney Plus in November 2019, have further solidified its market dominance (Daniel, 2021). Therefore, this study explores how Disney represents characters with physical disabilities considering that while Disney has made strides toward more inclusive storytelling with films like „Frozen,” „Coco,” and „Moana,” it is unclear if this shift extends to the portrayal of physical disabilities.

The Disney Classical Era, also known as the Golden Age of Animation, refers to the period in the Walt Disney Company's history during which it produced some of its most iconic and influential animated feature films. This era is generally considered to have begun with the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937 and ended in the late 1940s or early 1950s. The Renaissance period marked Disney's return to prominence following the Bronze Age of the 1970s and 1980s which were transitional decades for Walt Disney Animation Studios as it was a period which followed the deaths of Walt and Roy O. Disney and was marked by financial struggles and changes in creative leadership. The Disney Revival Era, also known as the Second Disney Renaissance, refers to the period starting around 2009 when Walt Disney Animation Studios experienced resurgence in critical and commercial success. The Disney Revival Era is marked by a return to traditional storytelling, high-quality animation, and a series of successful films (such as *Brave*) that resonated with audiences worldwide (Gibson, 2023).

This study is designed as a textual analysis focusing on *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Dumbo* (1941), (from the Classical Era) *Peter Pan* (1953), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), (from the Renaissance Era) *Brave* (2012), and *Luca* (2021) (from the Revival Era). The researcher argues that the selected films, drawn across the three eras, feature a range of characters and narratives that offer insights into the evolution of the representation of disability in Disney animated films.

2. Representation Theory of the Media

Representation Theory has long been central to media and cultural studies because it points to how meanings about people and social issues are not simply reflected in media but actively produced and circulated through it. Serge Moscovici's foundational work in 2000 established that social representations function to anchor unfamiliar ideas in familiar contexts and to prescribe norms for how groups should think about those ideas. However, the work of scholars

such as Hall (1980) seems to challenge the work of Moscovici by emphasizing the ideological and contested nature of media texts. Hall argued that media representations are never neutral: they encode dominant meanings which audiences may accept, negotiate, or resist, but rarely outside the boundaries set by the prevailing discourse.

When applying Representation Theory to portrayals of physical disability, it is critical to acknowledge that media rarely portrays disability in ways that are value neutral. Instead, as Cherney (2019) and Riley (2025) have argued, disability is commonly stereotyped, whether as tragic, inspirational, villainous, or pitiable, in a way that reflects deeply embedded ableist ideologies. These representations shape how society perceives disabled people, often reinforcing marginalization rather than challenging it. Duru (2019) echoes this by noting that representations “invite audiences to understand them and agree with them in certain preferred ways” (p. 50), showing how portrayals rarely offer a truly diverse or realistic picture.

However, the Representation Theory is not to be applied without a critical perspective. Scholars (Havens et al., 2009; Long, 2014; Napoli, 2014) suggest that the economic and institutional contexts of media production shape what representations are possible and this can be pointed out as an aspect which Moscovici did not fully explore. For Disney, a major global cultural industry, this institutional factor is crucial: its portrayals are not just about ideas but about profit, branding, and appealing to family-friendly markets. These imperatives are likely to influence which disabled characters appear, how they are designed, and what narrative roles they occupy.

However, the Representation Theory is still appropriate for this study for several reasons. Firstly, its central focus on how meaning is socially constructed and circulated is directly relevant to Disney’s immense cultural influence. Disney films do not merely mirror existing social values; they actively shape generational attitudes, especially about who belongs and who does not. Secondly, the theory’s focus on the influence of repeated images and narratives is essential for analyzing how disability has been represented throughout Disney’s classic, Renaissance, and contemporary periods. Thirdly, by highlighting ideological power, the theory enables this study to critically assess whether Disney’s portrayals have genuinely progressed or simply perpetuated earlier stereotypes in revised forms.

3. Representation of Disability in Disney Animated Films

To critically examine how Disney represents physical disability, it is important to first clarify what is meant by *disability* and how it differs from *impairment*. Within disability studies, this distinction is foundational. *Impairment* generally refers to a physical, sensory, or cognitive condition that affects an individual’s body or mind; for example, a missing limb, partial sight, or a learning difficulty (Oliver, 2018). *Disability*, however, as used in this study, extends beyond the biological or medical facts of impairment. It is better understood as a social and cultural construct: a system of meanings, barriers, and attitudes that limit the participation of people with impairments in everyday life (Shakespeare, 2006). This perspective, known as the social model of disability, argues that people are disabled not solely by their bodies but by inaccessible environments and discriminatory cultural narratives that define them as ‘other’.

This conceptual distinction is crucial when examining film and popular media. Representations of disabled bodies are never neutral; they help shape the cultural imagination

of what disability ‘means’. Films often blur the line between impairment and disability by presenting physical or cognitive differences not just as medical facts but as moral symbols or narrative devices. In Disney’s animated storytelling, this process can be seen vividly: a physical impairment is rarely portrayed just as one aspect of a character’s everyday reality. Instead, it is loaded with symbolic meaning which signify villainy, comic relief, victimhood, or a need for redemption. The concept of *Disneyfication* is particularly relevant here. Bryman (2004) defines this process as Disney’s transformation of complex and sometimes uncomfortable realities into sanitized, marketable fantasies. When it comes to disability, Disneyfication involves simplifying, exaggerating, or moralizing physical or cognitive differences for the sake of entertainment. Characters marked by visible difference which include a hunchback, a hook hand, unusually large ears can be said to have become narrative short-cuts that guide the audience’s emotional responses. Such representations are not accidental. Disney’s status as a global cultural powerhouse means its versions of fairy tales, myths, and fantasies reach millions of children and families worldwide. As Davis (2013) argues, mainstream animation studios such as Disney do not just reflect social attitudes about disability, they actively produce and circulate ideas about what kinds of bodies are normal, valuable, and heroic.

