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#### **Disability in Disney**

Chloe Bartz Hope College

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# Disney on Disability

Presenter: Chloe Bartz - Hope College, Holland, MI

Mentor: Dr. Curtis Gruenler Advisor: Elizabeth Schultz

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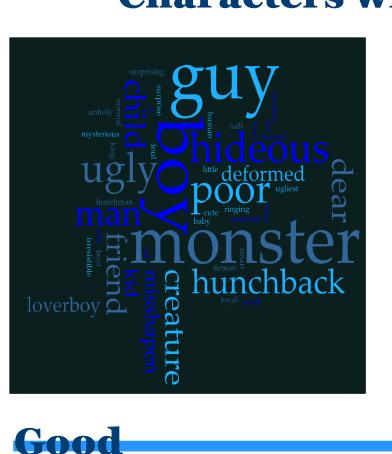
#### **Disclaimers**

- Person-first language will be used throughout the entirety of the poster as it is reflective of the preference of the team interlocuter Elizabeth Schultz who was an integral part of this project.
- Those characters that were analyzed are limited to those with physical disabilities. Developmental and intellectual disabilities were not analyzed to prevent misdiagnoses given wide range of speculation.
- This project received input from various people with disabilities and each character with a disability was agreed upon as having a disability by either a person with a disability, Disney producers, or a social worker.

#### **Terminology Guide**

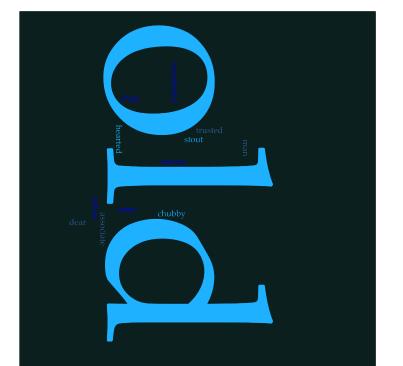
• CWD – character with a disability (Disney character) • PWD – person with a disability (real people) • Foil – Two characters who serve as each other's contrast and emphasize their differences because of their dissimilarity

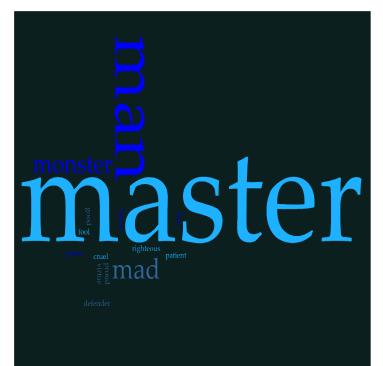
### **Characters with Disabilities**











**Characters without Disabilities** 

## The Substance is in the Semiotics

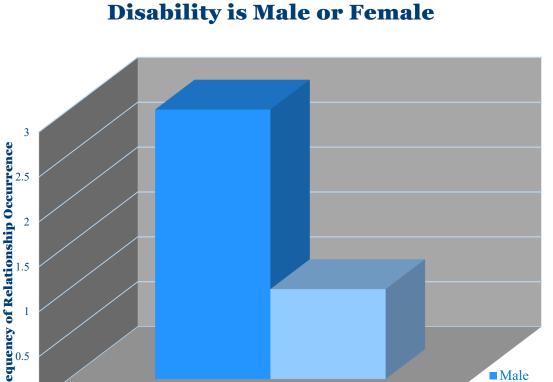
Disney is biased against characters with disabilities. We have found that whether a character is referred to with derogatory language has more to do with the character having or lacking a disability rather than if they are the hero or villain in the story. In general:

• good or evil plays little role in the language prescribed to characters • characters with disabilities had a high frequency of being referred to as "monster" "little" or by their disability • foils were frequently called "man" "dear," or "hero"

When we assessed the language used to refer to characters with disabilities and their foils, a disturbing trend was revealed. While only three of the 13 characters with disabilities are overtly characterized to be villains, all the characters with disabilities are referred to using derogatory or infantilizing terminology. Meanwhile, their foils are described using mature or empowering language.

In each individual instance, the abusive language patterns are hard to notice, and it is not until we place them next to each other that the systemic discrimination is traceable. Above is an example of how good and bad do not play a role in the respectability of language used to refer to a character, but ability and disability do. This is done using the characters Quasimodo, Frollo, Fidget and Dr. Dawson from the movies The Hunchback of Notre Dame and The Great Mouse Detective.

