‘Balancing family time with fighting villains’: Gender, agency and social action in the representation of Disney Heroes.

Abstract

This study provides a feminist stylistic account of gendered agency in a set of ‘Disney Heroes’ collectible trading cards designed for young children to play with. Through a mixed-methods analysis of grammatical, semantic and social agency in the texts, we show how the representation of male and female characters in these cards reinforces limiting, and potentially damaging, gender norms around men being more socially agentive, having more impact on the world around them, and ultimately being more ‘heroic’, than women. There is some cause for optimism in terms of the improved representation of female characters over time, and the foregrounding of female heroes’ agentive roles in their worlds, but ultimately the cards uphold the hegemonic status quo. The quantitative and qualitative dimensions of this analysis also revealed quite different insights, demonstrating the importance of analyses that account for the way linguistic strategies are deployed in context, and in combination with a range of other resources.

Keywords: Disney, feminist stylistics, transitivity, children, toys

Introduction

This article employs a feminist stylistic approach to analyse gendered representations of Disney characters in a set of ‘Disney Heroes’ collectible trading cards. These cards were part of a joint promotional campaign in 2019, where the UK supermarket chain Sainsbury’s collaborated with the entertainment corporation Disney to distribute the cards to their customers, as an incentive to spend money in-store. The cards are grouped into six imperative ‘challenge’ categories: Team Up, Eat Well, Get Active, Express Yourself, Do Good and Be Smart. They are therefore marketed as aspirational products, with children being encouraged to imitate the actions undertaken by their favourite Disney Heroes. Through a feminist stylistic analysis of these cards, we aim to understand what kinds of actions and attributes children are invited to emulate through their engagement with the Disney Heroes collection, and whether both boys and girls are invited to take up equal roles in the world.

In our exploration of an earlier Sainsbury’s promotion in partnership with LEGO, we outlined the importance of toys and products for children’s developing understanding of ‘‘normal’, expected or desirable’ gendered roles and relationships (Author 2 et al. 2020: 61). The socio-cultural significance of toys has been well attested. For example, in Caldas-Coulthard and van Leeuwen’s (2003: 54) analysis of fictional and factual narratives about teddy bears, they point to the intimate relationship between children and their teddies, which are often depicted as speaking, hearing friends and companions who are ‘deeply… caught up in the traumas of growing up and the complexities of the relationships between parents and children’. Looking at object-based children’s toys, Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) have argued that the design of these toys can affect children’s perception of, and relationships with, related objects and technologies in the wider world. For example, they suggest that the inclusion of eyes on toy clocks, telephones and vehicles can encourage children to form ‘an emotive, personalized bond’ with technologies of time, communication and transport (Kress and van Leeuwen 2020: 255). In this article, we reiterate our position that the analysis of children’s toys and products has an important place in

social and critical analyses. We also argue that the Disney Heroes cards have particular significance for young people's developing understanding of gendered norms, as human or human-like figures which children are directly encouraged to emulate. Further, we suggest that, like LEGO minifigures, the Disney Heroes' existence in fictional, fantasy realms heightens their potential for modelling transformative gendered roles and overcoming stereotypes. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2020: 265) put it, 'toys are mirrors of their world', but they can also 'herald a world to come'. This article will therefore consider the degree to which hegemonic gender roles are challenged and transformed in the cards.

By focusing on the textual descriptions featured in the Disney Heroes cards, we seek to discover how male and female heroes are depicted by examining what qualities are attributed to them, what actions they undertake, and how agentive each hero is shown to be. We employ a multi-faceted concept of *agency* to explore how much control the heroes are shown to have over themselves and others, and the degree of impact they have on the world around them. For example, we consider the representations of these heroes in terms of *grammatical agency* by examining the linguistic structures that determine the relationships between different elements in the clause. However, we also take *semantic agency* into account, considering the situated meanings attached to different elements of the clause. Finally, we examine how grammatical and semantic elements combine to produce a sense of the heroes' *social agency,* focusing on how the heroes' actions affect the world around them. As well as examining patterns across the whole dataset, we select three pairs of related heroes (for example husband/wife pairs and male/female iterations of a superhero) to compare like-for-like examples of male and female heroes in qualitative detail.

Textual representations of gendered agency

The present study contributes to the linguistic study of gendered representations in everyday texts (and other artefacts) in a number of ways. First, in terms of gendered representations in children's products specifically, this article builds on the findings of our previous research, which explores the 2017 Sainsbury's-LEGO 'Create the World' collectible cards (Author 2 et al. 2020). In this study, we reviewed a range of interdisciplinary literature showing how children's products have been consistently developed and marketed along sharply gender differentiated lines. In particular, we noted the persistent finding that 'boys' toys' tend to appear in professional and action-oriented settings, whilst 'girls' toys' usually occupy domestic and care-oriented settings, and often have a focus on beauty and physical appearance (e.g. Caldas-Coulthard and van Leeuwen 2002; Kahlenberg and Hein 2010; Martinez et al. 2013). Our earlier analysis, which focused on the visual depictions of male and female LEGO minifigures in 'Create the World' cards, confirmed that the Sainsbury's-LEGO promotion reproduced these gender-differentiated norms in many respects. For example, our results showed that the cards represented female minifigures as 'younger and slimmer, with more emphasised facial features', whilst male minifigures were 'depicted as physically stronger, larger and more mature' (Author 2 et al. 2020: 74). In terms of the minifigures' social actions, we noted that male minifigures were 'more likely to be functionalised in more dangerous or physical occupations', whilst female minifigures were more likely to be positioned in 'less adventurous, and more frivolous, roles' (Author 2 et al. 2020: 74). These results are echoed in Putland's (2020) analysis of the website home pages for LEGO City and LEGO Friends, which target male and female audiences respectively. Focusing on the way children are encouraged to interact with the toys, Putland

(2020) also found that roles and relationships were distinctly gendered in this promotional material. The LEGO Friends site, for example, promoted friendship, kindness and self-expression through interaction with an imaginary all-female friendship group. The LEGO City site, on the other hand, emphasised action-oriented relationships, with users often being positioned as heroes who are engaged in conflict within an imaginary LEGO city setting.

