

Exploration of Mental Health in Disney: Prevalence of Generalized Anxiety Disorder in popular Disney characters

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ABSTRACT

The following study was conducted to investigate the prevalence of Generalised Anxiety Disorder in popular children's media characters from Disney movies from the year 2000-2010. Widespread representation of psychological disorders in the media is vital to reduce the stigma surrounding such disorders and prevent underdiagnosis and treatment of patients. One character from each movie was selected using a random generator, and the study used a single-blind design, with 5 participants that were randomly assigned Disney movies to watch to observe the characters' behaviours and actions. They noted their observations based on the following criteria: general observations, childhood and family history, cognitive, affective, and behavioural components, history of abuse or psychiatric disorders, and a conclusion about the character. Two independent researchers with an IRR of 0.88 analyzed the participants' consensus on the movies to ensure no outliers. The participants' responses about each selected character were analysed qualitatively to calculate the prevalence of GAD in Disney characters by comparing the qualitative observations. The independent researchers scored each set of observations using the GAD-7 scale. It was found that only 26% of characters from the most popular Disney movies from 2000-2010 selected at random displayed symptoms of mild anxiety. Hence, it is essential to increase the representation of GAD in children's media to raise awareness and reduce stigmatization amongst watchers.

Keywords: *Disney, Anxiety, Mental Health, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Media, Stigmatisation*

This paper aims to investigate the prevalence of the depiction of mental disorders, particularly Generalized Anxiety Disorder, in children's media. The GAD-7 scale was utilized to compare symptoms of GAD in Disney characters and make assessments as to whether they portray any symptoms. Widespread representation of mental illnesses in the media is vital to normalize psychological disorders and reduce stigmatization in everyday life (Chen & Lawrie, 2017). This is especially vital in children's media, as

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children create understandings of the world and surroundings around them based on what they see depicted in the media (Siegal, 1991).

This paper will focus on representation in Walt Disney's films and TV shows as due to their extensive global presence, many children view and are influenced by their content. Many classic Disney movies and TV shows target young children who do not accurately understand mental illnesses. Hence, it is vital that widespread and influential media like Disney portray accurate displays of mental health disorders, as unrealistic and inaccurate portrayals are likely to be internalized by children and shape their understanding of mental health and how they view certain disorders later on in life (Stout et al., 2004). The findings of this research were helpful for researchers and clinicians looking into GAD and awareness about GAD in children's media.

Generalized Anxiety disorder comes under the class of anxiety disorders in DSM (Trauma-informed care in behavioral health services, 2014). The hallmark of GAD, according to DSM-V, is excessive anxiety and worry (apprehensive expectation), occurring more days than not for at least six months, about several events or activities (such as work or school performance) (Crocq, 2017). Individuals with GAD find it difficult to control their worries. The anxiety and worry are associated with three or more of the following six symptoms: restlessness, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, irritability, muscle tension, and disturbances in sleep patterns (APA, 2013). Only one of the above symptoms is required in children. Further, the anxiety, worry, or physical symptoms cause the patient clinically significant distress or impairment in social and other important areas of functioning (Martin, 2003). For the condition to be diagnosed as GAD, the disturbance should not be attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., a drug of abuse, a medication) or another medical condition (e.g., hyperthyroidism) (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2013). et al. furthered al. the et al.he, to diagnose GAD, it must not be better explained by another medical disorder, for example (negative evaluation in social anxiety disorder [social phobia], reminders of traumatic events in posttraumatic stress disorder, or delusional beliefs in schizophrenia or delusional disorder) (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2013). The lifetime prevalence of GAD has been estimated to be around 3.0% for females and 1.5% for males (Merikangas et al., 2010). Epidemiologic studies of nationally representative samples in the United States have found a lifetime prevalence of GAD of 5.1 percent to 11.9 percent (Horwitz and Grob, 2011). A review of epidemiological studies in Europe found a 12-month prevalence of 1.7 to 3.4 percent and a lifetime prevalence of 4.3 to 5.9 percent (Merikangas et al., 2010).

