Where is Rey? An exploration into assumptions regarding female characters in action films.

xxxxx

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Cardiff Metropolitan University for the degree of Bachelor of Science
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own independent investigation under the supervision of my tutor. The various sources to which I am indebted are clearly indicated. This dissertation has not been accepted in substance for any other degree, and is not being submitted concurrently for any other degree.

__________________________  xxxxx, Candidate.
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Where is Rey? An exploration into assumptions regarding female characters in action films.
ABSTRACT

Whilst female characters in action films have increased in numbers over the years, they remain marginalised in the marketing and merchandise of such films. This has important implications for childhood development, as it encourages traditional gender stereotypes and societal expectations of boys and girls, and thereby restricts opportunities that should be available to all regardless of gender. Nevertheless, the decision to marginalise female characters has been attributed to the belief that girls do not engage with action films and boys do not identify with female characters. However, empirical research exploring this belief has not yet been carried out. Therefore, the aim of the current study was to qualitatively explore children’s assumptions regarding female characters in action films. In doing so, children between the ages of 7-12 were provided with a story-completion task, and a thematic analysis of the completed stories resulted in two core themes: Female Action Figure as Desirable, and Action Figure Affords Opportunities. These findings, which are incongruent with the belief that has reinforced gender stereotypes, are discussed in terms of their relevance to the marginalisation of female characters in action films, and the persistence of gendered marketing in today’s consumer market. Directions for future research are also discussed.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Through the use of media outlets such as film, traditional gender stereotypes regarding which behaviours are deemed appropriate for females and which behaviours are deemed appropriate for males have been portrayed and reinforced internationally (Richardson & Wearing, 2014). The current research context lends support for this notion, and has provided empirical evidence which has shown multinational mass media companies, such as The Walt Disney Company, to persistently portray and reinforce gender stereotypes in their films (Birthisel, 2014; England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011; Lee, 2008; Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2009). For instance, analyses of Disney films ranging from 1937-2010 found the behaviour of female characters to be portrayed as feminine, submissive, nurturing, fearful, and affectionate, whereas male characters were typically portrayed as masculine, assertive, inspiring fear, and physically strong (Birthisel, 2014; England et al., 2011; Lee, 2008; Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2009). In line with this, when characters complied with traditional gender stereotypes in the Disney films, they were seen to be rewarded in the resolutions of the films, thereby reinforcing the desirability of gender conformity (England et al., 2011). These analyses have also revealed female characters to be considerably marginalised across Disney films that do not fall within the Disney Princess range, a finding that remains evident even when the characters in the films are non-human (Birthisel, 2014; Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2009).

In addition to this, the portrayal and reinforcement of gender stereotypes in popular children’s films has been shown to extend to the marketing and merchandise associated with such films (Auster & Mansbach, 2012; Fine & Rush, 2016; Martínez, Nicolás, & Salas, 2013; Owen & Padron, 2016). For instance, an analysis of the toy type and colour of the toys available on the Disney store website found those labelled for ‘girls only’ were primarily pink, purple, or pastel coloured, and were either dolls, cosmetics, domestic-orientated toys, or jewellery (Auster & Mansbach, 2012). On the other hand, toys which were labelled for ‘boys only’ were primarily red, black, grey, brown, or bold coloured, and were either male action figures, weapons, building toys, or miniature vehicles (Auster & Mansbach, 2012). Moreover, when labelling is not as explicit as this, gendered marketing can be seen to persist through the use of subtler cues, such as through the colour of the product and packaging, the sex of the model shown playing with the toy, and the physical segregation of these products online and in stores (Auster & Mansbach, 2012; Fine & Rush, 2016). Likewise, gendered marketing can be seen in the
language used in advertisement narratives for children’s toys, with language styles reflecting traditional gender stereotypes (Owen & Padron, 2016). For example, female toy narratives have been shown to include more intensive adverbs, adjectival references to appearance, triviality, fantasy, and social words, whilst male toy narratives have been shown to include more aggression words, and adjectival references to destruction, power, technology, and science (Owen & Padron, 2016). Additionally, research has shown female characters to be further marginalised in the marketing of Disney’s merchandise, with the percentage of advertisements including female characters significantly lower than advertisements including male characters (Martínez et al., 2013). Given Disney’s global domination of the children’s entertainment industry, with Disney’s merchandise sales equating to $52.5 billion in 2015 alone (Auster & Mansbach, 2012; Statista, 2015), these findings remain a particular concern as Disney is playing a substantial role in socialising and teaching children to conceptualise themselves and others in normative gender stereotypical ways (Bem, 1981; Birthisel, 2014).