In terms of textual representations of gendered actors in more adult domains such as newspapers and books, corpus linguistic methods have revealed some persistent patterns across large bodies of texts. For example, Pearce (2008) explored collocates (words that co-occur more often than would be expected by chance) of MAN and WOMAN in the British National Corpus (BNC). Baker and Baker (2019) created two corpora of newspaper articles taken from nine daily national British newspapers, one focusing on 'masculinity' and the other on 'femininity'. Both Pearce (2008) and Baker and Baker (2019) found that men and masculinity were associated with power, strength and concrete, often physical, social actions in these corpora. For example, Pearce (2008: 19) showed that 'man' was frequently the agent of 'verbs of action requiring strength and endurance', such as *conquer, dig, attack* and *strangle*, whilst 'women' were frequently the agent of verbs that implied 'emotional intemperance', such as *weep, cry* and *wail*. Further, Pearce notes that stereotypes around women's weakness and subordination were evident in the frequent positioning of woman as the objects of violent and powerful actions, such as *rape, assault, ravish, coerce* and *marginalize*. When men were positioned as grammatical objects, there was nevertheless often an implication that they were agentive actors (often criminals) who were difficult to restrain, through verbs such as *apprehend, handcuff, catch* and *wound*.

Baker and Baker's (2019) research also points to connections between masculinity and concrete, physical social actions. They showed that masculinity was often represented as something to be asserted and proven through repeated actions involving bravery and aggression, for example 'sliding across the ice on your belly, being a CIA agent, having your chest waxed, and being aggressive in bed' (Baker and Baker 2019: 373). Further, Baker and Baker (2019) draw attention to the impactful nature of actions associated with masculinity, arguing that masculinity is a 'force to be reckoned with' (370), with 'more scope to cause social change in society, and to impose control on people, sometimes through violence' (382). Femininity, on the other hand, was represented as something to be *used* rather than *proven,* with women being depicted as 'exploiting their femininity in order to persuade other people to follow their agendas' (Baker and Baker 2019: 375). This exploitation is often associated with sexuality, with women represented as using their bodies to get what they want, usually from men. Baker and Baker's (2019) study therefore suggests, paradoxically, that when women are agentive, they are often depicted as using that agency to permit or enable *others*' agency and control.

Turning to more qualitative analyses of gendered representations in adult domains, research in feminist stylistics has paid particular attention to the way certain grammatical patterns and structures can imply different levels of agency and action. In the present article, we take particular influence from a body of work that draws on early versions of Halliday's transitivity model (Halliday 1967, 1971, 1985) to analyse patterns of gendered agency in various genres (e.g. Burton 1982; Clark 1992; Mills 1994; Talbot 1995, 1997; Wareing 1994). In her now classic analysis of 'disenabling syntactic structures' in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar,* for example, Burton (1982) demonstrates how passivising grammatical structures render the female protagonist a helpless victim of electric shock treatment for depression, whilst other participants in the scene

take up more agentive roles (Burton 1982: 201). Building on Burton's work, Wareing (1994) shows how men often adopt more active roles, whilst women serve as the recipients of male action, in extracts from contemporary romance fiction. Wareing also finds that female characters' body parts are frequently subjected to fragmentation, and acted upon by male characters, whilst male bodies are rarely on the receiving end of actions performed by women. Similar patterns of female passivity and male dominance have also been uncovered in textual analyses of adult action adventure fiction (Talbot 1995) and in work on newspaper reporting of sexual violence (Clark 1992). Taken together, these studies point to the persistent grammatical downranking of female characters, in a way that reflects their socially subordinate positions in the textworld.

Overall, these analyses of the gendered representation of social actors across a range of texts, and from a range of perspectives, consistently point to a discursive trend for men and boys to be represented as powerful, active and agentive social actors, whereas women and girls are assigned roles and attributes indicating their relative weakness, inaction and lack of agency. In the present study, we build on these findings in a number of ways. First, we reassert the significance of children's products as important resources through which children learn about their place, and more specifically their gendered roles, in the world. Second, we seek to discover whether any progress has been made in terms of egalitarian gendered representations in Sainsburys' collectible card promotions. We also focus on a different semiotic aspect of the artefacts: whilst our own and other studies of children's products have focused heavily on the visual dimension of gendered representations, here we explore written representations of male and female Disney Heroes. Finally, we seek to re-emphasise the importance of multi-faceted, mixed methods analyses of gender, social action and agency. By treating agency as a multidimensional concept, and adopting a mixed-methods approach, we seek to move beyond early assertions in feminist stylistics that 'men are active' and 'women are passive' by interrogating different discursive mechanisms for representing activity and agency in the Disney Heroes collectible cards.