In one of the studies that explored Disney’s representation of disability as a visible marker of ‘otherness,’ Sammond (2011) argues that Dumbo’s big ears are more than just a physical quirk; they symbolize a social stigma that renders him an outcast until he redeems himself by transforming that stigma into spectacle. Sammond’s insight remains useful because it illustrates a key trope in Disney’s older narratives: physical difference is first framed as a problem to be pitied or mocked before it can be ‘overcome’ for narrative closure. However, what Sammond (2011) does not address, and what this study takes up, is how this ‘narrative of overcoming’ persists or mutates in later eras.

Norden (2012) deepens this critique by showing that *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996) recycles the archetype of the ‘Sweet Innocent’ through Quasimodo who is a character whose physical deformity simultaneously evokes sympathy and justifies his social exclusion. Norden persuasively demonstrates how Quasimodo is denied romantic fulfilment because his disability visually and narratively disqualifies him from being the heroic, desirable male lead. However, Norden’s work is largely restricted to one Renaissance-Era film. The limitation here is that he does not consider how this pattern compares with either Disney’s Classical Era or its Revival Era output.

Similarly, studies by Watson (2020) and Mintz (2019) revisit *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) to expose how physical differences are exaggerated for comic effect or moral lesson. Watson focuses on the dwarfs’ non-normative bodies as sites of dehumanization, branding them as distinctly ‘other’. Mintz extends this by analyzing Dopey through the lens of the medical model of disability. His exaggerated features and infantilized behavior evoke the trope of childlike innocence tied to intellectual or developmental disability. Both studies reveal how Disney’s earliest films used disability-coded features to deliver humor or emotional simplicity. However, both Watson (2020) and Mintz (2019) also stop short of examining whether these tropes survived the studio’s shift to more modern narratives and digital animation. This missing comparative context is where this study steps in, by interrogating whether such symbolic uses of disability are still embedded in Revival-era films such as *Luca* (2021).

The question of whether Disney’s representation has substantively improved is complicated by more recent studies. Bianchi et al. (2021) and Holcomb and Latham-Mintus (2022) broaden

the analysis beyond single films by surveying multiple Disney and Pixar productions. Bianchi et al. find that mental disabilities, especially traits coded as madness or ageing, appear more frequently than visible physical disabilities. They show that nearly half of the reviewed films rely on negative tropes: disability as burden, obstacle, or comic relief. Holcomb and Latham-Mintus echo this, showing that characters with disabilities are repeatedly framed as evil, ridiculous, or pitiful. They identify only *Winnie the Pooh* as breaking this trend by normalizing disability-like traits. These studies highlight that superficial changes in animation style or studio branding have not eradicated ableist tropes from Disney’s storytelling toolbox.

However, the analysis of the film *Luca*, which was done by Le (2022) suggests an emerging, casual mode of disability representation that neither vilifies nor sanctifies difference. Massimo, a character with a limb difference, is portrayed as a capable and caring father whose disability is visible but narratively irrelevant to his worth or competence. Le’s argument pushes the discourse forward by showing how mundane inclusion of disability can resist both pity and spectacle. However, Le’s optimism rests heavily on a single film. If *Luca* is indeed an outlier, the question remains whether Disney’s broader corpus reflects this progress or whether it remains constrained by its older narrative conventions. This is where the literature leaves an important gap. Much of the existing scholarship either focuses on single films (Le, 2022; Mintz, 2019; Norden, 2012; Sammond, 2011; Watson, 2020) or surveys a large corpus without sufficiently distinguishing between historical periods (Bianchi et al., 2021; Gibson, 2023; Holcomb and Latham-Mintus, 2022).

Gibson’s (2023) wide-ranging study of 56 Disney animated films from 1937 to 2016 identifies recurring motifs which suggest that disability is a problem or symbol of evil but did not strictly find out whether Disney’s portrayal has meaningfully shifted in the Revival era. Le’s (2022) encouraging case for *Luca* falls outside Gibson’s timeframe but does not address whether *Luca* is typical of a broader trend or an exceptional instance. The evolution or persistence of Disney’s portrayals of physical disability across its Classical, Renaissance, and Revival eras has not been sufficiently examined. This temporal approach matters because Disney is both a reflection of and a contributor to shifting cultural attitudes. It is not enough to ask whether individual films are progressive or regressive; it is necessary to ask whether Disney’s vast and influential catalogue shows genuine narrative transformation or simply repackages old tropes in new, market-friendly ways.

Accordingly, this study positions itself as a critical interrogation of continuity and change across Disney’s evolving narrative landscapes. Through a comparison of what obtains in the Classical, Renaissance, and Revival eras, this research asks: Has Disney moved beyond representing disability as spectacle, moral lesson, or comic device? Or do these tropes persist, albeit in subtler or more visually appealing forms? In answering this, the study builds on the existing literature by situating individual portrayals historically rather than reading them as isolated texts.

4. Methods

4.1. Research design

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, specifically textual analysis (TA). Textual analysis is widely recognized in media and cultural studies for its ability to uncover how meaning is constructed through language, imagery, narrative, and symbolism (Dhaenens

& Van Bauwel, 2023). Fürsich (2009) notes that TA is particularly valuable for analyzing visual and narrative texts because it systematically explores how media texts reinforce or challenge social norms as well as ideologies. Given that Disney films are not neutral cultural products but powerful texts that circulate meanings to global audiences, TA is an appropriate and rigorous method for this investigation.

