ABSTRACT
This study focused on the formation and spreading of stigma related to mental illness. The literature review of this study examined pre-existing research on mental health stigma in children’s media (including movies, books, and video games), religious stigma regarding mental health, and the dangers that the public perceives to be involved with mental illness. Additionally, a content analysis was performed on 80 Reddit posts that discussed 10 Disney characters who were theoretically diagnosed with mental illnesses based on the character’s words and actions in their respective films. These posts were coded for sentiment (positive, negative, and neutral on a 5-point matrix), and whether those who posted on Reddit connected the experiences of the characters to their own experience with mental illnesses. The results of the study provided no statistical evidence that personal experience with mental illness changes one’s perception of mental illness in Disney films. Based on this study, neither personal experience with mental illness nor lack thereof seems to have an effect on stigma: it is generally negative either way.

Keywords: stigma, mental illness, mental health, depression, anxiety, children’s media, Disney

INTRODUCTION
Mental health crises are on the rise in the United States. According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, suicide was ranked the 10th-leading cause of death in the United States in 2017. 129 Americans commit suicide every day (“Suicide Statistics,” 2019). According to Mental Health in America, 18.07% of the U.S. population, equivalent to roughly 44 million Americans, are currently suffering from mental illness of some kind, including, but not limited to, depression, anxiety, bipolar, and post-traumatic-stress disorders. In my home state of North Carolina, 1,440,000 adults are suffering from some form of mental illness (“Mental Health in America”).

1.4 million Americans attempted suicide in 2017, and of those, 47,173 lost their lives. Roughly 70% of these victims were white males. In fact, the number of men who commit suicide in America is 3.54 times greater than women’s (“Suicide Statistics,” 2019). Why do males account for such a vast percentage of our suicides? Is it perhaps that men do not seek professional help as readily as women do? Clarke of the Centre for Emotional Health, Department of Psychology, Macquarie University, and her associates seem to think so. In a recent study published in the Australian Journal of Psychology, Clark reported that 14% of all Australian adolescents will struggle with some form of mental illness. Focused particularly on anxiety related disorders, the AJP reported that only 15% of clinically anxious males would seek professional help. Based on their research, Clark and associates concluded that perceived social stigma (the idea that men who struggle with their mental health are “weak, not sick”) and a lack of education about mental health issues are the greatest obstacles young Australian men face when seeking help with their struggles (Clark et al., 2018).

RQ1: Does social stigma regarding mental health vary dependent upon gender of the stigmatized?

In an article published in Communication Education, Smith and Applegate of Pennsylvania State University define stigma as “profoundly negative stereotypes about people living with mental disorders.” This is further divided into two categories: “public stigma” refers to the stereotypes about mental health which a community has normalized, and “internal stigma” defines how an individual who struggles with mental illnesses absorbs stigma into his or her identity. Stigma often arises because of misunderstandings about those living with mental illness. Poor education on mental disorders, it seems, creates the idea that people who suffer from them are somehow threatening or dangerous to others (Smith & Applegate, 2018).

RQ2: How are social stigma regarding mental health developed and communicated?

The unfortunate reality is that many of today’s students are educated about mental health issues by looking at examples such as the Columbine shootings and other such disasters. Discussing mental health struggles in such a manner takes an atypical occurrence and makes it normal, stereotyping all mental health sufferers as mass murderers and the like. However, “it is important that discussions of
mental health not be dictated by the unthinkable acts of a few individuals, but rather should focus on the challenges, concerns, and opportunities associated with a topic that affects millions [...] across the world” (Rudick & Dannels, 2018).

**RQ3: Why is education about mental illness not sufficient to derail stigma?**

I consider myself a well-positioned researcher in this study as one who personally has battled both anxiety, depression, and subsequent suicidal spells. Having suffered from these issues and the stigma that is often attached to them, I have a personal motivation to learn how to change them for myself, and to help improve the emotional health of those who suffer as I do, as well as hopefully improving their ability to reach out for help.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