Data

As explained above, this article analyses a set of 'Disney Heroes' collectible trading cards that were distributed by the UK supermarket Sainsbury's during their 2019 promotion. We collected all of the Disney Heroes cards during the campaign, took photographs of each one, and collated the text of each card. There are 144 Disney Heroes cards in total, and the set is organised into six different 'challenge' categories, including 24 cards in each group: Team Up, Eat Well, Get Active, Express Yourself, Do Good and Be Smart. The cards feature single characters or groups from the wider Disney conglomerate, including the Star Wars and Marvel franchises. Because of our interest in gendered representations, our analysis focuses only on the cards featuring single characters, since the groups were often mixed-gender. As a result, we excluded the 'Team Up' category from our analysis, as well as a small number of 'team' cards included in other categories. Further, because we wanted to explore binary gendered representations of Disney Heroes, we excluded three non-human characters who did not seem to be categorised in binary gendered terms: the bird-like Porgs, and the robots R2-D2 and BB-9E, from the Star Wars franchise. After these exclusions, we were left with a set of 114 cards.

The template for the Disney Heroes cards, which is consistently deployed across the collection, is reproduced in Figure 1.[1] In this article we focus on the textual information of each card. This is presented in the lower central portion, and provides a brief written portrait to accompany an image of the hero, usually with a focus on the hero's unique skills, qualities or powers, the action(s) they undertake, and the effect they have on the world around them (e.g. 'Princess Leia never gives up hope when fighting the Empire'). This is a short stretch of text, averaging only 9 words across the whole set. However, a great deal of information is conveyed within this text, and each fragment often includes multiple clauses and circumstances. We are interested in how the heroes' actions are conveyed, and the agency that is attributed to them, in these short but complex texts, and whether there are any gendered differences in these depictions.

Figure 1: Disney Heroes card design template[2]

Methods

Through a feminist stylistic analysis of grammatical, semantic and social agency in the text of each 'Disney Heroes' card, we aim to demonstrate the extent to which the heroes are shown to exert agency and impact on the fictional worlds around them. In doing so, we respond to the following research questions:

- How agentive is each hero?
- Do the heroes act on themselves or others?
- How far reaching are the impacts of each heroes' actions?
- How is each hero positioned in relation to their actions, skills, and /attributes?

Our approach is influenced by both traditional feminist stylistic analyses of transitivity and agency in literary texts, as well as more recent critical discourse work on the textual construction of gender roles (see earlier discussion). In this section we describe some of the analytical concepts that inform our analysis, and explain how we have applied these to our dataset.

Quantitative analysis: Analysing gendered agency via clause and transitivity patterns

The first step we took to analyse patterns of gendered agency in the Disney Heroes card descriptions was to quantitatively code the main process of each text, distinguishing five process types according to Halliday and Matthiessen's (2013) transitivity classification system. This model sets out a system of process types that distinguish between outer/externalised experiences, which are realised mainly by what Halliday terms 'material' and 'behavioural' processes, and inner/internalised experiences, which are generally construed through 'mental', 'verbal' and 'relational' processes. The material clause construes some form of *change* or *transformation* occurring through time, usually in the form of 'doings' or 'happenings' (Halliday and Matthiessen 2013). Material processes can also take *transitive* and *intransitive forms,* and we coded each material process for this distinction. In traditional grammatical analyses, transitive clauses have a process that requires an object (a participant affected by the process, as in 'Tinkerbell **can fix** broken items'), whereas intransitive clauses do not require an object (as in 'Dory **will travel** endless distances'). Mental processes are verbs of cognition (e.g. 'Wasabi

[1] The original card designs have not been reproduced for legal reasons.

[2] Image attribution: the image in the centre of the card is created by IconMark, from Noun Project.

thinks on his feet [...]'), perception (e.g. 'see') and emotion/reaction (e.g. 'Mickey **loves** cooking for his friends'). Behavioural processes lie somewhere between material and mental processes, since they often involve some kind of physiological or psychological behaviour. Whilst behavioural processes are typically internalised, they tend to take a grammatical form typical of material 'doing' processes, for example 'smile' or 'cough'. Whilst there were some behavioural processes in the cards, such as 'Miguel *expresses* his happiness through singing and playing', and 'Ariel *spends* most of her time singing and exploring', this was a very low frequency category in our dataset. There were also relatively few verbal processes denoting speech in our dataset, though one rare example includes 'Squirrel Girl can talk to squirrels and has teeth strong enough to chew through wood'. Relational processes are processes of 'being'. Grammatically, they include forms of the copula ('is', 'was' and 'have'), and come in two modes: *attributive* ('*a* is an attribute of *x*') and *identifying* (*a* is the identity of *x*) (Halliday and Matthiessen 2013: 267). Existential processes simply represent something that 'exists', and are also realized by copula forms (e.g. 'there are birds in the tree'). There were no canonical examples of existential verbs in the data, though there were some processes that combined material and existential properties, as with the examples 'Violet **can become** invisible at will', and 'Maz Kanata **survives** the underworld with a balance between darkness and light.'

Whilst these broad distinctions between six main process types is a useful starting point for thinking about how representations are encoded in lexico-grammatical choices, the demarcation of discrete process types can be misleading, as illustrated in the above examples of Violet and Maz Kanata's texts. As Mills (1994) observes, the potential for a single linguistic item to have multiple meanings can raise problems for transitivity analyses based on form and 'conventional' usage. Mills therefore warns against mechanical applications of Halliday's model, arguing that a multi-faceted analysis of transitivity is necessary to capture the nuances of agency in feminist textual analyses. The indeterminacy of the categories, however, is in many ways built into Halliday's model. Indeed, Halliday acknowledges that the process types are 'fuzzy categories', and imagines the transitivity system as a spherical, rather than linear model, with each process type blending into the next, much like a colour chart (see Halliday and Matthiessen 2013: 216).

