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## The Echoes of Our Favourite Childhood Figures: Examining the Role of Disney in Lifelong Character Development Through Its Generational Fairy Tales

**Norbert Griszbacher**

Corvinus University of Budapest

**Ildikó Kemény**

Corvinus University of Budapest

**Ákos Varga**

Corvinus University of Budapest

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### Abstract

Since its founding, Disney has become the symbol of values such as joy, magic, entertainment, and family in our lives through loveable stories, characters, and unique experiences. Disney also has had a significant impact on youth culture with its ability to appeal to universal human experiences through its versatile character portfolio. Disney's recent tendency to reproduce their earlier success in modern adaptations (e.g., *The Little Mermaid* and *Snow White* coming in 2023) is the focus of this paper. It aims to examine the influence of Disney's representation of the mechanisms of our world on youth character development by comparing the responses given for the 'classic' and the 'modern' versions. For this reason, in addition to explicit measures (survey), an Implicit Associations Test (IAT) was used to discover those attitudes which would generally be hidden from explicit methods of analysis due to their subversive nature (e.g., deep affective content like nostalgia). The analysis revealed a significant correlation between IAT-measured implicit attitudes and explicit measures of attitudes and behaviour toward modern and classic (our target) categories. The results also indicate the significance of these scenes (especially the childhood 'classic' ones) as they can form strong bonds with the young audience, affecting their preferences, values, worldview, and, thus, their character development.

**Keywords:** Character development, childhood memories, Disney, Implicit Association Test (IAT), neuromarketing

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## 1. Introduction: Why Early Character Education Matters

In recent years, character development, and its vital part in our education, have served as a base for many discussions and research (Bialik et al., 2015; Department for Education, 2019; Naval et al., 2015; Pattaro, 2016; Purba et al., 2020; University of Birmingham, 2020). Despite all the interest, taking the first steps within the field of character education can be challenging as it lacks a definition on which there is a consensus (Pattaro, 2016). The definition of character education varies according to the particular viewpoint from which scholars connect to their research topic (Crossan et al., 2016). Jeynes (2019) adopts the definition of Lickona (1991), whereby “*character education is the deliberate effort to develop the virtues that enable us to lead fulfilling lives and build a better world*” (p. 228). Lickona’s (1991) definition is one of contemporary society’s most widely acknowledged interpretations of character education (Pattaro, 2016). It also underpins the definition offered by Berkowitz and Hoopes (2009), who describe character education as “*the deliberate attempt to promote the development of virtue, moral values, and moral agency in youth*” (p. 132), where educational settings have a central function. Character, as a concept, is pictured as the fluid, intangible part of our nature, which is consciously and subconsciously formed by repetitive behaviours. Although character traits can be inherited to some extent, other parts of the character, like virtues, values, and several other traits, are learned and developed at early life stages and then (re)shaped by the impact of family members, friends, school, work, and social experiences, and other critical life events (Crossan et al., 2016).

Character development is a complex, lifelong journey. In this regard, the lack of experience, which solidifies the value of maintaining certain character traits, makes youth more vulnerable due to susceptibility to outer influence while exploring new ideas and novel challenges - for which they might not yet be ready (Berk, 2008; Naval et al., 2015; Simon et al., 1972). As we can read in the opening line of one of the most cited articles in this area by Berkowitz and Bier (2005, p. 64), “*For a society to endure, it must socialize each generation of youth to embody the virtues and characteristics that are essential to that society’s survival and prosperity*”. This reflects how children’s capability to function as responsible citizens must be nurtured early on. Children who have sufficiently developed their character are most likely to overcome problems or obstacles in their lives. The right character education can be a vital tool in retaining hope and supporting an ideal way of survival for a generation who has to grow up - desirably into well-rounded, noble human citizens. This challenge is exacerbated by global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (González-Pérez & Ramírez-Montoya, 2022). Therefore, the importance of mastering character traits such as integrity, resilience, perseverance, optimism, a growth mindset, and (emotional) self-control, among others, increasingly comes under the spotlight (Crossan et al., 2016; Jeynes, 2019; Pattaro, 2016).

Despite the ongoing argument over whether we are born with, or inherit, a relatively fixed character set or that circumstances develop it with time, it is an established fact that early childhood development during the ‘golden years’ has a fundamental effect on a child’s developmental trajectory (Crossan et al., 2016; Jeynes, 2019; Paul et al., 2020; Saptatiningsih & Permana, 2019). As Gunawan (2017) pinpointed, early childhood (between 2-7 years of age) is usually the time when we start to learn about the means of living and socialising. This stands as both a sensitive yet critical period since it will significantly determine the individual’s attitudes, values, and behavioural patterns in later stages of life. Throughout this decisive period, the hidden potential may be actualised in case the proper stimulus is received. Hence, we cannot overstate the importance of age-appropriate character education. The positive and

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negative experiences arising from initial encounters with the external world tend to burn into our memory, significantly affecting our psychological-social development.

Referring back to Crossan et al. (2016), the foundation of our character is formed through repeated early childhood experiences, knowingly or unknowingly. Our judgement on the value of a characteristic is acquired through intentional reward/punishment by an adult or through direct experience with the effects of our actions in the real world through a learn-by-doing process. To illustrate this idea, imagine a baby that keeps repeating and getting used to an activity (either good or bad) because every time it is done, laughter, smiles, or applause welcome it. The young brain does not excel in making value judgements and instead works like a sponge, absorbing all received stimuli while trying to find consistency in the effects of their actions. In seeking consistency, children consolidate their experiences with reality and generate a contextual anchor for their actions in the maze of novel information (Helterbran, 2009; Leming, 2000; Standish et al., 2006). Early theorists have argued that humans are social beings, and the dependency, and thus attachment to these so-called anchors (e.g., between infants and their mothers) broadly defines these early development stages. The early bonds with these significant objects, either taking the form of a person or an item (representing a person or a part of the person) and the positive and negative experiences involving them will serve as a basis for critical life lessons (Freud in Strachey, 1994; Klein, 1949; 1950).

