



## CATALOGUING LGBTQ+ REPRESENTATION IN DISNEY'S ANIMATED CONTENT FOR CHILDREN

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### KEYWORDS

*LGBTQ+*  
*Gender Identity*  
*Disney*  
*Children's*  
*Visual Culture*  
*Animated Films*  
*Gender Diversity*

### ABSTRACT

*Gender diversity is gaining traction in children's animated content, with Disney playing a significant role in its representation. The protagonists in Disney productions are becoming integral to visual culture and serve as important reference points. This study categorises LGBTQ+ characters associated with the longstanding company. It analyses their characteristics and the prominent roles they play, aiming to explore how young audiences relate to non-heteronormative characters. The research highlights that visibility remains limited and underscores the ongoing need for greater inclusivity to ensure all identities are represented.*

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Received: 26/ 07 / 2024

Accepted: 03/ 09 / 2024

## 1. Introduction

The Walt Disney Company was founded in 1923, and is considered one of the most significant industries in animated film (Asebey Morales, 2011; Monleón-Oliva, 2022), contributing to the "global collective imagination of men and women" (Gandarilla de Andrés, 2016, p. 28). After a hundred years of audiovisual production, it is only in the last decade that LGBTQ+ characters have been openly included and identified in their animated children's content. The world's largest US media conglomerate is gradually evolving, as evidenced in its films and series, by subtly embracing gender diversity. This approach allows the sexual identities of its protagonists to be presented more naturally. By integrating these values into its family-oriented productions, the company provides young viewers with role models, though these characters are often secondary or less prominent. The inclusion of such characters in significant roles and storylines, when done authentically, can foster tolerance, respect, and normalisation among children and young people. The visual culture children encounter in their early years plays a crucial role in shaping their personality, self-concept, and identity (Mesías-Lema and Sánchez Paz, 2018).

These advances facilitate a more inclusive and fluid understanding of gender, recognising a broad spectrum of identities beyond the traditional categories (Martín-Ramallal et al., 2023). The American Psychological Association (APA, 2015) offers a comprehensive review of gender identity and advocates for a human rights-based approach to promoting diversity.

In Spain, references to the LGBTQ+ community are explicitly addressed in Law 8/2016. The Ministry of Equality, through the General Directorate of Sexual Diversity and LGBTQ+ Rights (2022), and a new multigender paradigm. On an international level, the United Nations General Assembly proposes an action plan aimed at ending all forms of poverty, addressing climate change, and combating inequalities to ensure no one is left behind (AECID, 2020; REDS, 2022). The 2030 Agenda outlines a framework for tackling these major sustainable development challenges through 17 Global Goals, known as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and 169 targets.

## 2. Methodology

This longitudinal research examines content produced and broadcast by Disney to catalogue the portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters. It describes their profiles and the roles they play, thereby elucidating the company's contribution to the dissemination and normalisation of this group. The study encompasses television series, films, and animated shorts intended for all audiences, covering the period from 1997, the year the first relevant film was identified, through to 2023. To locate this content, we reviewed film publications related to the topic and analysed Disney's productions.

The research focuses on the following specific objectives to explore these characters and their roles within the audiovisual content analysed:

- O1. To analyse the representation of LGBTQ+ identity models in children's animated series, films, and short films produced and broadcast by Disney.
- O2. To study the characteristics of LGBTQ+ characters and their relatability to young viewers.
- O3. To examine the prominence of LGBTQ+ characters to determine their impact on children's audiences.

Considering the above-mentioned objectives, the following hypotheses are proposed and will be tested in the study:

- H1. LGBTQ+ characters have been introduced only recently into children's animated series, films, and short films produced and broadcast by Disney, which has delayed their inclusion and, consequently, the identification of children with these characters.
- H2. The actions and profiles attributed to Disney's LGBTQ+ animated characters are still underdeveloped, which impedes the identification of the child audience.
- H3. Disney's LGBTQ+ animated characters have not achieved the necessary prominence for effective integration and promotion of LGBTQ+ representation among children.

The study employs a mixed-methods approach (Sánchez Flores, 2019), incorporating qualitative research (Shaw, 2003). This involves the use of an analytical register to identify LGBTQ+ characters and their roles, specifying the films, series, or short films they appear in. The register details the title, character name, recognition status by Disney, year of release or appearance, and the production or broadcasting company. The results are compiled into a table arranged chronologically according to the identified film content. Following this, the characters are analysed to highlight the characteristics and actions that bring visibility to their non-heteronormative sexual orientation.

The study also includes a quantitative exploration, analysing factors such as age, gender, sex, type of characters, and prominence (Orozco & González, 2012). Data is presented in graphs to illustrate the percentage of findings obtained from the research (Álvarez Contreras, 2023).