Bearing this indeterminacy in mind, we used combined codes (such as *material-mental* and *behavioural-relational*) to annotate the process types in our dataset, and checked one another's intuitions about how to categorise particular processes as our analysis proceeded, as a form of inter-rater reliability. For example, we agreed that the process 'uses' functioned as a material-mental process, somewhere in-between physical action and cognition, in the example 'Vision uses his vast intellect to come up with winning plans', but functioned as a material process in 'Spider-Girl uses her flexibility to swing through the streets', since the context suggests more physical action. Table 1 illustrates the full range of codes we deployed in the quantitative analysis of our dataset.

Table 1: Sub-categories of process types for main verbs across the dataset

Process type	**Total frequency**

	Raw frequency	% of total processes
Material	47	34%
Material-mental	6	4%
Material-existential	2	1%
Material-relational	1	1%
Behavioural-material	3	2%
Behavioural-relational	2	1%
Mental	23	17%
Verbal	4	3%
Relational-attributive-intensive	17	12%
Relational-attributive-possessive	14	10%
Relational-attributive-circumstantial	1	1%
Relational-identifying-intensive	19	14%
Relational-identifying-possessive	0	0%
Relational-identifying-circumstantial	0	0%
Total	**139**	**100%**

As well as using combined codes to capture the blurring of inner and outer experience, there is also a 'fuzziness' in capturing 'form vs function', perhaps exemplified most obviously by the presence of metaphorical structures. For example, in a literal interpretation of 'moves' in 'Simba moves past his fear to save the animal kingdom from Scar', this process would be categorised as a material, physical process. However, in the text, 'moves' is actually a metaphorical representation of a cognitive process (because fears are mental constructs, not tangible objects). Since our interest is in the choices that are made to represent heroes' actions and agency in particular ways, in cases such as these, we coded lexical choices in the literal sense. Therefore in this example, 'moves' was coded as a material action process, because the more physical connotations of 'moves' from other contexts is carried over in this usage.

Utilising early versions of Halliday's model to explore gendered representations in fictional texts, feminist stylisticians have found that male characters tend to occupy more active roles via material action processes, whilst women tend to serve less active roles, as the agents of more

mental and relational processes (Burton 1982; Talbot 1995, 1997; Wareing 1994). These studies also suggest that relational processes can have interesting implications for agency, since the decision to represent a particular character using a higher degree of relational processes can give the impression of relative inaction. Further, feminist stylisticians such as Talbot (1995) have suggested that transitive clauses can imply that characters possess a greater degree of agency in their environment, and that male protagonists are more often the grammatical subjects of transitive verbs, whilst other characters are represented through intransitive structures. By coding for process types and transitive/intransitive structures, we aimed to determine whether these early findings were replicated here. In particular, we sought to understand whether the male and female heroes' actions, overall, were more 'internalised', having little impact beyond themselves, or more 'externalised', having more effect on the world around them.

Qualitative analysis: Integrating grammatical, semantic and social agency

Given the 'fuzzy' nature of the transitivity model, and the importance of accounting for contextual usage, we sought a more nuanced exploration of the texts through a closer, qualitative analysis of a smaller group of cards. In order to directly compare like-for-like representations of male and female superheroes, we selected three pairs of heroes who were linked by their roles and relationships: Spider-Girl and Spider-Man, She-Hulk and Hulk, and Elastigirl and Mr. Incredible. The first two pairs represent male and female iterations of the same superhero phenomenon, whilst Elastigirl and Mr. Incredible are the two lead 'Incredibles' from the Disney franchise *The Incredibles.*

At this stage, we extended our analysis of clause and process types in the cards by drawing more fully on some of the sub-categories and descriptive concepts developed by Halliday, and further elaborated in feminist stylistics. We paid particular attention to variation within the most common process type across the set: material processes. For example, in order to determine whether some heroes' actions had more material effects on the world around them, we distinguished between relatively abstract processes such as *defends* and *shares*, versus more concrete processes such as *fights* and *cooking*. We also considered levels of intentionality, in terms of how 'deliberate' the heroes' material actions were implied to be, and whether those actions were more 'externalised', affecting others around them, or more 'internalised', affecting only the hero themselves. In addition, we paid attention to nominalisations in the text, a process which has the potential to place distance between processes and actors, and to the fragmentation of actors into the sum of their parts, which can have similar effects (Wareing 1994). We also considered the semantic implications of the heroes' actions and attributes, for example whether they are combative, aggressive or friendly, and took account of the context beyond the cards, considering the heroes' historical depiction in films, comics and television series. In our analysis of relational processes, we deployed the full range of types, first attending to whether these processes were attributive or identifying, and further, whether they could be attributed to the sub-categories of *intensive*, *possessive* or *circumstantial*. By combining these analytical tools in a close examination of the paired heroes, we sought to examine action and agency from a number of angles, and thus capture the full nuance of these depictions.