However much the young brain is a miraculous 'engine', the threat is looming in every corner since playing with devices with internet access in early childhood has become natural in the daily lives of modern society (Ling et al., 2021). As a result, children (and even parents) likely have little or no control over the youth's exposure to harmful images in day-to-day interactions with the new parts of the world (Kargin, 2018; Utami et al., 2020). Widespread media and technology have provided excellent access to a vast range of information (Indriati et al., 2021), let it be via television, computer, tablet, or smartphone. Nevertheless, it has simultaneously exposed children to more adult-oriented, harmful content beyond its benefits. As a result, children constantly receive mixed media messages about good and bad character values and suffer from the loss of reduced opportunities for early social interactions, hence community experiences (Imroatun et al., 2021; Jolls, 2008; Keumala et al., 2018). Consequently, nowadays, when a young brain is subject to television programs – whether news or cartoons – such media content has a massive impact on our worldview, influencing our judgement of the world and even ourselves. Resultantly, huge multimedia companies like Disney represent not only an entertainment source but also a force that shapes the identities, desires, and subjectivities of millions of fans around the globe (Brode, 2004; Bryman, 1999; Forgacs, 1992; Giroux & Pollock, 2010; Wasko, 2020).

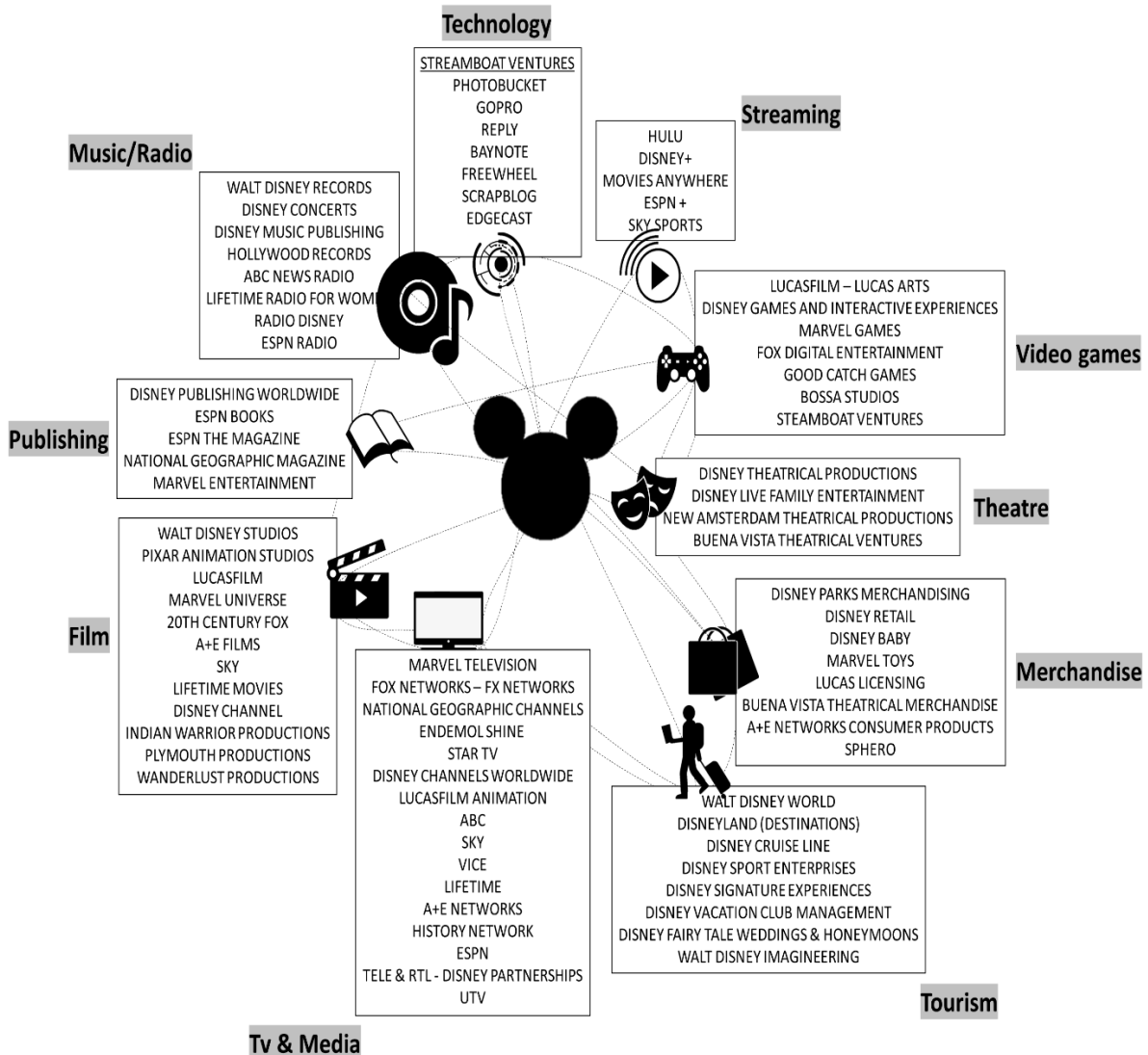
As literature is scant in this field, with our research, we intend to contribute to this debate by investigating the influence of the representation of our world in Disney scenes by using the combination of implicit associations between classic and modern Disney adaptations (IAT) and explicit (self-reported) survey-based answers related to general (Disney) preferences. The aim is to discover whether these early impressions define our later life values and choices, thus our character, proving that the power of the messages of children-targeted products has an influential factor in character development.

Our study follows the upcoming path: 2. Literature review: analysing the secondary sources relating to Disney's nostalgic content and the way this ever-growing brand influences our social practices, 3. Methodology: explicit and implicit measurements, 4. Results, 5. Discussion, and 6. Conclusion, limitations, and future research.

## 2. Literature Review: Disney and ‘The Multiverse of Madness’

The Disney brand stands for pleasure and entertainment across the globe. Figure 1 provides an overview of the several high-profile brands Disney has (majority or minority) ownership of today, slowly becoming one of, if not the most influential brands globally. Cartoons, films, comics, books, toys, and theme parks, among other Disney products, have become critical actors in the entertainment industry, thus, forming an integral part of our everyday lives (Giroux & Pollock, 2010; Wasko, 2020).