A total of 42 characters from 11 films, 8 series, and 1 animated short film aimed at a family audience have been identified to describe how LGBTQ+ characters are represented in the analysed media. In the first phase, characters with non-heteronormative sexual orientations are located, including both those recognised by Disney and those not officially acknowledged by the company. Notably, 10 of these characters have been classified as LGBTQ+ only by film critics and members of the community, not by Disney itself. At this stage, the release year of the films and, in some cases, the appearance year of the LGBTQ+ characters are recorded, as characters may be introduced at different times in certain series. This approach helps trace the evolution of gender diversity in children's content and identify which films, series, and short films feature these characters, including their names and the names of the production or broadcasting companies.

In the second phase, the study examines the LGBTQ+ characters not recognised by Disney, describing their characteristics and the actions that associate them with sexual diversity. This is followed by a similar analysis of the characters identified by Disney as LGBTQ+. This approach considers the corporation's criteria for presenting gender diversity in children's animation. Next, the research focuses exclusively on Disney-recognised characters, identifying and quantifying the gender identities represented among them (gay, lesbian, straight, bisexual, and asexual), according to the classification by the American Psychological Association (2015), and including transsexual and intersex categories (GLAAD, n.d.). We also assess their gender, age, and character type to understand the relevance and potential for identification among young audiences. We also examine their prominence to gauge the importance given to these characters.

### 3. Children's Identity and LGBTQ+ Characters

#### 3.1. *The LGBTQ+ Community*

Children typically form an understanding of their gender between the ages of 3 and 5 and develop their sexual orientation as they grow older (APA, n.d.). Gender identity relates to how an individual feels and identifies with their gender, whereas sexual orientation pertains to the type of attraction they experience (Osborne and Molina Petit, 2008). Non-heterosexual individuals are encompassed within the LGBTQ+ collective, an acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people (Biglia and Cagliero, 2019). This term is continually evolving, influenced by the sexual and gender liberation movements, which is why the "+" is included to acknowledge additional identities beyond those traditionally represented by the acronym.

A lesbian is defined as a woman who experiences physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction to other women. Conversely, a gay man feels this same attraction to other men. Trans people include those who identify as transsexual, transgender, etc., and have a gender identity different from the one assigned at birth; they may or may not undergo physical changes. Bisexual individuals are attracted to genders that are the same as or different from their own. Asexual describes individuals who do not experience sexual attraction (Asexual Visibility and Education Network, n.d.). Intersex refers to individuals with innate sex characteristics, such as genitalia, internal reproductive organs, and chromosomes, that do not fit traditional definitions of male or female (GLAAD, n.d.). Additionally, queer individuals challenge conventional notions of sex and reject societal preconceptions.

### **3.2. LGBTQ+ Content: Controversies and Developments**

Despite the progress made, LGBTQ+ characters are not universally accepted, and while support for the movement has grown over the past two decades, this acceptance varies significantly across different continents. Controversy often arises whenever film companies include LGBTQ+ characters, and in some countries where LGBTQ+ characters are not explicitly criminalised, there are still concerns about the inclusion of "gender ideology" in animated films.

The portrayal of these characters has sparked mobilisations from conservative lobbies, who argue that such content may harm the moral development of children. Additionally, as of 2024, homosexual acts are classified as criminal in 67 countries —primarily in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia— with eleven of these countries imposing the death penalty (Mauritania, Nigeria, Somalia, Afghanistan, Brunei, Iran, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen). In other countries, homosexual acts can result in life imprisonment or sentences exceeding 20 years (Fernandez, 2024).

In the United States, there has been a recent rollback of LGBTQ+ rights, with 532 laws enacted to restrict these rights. Notably, Florida's "Don't Say Gay", passed in 2022, bans educational content related to sexual orientation or gender identity for students aged 3 to 17 and defines sex as "determined by biology and reproductive functions" and gender as "binary, stable, and fixed" (Castro, 2023). Disney has occasionally complied with restrictions from countries opposed to LGBTQ+ visibility, incorporating non-normative sexual orientation elements discreetly to allow for their removal if necessary (Ceballos, 2022).

### **3.3. Gender Identity in Children's Animation**

Due to its nature, cinematography influences its audience, facilitating the spontaneous assimilation of its content (Sierra, 2000). Hence, dealing with issues related to gender identity in animated content favours its dissemination and approach to sexual diversity. Although there are still barriers to this, a hetero-patriarchal system continues to persist. Animation, which is labelled as visual culture and acts as a transmitter of values, is a socialising element and fulfils a moralising function. It is therefore essential to reflect on the principles that are transmitted and promoted, it is important to stop and question them, as well as to investigate the intentions behind the multiple stories that are told (Cantillo, 2015; Monleón-Oliva, 2021). The implications of recreational and elusive images associated with "magic and fiction" influence the integral development of the spectators who contemplate them for pleasure. They allow both to represent reality and to deform it. For this reason, the risks involved in animated films, especially those aimed at a child audience, should not be disregarded because of "the values and behavioural patterns they want to transmit" (Monleón-Oliva, 2021, p. 10-11).