Quantitative Analysis

As a preliminary to the first part of our analysis, we identified the gender of each Disney Heroes character from our sub-set of 114 cards, relying on a combination of direct indices in the text,

indirect indices in the images, and our knowledge of the Disney franchises and films. We began by calculating the number of female and male heroes in each 'challenge' category, expressed as a percentage of the total number of cards in each category. We then calculated the total number of female and male heroes across the set, expressed as a percentage of the total of 114 cards. These raw figures and percentages are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Balance of male and female characters in the Disney Heroes cards

Challenge category	**Female characters**		**Male characters**		**Total (category)**
	Raw frequency	% of total in this category	Raw frequency	% of total in this category	Raw frequency
Eat Well	7	32%	15	68%	22
Get Active	7	29%	17	71%	24
Express Yourself	10	44%	13	56%	23
Be Smart	10	45%	12	55%	22
Do Good	9	39%	14	61%	23
Total (set)	**43**	**38%**	**71**	**62%**	**114**

As Table 2 shows, there is a higher proportion (62%) of male characters across the set, with this difference being most pronounced in the 'Get Active' category, where male characters feature in 71% of the cards. The proportion of female and male heroes in the 'Be Smart' and 'Express Yourself' categories, on the other hand, are closer to being equal (45% versus 55%, and 44% versus 56%). This suggests that male is the default gender for a Disney Hero, echoing the gender balance of the 2017 Sainsbury's-LEGO 'Create the World' promotion (Author 2 et al. 2020), where 67% of the minifigures were depicted as male. Further, the unusually high proportion of male heroes in the 'Get Active' sub-category, and closer-to-equal proportion of female heroes in the 'Be Smart' and 'Express Yourself' sub-categories, suggests that male heroes are depicted as more active in the set, whilst female and male heroes are depicted as similarly intelligent and expressive.

For the main part of our transitivity analysis, we systematically coded the main process types used in the Disney Heroes texts using the five Hallidayan categories that were present in these texts (material, behavioural, verbal, mental and relational). As explained in the Methods section, we also used combined codes (e.g. *material-mental; behavioural-mental; relational-attributive-intensive*) to better capture nuances of contextual meaning. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 3, which displays the raw frequency for each process type across the whole dataset, and the raw frequencies split by gender. For ease of reference, this table collapses our combined codes. For example, the category 'material' covers all codes with 'material' in the label, such as *material, material-mental* and *material-existential*, and a process coded as *material-mental* is included in both the 'material' and 'mental' categories. Because we coded some processes to

more than one process type in this way, the total number of processes (153) is higher than the total number of cards (114). We accounted for the imbalanced gender representations in the set by expressing frequencies as a percentage of the total number of processes for each gender. For example, Table 3 shows there are 31 material processes attributed to female heroes, representing 49% of the 63 processes in total that are attributed to female heroes. For the material processes, we also calculated the total number of *transitive* and *intransitive* clauses, as a way of identifying the reach and impact of each heroes' actions. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 4, which displays the raw frequency of each main process type, the raw frequencies for male and female heroes, and the proportion of transitive and intransitive processes attributed to the male and female heroes.[3]

Table 3: Gender split of global process types for main verbs across the dataset

Process type	**Frequency for female characters**		**Frequency for male characters**		**Total frequency**	
	Raw frequency	**% of total female processes**	**Raw frequency**	**% of total male processes**	**Raw frequency**	**% of total processes**
Material	31	49%	27	30%	59	39%
Behavioural	2	3%	3	3.5%	5	3%
Mental	9	14%	20	22.5%	29	19%
Verbal	1	2%	3	3.5%	4	3%
Existential	2	3%	0	0%	2	1%
Relational	18	29%	36	40.5%	54	35%
Total	**63**	**100%**	**89**	**100%**	**153**	**100%**

Table 4: Frequencies of transitive and intransitive material processes across the set by gender

Process/clause type	**Frequency for female processes**		**Frequency for male processes**		**Total frequency**	
	Raw frequency	% of total female material processes	Raw frequency	% of total male material processes	Raw frequency	% of total material processes

[3] There are 30, rather than 31, material processes attributed to female heroes in Table 4 because one of these, 'become' in 'Violet can become invisible at will' (coded as 'material-existential'), does not take a grammatical Object, and so is not technically a transitive verb.

Transitive material processes	21	70%	21	78%	42	74%
Intransitive material processes	9	30%	6	22%	15	26%
Total	**30**	**100%**	**27**	**100%**	**57**	**100%**

From our preliminary qualitative readings of the texts, we inferred that the male heroes engaged in more externalised actions, and had more impact on the world around them, whilst the female heroes had a relative lack of agency and impact. If, as Halliday contends, material and behavioural processes encode more 'outer' or 'externalised' actions and experiences, and mental, verbal and relational processes encode more 'inner' or 'internalised' actions and experiences, then we might expect to see a higher proportion of material and behavioural processes being attributed to the male heroes, and a higher proportion of mental, relational and verbal processes to the female heroes. In the case of clause structure, if intransitive structures imply that an action has less impact on the material world, we might expect to see a higher proportion of intransitive clauses attributed to the female heroes, and transitive clauses to the male heroes. However, these hypotheses were not borne out by the above analysis. In fact, a higher proportion of *female* heroes were the agents of material processes than male heroes (49% and 30% respectively), and a higher proportion of *male* heroes were the agents of mental processes than female heroes (22.5% and 14% respectively). Further, a higher proportion of male heroes were associated with relational processes than female heroes (40.5% and 29% respectively). The proportions of behavioural and verbal processes were near-equal. The proportions of transitive and intransitive material processes were relatively similar, although slightly more transitive material processes were attributed to male than female heroes (78% and 70% respectively), and slightly more intransitive material processes were attributed to female than male heroes (30% and 22% respectively). The latter finding around clause types was more in line with our intuitions about the data, but the difference is arguably negligible.