The gendered nature of Disney films and merchandise has important implications for childhood development (Birthisel, 2014; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Richardson & Wearing, 2014; Wong & Hines, 2015). Not only do children look to gender cues in their environment as a means of making sense of their social worlds (Bem, 1981), but it is through play that children learn fundamental linguistic, social, and cognitive skills (Upton, 2012). Therefore, advertising gender stereotypical toys as being for ‘girls only’ and ‘boys only’ encourages societal expectations of girls and boys and thereby limits and restricts opportunities for development that should be available to all, regardless of gender (Blaise, 2012). For example, toys aimed at boys typically include spatial activities, which may then enhance the development of their spatial skills, whereas toys aimed at girls primarily focus on social play, which may then enhance the development of their social and language skills (Wong & Hines, 2015). Moreover, the reinforcement of traditional stereotypes has also been shown to influence children’s development in the classroom (Retelsdorf, Schwartz, & Asbrock, 2015; Wolter, Braun, & Hannover, 2015). For example, research has shown the more traditional a teacher’s attitudes are towards gender, the less motivated and competent in reading the boys in their classrooms are, thereby leading to long-term consequences for their reading related skill development (Retelsdorf et al., 2015; Wolter et al., 2015). It is suggested that this finding is due to the teachers being less likely to encourage boys to read as the activity is viewed as gender incongruent (Retelsdorf et al., 2015; Wolter et al., 2015). Furthermore, limiting children’s opportunities for development has been shown to impact their academic self-efficacy later in
life, with females displaying greater self-efficacy in English literature courses compared to males, and males displaying greater self-efficacy in mathematics and science courses compared to females (Huang, 2013). With this being the case, it is argued that the removal of gendered colour-coding and advertisements would not only allow for more gender inclusive opportunities for development, but would also decrease the gender gap that can be seen in disciplines that require strong spatial skills, such as in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (Wong & Hines, 2015).