FIGURE 1. THE DISNEY ENTERTAINING MULTIVERSE



Source: Author’s own compilation, based on thewalthedisneycompany.com, 2022

As illustrated in Figure 1, the Disney empire is built up of nearly countless entertaining universes, capable of functioning independently, creating a Disney multiverse where everyone can find something to their taste. On top of that, the current approach of Disney (2014- "The Disney Renaissance of Live Action Remakes" – listed in Table 1) was destined to strengthen even stronger bonds with the fans by promising a nostalgic tour with the beloved and long-missed figures of our childhood.

## 2.1. Nostalgia and the Renaissance of Disney Live-Action Remakes

The nostalgia market is currently flourishing as all companies are looking for ideas to (re)create lucrative new touchpoints for consumers. Since most markets are saturated, brands often turn to the past for inspiration. For instance, Disney live-action remakes and merchandising of the childhood favourites of Generations X-Z were designed to lead to an emotional, nostalgic journey to the past, giving people exactly the kind of reminiscent experience for which they longed.

TABLE 1. THE DISNEY RENAISSANCE OF LIVE-ACTION REMAKES

| Remakes (Modern Films)                 | Classics (Original Cartoons)          |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| Maleficent (2014)                      | Sleeping Beauty (1959)                |
| Cinderella (2015)                      | Cinderella (1950)                     |
| The Jungle Book (2016)                 | The Jungle Book (1967)                |
| Alice Through the Looking Glass (2016) | Alice in Wonderland (1951)            |
| Beauty and the Beast (2017)            | Beauty and the Beast (1991)           |
| Christopher Robin (2018)               | Winnie the Pooh films                 |
| Dumbo (2019)                           | Dumbo (1941)                          |
| Aladdin (2019)                         | Aladdin (1992)                        |
| The Lion King (2019)                   | The Lion King (1994)                  |
| Maleficent: Mistress of Evil (2019)    | Sleeping Beauty (1959)                |
| Lady and the Tramp (2019)              | Lady and the Tramp (1955)             |
| Mulan (2020)                           | Mulan (1998)                          |
| Cruella (2021)                         | One Hundred and One Dalmatians (1961) |
| Pinocchio (2022)                       | Pinocchio (1940)                      |
| Peter Pan & Wendy (2022)               | Peter Pan (1953)                      |
| The Little Mermaid (2023)              | The Little Mermaid (1989)             |

Source: Author's own compilation, based on disneyplus.com, 2022

Regarding the above-mentioned nostalgia phenomenon, Holbrook and Schindler (1991, p. 330) defined it as

*a preference (general liking, positive attitude, or favorable affect) toward objects (people, places, or things) that were more common (popular, fashionable, or widely circulated) when one was younger (in early adulthood, in adolescence, in childhood, or even before birth).*

In our study, we refer to personal or real nostalgia as a direct experience with the given component of nostalgia, which has different, unique meanings to everyone (Havlena & Holak, 1996). Positively, it could stand as a pleasant memory of the past, or it could induce the sense

of loss of previous experiences during the realisation that we are unable to recreate those moments (Holak & Havlena, 1998).

As Table 2 indicates, in most industries, we are witnessing the headway of nostalgic marketing approaches in the form of different advertisements and products. They work like a time machine by resurrecting older ideas (known as rebranding, retro, or vintage) to appeal to audiences eager to get ‘one more taste’ of the ‘pleasant past’. It is no longer about the product (or service) to be shown or bought but instead about the emotional components like memories, feelings, and fantasies these unique objects stir within each individual (Chou & Lien, 2014; Havlena & Holak, 1991; Holbrook & Schindler, 1991; Stern, 1992).

TABLE 2. EXAMPLES OF RECENT NOSTALGIC BRAND APPROACHES

| <b>Brand</b> | <b>Example(s)</b>  | <b>Year(s)<br/>(original)<br/>return</b> |
|--------------|--|--|
| Niantic Labs | Pokemon Go   | (1997-)<br>2016                          |
| Adidas       | The timeless Gazelle   | (1960s)<br>2016                          |
| Coca-Cola    | Christmas / Santa (and the iconic bottles)                               | (1930s)<br>2014-                         |
| H&M          | Friends themed collection  | (1994-2004)<br>2020                      |
| Calvin Klein | The Re-Issue Project #mycalvins  | (1990s)<br>2014                          |
| Budweiser    | Rewind   | (1980-2010)<br>2020                      |
| Netflix      | Stranger Things and trends from the 1980s                                | (1980s)<br>2016-                         |
| Meta         | Facebook Memories, Instagram #tb(t)                                      | (individual)<br>day-to-day               |
| McDonald's   | Throwback Deals  | (1990s)<br>2021                          |
| Nintendo     | Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) Classic Mini Plus, top classic games | (1983-)<br>2016                          |
| Nokia        | The release of the Nokia 3310  | (2000s)<br>2017                          |
| Walmart      | Famous Visitors campaign   | (1980-)<br>2020                          |

Source: Author's own compilation

Additionally, according to Van Tilburg et al. (2015), this kind of nostalgia fosters creativity through openness to experience, whereas nostalgia harnesses the past for engaging with the

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present and future. Moreover, Wildschut et al. (2018) noted that nostalgia might stand as a social cohesion tool as it is possible to transfer one's experience interpersonally and intergenerationally, creating a common bridge between different social groups, which fits the profile of Disney perfectly.