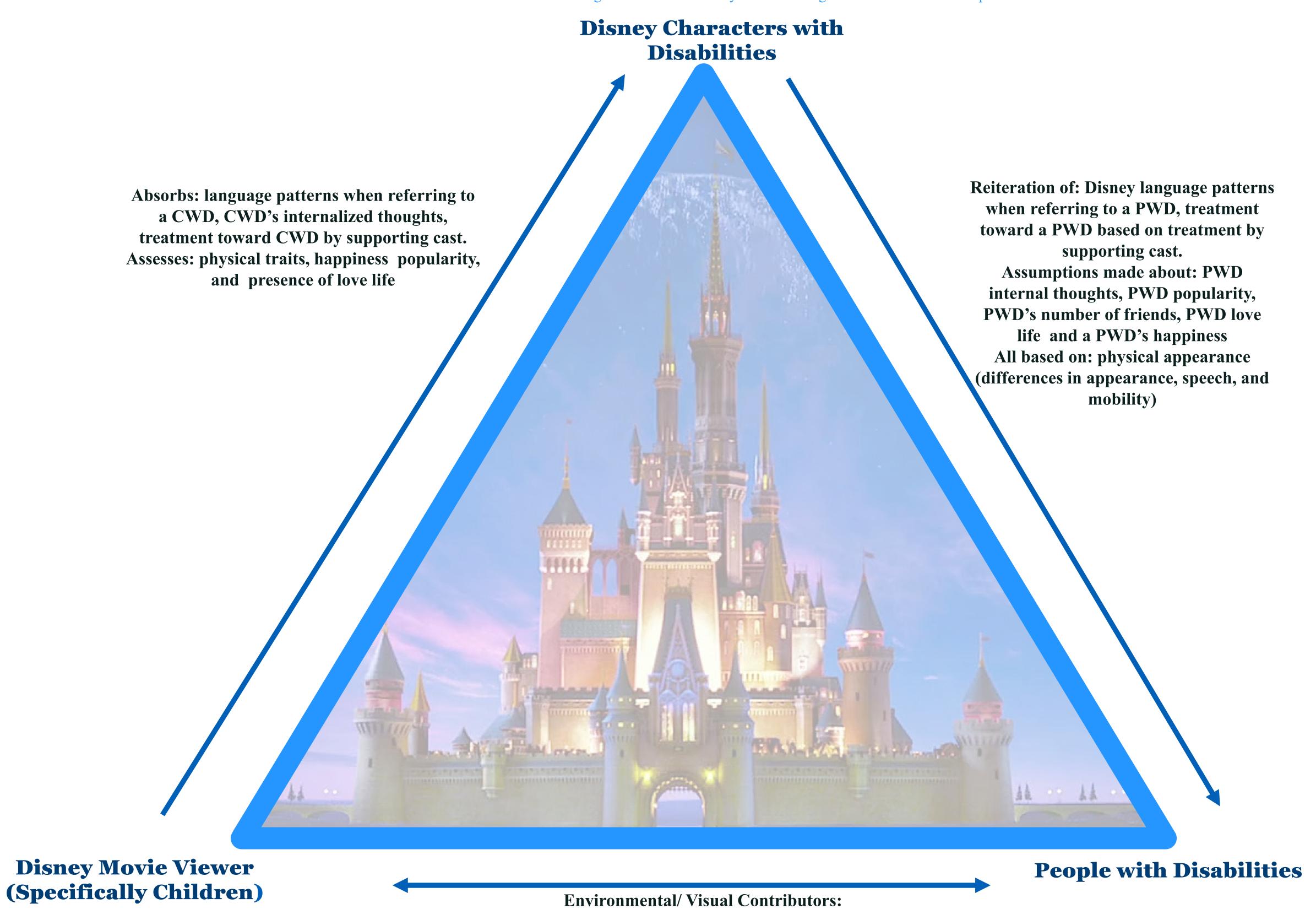
The Unspoken **Issue of Assumed** Asexuality



Physically Intimate Relationships and the Frequency at Which They Occur When the Character with a

## Mimetic Mediators

René Girard's mimetic theory emphasizes the importance of imitation in shaping all human behavior, even human desires. The questions driving this project were founded with human imitative behaviors in mind: Is Disney creating characters with disabilities that are inherently desirable to imitate (attractive, smart, popular etc.)? Is Disney creating complex, dynamic characters with disabilities? And are characters with disabilities withing Disney regarded respectfully? The study of language surrounding ability/disability in Disney was done for the purpose of evaluating the linguistic patterns children are hearing and associating with characters of disability during critical periods of their cognizant development. It can be assumed that if children are hearing derogatory phrases directed at characters with disability who look different than other characters, they will transfer this behavior over into real life. This diagram charts how Disney characters might mediate real relationships.