Further to this, the reinforcement of traditional gender stereotypes in Disney films and merchandise can lead to the struggle experienced by children with non-normative gender expressions and identities (Connolly, Zervos, Barone, Johnson, & Joseph, 2016; Conoley, 2008; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Johnson, 2014; Marshall, 2016; Richardson & Wearing, 2014; Saewyc, Konishi, Rose, & Homma, 2014). For instance, children who do not conform to gendered expectations are often bullied, such as when girls enjoy sports that are stereotypically considered ‘masculine’ or when boys enjoy activities that are stereotypically considered ‘feminine’, such as singing or the performing arts (Richardson & Wearing, 2014). This thereby further pressurises children to conform to the gender stereotypes that are reinforced by media outlets (Johnson, 2014; Richardson & Wearing, 2014). Furthermore, due to the discrimination and rejection that children with non-normative gender expressions and identities face from their peers and in some instances their families, they are at a heightened risk of psychological distress and suicide (Connolly et al., 2016; Conoley, 2008; Marshall, 2016; Saewyc et al., 2014). However, when these children feel supported by those around them and not discriminated against, they display developmentally normative levels of depression and a reduced risk of suicide (Connolly et al., 2016; Olson, Durwood, DeMeules, & McLaughlin, 2016; Saewyc et al., 2014). Considering the plethora of negative implications that the reinforcement of gender stereotypes can have on children and their development, there is an increasing need for multinational mass media companies, such as The Walt Disney Company, to be held accountable for the regulation and prevention of gender stereotyping in their films and merchandise. This would not only create a more gender inclusive environment for children’s development and their future trajectories but would also reduce the struggle experienced by those with non-normative gender expressions and identities.
In line with this, there has been an increase in popular movements campaigning against the portrayal and reinforcement of gender stereotypes in today’s consumer market (Johnson, 2014; Let Toys Be Toys, 2017; The Guardian, 2016). For instance, Let Toys Be Toys is a parent-led campaign which petitions against toy and publishing companies to stop them from limiting children’s interests by marketing toys and books for girls or boys only (Let Toys Be Toys, 2017). Whilst campaigns, such as Let Toys Be Toys, have been successful in encouraging several toy and publishing companies to cease gendered marketing, they have also highlighted how grossly prevalent gendered marketing is across the merchandise of Disney films. For instance, Disney has been shown to omit female characters altogether in the merchandise of their highly popular Star Wars and Marvel lines (Johnson, 2014; Let Toys Be Toys, 2015; The Guardian, 2016). This was seen with the most recent Star Wars Monopoly, where the character Rey was missing from the game and again with The Avengers, where the Black Widow was nowhere to be seen on the shelves alongside the toys of male characters who featured in the film (Let Toys Be Toys, 2015; The Guardian, 2016). Furthermore, the gendered marketing of action film merchandise has led to the creation of websites such as Her Universe, an online space where female fans of Star Wars and other action films are catered for, so that they too can be recognised among the company’s merchandise (Johnson, 2014).

Whilst advancements have been made to promote and increase gender equality on an international scale (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Sandler & Rao, 2012), gendered marketing still largely prevails in today’s marketplace (Auster & Mansbach, 2012; Fine & Rush, 2016; Martínez et al., 2013; Owen & Padron, 2016). Likewise, whilst female characters in action films have increased in numbers over the years (Inness, 2004; Van Raalte, 2015), they remain marginalised and replaced by their male counterparts in the marketing and merchandise of such films (Birthisel, 2014; Johnson, 2014; Let Toys Be Toys, 2015; Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2009; Martinez et al., 2013). This finding is evident regardless of whether the female character is a main character in the film, such as with the main character Rey in Star Wars: The Force Awakens, and the Black Widow in The Avengers. Nonetheless, the decision to marginalise female characters in films that do not fall within the Disney Princess range has been attributed to the belief that girls do not engage with action films and boys do not identify with female characters (Johnson, 2014; Let Toys Be Toys, 2015). For example, when merchandisers have been questioned about the marginalisation of female characters in their merchandise, as was seen with the Disney characters Rey and the Black Widow, they often cite a lack of interest being the reason behind their marketing decisions, and they argue that the
films from which these characters originate are boys films and therefore are marketed predominantly for boys, who do not want to play with girls (Johnson, 2014; Let Toys Be Toys, 2015). However, empirical research exploring the assumptions that girls and boys hold toward action films and female characters in these films has not yet been carried out.

Therefore, this study aims to explore children’s assumptions regarding female characters in action films, in hopes of not only extending the current research context, but of further investigating the belief which has reinforced gender stereotypes and the marginalisation of female characters in the marketing and merchandise of such films. In doing so, a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) will be employed, which will provide a rigorous, systematic, and accessible approach to the qualitative exploration of children’s assumptions regarding female characters in action films (Howitt, 2010; Stainton Rogers, 2011). In line with thematic analysis data collection methods, this study aims to implement a story-completion task. During the story-completion task, participants will be presented with a story stem, whereby they will be provided with the beginning of a story that includes hypothetical scenarios and characters, and will be asked to complete the story by writing what happens next (Braun & Clarke, 2013). As story-completion tasks aim to explore assumptions rather than viewpoints, this data collection method was deemed appropriate, given that the topic being researched relates to unambiguous social norms which are likely to dictate socially desirable viewpoints (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Moreover, whilst this method is a novel technique that has not yet been used with children in a non-therapeutic environment (Braun & Clarke, 2013), it was deemed ideal and appropriate for the participants age group.
CHAPTER 2: METHOD