## 2.2. The Disneyization of Society and The Disney Babies

As Bryman (1999) noted in his article “*The Disneyization of Society*”, brands such as McDonald's or Disney are powerful enough to transform the (consumer) world to their desired image by carefully planting their principles into more and more sectors of society. Large multinational companies - like Disney in our case - inevitably influence our everyday lives. Nowadays, popular fiction, especially Disney, stands as a vital machine in creating, reflecting, and reinforcing social values and norms as fictionalised and dramatised portrayals regularly displayed on the screen can easily form the base of our perceptions. In addition, nearly all forms of media have the power to write – rewrite (and deliver) different cultural messages (Greeley, 2018). Correspondingly, Disney being one of the primary sources of ideological and cultural knowledge, could result in a malformed, misshapen worldview, especially among the young ones affected at a critical age. This was highlighted by Brode (2004, p. 10),

*He [Disney] did, after all, reach us first (and, therefore, foremost), at that very point in our youthful development when either an individual or a generation is most receptive (and vulnerable) to such forces and ideas.*

During one's self-discovery, young people prove to be an easy target of the camouflaged messages and campaigns of profit-hungry companies which are “*shaping human meaning and behaviour and regulat(ing) our social practices at every turn*” (Giroux & Pollock, 2010, p. 1).

Based on the relevant academic literature, Disney can influence our development in many ways. In the last decades, researchers have examined Disney from many angles and identified the following problematic areas: images of madness (Beveridge, 1996), mental illnesses (Lawson & Fouts, 2004), death (Cox et al., 2005), negative portrayal of older characters (Robinson et al., 2007), indirect aggression (Coyne & Whitehead, 2008), and child maltreatment (Hubka et al., 2009), which can be found in Disney's children movies. The first encounter with these scenes at a relatively early age can be influential, and even traumatic as the young brain may not be ready to process the events (e.g., the unforgettable death of King Mufasa in *The Lion King*). Disney was also a target of severe criticism after the discovery of the biased portrayal of (trans)gender roles, questioning whether young boys and girls will have suitable role models to look up to. Recently, several studies concluded that the underlying stereotypical issues might stimulate the construction of unreal beauty and behaviour images within the developing brain (Bazzini et al., 2010; Do Rozario, 2004; Hoerner, 1996; Macaluso, 2018; Wohlwend, 2009). As previously discussed, these stereotypes are constructed by children through direct experiences or indirectly through some medium (Crossan et al., 2016; Gunawan, 2017), so these solid first impressions about death or how real princesses should look and act can form, change, and reinforce stereotypes.

One would think that Disney is exclusively for children since these fairy tales and the magical kingdom can most effectively reach those who have young and innocent minds who still believe in these kinds of fantasies. Although Disney's influencing strategy starts at a relatively early age with cartoons and toys (numerous parents reported that they ended up feeling guilty after not purchasing Disney products for their children, see Bohas, 2015), it does not end there at all. What is unique about the brand is that its magic works even through generations globally, as most of the characters and their stories become deeply rooted in people's minds. Disney accompanies many people throughout their most challenging years; the characters grow up

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together with the adolescents, forming a deep, lifelong connection between the beloved brand and the fans throughout these years (Huang et al., 2022). The company also has a remarkable ability to pull the right strings to trigger nostalgic feelings within the older target segments, especially among those who are desperately looking for joy, positive feelings, and the comfort of the past, which is now available as their favourite childhood figures come to life (as illustrated in Table 1). As Forgacs described this phenomenon (1992, p. 361),

*A Disney baby is also what you were if you were born at any date after 1925, were taken as a child to see Disney films, used to read Disney comics and owned some Disney merchandise such as a Mickey Mouse watch. Disney babies of the latter kind grow ideally into Disney adults. Disney adults take their children to Disney films and theme parks, buy them Disney merchandise and subscribe to the Disney Channel.*

Even after decades, the remakes mentioned above of the childhood classics are likely to lead to some kind of emotional resonance within the now-adults who will probably want to share those feelings with the new generations to teach them about something great from their own time proudly. Both generations are having a great time simultaneously: parents enjoy and recall those familiar, nostalgic moments while the kids experience a vicarious (transferred) nostalgia (Wildschut et al., 2018). With such nostalgic campaigns, Disney has ensured that after the first contact with the ‘big world’, it would be hard for many to forget this magical kingdom. We will be reminded of these childhood memories (and lessons) constantly, not only not to let the fire of Disney magic die out in the older generations but also to plant the seed of it in the newer ones as well; in most cases, the latter will be a shared effort between the brand and the ‘Disney parents’ (Forgacs, 1992).

Consequently, this potential bond formed early between the fans and the brand has a significant influence, working as a magnet attracting both young and old and making them sit down (together) for a movie. At any rate, as we can see, the impact of Disney - especially the one on our (character) development - goes far beyond ‘just a movie’. Without such a project, our research focuses on this phenomenon by explicitly and implicitly shedding light on the possible impacts of childhood TV scenes on our career development - with Disney classics and remakes at the centre of attention.

### **3. Methodology**

Forming an essential part of popular culture, films are interesting multimedia products. Beyond entertainment, watching a movie can provide us, amongst others, with inspiration, suggestions, and motivation, reflecting on our past and shaping our reality. Consequently, Disney's potential role in our character education is not a brand-new discovery. Previously researchers found several fundamental values and norms in the case of cartoons like ‘*Monsters University*’ (Greeley, 2018), ‘*Finding Dory*’ (Utami et al., 2020), and ‘*The Good Dinosaur*’ (Indriati et al., 2021), which, through repetition, can be transferable to the target audience. However, it must be mentioned that these studies focused on a single Disney story using qualitative content or textual analysis methods. These articles gave us the idea to examine a sequence of Disney tales together - both classics and remakes - using explicit and implicit methods in parallel to get a clearer understanding of the topic:

Research Question One (RQ1): Do we find an (early) bond between Disney and the fans?

Research Question Two (RQ2): What are the characteristics of Disney fans?

Research Question Three (RQ3): Can any connection with Disney influence our everyday decisions, thus our character?



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### 3.1. Research Design

The present study is based on a combination of explicit and implicit methods. The research started with a survey-based Implicit Association Test (IAT) (Greenwald et al., 1998), which was followed by an explicit self-reported questionnaire. The IAT was placed at the very beginning of the research so that the follow-up survey questions could not influence the attitudes reported during the implicit test (Griszbacher et al., 2022). The IAT consisted of 7 blocks (see Appendix 1), where before all the test blocks, practise blocks were introduced to let the respondents learn the principles before taking the actual quiz (Carpenter et al., 2019). A questionnaire followed the implicit part with questions centred around the key themes identified in the literature review.