Textual Analysis has been used in other studies to explore the representation of disability in the media. For example, Norden (1994) and Renwick et al. (2014) used the approach to examine the portrayal of disability stereotypes in Hollywood films. TA allows the researcher to go beyond surface-level observation to interpret latent meanings embedded in dialogue, visual design, character arcs, as well as recurring narrative devices (Fürsich, 2009). However, it is important to acknowledge that TA, like all qualitative approaches, can be limited by the researcher's interpretive position and the subjectivity inherent in reading texts (Lacity & Janson, 1994). In order to mitigate this, this study employed a transparent coding process. Moreover, the study grounded its interpretations in existing literature on disability representation.

Textual Analysis was selected over other qualitative methods, such as interviews or audience reception studies, because the focus is on the construction of representation within the texts themselves rather than on audience reactions or production contexts. Fürsich (2009) suggests that TA is most suitable when the aim is to interpret symbolic content in cultural artefacts to expose dominant meanings and ideologies. This aligns with the purpose of this research, which is to critically compare how physical disability has been portrayed in Disney animation from its Classical Era through its Renaissance and into the Revival Era.

4.2. Population and Sample

The population for this study comprised all Disney animated feature films produced between 1937 and 2023. According to The Walt Disney Company's official catalogue, the total stands at 62 feature-length animated films up to 2023 (Walt Disney Animation Studios, n.d.). From this population, a sample of six films was purposively selected: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Dumbo* (1941), *Peter Pan* (1953), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), *Brave* (2012), and *Luca* (2021). The selection criteria were: (1) each film prominently features characters with visible or coded physical disabilities; (2) the films collectively span the three distinct Disney eras under study which are: Classical (1937–1959), Renaissance (1989–1999), and Revival (2009–2022); and (3) they have been discussed in existing academic literature to enable deeper engagement with and critique of previous findings. The inclusion of both human and non-human characters, diverse narrative genres, and different cultural contexts supports an in-depth cross-era comparison. While a larger sample might have been feasible, the focus here is on depth of interpretive insight rather than breadth of coverage.

The researcher agrees that the balance of films per era is not numerically equal, with three films representing the Classical Era, one representing the Renaissance, and two from the Revival period. This distribution is not an oversight but rather an intentional, purposive sampling strategy focused on selecting films that are both culturally prominent and academically discussed in existing literature in a way that ensures that the analysis engages meaningfully with ongoing scholarly debates (Mintz, 2019; Norden, 2012; Sammond, 2011). The researcher acknowledges that this imbalance may pose limitations in terms of strict comparability. However, the researcher's approach prioritizes depth of textual and thematic

analysis over sheer numeric symmetry. The Classical Era, as the earliest and longest of the three, produced a larger pool of eligible films prominently featuring characters coded as physically disabled, hence the inclusion of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Dumbo* (1941), and *Peter Pan* (1953). In contrast, the Renaissance Era’s focus on reimagining classic tales often did not foreground visible disability to the same degree; *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), however, stands out both for its explicit engagement with physical difference and its sustained critical reception, making it an eligible representative for that era.

4.3. Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis was individual film scenes that depict or discuss physical disability, either directly or symbolically. Following McKee (2003), scenes were treated as the basic textual unit because they are discrete narrative moments that combine visual, auditory, and linguistic elements. Scenes were examined for how they frame characters with physical disabilities. The language used to describe the scenes; visual cues highlighting difference or normality, as well as the narrative role the disability plays were also considered.

4.4. Instrument for Data Collection

The instrument for data collection was a researcher-designed coding guide. It ensured a systematic and replicable approach to coding and helped to mitigate the interpretive risks that are inherent in qualitative textual work. The coding guide consisted of the following content categories:

- Character portrayal: physical description, visible impairments, costume, and body movement.
- Narrative function: hero/villain, comic relief, moral lesson, romantic plot relevance.
- Stereotypes: tropes such as the ‘supercrip’, villainous disfigurement, infantilization, pity object.
- Dialogue cues: how characters speak about disability or difference.
- Visual symbolism: framing, lighting, emphasis on bodily difference.
- Era-specific context: cultural or industrial factors visible in production style or theme.

4.5. Method of Data Analysis

The data analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s (2012) six-phase thematic analysis (TA) framework, which is widely used in qualitative research for its flexibility and transparency. Similar studies (such as Bianchi et al., 2021; Holcomb & Latham-Mintus, 2022) have used thematic analysis to map disability tropes in media and this demonstrates this suitability of this method for systematically comparing representations across multiple texts and time periods.

The first phase involved familiarization: the researcher watched each film multiple times and took descriptive notes on scenes depicting physical disability. The second phase involved generating initial codes, including labels such as *heroic disabled figure*, *tragic victim*, *villainous deformity*, *comic difference*, *redemption narrative*, and *casual inclusion*. These codes built directly on disability media literature (Norden, 2012).

In the third phase, codes were grouped into broader themes which capture patterns that cut across films and eras. For example, codes about ‘heroic disabled character’ and ‘redemption

arc' were grouped under Narrative Rehabilitation, while 'villainous disfigurement' and 'visual grotesque' were grouped under Monstrous Othering.

The fourth phase involved reviewing and refining themes in order to ensure that they accurately captured the underlying data. The fifth phase involved defining and naming each theme clearly, supported by illustrative excerpts from scenes and dialogue.