*History of Mental Illness Stigma*

It has been mentioned that the number of male suicides in the United States is over 230% higher than the number of female suicides. Is this perhaps caused by a difference in the stigma attached to mental illness in men versus in women? Whether or not that is true remains to be seen, but there is certainly a significant difference between the two. According to research by Hagget in *British Psychological Society*, there is a great disparity between the number of men who suffer from mental illnesses and the number who are actually diagnosed, and part of the reason for this is the social stigma that has developed over the centuries. In the Georgian Period in England (1714-1830 A.D.), men were seen as thinkers and feelers. To be a man meant to be “virtuous and wise,” so personal introspection and reflection were encouraged. Later, as the times changed from the days of the Enlightenment to the Industrial Revolution, social constructs of what it meant to be male and female began to shift. With a greater emphasis on the philosophy that Christian masculinity meant simply to be a good husband and father, little room was left for a man’s emotions during this period in history. This cultural return to conservatism was compounded by the new evolutionary ideas of Charles Darwin, which emphasized the differences between men and women. Women were considered inferior to men, supposedly dominated by impulse and emotion. Men, on the other hand, were supposed to be respectable, rational, and self-restrained. These ideas of what it meant to be a man were prevalent through the days of the Industrial Revolution all the way through the World Wars. Men who suffered from
shell-shock, anxiety, and other similar disorders were assumed to have simply been scarred by war. Depression and agitation were possible diagnoses for men, but neurosis was a diagnosis reserved for women. On the other hand, it was more socially acceptable for men to binge-drink to cope with emotional stress in those days, while women who consumed alcohol were depicted as promiscuous. This is interesting to note, since rates of both suicides and alcohol consumption are higher in men than women (Hagget, 2014). **HYPOTHESIS 1: Men with mental illnesses will be more heavily stigmatized than women.**

This mindset has been passed down through the years until it has reached the present generation. The formation of these ideas starts early, likely during childhood. The *Journal of Mental Health* reported in 2003 that children often did not have a concrete knowledge of what mental illness really is, nor of how it symptomatically manifests itself. They did, however, seem to know that mental illness was “somehow less desirable than other kinds of health conditions” (Wahl, 2003, p. 2). Though it may be assumed that children learn about mental illness from their parents, the truth is likely more complicated. Wahl states in his research that ideas about mental illness start young, and that even children who do not have a concrete knowledge of what mental illness is and what it looks like symptomatically still know that it is less desirable than other health issues (Wahl, 2003). Rudick and Dannels also notice this trend, stating in *Communication Education* that most school psychologists expect that children will want to avoid other children with perceived depression or anxiety (Rudick & Dannels, 2018). Rudick and Dannels believed that this behavior would be spurred on and encouraged by parents, but Lorona and Miller-Perrin at Pepperdine University disagree with this theory. According to their research, children do not spend much time talking to their parents about mental health issues, yet they seem to know that the subject is somewhat of a social taboo, and that people with mental illnesses are to be avoided (Lorona & Miller-Perrin, 2016).

**Children’s Media and Stigma**

There must be, then, other sources of stigma. Lorona, Miller-Perrin, and Wahl all propose that one possible source is children’s media. Wahl published several studies in the *Journal of Mental Health* during the late 1990s, and each reported negative portrayals of characters with mental illnesses. From Saturday morning cartoons to Disney movies like *Dumbo* (1941), *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), and *Beauty and the Beast* (1992), much of children’s televised entertainment featured characters with mental health issues. These characters were usually
single Caucasian males. They were not often identified with actual diagnoses, but with slang terms such as “psycho,” “wacko,” “losing your mind,” “nuts,” “certifiable,” and “mad.” They failed more often than they succeeded, rarely attaining whatever their goal or dream was in the narrative. Physically, these characters were portrayed as unattractive, usually with unruly hair, missing teeth, or bad breath. These characters were rarely treated for their conditions, and the success of such treatment was even rarer (Wahl, 2003). **HYPOTHESIS 2:** Children’s media negatively influences stigma.

Religion and Stigma

Religion, surprisingly, also seems to play a role in this dangerous mental health stigma, marking members of their own community who suffer so as “less than” the general population. According to research by Wesselman and Graziano (Purdue University), those with mental health issues are often deemed by Christians to have committed some gross sin or overlooked some important religious performance. Those who suffer from mental illness, it would seem, are just not exercising enough faith, or not praying enough, etc. Often, this leads Christians to be skeptical about the practicality or usefulness of psychiatric or medical help in cases of mental illness, preferring to seek spiritual or scriptural remedies instead (Wesselman & Graziano, 2010). **HYPOTHESIS 3:** Religious beliefs play a significant role in the formation of stigma.