Sampling Procedure
This study recruited 75 children between the ages of 7-12, who resided in the South Wales area, and in which 32 were female. Participants were recruited through local schools, where Head Teachers were approached to determine their willingness to take part in the study. Participants between the ages of 7-12 were recruited specifically, as the study’s aim was to explore the assumptions of children and this age range would ensure the participants could complete and engage with the task well. Additionally, this age range was purposefully chosen, as children aged 13 and above are legally able to work in the United Kingdom (GOV, 2017), and therefore would hypothetically be able to buy their preferred gift if they did not like the gift that was received by the main characters in the story-completion task. Similarly, participants between the ages of 7-12 would not only be reliant upon their parents and relatives to buy them toys that were either requested or given as gifts, but would also be old enough to have socialised with peers and thereby to have developed an awareness of gender (Martin & Ruble, 2004).

Data Collection Process
In their classroom environment, a story-completion task was implemented (Braun & Clarke, 2013), whereby participants were presented with one of two story stems (see Appendix 1 and 2). In the story stem scenarios, a male protagonist receives a female action figure as a gift from a family member, and the figure is either Rey from Star Wars: The Force Awakens or the Black Widow from The Avengers. As merchandisers often cite a lack of interest for their marketing decisions, suggesting that films such as these are boys films and therefore are marketed predominantly for boys who do not want to play with girls (Johnson, 2014; Let Toys Be Toys, 2015), male protagonists were chosen for both scenarios to explore cross-gender play. Moreover, Disney female characters Rey and the Black Widow, who do not fall within the Disney Princess range, were chosen specifically as they were seen to be marginalised recently in the merchandise of their respective films (Johnson, 2014; Let Toys Be Toys, 2015), and the films which they are in comprise other characters that generate affection and admiration. Therefore, their inclusion in the story-completion task would offer insight into whether the decision to marginalise these characters due to a lack of interest was warranted.
Once participants received the story-completion task, they were instructed to spend a minimum of ten minutes completing the story being as creative as they would like, and were advised that the story could unfold over hours, days, weeks, months, or even years. After the task was completed, all forms were collected by the Lead Researcher from the Head Teacher for analysis. Prior to the commencement of the data collection process, ethical approval was granted by the Psychology Ethics Panel at Cardiff Metropolitan University (ethics reference number: 8890). In addition, Head Teachers were provided with the relevant information form and asked to provide consent in loco parentis. Obtaining consent on this basis was deemed appropriate given that the nature of the research was not sensitive, and participants would only be asked to confirm their age and sex (British Psychological Society, 2014).

Method of Analysis

The story-completion task forms were analysed using the six-phase thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). In doing so, each task form was carefully read in order to identify and code for each line of data. Each code was then used to generate potential themes in the data. The themes derived from the data were given an overarching name and definition, which distinctly reflected the theme in relation to the data. The resulting themes were then reviewed, in order to ensure they related to the initial coded lines of data. The thematic analysis adopted a realist/essentialist framework. Therefore, the themes were derived from the data at a semantic level (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke, Braun, & Hayfield, 2015). In line with this, Braun and Clarke’s (2006) “15-point checklist of criteria for good thematic analysis” (p. 96) was strictly adhered to, to ensure a high standard was maintained throughout the analytical process.
CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

The following chapter discusses the two core themes and seven sub-themes derived from the data during thematic analysis. Both core themes and sub-themes can be seen in Figure 1.