Familiarity of location, companionship, reactions of companions

## Why Disney?

- Disney is representative of popular Western culture and has been for the past eight and a half decades
- Disney's target audience is children between the ages of three to twelve during which time these children are highly impressionable
- The universality if Disney

## Mimetic Theory

- Proposed by Rene Girard Three Parts
- Mimetic Desire When an individual desires something because they see someone else desiring the same thing, this is the result of mirror neurons
- Scapegoating An individual who is othered usually at random, and is collectively sacrificed to relieve societal tension
- Judeo-Christian Revelation When people step outside the violence cycle, putting aside personal desires and side with the scapegoat

## The Power of Representation

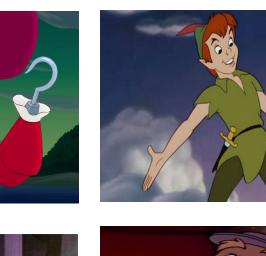
- Children are particularly impressionable and will mimic the language, songs, dances and outfits of favorite characters
- If the language used to describe CWD is infantilizing or disrespectful, children will internalize and regurgitate
- Negative language associations with characters that do not fit the Disney ideal form neural pathways that can translate into real life and prevent respectful, positive interactions between developing children and PWD





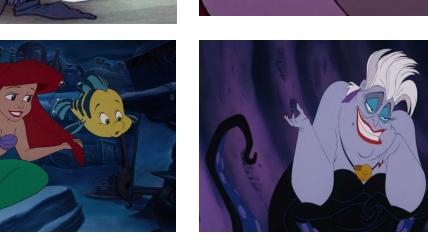






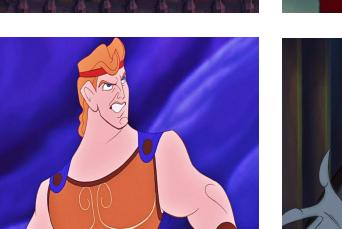






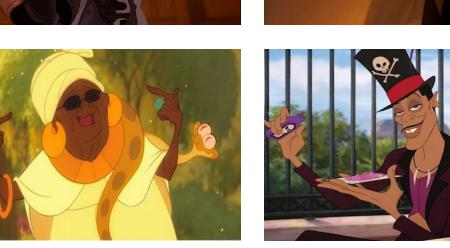


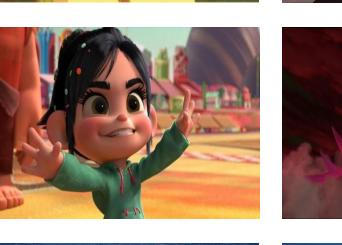




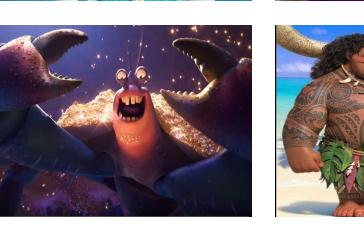


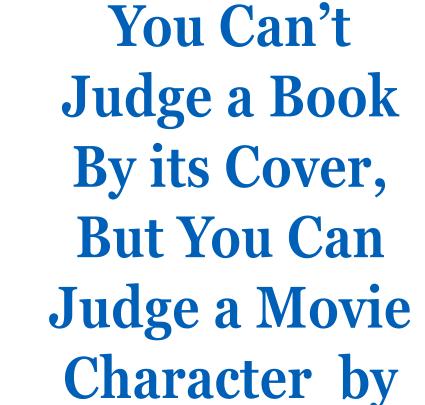












Their Body

What does good look like? What does evil look like? How does a disability play into the moral assumptions we make about others? [good characters] have expressive eyes with large pupils, a small pert nose and a small mouth with thick lips...[villains] are built using squares and triangles to make them appear more masculine" (Bancroft in Resene). The cute culture, good guy correlation the media megalodon, Disney, has been curating has resulted is a problematic theme of representation. Children are then taught that people who look different, especially those that are angular, overweight, speak or move differently, have different colored skin or whose bodies that are not conforming to the ideal soft features of Disney, are bad. This villainization of the

- Do people with disabilities experience sexual desire or have sex lives? The answer is, of course they do. Having a disability is not a precursor to an asexual lifestyle unless that is what an individual chooses. However, romantic or sexual expression for characters with a disability is stunted in its representation in Disney, especially for female characters with disabilities. • Women with disabilities either had to "cure" their disability or control it so it was nearly invisible in order to enter a physically intimate relationship
- Men with disabilities had to be in a position of power or have some superpower that negated their disability in order to be portrayed in a physically intimate relationship
- Men with disabilities are more likely to be shown in physically intimate relationships than women (3x more likely)
- Characters with disabilities in physically intimate relationships: Hercules and Meg, Ariel and Eric, Captain Hook and Mr. Smee, and Beast and Belle
- Queer Theory and Disability Studies rose as twin pillars in in the literary theory world in the 1990s. However, there intersectionality of the two theories is often left untouched based on the quiet assumption that people with disabilities are frequently asexual or aromantic. This assumption is unfounded and harmful and is in desperate need of further research not only within Disney films, but in the real world. \*A physically intimate relationship is defined as: hand holding, kissing, cuddling, sexual intercourse etc.

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bodies with disabilities

in Disney feeds into the

culture that has long

scapegoated people

with disabilities.