Mental Illness Perceived as Dangerous

Rudick and Dannels found that children with ADHD or major depression were perceived by their classmates as very likely to be dangerous, both to themselves and to others. This is perhaps due to a misconstrued view of the dangers of mental illnesses. Though individuals with mental illness statistically have just about the same homicide rate as those of the general public, many people believe that those who suffer from mental illnesses are much more dangerous (Rudick & Dannels, 2018). This, too, is also likely due to exposure to negative media narratives about mental health. In his research, Wahl continues with reporting that mentally ill characters were not only portrayed as unattractive misfits and outcasts, but they were often the evil, villainous, and dangerous characters. Wahl cites the children’s book *How to Eat Fried Worms* by Thomas Rockwell which includes the following quote: “Crazy people are like dogs. If they see you’re afraid, they attack” (Wahl, 2003, p. 253). Wahl also referred to J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, in which Harry Potter is warned to be wary of a prisoner who is mad and “a danger to anyone he comes across” (2003, p. 253).

Superhero comic books of the late 90s and early 2000s also share this sentiment. In a 2001 issue of *Green Lantern*, the villain, Nero, starts out in a psychiatric ward with a diagnosis of schizoaffective disorder. Others superhero stories, like the Joker in *Batman* and The Green Goblin in *Spiderman* enforce the idea that “madness is what turns good people […] into villains” (Wahl, 2003, p. 253).

Religion continues to feed this argument as well. Since many religious people believe that mental illness is ultimately a spiritual issue, their mindset is often that the sufferer should be able to take care of themselves. After all, what is needed is simply a little more faith. Because of this, when mental health patients do not get better, they are labeled by believers as “Unpredictable, unattractive, indecisive, and dangerous” (Wesselman & Graziano, 2010, p. 404). They are either looked down upon for not measuring up to the religious standard of faith and trust in God, or worse yet, they are deemed as dangerous to the group and possibly demon-possessed (Wesselman & Graziano, 2010).

If the mentally ill are dangerous people, then they need to be dealt with as such. At least that is the next logical conclusion to which media takes us. Wahl continues in his research to report on several online video games. In one game, *Lunatics Online*, kids take on the role of a mental patient attempting to escape from a wacky mental institution. Another, *Twisted Metal: Black*, features mentally ill patients who have escaped from an asylum, one of whom preys on human flesh (Wahl, 2003).

Even though schools have attempted in the past to educate children on mental health, and hopefully improve their attitudes about it, these attempts are often unsuccessful, simply on account of the massive amount of stigma that media, religion, and parents both create and spread (Lorona & Cindy Miller-Perrin, 2018). This leads me to the following hypothesis as a tentative answer to my third research question, “Why is education about mental illness not sufficient to derail stigma?” **HYPOTHESIS 4:** Educators fail to change stigma because the mentally ill are portrayed as dangerous in children’s media.
METHODS

Due to both the time and financial constraints of this study, I was not able to test all four of my hypotheses. Instead, I chose to focus on trying to satisfactorily study and test just one of them, “HYPOTHESIS 2: Children’s media negatively influences stigma.”

The research method I chose to use for this project is a content analysis. Content analysis, according to Communication Research by Keyton, is the simplest method of analyzing message content. It is an effective method for examining emerging themes in human reaction to the media with which they interact. In the case of this study, a content analysis would be the most effective because the desire is to discover if the mental illness themes expressed in today’s children’s media echo the sentiments of the media reported by Wahl. The studies conducted by Wahl only encompass the children’s media of the late 1990s and early 2000s. The purpose of this content analysis is to discover whether that trend has continued.

As an example of an effective content analysis, the Journal of Electronic Media and Broadcasting published a study on rap music in 2009. Conrad, Dixon, and Zhang wanted to investigate how rap music videos influence cultural views about violence, sex, misogyny, and beauty (Conrad et al., 2009). The trio directed a content analysis of a population of 108 popular rap music videos of the day, coding for variance in materialistic, misogynic, violent, love, cultural expression, and political content. In addition, references to differences in perceived physical beauty between whites and blacks were also coded, including hair texture, skin tone, eye color, etc. Their samples came from three major television music video outlets: Black Entertainment Television (BET), Music Television (MTV), and Video Hits 1 (VH1). Though their study was limited by the fact that they only studied rap music videos that had been released in that year (2009), the trio believed that their study was still relevant because, by studying just current releases, they would find an accurate sample of what the majority of rap culture was doing at that time (Conrad et al., 2009).