Singer and Singer (1984) equated the degree of influence of family in media to children's real-life interactions with parents and family environment. Indeed, media family portrayals provide children with examples that offer information about the home environment, parent-child interactions, and family roles. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1975) proposes that learning is achieved by observing one's surroundings; media influences how people, especially children, view mental disorders and forms the basic understanding of generic or specific symptoms for any illness. Thus, children may identify with and form emotional bonds to certain characters, draw comparisons between media families and real-life interactions, and imitate what they see on screen (Callister et al., 2007; Robinson and Skill 2001). However, past research has shown that the depictions of mental illnesses in children's media are often inaccurate and derogatory (Signorielli, 1989). Wilson et al. (2000) conducted a study on 12 children's cartoons and found that in total, 46% of the episodes contained a reference to a mental illness. The study found that commonly used terms like

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'crazy,' 'mad,' and 'losing your mind 'were employed to denote characters devoid of desirable traits (Wilson et al., 2000).

This paper will focus primarily on the representation of mental illnesses in Disney characters. For over eighty years, Disney has continued to entertain young audiences with a wide array of content. From films and video games to lunch boxes, the Disney characters and their stories have been recurring cultural motifs in modern society. The Walt Disney Company provides entertainment targeted at children through various mediums such as films, TV networks, major theme parks, merchandise, and many more. The Walt Disney Company has a physical presence in 30 countries in theme parks, attractions, and stores, while its media content reaches families in 133 countries (Carillo et al., 2012).

Modern-day mass media is an element where children gain knowledge and expertise and ultimately form an identity for themselves (Collier 2014). Disney has transformed the industry of childhood entertainment into a force of education, implementing values and social structures that shape the very basis of childhood imagination (Giroux, 2010). Over the past 30 years, a substantial amount of research has been conducted to determine the effect of the mass media on the public's belief systems (Diefenbach, 2007). These studies have concluded that the media's ability to influence public perception and the extent to which people are exposed to media representations make mass media one of the most significant influences in developed societies (Chandran et al., 2019; Hanley, 2015). Considerable research has shown that the media is the public's most important source of information about mental illness (Coverdale et al., 2002). It has been found that representations of mental illness in media can be so influential that they can override an individual's own experiences and alter their perception of mental illness and those suffering from them (Stout et al., 2014; Philo, 1996 cited in Rose, 1998). As far back as the 1960s, mental health representations in the media have been few and distorted (Chen and Lawrie, 2017). Hence, it is crucial for a widespread and accurate picture of mental illnesses by the media sources due to a considerable influence on the public (Beveridge, 1996). Misrepresentation of such illnesses creates a stigma around mental health and forms a prejudice around this spectrum (Rossler, 2016). Lawson and Fouts (2004) found that the average number of mental illness references per Disney film was 4.6. These references were commonly employed to segregate and denote the inferior status of the character they were used for. It has been argued that in the absence of a clear diagnosis, audiences are left to generalize from one particular description of behaviors to all people with mental illness (Coverdale et al., 2002; Wilson et al., 1999). Such generalization is likely, based on the general public's pre-existing views on mental illness and how the media usually depict people with mental illness. Coverdale et al. (2002) claimed that such generalizations and subsequent stigmatization could be diminished by illustrating specific psychiatric diagnoses and ensuring the relevance of such diagnoses.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) is one of the most frequent psychiatric disorders, second to depression (Tait et al., 2011). It can be easily missed due to co-occurrence with other psychiatric disorders, somatic complaints, and physical medical conditions (Tait et al., 2011; Batterham et al., 2013). Hence, despite the fairly high prevalence and psychosocial impairment that can result from GAD, recognition of symptoms is fairly low, and GAD often remains undetected and undertreated (Kroenke et al., 2007). Hence, there must be widespread awareness about the symptoms of GAD, and they need to be accurately portrayed in the media to raise awareness about GAD, starting with children. When there is a lack of depiction of mental disorders in the media, it becomes easy for watchers to dismiss

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symptoms of GAD like excessive worrying as personality ‘quirks,’ which translates into an internalized thinking pattern even in real life.