Our findings from this first stage of analysis might suggest one of two things. First, they appear to suggest that the patterns of gendered agency in the Disney Heroes cards are more balanced than our initial expectations, and existing research, would suggest - and perhaps even that these representations of Disney Heroes transcend dominant gender norms. However, when we began to examine the way processes were being represented in the texts more qualitatively, we noted that there were many ways of backgrounding or foregrounding a character's agency and impact on the world that could not be traced through the quantification of process and clause types alone. For example, not all transitive material process clauses implied the same level of agency and impact, and some of the qualities attributed to the heroes in relational clauses implied far more physical prowess and action than others. As we have previously suggested, then, this quantitative analysis of transitivity and process types may not be a sufficiently sensitive tool for revealing more nuanced expressions of agency and impact, and a qualitative approach may better account for the grammatical and semantic nuances of these representations. Our analysis now turns to such an in-depth, qualitative analysis.

Qualitative Analysis

Elastigirl and Mr. Incredible: Combative material processes

Elastigirl and Mr. Incredible are the main characters of the Disney Pixar franchise 'The Incredibles', featuring in both *The Incredibles* and *The Incredibles 2*. At the start of the first film, the two heroes are depicted in an action scene, fighting crime in the streets of Metroville, before dashing to their wedding just in time to say their vows. Mr. Incredible's primary power is strength, whilst Elastigirl's is elasticity, which she uses to stretch and form shapes with her body, including a boat and parachute. Early on in *The Incredibles*, the heroic status of this pair is compromised when they are banned from using their superpowers. Whilst Elastigirl keeps to the ban, Mr. Incredible frequently goes out on secret superhero missions in disguise, leaving Elastigirl at home with their children. In the textual depictions of Elastigirl and Mr. Incredible, which are reproduced in Excerpts 1 and 2, both characters are positioned as agents of material processes. However, the actions attributed to these heroes, and the degrees of abstraction and externalisation encoded in these actions, are quite different.

(Excerpt 1) Elastigirl
Elastigirl balances family time with fighting villains

(Excerpt 2) Mr. Incredible
Mr. Incredible fights evil with his endless energy and enthusiasm

Both of these texts reference the action of *fighting,* and more specifically, fighting a malignant force ('villains' and 'evil', respectively). This is consistent with the film characterisation of Elastigirl and Mr. Incredible, who are both depicted fighting 'villains' at the start of the film. The combative action of fighting is material, concrete, intentional and externalised, and as such it has the potential to imply a high degree of agency, physicality and impact on the world. However, the action is positioned differently in relation to the heroes and their attributes in each of the texts. In Excerpt 2, 'fights' is the main verb in the transitive clause 'Mr. Incredible fights evil…', which has the syntactic structure [hero] [material process] [object]. In this instance, Mr. Incredible is grammatically positioned as the agent who undertakes the action of fighting, and in doing so, has a direct impact on an external force ('evil'). However, in Excerpt 1, Elastigirl's agency in relation to the combative action of 'fighting' is backgrounded through the nominalisation 'fighting villains'. Further, the main process for Elastigirl is the metaphorical *balancing* of two practices: *family time* and *fighting villains* (with the positioning of family time first in this two-part list making it more prominent). *Balancing,* unlike *fighting,* is in this case an abstract and internalised process which concerns Elastigirl's personal weighing up of different aspects of her life, and has far less impact on the world around her than 'fighting'. Thus, Mr. Incredible is depicted as having a more direct effect on the world around him because of the high level of semantic agency and external impact encoded in the process 'fights', his position as the agent of this process, and the transitive construction of the clause. Elastigirl, on the other hand, is depicted as having comparatively less impact on the world around her because of the relatively low level of semantic agency and external impact encoded in the main verb 'balances', and the relegation of 'fighting' to a noun phrase.

Spider-Girl and Spider-Man: Using your powers

Spider-Girl and Spider-Man have a long history in the Marvel comics and films. Spider-Man, also known as Peter Parker, has powers including strength, agility and a 'spidey sense' for impending danger, as well as sticky hands and feet that allow him to climb and stick to vertical surfaces. Spider-Girl (also known as Mayday Parker) is the teenage daughter of Peter Parker and Mary-Jane Watson, who inherits her father's powers. Spider-Man, who has been the subject of multiple feature-length films, makes several appearances across our data-set, twice as 'Spider-Man', once as Miles Morales, a version of Spider-Man from the animated film *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, and once as part of the 'Spider-Man Team'. Spider-Girl, who has yet to feature in a Disney-Marvel film, appears only once, although Ghost-Spider, a female character from *Into the Spider-Verse*, is depicted in her own card as well as being pictured in the 'Spider-Man Team'. Our analysis focuses on the textual representation of characters from the original Spider-Man universe: Spider-Man and Spider-Girl, as shown in Excerpts 3, 4 and 5. We consider how each Spider Hero is depicted as *using their powers* in these texts.