### 3.2. Implicit Measurements

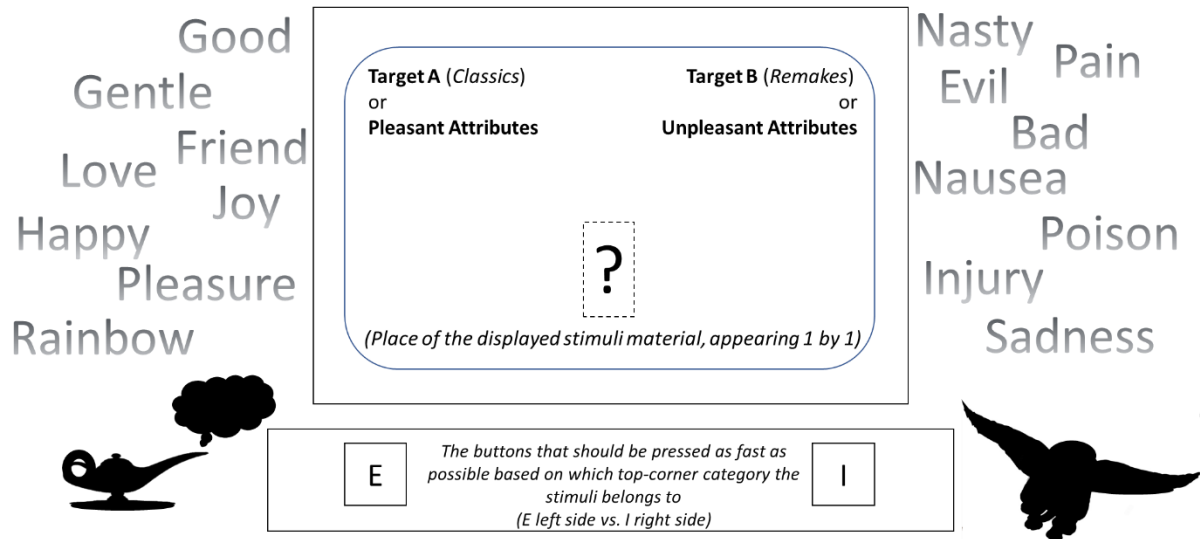
To avoid any distorting elements that may arise from the features of nostalgia in our exploratory research, a survey-based IAT was applied that is capable of revealing the relationship between a chosen target pair (e.g., insects vs flowers) and categories (like pleasant and unpleasant) by assessing the mental associations (Brendl et al., 2001; Brunel et al., 2004; Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001). Although implicit measures may still be in their infancy, these are considered methods free of response bias since the respondents are unaware that they are reporting their attitudes towards the targets during the pairing task (Maison et al., 2004). Additionally, its good consistency, predictive power, and flexibility are often highlighted among the benefits (Bar-Anan & Nosek, 2014; Gregg et al., 2013). However, the IAT has recently received heavy criticism (Jost, 2019; Schimmack, 2021), among others, due to its seemingly low retest reliability (Bar-Anan & Nosek, 2014; Gawronski et al., 2017; Lai & Wilson, 2021). Nevertheless, the IAT is still one of the most popular implicit research tools with the ability to indirectly investigate psychological constructs by using automatic associations between evaluative dimensions and attitude objects (Greenwald et al., 2003). As Carlsson & Agerström (2016) noted, despite all the concerns about the test, the IAT provides an effective tool for investigating attitudes, preferences, and stereotypes. Epifania et al. (2021) also reported that the IAT has the potential to be used in an even broader and more varied range of research fields in the future. Regardless, for all this to be feasible and for the validity of the results obtained in neuromarketing research not to be questioned, several disciplines need to be coordinated, including the latest advances in neuroscience, psychology, and economics (Varga, 2016).

The respondents completed a survey-based IAT in Qualtrics, comparing classic and modern Disney adaptations stimuli set on the dimensions of pleasant and unpleasant (represented by Figure 2). To determine our error rate, we set the IAT to drop participants with the proportion of too short response times, namely 300ms (Greenwald et al., 2003). As for the stimulus materials of the IAT survey, images from 10 different Disney cartoons and modern film remakes were presented (see Table 1, the first ten pairs). The cartoons were classified as '*classic*', the remakes as '*modern*' and the following standard words belonged to each rating attribute (Maison et al., 2001):

- a) Pleasant: friend, happy pleasure, gentle, good, joy, love, rainbow
- b) Unpleasant: nasty, pain, evil, nausea, poison, bad, injury, sadness

Figure 2 helps to visualise the IAT process running in Qualtrics via a device with a keyboard:

FIGURE 2. THE IMPLICIT ASSOCIATION TEST IN QUALTRICS



Source: Author's own compilation, based on Maison & Maliszewski, 2016, p. 4.

The difference in the response rate between the evaluative dimension and the pairing with polar attitude objects indicates the extent of the implicit attitude power. So, suppose classic and pleasant are strongly connected. In that case, the respondent should respond faster if you must give the same answer (for example, by pressing "E" or "I" as Figure 2 also displays) on these two terms which position (left or right side - pressing the equivalent button) was randomly assigned (then reversed) at each case by the online Qualtrics platform (Carpenter et al., 2019).

### 3.3. Explicit Measures

Since neuro-based measurements are complementary to traditional methods (Lee et al., 2007; Plassmann et al., 2015; Ramsøy, 2015; Varga, 2016), the modern adaptation/unpleasant IAT was extended with an explicit survey to be able to compare implicit and explicit responses. In our case, the focus fell on the associations between the classic (vs modern) Disney adaptations and unpleasant (vs pleasant) categories. As an initial test of the survey-software IAT, an implicit preference was expected for classic adaptations over modern ones (targets) and correlations with explicit measures as well (Hofmann et al., 2005; Greenwald et al., 2009). Subjects completed a set of questionnaire measures of behaviour and attitude toward our target categories. The questionnaire contained the following questions:

- a) Self-reported behaviour: frequency of watching movies (one question set about Disney-produced ones, one about movies in general, 5-point Likert scale),
- b) Preferences: attitude towards the target categories (5-point Likert scale),
- c) Demographic variable questions.