![Diagram of core themes and sub-themes]

*Figure 1. Overview of Core Themes and Sub-themes*

Each of the themes displayed in figure 1 will be discussed in turn with supporting quotes derived from the data.
1. Female Action Figure as Desirable

**Reaction to Loss**

Across the dataset, the assumption that the female action figure was desirable was salient in the way the participants discussed the protagonist’s reaction to the loss of the figure. This finding was commonly seen in the stories written by both female and male participants, as well as in the two story stem scenarios which were provided. For example, the stories described the protagonist as feeling sadness and disappointment over the loss of the figure, which was seen in the following quote:

*(Story 40, Female, Age 11)*

The way in which the participants detailed the response to loss suggests the figures desirability. This was seen in the way ‘Eric’ was described as upset over the loss of the figure and how the loss itself was defined as tragic. The figures desirability was further highlighted when ‘Eric’ was described as immediately searching and enlisting help from everyone so that he may be able to locate the missing figure. Additionally, the participants described both ‘Eric’ and ‘Thomas’ as investigating the figures disappearance and assigning blame so that the figure could be located, which was evidenced in the following quotes:

*(Story 8, Male, Age 12)*
The desire to locate the lost figure became a priority across the dataset where loss was a part of the storyline.

**Reaction to Breakage**

The desirability of the figure was further highlighted in the way the participants discussed the protagonist’s reaction to the figure breaking. For example, the figure was seen to break across several stories, however, this was primarily the result of overuse and non-stop play, and led to assumed feelings of devastation and dismay. This was seen in the following quote:

(Story 22, Male, Age 10)

In addition, a common reaction to the figure breaking was the main character requesting and pleading for a replacement female action figure, as evidenced by the previous quote as well as the following quote:

(Story 68, Female, Age 11)
The immediate reaction to replace the broken figure suggests that the participants perceived the female action figure to be desirable in both story stem scenarios.

*Seen as Valuable*

Further to this, the notion of the female action figure as being desirable was seen when the action figures valuableness was emphasised. This was seen when reference was made to the figure being a limited edition and special, as can be seen in the following quotes:

*But, this action figure had never ever been seen before. It was a “limited edition”, tall, Black Widow, with leathered boots and shiny armour.*

(Story 61, Female, Age 11)

*So there it was limited edition Black Widow under my sake plastic tree from asda. What a sight it was “wow thanks dad” I thought I was on top of the world but my sister*

(Story 8, Male, Age 12)

The figure was additionally seen to be displayed by participants as valuable in how it was intentionally requested by the protagonist, and described as allowing them to have a complete set, which was seen in the following quotes:
The female action figure was perceived to be of value, a limited edition, and allowing for a set to be completed, which was frequently expressed by both female and male participants across the dataset.

**Inseparableness**

A predominant finding derived from the data, and which further suggested the figures desirability, was the perceived inseparableness of the protagonist and the figure. This finding was seen in the stories completed by both female and male participants, and was seen across the dataset. For example, ‘Eric’ and ‘Thomas’ were both seen to be inseparable from the figure by keeping hold of the figure for activities with friends, during the school day, as well as during time spent in the home carrying out daily routines. This was seen in the following quotes:

(Story 14, Female, Age 7)
The inseparableness emphasised in the stories draws attention to the figures desirability. The perceived inseparability between the main character in the story stem and the female action figure was seen to be intense and dramatic, especially during the times when it was suggested by a parent that they get rid of the overused figure, as highlighted by the previous quote.

**Positive Affect**

The female action figures desirability was additionally made prominent by the positive affect participants described when the protagonist received the figure in both story stem scenarios. This was seen when they were perceived to feel elation, immediate excitement, happiness, and enjoyment when receiving the figure, as was seen in the following quotes:

(Story 36, Male, Age 11)

(Story 45, Male, Age 11)

(Story 37, Female, Age 11)

Both ‘Eric’ and ‘Thomas’ were not only perceived by both female and male participants to feel positive affect themselves, but were also assumed to physically show this positive affect in their behaviour displayed after receiving the figure, such as leaping with joy and expressing positive affection to the gift giver. These displayed expressions of positive affect and gratitude further draw upon the desirability of receiving the female action figure.
2. Action Figure Affords Opportunities