The sixth and final phase involved synthesizing these themes into a comparative narrative that highlights both continuity and shifts in how Disney constructs physical disability. This approach aligns closely with Holcomb and Latham-Mintus (2022) and Bianchi et al. (2021), who also used thematic coding to reveal enduring stereotypes and representational trends in Disney and Pixar films. However, unlike those studies, which often summarize across large corpora, this study's detailed scene-level TA provides deeper insight into how meaning is constructed within each era's distinctive social, cultural, and industrial context.

One of the main strengths of textual analysis is that it allows for a detailed, systematic examination of how meaning is constructed through dialogue, visual symbolism, and narrative structures, uncovering subtle themes and hidden messages that casual viewing might overlook. It also enables the researcher to situate these meanings within wider social, cultural, and historical contexts, showing how media texts reflect and shape dominant ideologies. This makes textual analysis especially powerful for critically interrogating sensitive issues like disability representation, where stereotypes and hidden biases can be embedded in storylines, character design, and imagery.

5. Data presentation. Plot summaries of selected Disney animated films

5.1. Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

After fleeing her cruel stepmother's deadly jealousy, Snow White finds safety with seven dwarfs who each have unique traits that set them apart from others. Living together in a small forest cottage, the dwarfs build a supportive family where their differences are accepted. Their community shows how people with physical or social differences can thrive through mutual care and teamwork. When the evil queen tricks Snow White with a poisoned apple, the dwarfs fight to protect her. In the end, true love's kiss saves Snow White, but it is the dwarfs' kindness and unity that truly sustain her.

5.2. Dumbo

In Disney's 1941 animated classic *Dumbo*, a young elephant with oversized ears, nicknamed Dumbo, is born in a circus. Initially ridiculed and ostracized for his unusual ears, Dumbo is separated from his protective mother, who is deemed dangerous after defending him from bullies. Alone and friendless, Dumbo befriends Timothy Q. Mouse, who becomes his mentor and helps him discover his hidden potential. After a series of misadventures, including a drunken escapade that leads to a surreal, hallucinatory experience with pink elephants, Dumbo learns to use his large ears to fly. This newfound ability turns Dumbo into the circus's star attraction, reuniting him with his mother and earning him widespread acclaim. The film ends on a triumphant note, as Dumbo's unique feature becomes a symbol of his strength and individuality, transforming his once-mocked appearance into a source of pride and success.

5.3. Peter Pan

Peter Pan, the adventurous boy who refuses to grow up, takes Wendy and her brothers to Neverland, where they encounter the villainous Captain Hook (who has a missing arm), engaging in thrilling escapades. Ultimately, Peter learns the importance of family and friendship, while Wendy returns home with newfound wisdom. While disability is not explicitly addressed in the main plot, implicit themes related to disability are present, particularly in the character of Captain Hook. His missing hand, replaced by a hook, seems to influence his character and motivations.

5.4. The Hunchback of Notre Dame

Disney’s 1996 animated film *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* tells the story of Quasimodo, the kind-hearted bell-ringer of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, with a hunchback. Raised in isolation by the cruel Judge Frollo, who instills fear of the outside world in him, Quasimodo dreams of experiencing life beyond the cathedral walls. During the Festival of Fools, he ventures out and meets the compassionate gypsy, Esmeralda, who defends him from the mocking crowd. She becomes his friend, showing him kindness and acceptance. Meanwhile, Frollo, obsessed with eradicating the gypsies, develops a sinister infatuation with Esmeralda and vows to capture her. Esmeralda seeks sanctuary in the cathedral, where Quasimodo and Captain Phoebus, a soldier disillusioned with Frollo’s tyranny, help protect her. As Quasimodo grapples with his feelings for Esmeralda and his loyalty to Frollo, he musters the courage to defy his master. Frollo eventually discovers Esmeralda’s hiding place and sets the cathedral ablaze in his attempt to capture her. Quasimodo rescues her, and together with Phoebus, they confront Frollo. In the climactic battle, Frollo meets his demise, and Quasimodo is finally accepted by the people of Paris. The film concludes with Quasimodo emerging from the shadows, embraced by a new sense of belonging and freedom.

5.5. Brave

In *Brave* (2012), King Fergus of Clan Dunbroch is a powerful Scottish ruler known for his strength and resilience despite losing his leg in a battle with the demon bear Mor’du. His disability does not hinder his leadership or fierce protection of his family. As his daughter Merida defies tradition and accidentally transforms Queen Elinor into a bear, Fergus’s determination and warrior spirit become crucial. His prosthetic leg symbolizes survival and adaptability, subtly portraying physical disability as compatible with authority and heroism. Through Fergus’s courage, the film shows that impairment does not diminish his identity as father and king.

5.6. Luca

The 2021 Disney animated film *Luca* narrates the adventures of a young sea monster who transforms into a human when on land. In a quaint Italian town, Luca befriends another sea creature, Alberto, and they embark on a summer of discovery and friendship while concealing their true identities from the townsfolk. Massimo, born without a right arm, is subtly integrated into the plot, contributing to his character development and interactions. He is portrayed as

Luca's caring and supportive guardian, depicted as capable, resourceful, and fully integrated into the community of Portorosso despite his disability.

6. Patterns of Representation of Characters with Physical Disability

6.1. Disney Classical Era (1937–1959)

6.1.1. Vulnerability and Marginalization

In Disney's Classical Era, characters were marked by visible physical difference, and they often experience rejection or isolation. However, the nature of this differs between *Dumbo* and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. In *Dumbo* (1941), Dumbo's oversized ears single him out as a spectacle for ridicule. Other elephants dismiss him cruelly: "little F-R-E-A-K. Yes, him with those ears that only a mother could love." sneers one elephant. Clowns and circus spectators jeer at him as an oddity. Cinematic framing, especially close-ups of his ears, as shown in the trailer of the film *Dumbo*, available in the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLtQ3bCvBA0>, constantly remind the audience of his difference. Shots of Dumbo alone under harsh spotlights evoke a deep sense of alienation within the circus which is vibrant and bustling.