Their studies concluded that the men in these videos were much more likely than women to use their music for community building, fighting oppression, and so on. Women, by contrast, were primarily presented in rap music videos as submissive to men, or as sexual objects. Conrad, Dixon, and Zhang used what they found to develop hypotheses about how these music videos affect cultural insecurities about beauty, identity, and societal roles for women (Conrad, et al, 2009).

In the same way, my research investigated mental illness stigma in current children’s media. My research delved into one of the frontrunners of children’s media and entertainment: The Walt Disney Company. Wahl’s aforementioned research on mental health stigma discussed negative stereotyping of mental illness in multiple Disney films, including Dumbo (1941), Alice in Wonderland (1951), and Beauty and the Beast (1992) (Wahl, 2003). In order to investigate whether this stereotyping seems to be continuing, this study focused on cultural reaction to Disney cartoon films that have been released subsequently to the films cited by Wahl. However, studying all Disney films made since 1992 would be an impossible task to accomplish within the time constraints of this study. Thus, this study focused on audience reaction and perception to portrayals of mental illness in popular characters from these films as expressed on Reddit, the popular internet forum site.

Making the Case for Studying a Forum

The Journal of Media Psychology released a study of internet forums in 2013. In this study, internet forums are defined as “an online discussion site” (Holtz & Wagner, 2012, p. 55). They generally begin with one member writing a post on a particular subject, and then other users can reply with subsequent posts of their own. One advantage of analyzing forum posts is that there is a near-infinite amount of information to be found (Holtz & Wagner, 2012). Forums can, in some senses, serve as a sort of “virtual focus group” (Moloney et al., 2003, p. 274). For the purposes of this study, forum posts about Disney characters with mental illnesses will serve as a focus group of sorts for research.

The following Disney characters have been theoretically diagnosed with mental disorders by multiple sources, including screenrant.com, ranker.com, and therichest.com film review websites (Casano, 2019; Geller, 2016; Voutiritsas, 2017).

Among this list, two characters are (theoretically) diagnosed with sociopathy, two with depression, two with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, one with avoidant personality disorder, one with atelophobia (fear of failure), one with generalized anxiety disorder, and one with Stockholm syndrome. Five characters are male, and five are female. It is
also worth noting that two of the male characters (Tigger and Piglet) are animals instead of human.

**Table 1**  
*Disney Characters Diagnosed with a Mental Illness*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character Name</th>
<th>Diagnosis</th>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Release Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jafar</td>
<td>sociopathy</td>
<td><em>Aladdin</em></td>
<td>1992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scar</td>
<td>sociopathy</td>
<td><em>The Lion King</em></td>
<td>1994, remake 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mulan</td>
<td>atelophobia</td>
<td><em>Mulan</em></td>
<td>1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tigger</td>
<td>attention deficit hyperactivity disorder</td>
<td><em>The Tigger Movie</em></td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piglet</td>
<td>generalized anxiety disorder</td>
<td><em>Piglet's Big Movie</em></td>
<td>2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapunzel</td>
<td>Stockholm Syndrome</td>
<td><em>Tangled</em></td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merida</td>
<td>avoidant personality disorder</td>
<td><em>Brave</em></td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsa</td>
<td>depression</td>
<td><em>Frozen</em></td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>attention deficit hyperactivity disorder</td>
<td><em>Frozen</em></td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlie Brown</td>
<td>depression</td>
<td><em>The Peanuts Movie</em></td>
<td>2015</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This study conducted a search on Reddit for posts about each of these characters and their respective mental disorders. These searches were based on keywords such as the characters’ names and their respective perceived mental illnesses. For example, Tigger was searched under the following Google search: “Tigger” “ADHD” “Site:Reddit.com.” The search was made using Google Chrome, and under an Incognito tab.