### 3.4. Data

Data collection was performed in the autumn academic term of 2019, conducted via Qualtrics online software to fulfil the requirements of our exploratory research (see earlier for the characteristics of the IAT). The test was shared in online Disney fan groups on different platforms and then re-shared by the fans among people with the same interests, using a so-called snowball sampling technique to identify and reach all those who had at least a slight connection to the brand previously. Our choice fell on this method because, in this way, it was more likely to reach a more significant proportion of our target segment within the given

timeframe with the lack of financial means (Baltar & Brunet, 2012; Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Heckathorn, 1997; Johnson, 2014). All research subjects participated voluntarily after all the key information was given regarding the aim of the research, features, length, voluntary participation, risks, confidentiality/anonymity, right to withdraw and e-mail contact in case of any questions or concerns on the cover page of the IAT. The test ended with a total of 130 responses, and 116 fulfilled the IAT criteria, providing a sufficient dataset for further analysis. After the data collection ended, all the records were anonymised (using code names such as ‘participant1’ and ‘participant130’) and stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act. The obtained information was available only to the researchers participating in the project (carefully following the points agreed on with the respondents at the start of the survey).

For data analysis, first, the built-in module of the iatgen.org platform was used to calculate the result of the IAT (sorting the data exported from Qualtrics.com). Then with the help of the IBM SPSS Statistics 26 software, the explicit and implicit results were compared to answer the research questions.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Validity and Reliability

In our explicit measures, overall and specific attitudes towards both targets were measured with an 18-item scale; the questions were centred around nostalgia, quality, and identification in the dimensions of classic and modern Disney adaptations (see Table 3).

TABLE 3. EXPLICIT SCALE VALIDATION

|                             | <b>Modern</b> | <b>Classic</b> |
|-----------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Cronbach alpha ( $\alpha$ ) | 0.724         | 0.628          |
| Mean                        | 23.570        | 21.350         |
| <i>SD</i>                   | 5.718         | 4.225          |

Source: Author’s own compilation

As depicted in Table 3, we found moderate reliability in the case of classic adaptations and good reliability in the case of modern adaptations (Hair et al., 2006; Peterson & Kim, 2013).

### 4.2. Demographic Profile

The descriptive statistics are summarised with the help of Table 4.

As in Table 4, the requirements of the IAT (Qualtrics) and the online data collection method broadly defined the sample, dominated by young, Budapest-based females with a university degree. It must be mentioned that this observation aligns with the previous ones made recently in Hungary using the implicit test in very different research areas, including manufacturer brands and private labels (Fuduric et al., 2022) and sports services marketing (Griszbacher et al., 2022). Nevertheless, our main aim to reach the ‘Disney segment’ (X-Z generations), the ones who potentially grew up on the classics and also watched the recent remakes, can be described as successful.

TABLE 4. SAMPLE DESCRIPTIVE

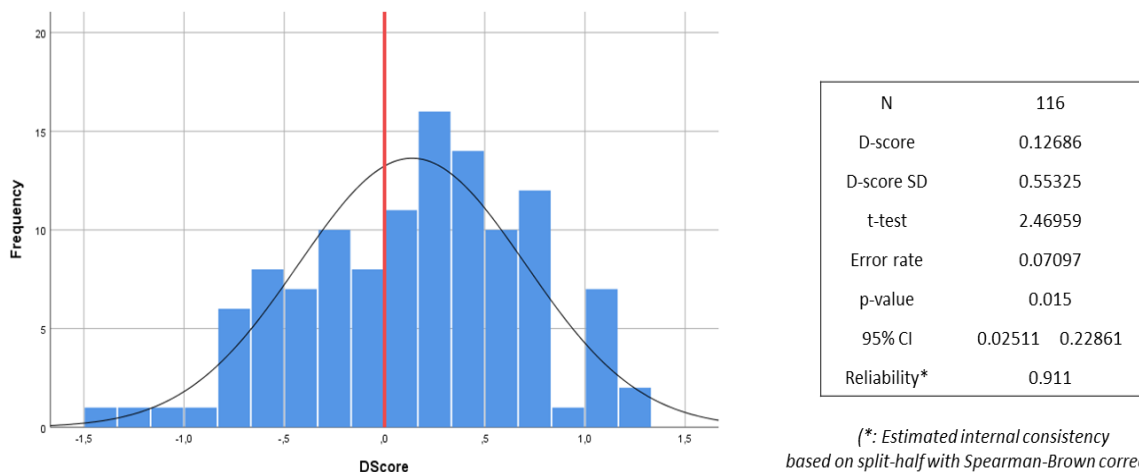
| Dimension               | Result   |
|-------------------------|--|
| Number of respondents   | 130  |
| Complete IATs           | 119  |
| Valid IAT responses     | 116  |
| Gender                  | 87 (female), 29 (male)                             |
| Age                     | 69 (17-24 years), 31 (25-34 years), 16 (35+ years) |
| Age (S.D.)              | 1.024  |
| Highest education level | 81 (university), 35 (no university degree)         |
| Living place            | 78 (Budapest), 8 (big city), 30 (smaller city)     |
| Family status           | 43 (single), 55 (relationship), 18 (married)       |

Source: Author's own compilation

### 4.3. Experiment Results

The implicit and explicit results were combined in our analysis (Greenwald et al., 2009; Hofmann et al., 2005). The dropped trial rates were low, and only 3 participants were excluded ( $M_{\text{timeout rate}} < 0.00102$ ,  $M_{\text{error rate}} = 0.07097$ ). The result of the IAT, namely the D-score, is the individual time response numbers, an aggregation of their response speed for the IAT questions. As shown in Figure 3, as a rule, the final score falls between -2 and +2 according to which category was easier (faster) to link with the positive dimensions (e.g., target category (Disney classics) + positive images = positive D-score) (Carpenter et al., 2019; Greenwald et al., 2003).