GAD has been the most common mental disorder in primary care settings and is associated with increased health services (Batterham et al., 2013). In a study of adult primary care patients in four Nordic countries, the rates of GAD were 4.1 to 6.0 percent among men and 3.7 to 7.1 percent among women. However, Opeland et al. (2014) reported a cumulative prevalence of GAD as high as almost 10% in young adulthood. One-fourth of all lifetime cases of GAD start by age 20 years (Kessler et al., 2005). Despite the fairly high prevalence and the psychosocial impairment that can come with GAD, recognition of the symptoms is relatively low, and GAD often remains undetected and undertreated (Kroenke et al., 2007; Lieb et al., 2005). Thus, making this research even more relevant. Lastly, since Disney has gained so much relevance, it becomes even more important to explore this relevance in Disney. Thus, this paper will explore the presence of GAD in Disney characters.

This paper utilizes findings from research by Singer and Singer (1984), Siegal (1991), Bandura (1975), and Coverdale et al. (2002) to explore the impact of media on children’s mindset and perceptions towards mental disorders. Research by (Giroux 2010) was utilized to examine the widespread impact that Walt Disney movies have on viewers. Results from studies by Tait et al. (2011) and Kroenke et al. (2007) were used to develop the significance and prevalence of GAD and why it is vital to increase awareness about its symptoms among the general population to avoid undertreatment and diagnosis. Studies by Spitzer et al. (2006), Kroenke et al. (2007), Tiirikainen et al. (2019) were used to determine the reliability and validity of GAD-7 as a scale.

Research Aim and Objectives

Overall aim

This paper seeks to investigate the prevalence of the depiction of generalized anxiety disorder in Disney characters. GAD-7 scale was used to compare symptoms of Disney characters and make assessments accordingly. 20 Disney characters were chosen at random from the most popular Disney movies of the early 2000s. The characters were assessed according to their specific behaviors, mainly their actions and dialogues in the movies or shows.

Specific objectives

- To explore the effect of media on children’s mindset and perceptions of mental illness.
- Discuss the importance of the media's widespread representation of mental disorders and their role in breaking down stigmatization in real life.
- To discuss the purpose of focusing on Disney movies for this study. Since Disney movies have a global presence and widespread influence on children, they were selected to focus on this research study.
- Exploring the relevance of Generalized Anxiety Disorder as a common mental health illness and ensuring there are adequate depictions of symptoms in the media.
- Using the GAD-7 scale to compare symptoms of 20 Disney characters from popular movies in the 2000s and making final assessments on the chosen characters.
- Calculating the prevalence rate of GAD and comparing it to the actual prevalence rate of GAD in adults.

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METHODOLOGY

Participants

Five participants took part in this study. All participants belong to the 18-25 years age group, and the participant sample consisted of 2 males and 3 females. All participants were members of different departments in the You're Wonderful Project; (YWP;) and were selected through convenience sampling. It was ensured that no participants from the research team of YWP; were selected to prevent any participant or researcher bias.

Measures

This study used the GAD-7 as a measure to observe the behavior of Disney characters and assess whether they display symptoms of GAD or not. This 7-item Generalized Anxiety Scale (GAD-7) developed by Spitzer et al. in 2006 was used in the study to compare symptoms of GAD in Disney characters and make assessments about whether they display symptoms. The GAD-7 is a self-report scale designed to identify probable cases of GAD (Spitzer et al., 2006). The scale consists of 7 measures, asked in the form of questions on the occurrence of symptoms, with answers ranging from 'not at all,' to 'several days' to 'more than half days' and finally 'every day.' The answers are assigned with scores of 0,1,2,3, respectively. The scores are then added to make an assessment, with a maximum score of 21. The cut-off score for mild anxiety is 5 points, and the cut-off score for moderate anxiety is 10 points. The cut-off score for severe anxiety is 15 points. Further evaluation is recommended when the patient's score is 10 or above.

For this study, 15 Disney characters were chosen at random from 15 of the most popular movies of the 2000s. In order to choose films with the most impact around the globe, the highest-grossing (from 100 million USD to 900 million USD) films between 2000 and 2010 were selected. The list of highest-grossing Disney movies from 2000 to 2010 has been shared in appendix A. One character was randomly selected from each film using a random name generator.