(Excerpt 3) Spider-Girl
Spider-Girl uses her flexibility to swing through the streets of the city

(Excerpt 4) Spider-Man (1)
Spider-Man fights crime with amazing spider-like abilities

(Excerpt 5) Spider-Man (2)
Spider-Man uses his powers to help his local neighbourhood

Excerpt 4 has the same grammatical structure and semantic implication as Excerpt 2 (Mr. Incredible), where the hero is the agent of a transitive, combative process, in this case 'Spider-Man fights crime', and the powers that enable them to carry out this action are introduced in a circumstantial element, in this case 'with amazing spider-like abilities'. In both Mr. Incredible and Spider Man (1)'s texts, the delayed introduction of the hero's powers in a circumstantial element prioritises the hero's (combative, impactful) actions over their abilities, thus emphasising their agency and impact on the world around them.

Excerpts 3 and 5 deploy a different syntactic structure, which can be glossed as '[Hero] [uses] [power] to [undertake action]'. In these texts, the spider heroes' powers are introduced in the object position, as a force the hero consciously deploys. This construction has a number of effects. First, in contrast with Excerpt 4, the heroes' ability to *use* their power(s) is syntactically foregrounded over the actions they undertake with this power ('help' and 'swing', respectively). Second, it creates a fragmenting effect, isolating the heroes' powers from their personhood. This fragmentation gives the impression that the heroes' *powers* generate action and effect in the world, whilst the *heroes themselves* are positioned as vectors through which their powers travel. Thus, through the construction '[Hero] [uses] [power] to [undertake action]', the hero is endowed with relatively less agency than alternative formulations.

Although Excerpts 3 and 5 employ very similar syntactic structures, the representations of Spider-Man 2 and Spider-Girl are not completely equal; there is a key difference in the way the process contained in the subordinate clause is construed. In Spider-Man 2's text, the subordinate

clause ‘to help his neighbourhood’ is transitive, suggesting that his powers affect others directly, whilst in Spider-Girl’s text, the subordinate clause ‘to swing through the streets of the city’ is intransitive; this action does not affect the world around her. Overall, our analysis suggests that the two Spider-Man characters are depicted as having more agency and impact on the world around them than Spider-Girl, through the syntactic construal of the relationship between the heroes, their abilities, and the world around them. This finding goes some way to explaining why the high proportion of material processes attributed to female heroes in the collection overall does not necessarily point straightforwardly to more agentive representations of these characters.

She-Hulk and Hulk: Relational Processes

She-Hulk and Hulk, like Spider-Girl and Spider-Man, are both characters from the Marvel Universe who feature in the Marvel comics and films, as well as in television series. Hulk first appeared in the Marvel comic series ‘The Incredible Hulk’ in 1962, whilst She-Hulk did not appear until 1980, in the series ‘Savage She-Hulk’. In this series, She-Hulk (otherwise known as Jennifer Walters) is introduced as the cousin of Hulk (otherwise known as Bruce Banner). Bruce saves his younger cousin by giving her a blood transfusion, which transforms her into She-Hulk, a character who is not as strong as Hulk, but maintains better control of her emotions and alter-ego. Hulk has appeared in a number of Marvel films, including the 2008 film ‘The Incredible Hulk’, and all four of the ‘Avengers’ films. She-Hulk has not yet appeared in a Marvel film, though she will feature in a TV series titled ‘She-Hulk’, due to be released on the streaming service Disney Plus in 2022.

As with Spider-Girl and Spider-Man, the female and male iterations of the Hulk character are not depicted on equal terms. First, in both cases the male hero predates, and has a hand in the creation of, the female iteration. Second, the naming of these hero pairs is also not equal: whilst Spider-Man is gendered using the adult form ‘man’, Spider-Girl is gendered using the child form ‘girl’. Hulk is not explicitly gendered at all, whilst She-Hulk’s name is marked for gender. It is also interesting that, in both of these pairs, the heroes are related, and the female hero is younger. Overall, the history and presentation of these characters positions the female heroes as subordinate to their more established male counterparts. The descriptions of She-Hulk and Hulk on the Disney Heroes cards, shown in Extracts 6 and 7, echo this imbalanced portrayal of the characters.

(Excerpt 6) She-Hulk
She-Hulk might be tough but she’s also fun-loving and kind

(Excerpt 7) Hulk
Hulk has an almost unlimited degree of strength and speed. Hulk Smash!

The main processes in these clauses are *relational,* a key difference from the examples discussed so far, which primarily include material processes. Relational processes account for 35% of the main processes across the data set, and are more frequent in representations of the male heroes (see Table 3). These clauses assign qualities, identities or attributes to the heroes, rather than focusing on the actions they undertake. However, in many cases these qualities still imply physical action, and this is true in Excerpts 6 and 7, where She-Hulk’s ‘tough’ nature, and Hulk’s

‘strength and speed’, are strongly related to physical actions such as picking up heavy items, running, or standing up to enemies.

However, there are several key differences in the way these texts construe Hulk and She-Hulk’s attributes, and the way these heroes are positioned in relation to these attributes. First, the main process in Hulk’s text, ‘has’, is a relational-attributive-possessive verb, which construes the attributes of ‘unlimited… strength and speed’ as powers that he *possesses.* This process type implies a higher degree of agency and control than the relational-attributive-intensive processes attributed to She-Hulk: ‘might be’ and ‘is’, which imply she doesn’t have any control over her personal qualities - this is just ‘the way she is’. Second, She-Hulk and Hulk’s texts deploy different syntactic structures. Whilst Hulk’s first clause can be glossed as [Hero] [has] [attribute], She-Hulk’s clause takes the more complex form [Hero] [might be] [attribute] [but] [hero] [is also] [attribute]. Through this construction, She-Hulk is attributed the qualities of being ‘tough’, ‘fun-loving’ and ‘kind’, but these qualities are not given equal weight. In the first clause, the modal ‘might’ serves to hedge, and to anticipate, the second part of the clause, which offers the contrasting attributes of ‘fun-loving’ and ‘kind’ without any mitigation. This construction implies that ‘toughness’ alone, without the (more stereotypically feminine) qualities of being ‘kind’ and ‘fun-loving’, would be dispreferred.