*Inspiration*

The action figure was also assumed to afford opportunities. This was seen in the stories where the figure itself served as an inspiration to the protagonist, providing opportunities for goal setting and creativity. For example, the figure was seen to inspire them to collect an entire set, to become the biggest fan, to audition to play a role in future films, and to create an enhanced version of the figure in the future, as can be seen in the following quotes:

(Story 3, Female, Age 11)

(Story 9, Male, Age 12)

As was seen in the previous quotes, the participants deduced that the action figure would afford opportunities in the short-term as well as in the long-term, allowing them to set and achieve goals, whilst providing opportunities for creativity in the process.

*Imaginative Play*

An additional opportunity afforded by the action figure was the opportunity for imaginative play, which was a salient feature across the dataset. This was seen when the participants referred to the main character in both story stem scenarios engaging in imaginative combat, travel, heroism, comradery, and adventure. This finding was prevalent in the stories completed by both female and male participants, and was illustrated in the following quotes:
Moreover, the afforded opportunities for imaginative play were further highlighted by the participants in the several stories where the figure itself was seen to come to life, enhancing the opportunities for imaginative play. This was displayed by the following quote:

As can be seen, the figure afforded opportunities for inspiration and imaginative play in a way that was not limited or constrained by the female action figure and traditional gender stereotypes.
Summary of Results

Overall, the results of the analysis have highlighted the ways in which the action figure was assumed by both female and male participants to be desirable and affording opportunities in both story stem scenarios. The desirability of the figure was salient in the way participants described the protagonist’s reaction to the loss and breakage of the figure, the value they associated with the figure, their inseparableness from the figure, and the positive affect expressed when the figure was initially received. Additionally, the action figure affording opportunities was salient across the dataset, and was seen in the way the figure was a source of inspiration and allowed for imaginative play. Through the consideration of the two core themes and seven sub-themes, the analysis suggests that regardless of the figures perceived gender, the protagonist was described by the participants to engage with the action figure as they would with any other figure. Similarly, their engagement with the figure was not limited or constrained to traditional gender stereotypical roles.
CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

The aim of the current study was to explore children’s assumptions regarding female characters in action films. This study not only hoped to extend the current research context, but also to further investigate the belief which has reinforced gender stereotypes and the marginalisation of female characters in the marketing and merchandise of films that do not fall within the Disney Princess range, that is, that girls do not engage with action films and boys do not identify with female characters (Johnson, 2014; Let Toys Be Toys, 2015). The findings of the present research contrasted greatly with this dominantly held belief, highlighting female and male children’s assumptions of a female action figure as both desirable and affording opportunities. A female action figures desirability was evident from the way participants described the protagonist’s reaction to the loss of the figure, their reaction to the breakage of the figure, the value associated with the figure, their displayed inseparableness from the figure, and the positive affect described when the figure was initially received. Furthermore, the assumption that the action figure affords opportunities was evident from the way participants perceived the figure to allow for inspiration and imaginative play.