In each search, the number of search results was recorded. The top ten most popular results for each search were examined in detail. Data was collected in each search of these examinations, and each post’s text was coded based on how the perceived mental illness was described on a sliding scale (Very Positive–Somewhat Positive–Neutral–Somewhat Negative–Negative–N/A). Additionally, it was recorded in each post whether the author related personal experience to the character’s perceived mental illness. Though the sample size was small, due to time constraints of this study, it is still possible that these posts provide a strong example of the overall opinion of the general public. There were relatively few posts on these characters and their respective mental illnesses, and so it seems reasonable that examining the first ten search results provided should give an inclusive, representative sample of the sentiments of the population.

**RESULTS**

My study provided the following results (please see next page). The search that provided the greatest number of results was “Elsa, Depression” with 2,190 results. The smallest number of results was a tie between “Anna, ADHD,” and “Scar, Sociopath” with 118 results a piece. It is also worth noting here that the searches “Mulan, Atelophobia,” “Merida, Avoidant Personality Disorder,” and “Elsa, Avoidant Personality Disorder” provided zero results.

In each character’s search, the top 10 results were not always relevant for the purposes of this study. For instance, a result for the search “Rapunzel, Stockholm Syndrome,” was a post asking commenters to share which Disney princess they would most like to sleep with: the post did not mention Stockholm Syndrome. This post was discarded from the study in favor of result #11. In another case, a result for the search “Jafar, Sociopath” was a post that did not mention sociopathy and simply read “F*** Jafar.” Posts such as these were also discarded from this study. Because of this, not every character’s perception was based solely on the top 10 results in my incognito Google search, and in the cases of “Scar, Sociopath,” and “Anna, ADHD,” less than 10 search results were actually found to bear any relevance for the purposes of this study.

Of the 70 posts that were considered relevant for this study, 12 included a connection between the film character’s mental illness and the writer of the post’s own experience. The mean sentiment score of each post that included some sort of personal relation to the alleged mentally ill character (1) was calculated.
**Table 2**

*Data Analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character Name &amp; Mental Illness</th>
<th>Total Number of Results</th>
<th>Sentiment Score of 1</th>
<th>Sentiment Score of 2</th>
<th>Sentiment Score of 3</th>
<th>Sentiment Score of 4</th>
<th>Sentiment Score of 5</th>
<th>Relation to Personal Experience Mentioned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jafar / Sociopath</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>7 / 10</td>
<td>0 / 10</td>
<td>2 / 10</td>
<td>1 / 10</td>
<td>0 / 10</td>
<td>1 / 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scar / Sociopath</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>6 / 8</td>
<td>1 / 8</td>
<td>0 / 8</td>
<td>1 / 8</td>
<td>0 / 8</td>
<td>2 / 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mulan / Atelophobia</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tigger / ADHD</td>
<td>394</td>
<td>1 / 10</td>
<td>0 / 10</td>
<td>7 / 10</td>
<td>1 / 10</td>
<td>1 / 10</td>
<td>1 / 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piglet / GAD (Anxiety)</td>
<td>962</td>
<td>1 / 10</td>
<td>2 / 10</td>
<td>6 / 10</td>
<td>1 / 10</td>
<td>0 / 10</td>
<td>0 / 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapunzel / Stockholm Syndrome</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>1 / 10</td>
<td>2 / 10</td>
<td>5 / 10</td>
<td>1 / 10</td>
<td>1 / 10</td>
<td>2 / 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merida / Avoidant Personality Disorder</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsa / Depression</td>
<td>2,190</td>
<td>0 / 10</td>
<td>0 / 10</td>
<td>4 / 10</td>
<td>4 / 10</td>
<td>2 / 10</td>
<td>3 / 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna / ADHD</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>0 / 2</td>
<td>0 / 2</td>
<td>1 / 2</td>
<td>0 / 2</td>
<td>1 / 2</td>
<td>1 / 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlie Brown / Depression</td>
<td>1,230</td>
<td>3 / 10</td>
<td>3 / 10</td>
<td>3 / 10</td>
<td>0 / 10</td>
<td>1 / 10</td>
<td>2 / 10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The mean sentiment score for posts that did not include any sort of personal relation to the alleged mentally ill character (0) was also calculated (values were rounded to the nearest hundredth):

- Mean Sentiment Score (0) = **2.66**
- Mean Sentiment Score (1) = **3**
- Mean Sentiment Score (All) = **2.83**

The median for each was also calculated:

- Median Sentiment Score (0) = **2.64**
- Median Sentiment Score (1) = **3**
- Median Sentiment Score (All) = **3**

The mean sentiment score was also calculated by gender of the character from the posts that were analyzed in this study.