Before watching the movies, the participants all noted their observations on one common movie. Based on the chosen movie, they all noted one detailed observation on a selected character's affective, behavioral, and cognitive components, any notable history of abuse or psychiatric disorders, along with one conclusive analysis of the character's behavior and actions. This analysis and detailed observations were then checked by two independent researchers to ensure there was a consensus. Then, each participant watched 4 movies, so that each movie was cross-coded by two participants. The observations made by the participants were analyzed qualitatively by two independent researchers with an IRR of 0.88 and then compared to the GAD-7 scale to make assessments on whether the characters display symptoms of GAD or not. The prevalence rate for characters displaying GAD was calculated and compared to the world's actual prevalence rate of people with GAD. It has been found that the prevalence rate of the general population was around 2-3%, according to DSM criteria (Martin, 2003).

RESULTS

According to the participant's observations, the characters' behaviors were assessed for anxiety according to the GAD-7 scale. According to the GAD scale, if characters get a score between 0 and 5 on the GAD-7 scale, they display no anxiety symptoms. If they get a score between 5 and 10 on the scale, they display mild anxiety symptoms. Results reflected that

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mild anxiety symptoms were observed only in 26% of the characters observed for the study, and no symptoms were observed in the rest of the characters analyzed, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Results

S. No	Name of selected character	Assessment of Anxiety according to GAD scale
1.	Remy	Mild symptoms of anxiety were displayed
2.	Chicken Little	No symptoms of anxiety were displayed
3.	Bolt	No symptoms of anxiety were displayed
4.	Zini	No symptoms of anxiety were displayed
5.	WALL-E	No symptoms of anxiety were displayed
6.	Randall Boggs	Mild symptoms of anxiety were displayed
7.	Fezzwig	No symptoms of anxiety were displayed
8.	Captain Hook	Mild symptoms of anxiety were displayed
9.	Vincenzo	Mild symptoms of anxiety were displayed
10.	Flynn Rider	No symptoms of anxiety were displayed
11.	Prince Naveen	No symptoms of anxiety were displayed
12.	Russel	No symptoms of anxiety were displayed
13.	Lilo	No symptoms of anxiety were displayed
14.	Darla	No symptoms of anxiety were displayed
15.	Sally Carrera	No symptoms of anxiety were displayed

DISCUSSION

The paper aims at investigating the prevalence of depiction of Generalized Anxiety Disorder in Disney Movies. By looking at the symptoms portrayed by the characters, assessments were made accordingly. GAD is the second most common psychiatric disorder, yet its representation often goes undetected or misdiagnosed. In this paper, 'the manifestations of this disorder are seen in Disney characters and how it shapes an understanding of mental illnesses among its audience. Since children form most of Disney's audience, how mental illnesses are represented can shape their perception of mental illnesses. Often, child viewers learn stereotyped attitudes and stigmatizing terminology used in such films.

Hence, the findings of this paper will help researchers gain an insight into the prevalence of GAD in children's media. Increasing the prevalence of GAD in the media can be a vital factor for reducing stigma and raising awareness among children and audiences. Raising awareness about the symptoms of GAD can help reduce underdiagnosis and undertreatment of GAD.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study investigates the prevalence of GAD in 20 random Disney characters to provide an insight into the prevalence of the portrayal of GAD in children's media. It was found that only 26% of characters from the most popular Disney movies from 2000-2010 selected at random displayed symptoms of mild anxiety. It is essential to increase the representation of GAD in children's media to raise awareness and reduce stigmatization amongst watchers. Children are the most influenced by media and create internalized understanding mechanisms based on what they see. The symptoms of GAD are easy to overlook as well as underdiagnose. Hence raising awareness among audiences will help reduce and prevent future underdiagnosis and undertreatment.

