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Villains, Morality, and Redemption: A Content Analysis of Children’s Movies

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Villains, Morality, and Redemption
A Content Analysis of Children’s Movies

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University of Rhode Island
I. BACKGROUND

Since May 2018, I have been a research assistant for Dr. Megan Parry for her project on the depictions of the criminal justice system in children’s animated movies. My focus on villains and redemption emerged out of the preliminary findings of Dr. Parry’s research, presented to Dean Riley of the College of Arts & Sciences in October 2018.

The importance of this research stems from the influence children’s media can have on children’s social and moral upbringing. How children’s movies depict villains and the criminal justice system can affect the development of their attitudes towards offenders and criminal justice actors.

II. THEORIES OF MEDIA INFLUENCE

This research is based on the following theories of media influences:

a. Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), and

b. Cultivation Theory (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2009).

According to these theories, children's psychosocial development is affected by the media they watch as well as the amount of time spent watching it.

III. PRIOR RESEARCH

Children’s media, including books, television shows, and movies, have been analysed for messaging about the following:

a. Age – focuses on the stereotypical depictions of older characters in children’s media as senile or villainous, and considers implications for children’s attitudes toward older adults (Bishop & Krause, 1986; Danowski & Robinson, 2012; Kirkland, 2010; Robinson & Anderson, 2006; Robinson, Callister, Magoffin, & Moore, 2007; Zurcher & Robinson, 2018).
b. Gender & Sexuality – analyzes stereotypical depictions of women, men, girls and boys as well as any changing trends; also analyzes messaging about transgenderism and homosexuality as signalling villainy (Davis, 2006, 2013; Li-Vollmer & LaPointe, 2003; Mallan, 2000; Putnam, 2013).


d. Mental Illness – analyzes how physical and mental illnesses are depicted and/or talked about, and raises concerns about use of stigmatizing language and portrayals of mental illness (Wahl, 2003; Wahl, Wood, Zaveri, Drapalski, & Mann, 2003; Wilson, Nairn, Coverdale, & Panapa, 2000; Lawson & Fouts, 2014).

e. Death – analyzes how death scenes are depicted and how they vary between protagonists and antagonists (Cox, Garret, & Graham, 2005; Tenzek & Nickels, 2017; Graham, Yuhas, & Roman, 2018).

f. Demonization – considers how seemingly ‘bad’ behaviour is demonized with no references to the social context, and considers concerns about children’s attitudes toward wrong-doers (Fouts, Callan, Piasentin, & Lawson, 2006).

g. Justice – analyzes depictions of justice in superhero cartoons, and raises concerns about the level of punitiveness depicted (Kort-Butler, 2013; Martin, 2007).

IV. CURRENT RESEARCH

My research with Dr. Parry focuses on the depictions of villains in children’s movies and the consequences they face for their actions.

b. Coding: coded for presence of villains, their appearance, morality, motives, crimes committed, and consequences faced.
   i. Morality coded as good, evil, or grey.
   ii. Consequences coded for death, official punishment, unofficial punishment, and freedom; also coded for redeemed or unredeemed.

V. RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

Findings about villains’ dying, being punished officially or unofficially, or being allowed to go free are analysed for messaging about punitiveness. Finding about villains being redeemed, offering reparations, and/or being forgiven by the protagonists are analysed for implications for rehabilitation, restorative justice, and forgiveness.
VI. REFERENCES