On the contrary, in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), the Seven Dwarfs are defined by their short stature and unique, sometimes exaggerated, physical traits, such as large noses, eyes, and ears, as shown at 28:23 minutes in the full movie which is available in the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wj1A9Mt313k>. While they may not be overtly described as "disabled," their bodily differences separate them from the human world. Unlike *Dumbo*, they do not face ridicule or hostility. Instead, they live secluded in the forest. They are content yet detached from the kingdom's social and political life. It can be argued that although the dwarfs' isolation is self-chosen, it still points to an implicit message: those who are physically "different" live apart. Thus, it can be argued that *Dumbo* externalizes difference through ridicule and public spectacle, while *Snow White* internalizes it through a separate, hidden community. However, both films reflect how the era saw bodily difference as "otherness," though the tone varies: Dumbo suffers cruelty; the dwarfs exist in seclusion.

6.1.2. Resilience and Empowerment

In *Dumbo* and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the theme of overcoming marginalization emerges but takes distinct forms. In *Dumbo*, empowerment is individual and miraculous: Dumbo transforms his difference into a superpower. Encouraged by his friend Timothy Q. Mouse who said to him: "The very things that held you down are gonna carry you up!", Dumbo learns to fly, turning ridicule into awe. Triumphant musical scores accompany soaring flight scenes, marking his moment of liberation from mockery.

In *Snow White*, the dwarfs' empowerment is collective and practical. They protect Snow White from danger and defend their home fiercely when the Queen threatens her. Their song "Heigh-Ho" embodies resilience through work and togetherness: their livelihood and friendship make them strong. Unlike Dumbo, they do not dramatically transform society's view of them, they remain separate but self-sufficient (as miners), reinforcing the idea that empowerment can come from solidarity, not only individual heroism.

On the other hand, in *Peter Pan*, Captain Hook shows resilience, but it is twisted by obsession. He constantly evades the crocodile that ate his hand. The tick-tock soundtrack and Hook’s shout, “*Save me, Smee!*” highlight that he survives through being cunning, not transformation. Hook’s perseverance is survivalist and is driven by bitterness rather than growth.

6.1.3. Friendship and Support

Supportive relationships play a crucial role in both films. Dumbo survives humiliation with the help of his mother’s gentle protection and the lullaby “*Baby Mine*” points to this bond. Timothy believed in him. Timothy’s line when he was encouraging Dumbo to fly with his large ears, “*Dumbo! C’mon, fly! Open them ears!... You can fly!!*”, seemed to flip Dumbo’s stigma into potential.

In *Snow White*, the dwarfs’ companionship with Snow White humanizes them. During a time of danger, one of the dwarfs, Grumpy, initially suspicious, said, “*The Queen ’ll kill her! We’ve gotta save her!*” The dwarfs’ group dynamic shows that friendship and care can bridge differences and create family-like bonds.

6.1.4. Wickedness and Villainy

Meanwhile, *Peter Pan* (1953) links disability with villainy through Captain Hook, whose missing hand (replaced by a metal hook) is both his weakness and a symbol of menace. Hook’s bitterness which is shown when he uses sentences such as, “*I’ll get you for this, Pan, if it’s the last thing I do!*”, suggests that his disability defines him. The use of dark colors makes this connection stronger. The sinister nature of Captain Hook can be seen clearly at 2:56 minutes in the clip of *Peter Pan* movie which can be accessed through the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0DtHUFyw2xg>, where close-up shots show the hook shining in the moonlight and catching Peter’s hat. These moments suggest that Captain Hook’s missing hand is linked to his anger and help present him as a threatening character. Moreover, the music sets a foreboding tone during scenes involving him, in a way that enhances the sense of danger and menace.

The shadows cast by the hook fixed to Hook’s hand as shown at 2:47 minutes in the clip of the *Peter Pan* movie available in the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0DtHUFyw2xg>, for instance, seem to signify the darkness consuming him and how his disability shapes his identity and actions. On the other hand, scenes suffused with gentle, otherworldly light may signify moments of hope and transformation, especially as characters like Peter Pan and Wendy confront their fears and embrace their inner resilience. Moreover, the framing of shots in the film seems to accentuate the character’s disabilities and their narrative impact. For example, positioning Hook against the backdrop of his ship or the menacing crocodile that stalks him seems to heighten his vulnerability and paranoia.

7. Disney Renaissance Era (1989–1999)

7.1 Vulnerability and Marginalization

The Renaissance Era marks a shift towards more complex stories, yet physical difference can be found to be a marker of social rejection or villainy. In *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), Quasimodo’s hunchback and facial deformity isolate him within Notre Dame’s stone

walls. He describes himself heartbreakingly: “*I am deformed, and I am ugly.*”, while Frollo follows up by saying that “*These are crimes for which the world shows little pity*”, suggesting that society dislikes disabled people. The townspeople mock him cruelly during the Feast of Fools, chanting “*King of Fools!*” as they throw food at him. Cinematic contrasts in form of warm light bathing Notre Dame’s interiors versus the cold, harsh shadows of the city visually separate Quasimodo’s sanctuary from society’s cruelty.

The color scheme in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996) reflects the contrast between light and darkness, symbolizing moral ambiguity. Warm, golden hues depict Notre Dame Cathedral, while darker tones represent the city streets and Frollo’s lair to lay emphasis on the themes of oppression faced by Quasimodo. Cinematic angles highlight Quasimodo’s disability and emotional journey, while close-up shots as shown at 0:10 minutes of the trailer clip of the film which can be found in this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6i3lyx1I_g, emphasize his deformities and wide shots capture the vastness of the world around him.