FIGURE 3. HISTOGRAM OF THE D-SCORES



Source: Author's own compilation

Our implicit result, the positive overall D-score (0.12686), shows that the scores are trending towards classic to pleasant dimensions (see the histogram above, where the data are the D-scores of the respondents and positive scores mean pleasant and negative mean unpleasant), which means it was easier (faster) to associate classic stimuli with the pleasant dimension. The positive tendency (IAT) indicates that there is a strong(er) link with childhood (classic) Disney scenes (RQ1).

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Intending to reveal the characteristics of the Disney fans (RQ2), we grouped the D-scores into four categories: (1) 'anti-classics'  $-2 \leq \text{D-score} < -1$ ; (2) 'rather remakes'  $-1 \leq \text{D-score} < 0$ ; (3) 'rather classics'  $0 \leq \text{D-score} \leq +1$ ; and (4) 'classics or nothing'  $+1 < \text{D-score} \leq +2$ . A significant relationship was found between the respondents' age and the level of commitment to Disney (classics), meaning that the younger the participant, the closer they felt to the original stories, finding themselves in higher (more positive) D-score groups ( $\text{Chi}^2=28.805$  Cramer's  $V=0.288$ ,  $p<0.017$ ). However, there was no other identifiable relationship between the respondents' demographic variables and the Disney (classics) fan groups.

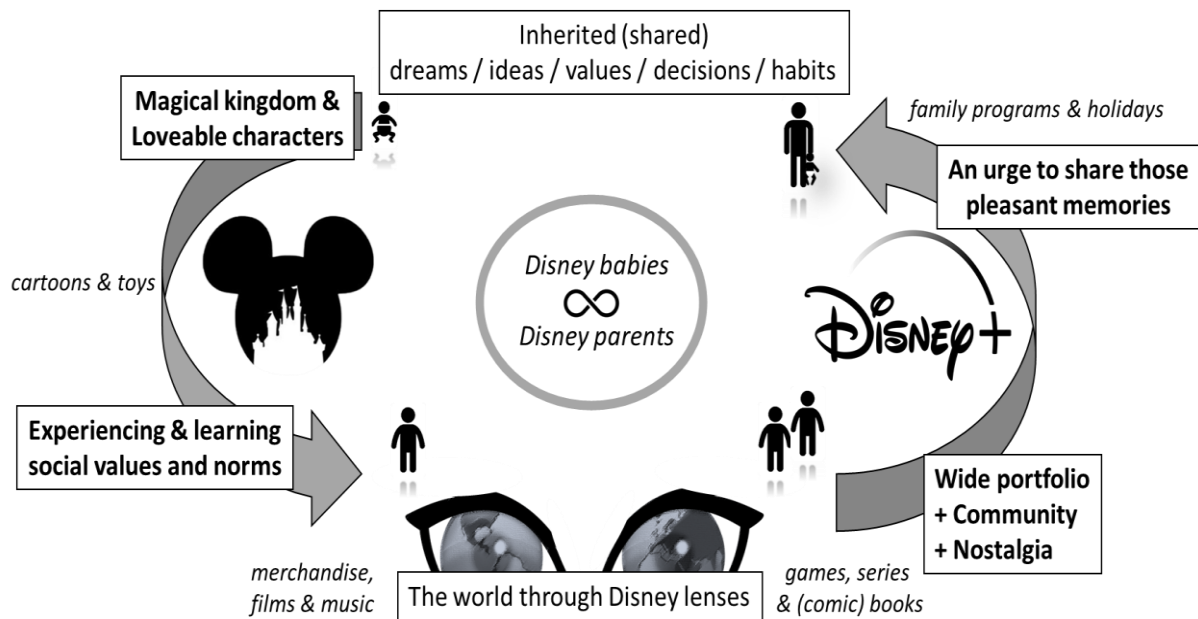
To see whether the level of Disney (classics) fandom impacts our preferences and attitudes, we cross-checked the IAT and the self-reported behaviour question scores (RQ3). Between the D-scores and the explicit measures of our study, we found the strongest correlation for the statements: "The classic adaptations are better" (Pearson's  $R=0.337$ ,  $p<0.000$ ), "The modern adaptations offer the same experience as classics" (Pearson's  $R=-0.342$ ,  $p<0.000$ ), "The remakes are better because they tell my childhood experiences in the language of the 21st century" (Pearson's  $R=-0.329$ ,  $p<0.000$ ), "I prefer classic Disney to remakes" (Pearson's  $R=0.197$ ,  $p<0.034$ ), and "I enjoyed the remakes more than the original ones" (Pearson's  $R=-0.190$ ,  $p<0.041$ ). As a result, explicitly and implicitly, the respondents in several categories (i.e., experience, language) expressed the feeling that the content of the original Disney universe was closer to them than the new ones.

## 5. Discussion

The present study shows that Disney has a special place for most of us, not only in our hearts but also in our brains affecting purchases and other everyday decisions. Even though both classic and modern targets were associated with affective content during the IAT, the classic target elicited significantly higher levels of enjoyment, confirming how powerful childhood encounters with Disney can be and the presence of a nostalgic bond that most fans still carry, even as adults. The identified strong link with these past motives is aligned with the findings of Brode (2004), in the sense that the brand's success mainly originated from its ability to find the children with its magical, happiness-promising kingdom at the most receptive but also susceptible times. This result also supports the idea of Forgas (1992) about the different generations of 'Disney babies' as Disney not only reaches us as a child but also constantly gets back to us through various nostalgic messages, in a sense holding our hands throughout our lives.

Disney functions as the first gateway to the big world, experiencing and learning its wonders and threats through Disney's lenses, and later on, standing there as a good old friend and mentor who is always there if we need someone to turn to. Nostalgia seems to be a vital tool in this strategy as young adults, especially the ones living in troubling times, are often fond of reminiscing and looking back on what felt good and/or was popular in 'the good old days' as the literature review summarised (Havlena & Holak, 1991; 1996). In addition, in this way, the older generations can be used as a medium between the brand and the children, completing a 'never-ending cycle of Disney babies and parents', summarised in Figure 4. All this aligns with the conclusions of Bryman (1999), Giroux and Pollock (2010), and Wasko (2020) regarding the way big multinational companies like Disney, with carefully planned (marketing) strategies, are slowly taking control over increasingly larger slices of our lives, 'Disneyfying our society'.