The present findings have important implications for the merchandise of action films. For instance, these findings have highlighted how in contrast to popular belief, girls can and do engage well with action films and their merchandise, and boys too, can and do engage well with female characters. Moreover, this engagement was not limited in anyway by the action figure being a female character. The figure was still perceived to engage in activities throughout the stories that one would likely see with a male action figure, engaging in battles, adventures, and imaginary travel. Therefore, the decision to marginalise female characters in the marketing and merchandise of action films appears to be unwarranted. Moreover, it would appear as though there is indeed a market for female character merchandise, which was displayed in the way participants emphasised the female action figures valuableness by suggesting the figure was a limited edition and would enable the protagonist to complete a set. These findings draw special attention to the way in which a set was seen as incomplete prior to the addition of the female action figure, and further highlight children’s desire to add these characters to their toy set, regardless of the figures perceived gender. Likewise, these findings illuminate children as consumers who are aware of the different value categories of toys, and who seek to accumulate multiple versions of franchise merchandise. Therefore, from a marketing perspective, the inclusion of female action figures would likely not detract from sales but rather add to them.
In addition to this, given the negative implications gendered marketing has on childhood development (Bem, 1981; Birthisel, 2014; Blaise, 2012; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Huang, 2013; Retelsdorf et al., 2015; Richardson & Wearing, 2014; Upton, 2012; Wolter et al., 2015; Wong & Hines, 2015), and the distress experienced by children with non-normative gender expressions and identities (Connolly et al., 2016; Conoley, 2008; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Johnson, 2014; Marshall, 2016; Olson et al., 2016; Richardson & Wearing, 2014; Saewyc et al., 2014), these empirical research findings highlight the growing and imminent need for the reconfiguration and regulation of popular beliefs regarding what it means to be ‘female’ or ‘male’. Similarly, multinational mass media companies who tend to market and advertise merchandise through a traditional gender stereotypical lens, such as The Walt Disney Company, should be held accountable for their role in the promotion of gender stereotypes in their films and merchandise (Birthisel, 2014; England et al., 2011; Lee, 2008; Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2009). This remains especially important, as Disney’s far reaching promotion of gender stereotypes not only goes against business ethics and corporate social responsibility (Grosser, Moon, Freeman, & Nelson, 2014), but the present findings suggest that these stereotypes are irrelevant to how the children actually perceive and engage with action films and the merchandise itself.

There were other areas of interest derived from the data which were not pertinent to the present study’s aims. For instance, whilst the figure itself was not seen to be restricted by gender stereotypes during play, the victims in the participants’ stories who were in need of rescuing were predominantly female bystanders. This finding is in line with traditional gender stereotypes of females, and their portrayal in the media as being fearful and passive (Birthisel, 2014; England et al., 2011; Lee, 2008; Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2009). Further to this, female participants had a tendency to focus on the appearance of the figure itself in their stories, a finding which was not seen as frequently in the stories completed by male participants. This finding too, coincides with traditional gender stereotypes and the gendered marketing that exists today which encourages girls to focus on appearance through the promotion of ‘girls only’ toys that are primarily cosmetics and jewellery (Auster & Mansbach, 2012). Whilst these findings were not themes relating to the figure itself, they bring to bear issues regarding gender that future research should aim to explore.
In line with this, as the present study was the first of its kind to employ a story-completion task in a non-therapeutic way to explore children’s assumptions of female character’s in action films, future research should aim to further explore these findings. Such research could employ a drawing task to further explore children’s perceptions of gender. For instance, children could be provided with comic strip templates and be instructed to complete and then talk through their drawings. Previous research has provided support for the use of drawing tasks to explore children’s perceptions, and has suggested that drawing tasks are a valuable contribution to research, as they provide a more complex and multi-layered picture of the topic under study (Eldén, 2013). Further to this, whilst the present study included two female characters from action films in the story stem scenarios, future research could consider constructing scenarios that include one female character and one male character. The chosen characters in these scenarios should be similar in popularity in order to prevent unintentional bias that could influence the research findings. For instance, the Black Widow and Hawk Eye could be chosen, as both characters are present in The Avengers films and are also aligned with regards to their popularity and presence in the films. Employing a content analysis on the resulting data would then allow for researchers to compare and contrast the assumptions relating to both female and male characters in action films (Wilkinson, 2015).

Further to this, a limitation in the current study is that the data was analysed by one researcher. This could have had the potential to lead to blind spots in the data being missed due to the absence of another point of view. However, whilst this was seen as a limitation, Braun and Clarke’s (2006) “15-point checklist of criteria for good thematic analysis” (P. 96) was strictly adhered to, and as a result, the negative impact this could have had on the quality of the analysis was reduced. Moreover, in order to assess the reliability of the coding, 10% of the data was recoded six weeks after the initial coding was carried out, and Cohen’s (1960) Kappa test was performed to determine consistency: K=0.899 (89.95%). This level of agreement between the initial coding and recoding is considered to be “almost perfect” (Viera & Garrett, 2005, p. 362).