The framing techniques employed in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996) serve to accentuate the film’s themes of social inclusivity and discrimination. Through the positioning of Quasimodo alongside characters such as Esmeralda and Phoebus, the stark difference in their treatment of him based on his character rather than his appearance becomes apparent. Additionally, situating Quasimodo against the majestic backdrop of Notre Dame Cathedral symbolizes his divine connection and his role as a beacon of justice and compassion. Lighting plays a significant role in pointing to the themes of oppression and cruelty, particularly in scenes involving Frollo. The harsh lighting emphasizes the darkness and injustice that Quasimodo confronts in his struggle for acceptance and understanding. Thus, Quasimodo’s difference evokes pity and sympathy, while that of Hook, from the Classical Era, marks him as dangerous. Both Quasimodo and Captain Hook face alienation, the former as a victim, the latter as a villain. Moreover, Quasimodo’s deformity draws public scorn, while Hook’s amputation becomes a narrative tool for menace and revenge.

7.2. Resilience and Empowerment

Quasimodo’s resilience is portrayed with remarkable compassion. Though locked away, he dreams of freedom; “*Safe behind these windows and these parapets of stone... out there...*” he sings, longing to belong. His bravery in saving Esmeralda shows that his physical difference does not limit his moral courage. Alan Menken’s choral arrangements and the cathedral bells amplify his triumphs, imbuing his flight across Notre Dame with sacred grandeur. Quasimodo earns respect and agency by confronting oppression; Hook, in the Classical Era, never moves beyond vengeance. His disability trapped him in villainy.

7.3. Friendship and Support

Friendship defines Quasimodo’s path to self-worth. Esmeralda’s kindness can be described as transformative. The gargoyles, though comic relief, symbolise his inner courage talking back to self-doubt. These bonds allow Quasimodo to risk everything for love and justice. In *Peter Pan*, Hook’s world is loveless. Smee, his bumbling sidekick, calls him “*Cap’n!*” with forced loyalty but never offers true comfort. Hook’s isolation is part of his punishment: unlike Dumbo or Quasimodo, he finds no redemption through friendship. The Renaissance portrayals

reinforce that while marginalization persists, supportive relationships can redeem characters marked by disability, except when that disability is used to embody evil.

8. Disney Revival Era (2009–2022)

8.1. Vulnerability and Marginalisation

Disney’s Revival Era brings fresh perspectives by normalising physical difference without centering it as a source of shame or villainy. In *Brave* (2012), King Fergus’s missing leg, the result of battling Mor’dù the bear, is worn like a badge of honor. His response to Merida when she explains how the bear ate his leg, “*That’s my favorite part!*” and his insistence on fighting the bear, which was shown when he said to it, “*I’ll fight you with my bare hands*” is a proof of his courage, despite his deformity. Unlike Quasimodo’s deformity or Hook’s missing hand, Fergus’s disability does not isolate him; it deepens his status as a brave leader. Moreover, warm, earthy colors and wide shots of the Scottish Highlands reinforce his integration with nature and clan.

Similarly, in *Luca* (2021), Massimo’s missing right arm is simply part of who he is. He never hides it, nor does it attract pity. Instead, he is introduced catching fish single-handedly. He towers over his small boat and cuts things skillfully with his left arm in a way that suggests that disability is no longer a plot twist or moral lesson but an ordinary trait. Thus, unlike earlier eras, the Revival Era depicts physical difference as incidental to one’s social standing. Neither Fergus nor Massimo is marginalized; both are respected. They are portrayed as capable heads of family and community.

8.2. Resilience and Empowerment

Fergus’s resilience lies in how he continues leading, fighting, and parenting with gusto. He trains Merida, clashes with Queen Elinor, and laughs about his prosthetic leg. Wide shots of him hunting, sword-fighting, and feasting show a man who is full of life. Massimo’s strength is quieter but equally powerful. He runs his fishing business, provides for his daughter Giulia, and mentors Luca and Alberto with what can be described as gentle authority. These portrayals normalize the idea that disability does not require miraculous overcoming. Instead, Fergus and Massimo thrive because their communities accept and support them as they are.

8.3. Friendship and Support

Unlike Dumbo or Quasimodo (from the Classical and Renaissance Eras, respectively) who rely heavily on friends for rescue, Fergus and Massimo offer support to others. Fergus encourages Merida’s independent spirit, despite Elinor’s disapproval.

Massimo feeds and mentors Luca and Alberto, sharing warm spaghetti scenes. This reversal is striking: disability no longer positions characters as dependent but as sources of comfort, skill, and protection. It signifies an inclusive narrative where physical difference coexists with leadership and nurturing.

9. Discussion

The patterns of representation identified in this study demonstrate how Disney's depiction of characters with physical disabilities has both mirrored and perpetuated prevailing cultural narratives, while also gradually challenging them. Through the framework of representation theory, which examines how media constructs meaning and shapes audience perceptions (Hall, 1980), the research indicates that characters with physical disabilities have frequently been portrayed as "other," particularly during the Classical and Renaissance Eras. This "othering" is consistent with Hall's idea that meaning is produced through difference. In this case, difference is embodied visibly and used narratively to define who belongs within or outside the social order.