FIGURE 4. THE NEVER-ENDING CYCLE OF DISNEY BABIES AND PARENTS



Source: Author's own compilation

Compared with the few research studies in this field (Greeley, 2018; Indriati et al., 2021; Utami et al., 2020), the novelty of our research is that we examined a series of Disney films (both classics and remakes) while using implicit and explicit methods combined. These explicit and implicit measures also shed light on Disney's educational potential (dreams, values, decisions, and consequences).

As our results confirmed, in today's booming entertainment industry, what we choose to do in our free time beyond fun has a decisive role in the light of every situation, presenting a different experience and opportunity to learn and deepen one's character (Crossan et al., 2016). Following Greeley (2018), Utami et al. (2020), Indriati et al. (2021), we proved that these tales could serve an important educational role, especially during the early 'golden years'. These early experiences and images from Disney might fade with time but will hardly be forgotten. Based on the literature from early childhood, the continuous encounter with the brand and its messages (due to the nostalgic content), these so-called 'repetitive lessons' from Disney, especially during our most formative years, will inevitably have a substantial impact on our character (Figure 4).

The recurring values seen at these early stages will likely serve as a foundation for morality, invoking desires, and structuring thought and action accordingly, potentially for a lifetime (Crossan et al., 2016; Gunawan, 2017; Jeynes, 2019; Paul et al., 2020; Saptatiningsih & Permana, 2019). Moreover, since the results of character education are usually not visible in a short time (Crossan et al., 2016; Lickona, 1991), these effects might not even be recognisable in one's childhood but come to life later, over the decades. Thus, if they are not recognised in time, they can cause an irreversible shift in a given direction in one's development. Nowadays, the content shown on television serves a critical socialising function. Therefore, Disney has a significant role in youth culture with its universal language and versatile character portfolio. Based on the research, it is suggested that we have to be careful with the available, unlimited Disney content as some weighty memories burned into our minds as a child might contain negative values and disturbing images as well (Bazzini et al., 2010; Beveridge, 1996; Coyne & Whitehead, 2008; Cox et al., 2005; Do Rozario, 2004; Hoerner, 1996; Hubka et al., 2009; Lawson & Fouts, 2004; Macaluso, 2018; Robinson et al., 2007; Wohlwend, 2009).

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## 6. Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Research

This study made some important findings. In understanding with Hofmann et al. (2005) and Greenwald et al. (2009), the findings of our exploratory study confirm the validity of the joint application of implicit and explicit measures. However, follow-up studies are required to understand how childhood experiences (i.e., Disney cartoons) exactly affect our character development and the effectiveness of neuromarketing applications.

There are also some limitations to this study that can guide future researchers. Firstly, although the IAT has several benefits, it is a time-consuming test that requires a high degree of concentration that usually hinders reaching a more significant number of participants. Although our sample size seems relatively low, based on the most cited IAT research (Brunel et al., 2004; Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001; Greenwald et al., 1998; Maison et al., 2004), it can be concluded that in the case of this kind of research the average sample size often falls around 80 (Greenwald et al., 2009). Secondly, the test has certain technological restrictions (e.g., pressing given buttons). Thus, a device with a keyboard is needed and currently only applicable via Qualtrics.com, setting an online data collection method that primarily determines the demographics (Fuduric et al., 2022; Griszbacher et al., 2022). In future research, a larger sample size (with more nations involved) could be used to validate the measures. Thirdly, following our research focus with the IAT, we could only compare the link to classics and remakes along a pleasant-unpleasant axis.

It remains for future research to explore whether, among others, the good or the bad values are acquired easier, in what percentage they are present in the classics and the remakes, and what age group is the most endangered in this sense. Together with the present findings, future research can enrich our understanding of the complex topic of character development and its implications for quality of life and psychological well-being, and in our case, we must not forget its commercial applications either.

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## Declaration Statements

### Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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### Ethics Statement

The dataset associated with this article is not publicly available due to ethical approval restrictions.

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## Appendix

### A. Implicit Association Test (IAT)

7 blocks (set of trials).

D-score calculated via the results of Block 3 + 4 + 6 + 7 (see Carpenter et al., 2019).

1. *Initial target-concept discrimination* (20 trials)
2. *Associated attribute discrimination* (20 trials)
3. *Initial combined task* (20 trials)
4. *Repeated combined task* (40 trials)
5. *Reversed target-concept discrimination* (40 trials)
6. *Reversed combined task* (20 trials)
7. *Repeated reversed combined task* (40 trials)

### B. Reported Behaviour and Preferences

Measured on a 5-point Likert Scale.

1. To what extent do you consider yourself a Disney fan?
2. I watched a lot of Disney cartoons when I was a child
3. Today I enjoy watching Disney cartoons especially for nostalgic reasons
4. I was excited when I heard about the new remakes
5. I enjoyed the remakes even more than the original ones
6. The original stories are better
7. I prefer classic Disney to remakes
8. It is important for the younger generations to have the chance to also experience the original Disney world and magic offered by the classics
9. The classics (cartoons) are for children primarily
10. For children it is easier to understand and identify with the message of the original Disney movies (cartoons)
11. Children feel themselves closer to the characters of the original movies (cartoons)
12. The new remakes will be able to replace the original ones at one day on the way of becoming truly timeless
13. The modern adaptations offer the same experience as classics
14. Watching remakes give me much more satisfaction
15. Thanks to the modern approaches it is easier to understand the plot and the motivation of the characters (evil vs. good)
16. I don't consider the adaptations to be authentic as they (re-)present the main characters differently
17. The remakes are better because they tell my childhood experiences in the language of the 21st century
18. The target audiences for the remakes are mainly the older generations
19. Remakes are better for children as they tend to showcase modern values, actions and places

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### **C. Demographic Data**

1. Gender
2. Age
3. Highest education level
4. Living place
5. Family status