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Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

Certain limitations were faced during this study. To formulate a diagnosis of GAD, anxiety, and worry associated with the disorder have to be present for more days than not for the past 6 months, which cannot be determined by simply observing characters in the movies. In addition to this, more often than not, symptoms present in fictional characters are very few (one or two) for them to be determined as symptoms of GAD. According to DSM-V, anxiety, and worry are associated with three (or more) of six symptoms. Hence, the anxiety observed may not be associated with GAD. For further research, the investigation can be broadened to determine the prevalence of representation of other mental illnesses in the media, such as Major Depressive Disorder or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Further studies can also be conducted to investigate and observe the impact of viewing inaccurate and misrepresented mental illness in media on the Research's perception and treatment of mental disorders and patients suffering from them.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors Taarini Mittal, Shivangi Khattar, Manya Mograi, Manya Khanna, Akash Saxena declare that they have no competing interests.

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APPENDICES

Appendix- A: Table of highest grossing Disney movies from 2000-2010

S. no	Movie	Release year	Worldwide Box office earnings
1.	Finding Nemo	2003	\$940,335,536
2.	Up	2009	\$735,099,082
3.	The incredibles	2004	\$633,019,734
4.	Ratatouille	2007	\$623,722,818
5.	Tangled	2010	\$585,727,091
6.	Monsters, Inc.	2001	\$577,425,734
7.	WALL-E	2008	\$533,281,433
8.	Cars	2006	\$461,983,149
9.	Dinosaur	2000	\$349,822,765
10.	A Christmas Carol	2009	\$325,286,646
11.	Chicken Little	2005	\$314,432,837
12.	Bolt	2008	\$309,979,994
13.	Lilo and Stitch	2002	\$273,144,151
14.	The Princess and the Frog	2009	\$267,045,765
15.	Brother Bear	2003	\$250,397,798
16.	Atlantis: The lost empire	2001	\$186,053,725
17.	Meet the Robinsons	2007	\$169,333,034
18.	The Emperor's New Groove	2000	\$169,327,687
19.	The Jungle Book 2	2003	\$135,703,599

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Appendix- B: List of Characters

One character from the list of characters had been chosen using a random free random name generator (which has been found via Google)- <https://miniwebtool.com/random-name-picker/>
The character chosen by the random generator has been written in bold.

1. **Finding Nemo-**

- Nemo
- Darla
- Martin
- Dory
- Bruce
- Crush
- Nigel
- Bubbles
- Gill

2. **Up-**

- Carl Fredrickson
- Russel
- Dug
- Charles Muntz

3. **Ratatouille**

- Remy
- Alfredo Linguini
- Anton Ego
- Colette Tatou
- Skinner
- Auguste Gusteau
- Emile
- Django

4. **Tangled-**

- Rapunzel
- Flynn Rider
- Mother Gothel

5. **Monsters Inc.**

- Mike Wazowski
- Boo
- James P Sullivan
- Randall Boggs
- Roz
- Henry J. Waterhouse
- George Sanderson

6. **WALL-E**

- WALL-E
- Eve
- Shelby Forthright
- Captain B. McCrea
- M-O
- AUTO
- WALL-A
- Hal

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Disney characters**

7. Cars

- Lightning McQueen
- Mater
- Doc Hudson
- Chick Hicks
- Sally Carrera
- Filmore

8. Dinosaur

- Aladar
- Kron
- Baylene
- Zini
- Eema
- Neera

9. A Christmas Carol

- Ebenezer Scrooge
- Jacob Marley
- Bob Cratchit
- Tiny Tim
- Fezziwig

10. Chicken Little

- Chicken Little
- Abby Mallard
- Foxy Loxy
- Mr. Woolensworth
- Melvin
- Goosey Loosey

11. Bolt

- Bolt
- Penny
- Mittens
- Dr. Calico
- Penny's Mother

12. Lilo and Stitch

- Lilo
- Stitch
- Nani
- David Kawena
- Pleakley

13. The Princess and the Frog

- Tiana
- Dr. Facilier
- Prince Naveen
- Charlotte La Bouff
- Mama Odie
- Louis
- Eudora
- Ray

14. Atlantis: the lost empire

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- Princess Kida
- Milo James Thatch
- Audrey Rocio Ramirez
- Gaetan
- Vincenzo

15. The Jungle Book 2

- Mowgli
- Kaa
- Shere Khan
- Baloo
- Bagheera

16. Peter Pan 2: Return to Neverland

- Captain Hook
- Peter Pan
- Wendy Darling
- Smee