Characters such as Dumbo (*Dumbo*, 1941) and Quasimodo (*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, 1996) exemplify this dynamic. Both are portrayed as outsiders who must navigate societal marginalization due to their physical differences. Their outsider status is not neutral: it carries moral and emotional connotations that echo broader cultural discourses. For example, Dumbo's large ears and Quasimodo's hunchback function symbolically as signs of inferiority or ridicule within their respective societies. This is consistent with Norden's (2012) and Sammond's (2011) arguments that classic Hollywood animations often employ disability as a visible marker of deviance or pitifulness. Dumbo's public humiliation and Quasimodo's forced isolation within Notre Dame vividly enact the representational trope of the disabled body as spectacle — reinforcing the notion that "normalcy" is constructed by defining what it excludes (Davis, 2015). Regarding the dwarfs, they are physically distinct and live on the periphery of human society, which has been interpreted by scholars such as Norden (2012) and Sammond (2011) as symbolic of difference and otherness. While they are not portrayed as seeking integration into mainstream society in the same direct manner as Dumbo or Quasimodo, their separation and coded physical traits still resonate with wider historical tropes of marginalization and deviance from "normative" bodies. Moreover, the analysis in this study highlights how their isolation in a self-contained realm mirrors historical cultural narratives in which physically different bodies were segregated or confined to "safe" spaces apart from dominant society.

As the findings indicate, Disney's narrative techniques simultaneously embed counter-narratives of resilience. Despite being stigmatized, Dumbo reclaims his ears as a source of flight, while Quasimodo's inner nobility contradicts the deformity that is supposed to define him. Such plotlines partially disrupt the fixed meaning of disability as purely negative, and this aligns with Watson's (2020) notion which suggests that mainstream texts can reproduce dominant meanings while also offering space for subversion. For example, the repeated motif of Dumbo's flight directly resists the frame of his ears as purely burdensome in a way that invites viewers to reimagine difference as potential.

However, these Classical and Renaissance Era films still largely reproduce a binary logic: disability is either a burden to be overcome (Dumbo) or a marker of moral contrast (Quasimodo's virtue versus society's cruelty). Even the association of disability with villainy in *Peter Pan* (1953), where Captain Hook's amputation becomes a narrative shorthand for wickedness and revenge, illustrates how Disney's earlier representations relied on deeply entrenched stereotypes that linked physical impairment to moral corruption, and this is a trope well-documented by Mintz (2019).

The comparison with the Disney Revival Era films, *Brave* (2012) and *Luca* (2021), as well as with these films and the ones produced in the Classical Era and Renaissance Era point to a significant shift in how disability is represented by Disney. Rather than focusing on overcoming disability or using it as a moral signpost, *Brave* (2012) and *Luca* (2021) treat physical difference as incidental to identity. King Fergus's missing leg in *Brave* is woven seamlessly into his characterization as a bold and humorous leader, never presented as a tragedy. Likewise, Massimo's missing arm in *Luca* is acknowledged just once — "*Born this way*," he says, framing it as an ordinary trait rather than a defining obstacle, and this minimal narrative emphasis contrasts sharply with older films, which foregrounded the physical difference as a source of plot tension and spectacle.

This subtle normalization suggests an evolution in representational strategy: Disney's Revival Era engages more with the politics of recognition than with the older politics of pity or fear (Carlson, 2017). Here, representation theory reminds us that meaning is historically situated. The shift towards normalization reflects wider cultural movements, such as the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy (United Nations, 2019) and the increased visibility of Disability Pride (Lindsey, 2024), which challenge the charity model (Barnes, 2013) and instead promote a rights-based framing of disability. The portrayal of Massimo aligns with what Le (2022) describes as a progressive trend in contemporary children's media to present disabled characters as multidimensional and competent in a way that avoids narrative pity.

The contrast between Classical Era and Revival Era films also exposes how Disney's representations mirrored dominant social structures of their times. Between 1930 and 1960, when *Snow White* and *Dumbo* were produced, the prevailing Charity Model saw disabled individuals as objects of benevolence, reinforcing dependency (Pelka, 2012). Such discourses appear in the way *Dumbo*'s rescue hinges on Timothy's intervention rather than structural change and this seems to point to how real-world disabled individuals relied on charity rather than rights-based protections. This context explains why early Disney films presented disability as a spectacle of vulnerability or pity, with few pathways for structural belonging.

By contrast, *Luca* and *Brave* reflect a representational logic which is more consistent with the Social Model of Disability, which positions barriers and not bodies as the true disabling force (Grinker, 2020). Neither Massimo nor Fergus is defined by overcoming their difference; instead, they embody everyday competence and emotional richness that signal a cultural shift towards inclusion. These portrayals suggest that Disney is not merely reflecting but also contributing to changing meanings around disability in a way that can help to shape audience expectations that physical difference is neither tragic nor villainous, but simply part of human variety.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that even this more inclusive turn has limits. The rarity of disabled protagonists, as opposed to side characters such as Massimo, shows that representation often stops short of full narrative centrality. As Holcomb and Latham-Mintus (2022) found, older Disney texts generally place disabled characters at the narrative margins; *Luca* hints at progress by making Massimo active and respected, yet he remains secondary to the story of able-bodied characters. This highlights that while narrative tropes have evolved, structural representation and decisions around who gets to be the hero still needs closer scrutiny.

Characters, such as the dwarfs, King Fergus, and Massimo, are supporting rather than central protagonists and researcher agrees that this does not constitute full empowerment in the sense of narrative centrality, as discussed by Holcomb and Latham-Mintus (2022).