A further limitation in the present study is that the design was based on the premise that the participants were aware of who Rey and the Black Widow are, as this was not screened for before the data collection process began. Whilst there were relevant images included on the story-completion task forms (see Appendix 1 and 2), this could have influenced the research findings. Therefore, future research should redesign this aspect of the study, and screen for awareness of the chosen characters prior to the data collection process.
In conclusion, the results of the present study draw attention to children’s assumptions regarding female characters in action films, which have been shown to be incongruent with the argument cited by merchandisers for the reasoning behind their marketing decisions (Johnson, 2014; Let Toys Be Toys, 2015). Seeing as how children do not appear to be concerned with gender when it comes to play, the persistent enforcement of gender stereotypes is unwarranted, and the argument itself no longer holds. There are numerous practical applications of the current research findings. In addition to offering a way forward for future research in an area that is understudied at present, these findings could be used to promote the cessation of gendered marketing, which research has shown to be considerably damaging to childhood development and to those with non-normative gender expressions and identities. In line with this, the present findings will be provided to the parent-led campaign, Let Toys Be Toys, so that they can be utilised and drawn upon to counter the argument that has encouraged gendered marketing and the marginalisation of female characters in the marketing and merchandise of film.

_Reflexive Analysis_

Reflexivity refers to a researcher’s awareness of their own personal and epistemological contributions to the way meanings are constructed throughout the research process (Willig, 2008). Throughout the research process in the current study, my role as a researcher was influenced by my being a feminist. Being a feminist not only influenced my decision to focus on gender for my dissertation project, but it also encouraged me to work on a project that had the potential to increase gender equality. Additionally, my role as a researcher was influenced by my interests in childhood development, and my research goals of creating a more inclusive childhood for both girls and boys. This influenced my decision to work with children for this project, and to explore a commonly held belief which has promoted an exclusive childhood for girls and boys through its contribution to the promotion and persistence of gendered marketing. Whilst it could be argued that these influences could have potentially provided me with a certain level of bias, I believe they allowed me to engage with the data on a deeper level (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Likewise, I believe they enhanced the quality of the analysis as my interest in this area meant that I allocated a significant amount of time to each phase of the six-phase analysis without rushing or lightly going through each phase, in line with Braun and Clarke’s (2006) “15-point checklist of criteria for good thematic analysis” (P. 96). Moreover, I feel that these interests allowed for the children who participated in this study to have their stories and thereby their assumptions recognised and heard, and in a novel way that was relevant to them.
REFERENCES


Appendix 1. Story-completion Task Form Scenario A

STORY-COMPLETION TASK

Gender:

Age:

You have been invited to take part in a story-completion task. This means that you will be provided with the opening sentence of a story and then you will write what happens next. There is no right or wrong way to complete the story, and you can be as creative as you like. Your story can unfold over hours, days, weeks, months, or even years.

Please read and complete the following story:

Eric likes Star Wars and for his birthday, Eric’s grandmother bought him a Rey action figure… What happens next? (Please spend the following ten minutes completing the story, continuing onto the following page if you need to).
STORY-COMPLETION TASK

Gender:

Age:

You have been invited to take part in a story-completion task. This means that you will be provided with the opening sentence of a story and then you will write what happens next. There is no right or wrong way to complete the story, and you can be as creative as you like. Your story can unfold over hours, days, weeks, months, or even years.

Please read and complete the following story:

Thomas likes The Avengers. As a gift, Thomas’s father bought him a Black Widow action... What happens next? (Please spend the following ten minutes completing the story, continuing onto the following page if you need to).
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Signed: ________________________________

xxxxx

Date: ________________________________