- Mean Sentiment Score (Male) = **2.17**
- Mean Sentiment Score (Female) = **3.54**

The median for each was also calculated:

- Median Sentiment Score (Male) = **2.13**
- Median Sentiment Score (Female) = **3**

**DISCUSSION**

The mean sentiment score of the posts of group 0 (no relation to personal experience within post) was lower than the mean sentiment of group 1 (relation to personal experience within post). The same was true of the medians for each group. The 15 also had two characters with a mean sentiment score of 5 ("Elsa, Depression," and "Anna, ADHD"), whereas the highest mean sentiment score for the 0s was 4.75 ("Elsa, Depression"), and the next highest mean score was 3.11 ("Tigger, ADHD"). It is also worth discussing the fact that, of the 70 posts analyzed, only 12 (about 17%) included personal relationship to the mentally ill character. 58 posts (about 83%) did not. This would lead me to believe that, of the people who watch Disney films and theorize about mental illnesses among characters in the film, most do not suffer from or have personal experience with mental illnesses (or at least they do not express that they do on Reddit).

An unpaired t-test was performed on these data. The P value equals 0.34, which is not considered to be statistically significant. The implication of this result is that the presence or absence of a viewer’s personal relation to a film character with mental illness does not change the viewer’s perception of that mental illness. Because the value is small, there still could be a connection between the two but a larger sample would help determine whether this connection is significant or just due to chance. Continued research in this area would certainly be required to know for sure. Future researchers might consider analyzing posts on other social media sites, as well as other forms of children’s media.

Additionally, the mean and median sentiment scores of the female characters in these posts were much larger than those of the male characters in these posts. Though my method was not designed to test “HYPOTHESIS 1: Men with mental illnesses will be more heavily stigmatized than women,” this information could possibly provide evidence of its validity. Again, future study would be required.
CONCLUSION

It seems that there is not a connection between a viewer's ability to relate to mental illness perceived in children's media and a viewer's own experience with mental illnesses. This could support Smith and Applegate's report that stigma is often informed by a lack of public knowledge about mental illnesses. It would presumably be difficult for a person's experience with mental illness to change their mindset about mental health if they have insufficient knowledge of what mental illnesses are or how they work.

The data also supports Lorona and Miller-Perrin's studies that show that children seem to know almost intuitively that mental illnesses are less desirable than other disabilities. Of the 70 posts that were studied, 27 (39%) had a sentiment score of 1 or 2, while only 15 (21%) posts had a sentiment score of 4 or 5. Interestingly, the majority of the posts were scored neutral, with 32 posts earning a score of 3. It would seem that, if perception of mental illness is changing in children's media at all, it is changing from a feeling of fear or disgust to one of indifference. It is also worth noting the discrepancy between the mean sentiment score of the female characters versus the male characters, which reinforces Hagget's research that mental illness is less socially acceptable in men than in women.

However, this study only covered the top 80 posts about 10 theoretically mentally ill Disney characters on Reddit. Although I believed that this is a broad enough sample to give at least an idea of how mental illness is portrayed in children's media, based upon the popularity of Disney films and their significance in previous research, such as Wahl’s, this is a topic that undoubtedly deserves deeper study. It would be interesting to know whether this trend of viewer perception continues across a wider sample of posts, or for children's movies from other film companies, such as Universal or DreamWorks. I believe that other forms of children's media, such as video games, books, and iPhone apps, should also be studied.

Additionally, another realm of future study to be considered would be to investigate stigma on other social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, etc.) Also, though this study began with the intention of finding posts in which the authors connected their posts to their own personal experience with mental illness and stigma, this study only discovered a small sample of posts which actually did so. It would also be important in a future study to find information from more people who have experience with mental illnesses, especially from those who have experienced stigma themselves.

Finally, my study did not have the time or finances to more thoroughly investigate religion and its influence on stigma, so this could be another realm of future study to pursue.

REFERENCES


The citation system used in this essay is APA 7th.