However, within representation theory (Hall, 1980), it can be argued that supporting characters still play a crucial role in constructing and circulating meanings about difference. It can also be

considered that the shift that is traced is therefore less about the disabled character moving from side roles to main protagonist (which remains limited in Disney) but more about how these characters are framed: from spectacle or comedic curiosity (*Snow White*, *Dumbo*) to well-rounded, respected individuals embedded naturally within their communities (*Brave*, *Luca*).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Disney's portrayals of physical disability have moved from overt marginalization and spectacle to a more nuanced recognition of difference and this is a pattern that both reflects and contributes to changing social norms. Representation theory helps reveal that such portrayals are never neutral: they produce meanings that can influence how audiences see and interpret physical disability, and as the cultural push for inclusive media continues, Disney's evolving narratives may help normalize disabled identities not only as part of the background but as rightful protagonists at the center of their own stories.

The study has some limitations. It focuses solely on Disney animated films, which might not fully represent the broader film and media landscape. Other studios and genres could portray physical disability differently, and their inclusion could provide a more comprehensive understanding of representation. Additionally, the selection of only six films may not capture the full spectrum of Disney's portrayal of physical disability over time. A more extensive range of films from various periods could offer a deeper analysis of trends and changes. The researcher acknowledges that the purposive sample of six films (three from the Classical Era, one from the Renaissance, and two from the Revival) creates an imbalance that limits strict era comparability. This reflects the focus of the research on cultural prominence and scholarly relevance rather than numerical symmetry. The researcher also acknowledges that some featured characters, such as the dwarfs, King Fergus, and Massimo, are supporting rather than central protagonists, which constrains conclusions about full narrative empowerment.

Moreover, Textual Analysis inherently involves interpretation, which could be influenced by researchers' subjective biases. Using multiple coders or additional qualitative methods could enhance the reliability and validity of the findings. Furthermore, the study lacks a deeper exploration of the cultural, social, and historical contexts that shape these representations. Including such contexts could provide richer insights into the factors influencing disability portrayal in media.

The study primarily focuses on film content without considering audience reception or the impact of these representations on viewers, particularly individuals with disabilities. Incorporating audience perspectives through surveys, interviews, or focus groups could offer valuable insights into how these portrayals affect attitudes and perceptions. Despite these limitations, the study employed an in-depth analysis, including photo descriptions, to explore the representation of physical disability in the selected films.

Future research should consider a comparative analysis of physical disability representation across multiple studios, including other animation giants like DreamWorks, and across various film genres. Including a broader range of films from different studios and genres, such as live-action films, could provide a more comprehensive perspective on the portrayal of physical disability.

Increasing the number and variety of films analyzed, spanning a wider range of periods, would offer a more thorough overview of Disney's representation of physical disability over time. This could involve analyzing films from different decades, including both classics and recent releases, to capture evolving trends.

Employing more rigorous methodological approaches, such as multiple coders or inter-rater reliability assessments, could help mitigate subjective biases in textual analysis.

Additionally, incorporating qualitative methods like interviews or focus groups with filmmakers, disability advocates, and individuals with disabilities could provide deeper insights into the nuances of representation.

10. Conclusions

This study shows that historically, characters with disabilities in Disney films were often depicted as outsiders who were grappling with acceptance and belonging, as seen with Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996) and *Dumbo* (1941). These characters, despite facing societal mistreatment, displayed resilience and inner strength, reflecting common stereotypes. However, beginning with the Renaissance era, there was a noticeable shift towards more in-depth portrayals. Films like *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996) began to explore the multifaceted emotions and experiences of characters with disabilities, presenting them as individuals with their own hopes, dreams, and fears. This trend continued and evolved, with more recent films from the Revival era emphasizing themes of empowerment and self-discovery. For instance, *Luca* (2021) portrays Massimo as a capable and independent individual, with his disability minimally referenced and not central to his character. This positive representation is likely to have a beneficial impact on a broad audience, especially those with disabilities. It reflects a more inclusive media landscape where disabled individuals are not ostracized or stereotyped but are seen as part of the community.

The findings of this study are consistent with media representation theory, which posits that media reflects and shapes societal attitudes and values. In Disney’s classical era, characters with physical disabilities were depicted as marginalized and vulnerable, reflecting societal stigma and negative stereotypes prevalent from 1930 to 1960. During this period, disabled individuals were often seen as pitiable and dependent, mirroring the dominant charity model of disability. Conversely, in the revival era, Disney’s portrayal shifted towards resilience and empowerment, aligning with contemporary cultural shifts towards inclusivity and advocacy for disability rights. This evolution in representation underscores media’s role in both reflecting and influencing changing societal norms and attitudes. This shift towards more positive and inclusive representations aligns with the current cultural context, which increasingly calls for inclusivity and reflects changing societal norms and attitudes towards disability.

Nuanced portrayals of persons with disability as seen in *Luca* (2021) can educate non-disabled audiences, helping them understand that disability is just one aspect of a person’s character and does not define them entirely. Positive representations can help challenge and change societal attitudes toward persons with disabilities. They promote understanding, acceptance, and empathy, breaking down stereotypes and reducing prejudice. Through the depiction of characters with physical disabilities as complex, capable, and integral members of society, films can influence public perceptions and foster a more inclusive culture. For individuals with physical disabilities, seeing positive portrayals in films can be empowering. It can provide role models and a sense of validation, enhancing self-esteem and self-identity.

Representation matters, and positive images can inspire confidence and ambition and show that the experiences and stories of persons with disabilities are valuable and worth telling. Films with positive portrayals of persons with disabilities can serve as powerful tools for advocacy and raising awareness about disability issues. Moreover, positive portrayals can influence the film and entertainment industry itself, encouraging more inclusive casting and storytelling

practices. It can lead to more opportunities for actors with disabilities and promote diversity both on and off-screen. This shift can drive the creation of more authentic and varied narratives that reflect the true diversity of human experiences.

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