The final difference in these constructions is the qualities or powers that are attributed to the heroes. As noted above, She-Hulk’s ‘fun-loving’ and ‘kind’ qualities are foregrounded over her toughness, and these attributes contrast sharply with the ‘unlimited… strength and speed’ attributed to Hulk. She-Hulk’s qualities imply relational actions that involve working together in harmony with others, for example through friendship and collaboration. Further, although ‘fun’ could involve physical actions such as dancing or playing sports, the attributes of ‘strength’ and ‘speed’ are more directly related to physical actions, such as picking up heavy items, fighting, smashing things and running. Indeed, the second clause in Hulk’s text makes the action of ‘smashing’ explicit, in the phrase ‘Hulk Smash!’. Here, Hulk is afforded a high degree of agency in carrying out a concrete, intentional action associated with his strength. Overall, the contrasting representations of Hulk and She-Hulk show that not all relational identifiers are equal, and that sometimes relational clauses *can* imply a high degree of action and agency. For example, Hulk’s attributes of ‘strength’ and ‘speed’ position him as a more physical, active and impactful hero than She-Hulk, whose fun-loving and kind nature is emphasised.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we have analysed a set of ‘Disney Heroes’ collectible cards with a focus on the grammatical, semantic and social agency attributed to male and female heroes. The quantitative analysis, contrary to our expectations, revealed that a higher proportion of female heroes were represented as agents of material processes, and a higher proportion of male heroes were represented as agents of mental processes and relational processes, in these cards. Further, the distribution of transitive and intransitive clauses was fairly even across the dataset, with only slightly more transitive clauses attributed to male heroes, and slightly more intransitive clauses attributed to female heroes. These findings suggest that, if we take transitive, material processes to be externalised and impactful, and intransitive, relational and mental processes to be more internalised, then overall the female heroes seem to be depicted as more agentive and impactful than the male heroes in this set. By contrast, however, the qualitative analysis suggests that the

Disney Heroes cards do not, in fact, present any significant challenge to hegemonic norms of gendered action and agency. This analysis reveals that male heroes *are* shown to affect the external world around them in more concrete ways than their female counterparts, whilst the female heroes' impact on the world around them is semantically and grammatically backgrounded.

Given the differences between the quantitative analysis, which explores limited dimensions of grammar and transitivity, and the qualitative analysis, which deploys a more nuanced and context-sensitive examination of the heroes' actions in context, we would argue, following Mills (1994), that mechanical analyses of process and clause types can only reveal so much. In particular, it would appear that coding 'material' processes as exclusively 'externalised', and therefore more impactful, but 'mental' and 'relational' processes as exclusively 'internalised', and therefore less impactful, may result in flawed interpretations. In fact, our qualitative analysis shows that 'material' processes are by no means always externalised, as with the example of 'fighting' versus 'balancing', and 'relational' processes can imply very different levels of action and agency, as the discussion of the relational-attributive-possessive process 'Hulk has… strength and speed' versus the relational-attributive-intensive process 'She Hulk might be tough...' has suggested. Further, it is important to account for the full range of grammatical, semantic and contextual resources employed in these texts, rather than isolating individual dimensions. For example, in the analysis of Spider-Girl's text, her relative agency and impact in comparison with Spider-Man can only really be appreciated through consideration of the syntactic structure that places her powers in the object position, fragmenting her power from her personhood, alongside the use of an intransitive subordinate clause.

In terms of the wider implications of our findings, there is some cause for a degree of optimism around shifting gendered roles and actions in the Disney Heroes cards. For example, there does seem to be a move towards more equal gendered representation in Sainsbury's promotions, since the proportion of 67% male characters in the 2017 promotion (Author 2 et al. 2020) has reduced to 62%. Further, despite the dearth of female heroes in Disney films historically, characters such as Spider-Girl and She-Hulk, who are significantly *under*-represented in Marvel films, are nevertheless included in the set, bringing some balance to an otherwise very unbalanced domain. The quantitative analysis also suggests that some attempt has been made to foreground the material action and agency of female characters in the set: although the material actions undertaken by male and female heroes are not always equally impactful, female heroes are nevertheless the agents of material actions more often, overall, than the male heroes. However, we outline these quantitative findings with very cautious optimism, since a minor increase in the representation of female characters is a potentially superficial change, if it is not supported by positive and transformative representations of those characters. Indeed, it may be that large corporations such as Sainsbury's and Disney are simply continuing to reinforce limiting, and potentially damaging, hegemonic gender norms in more subtle ways, whilst appearing at first glance to be more progressive, in order to satisfy increased pressures to display gender equality. Our qualitative analysis suggests that this is indeed the case with the Disney Heroes. Despite their potential to create transformative fantasy characters, the representation of male and female heroes in these cards continues to construct a world in which men are more socially agentive than women, and have more impact on the world around them. The message to children, ultimately, is that men are more heroic.

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