Hence, sexually diverse identities should have a space in these formats and be given visibility in childhood so as not to generate a bias towards binary gender. It should be borne in mind that gender identity is a symbolic representation that takes shape over the course of one's life, retaining a foundation that is constructed in the early years of existence. Guidano and Liotti (1983) identify three fundamental stages in the development of gender identity, which Zaro (1999) further elaborates: (A) Early childhood and pre-school age (from approximately 2 and a half to 5 years old), during which the foundations of personal identity are established, and children learn to distinguish themselves from others. At this stage, parents play a crucial role in helping children understand gender concepts. (B) Second childhood, which lasts until puberty and involves a transition from a rigid to a more flexible understanding of gender. (C) Adolescence, up to the age of 18, requires adjustment to new physical and social changes, which is critical for future identity development.

Social learning takes place throughout life. In early childhood, as mentioned above, the socialising agent par excellence is the family; they are the protectors and transmitters of cultural values that they themselves live and reproduce (Espinar, 2007). Apart from this, others include friends, school, films, and television series.

### **3.4. Identification with LGBTQ+ Children's Characters**

The identification with a film often hinges on its characters. Characters are fundamental in animated films; they are endowed with personalities, and the plot revolves around their experiences and emotions (Porter & Susman, 2000). To foster a connection with viewers, characters are given distinctive features,

including values, virtues, fears, and flaws, which contribute to their humanisation (Cuenca Orellana and Martínez Pérez, 2022).

There are numerous methods for cataloguing characters (Pérez Ruff, 2016), but this study applies specific proposals. Firstly, the functions characters serve in advancing the plot or subplot are considered (Fernández & Bassiner, 1996). In this research, characters are classified as main character, supporting character, supporting cast, extras, and background extras. The protagonist carries the most significant weight and is the most prominent figure, while the supporting character, though notable, does not reach the protagonist's level of importance and is not essential for the plot's coherence. Supporting characters are next in importance, with more limited roles, followed by extras with brief lines of dialogue, and background extras who fill the background and atmosphere without any dialogue (Gómez García, 1997).

Attention is given to the character's screen time, their LGBTQ+ gender identity, and their appearance, including age and gender (Field, 1995; Propp, 1981). These factors influence the character's behaviour and can affect the viewer's attention and identification. Therefore, this research examines age to determine how closely characters align with the target audience of children's animation, and appearance is considered when it provides insight into personality.

Since the characters are animated, not all have human physiognomies, making it more challenging to relate to non-human entities such as monsters, animals, or machines.

### **3.5. LGBTQ+ Content for Children's Audiences**

Initially, LGBTQ+ content was primarily aimed at children older than preschool age, but in recent years, such references have begun to appear in productions for children under the age of 5. For example, the Disney Junior series *Rescue Unit* —designed for younger children— features Violet's two mums, two talking vehicles, two dads, and a daughter. Similarly, the Nickelodeon spin-off *Team Rubble* from *Dog Patrol* includes a non-binary character named River in the episode "The Team Builds an Observatory," presented as a role model for the puppies and young viewers. Additionally, *Peppa Pig* introduced Penny Polar Bear in 2022, who mentions having two mothers (Rojas, 2023).

Audiovisual content for these young ages serves as a significant socialising element, highlighting the importance of embedding these values in the narratives (Behm-Morawitz and Mastro, 2009; Pereira, 2005). Such content plays a crucial role in shaping and normalising diversity among its young audience (Monleón-Oliva, 2021).

## **4. Results**

This research examines content produced and broadcast by Disney to study the representation of LGBTQ+ characters. By reviewing film publications and viewing the North American company's content, a total of 42 characters have been identified across 11 films, 8 series, and 1 animated short film intended for all audiences.

### **4.1. Chronology of LGBTQ+ Content Dissemination at Disney**

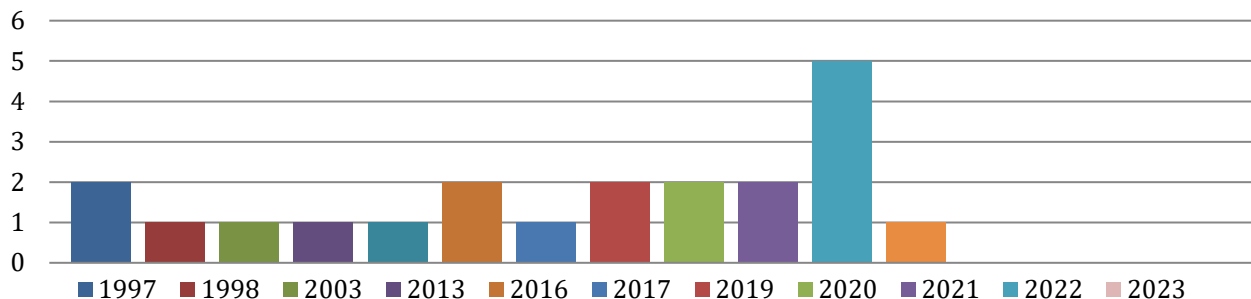
Disney did not feature visibly LGBTQ+ characters until 2016 when *Finding Dory* explicitly included a lesbian couple. Following this, there were occasional subtle gestures, but it wasn't until 2020 that homosexuality took centre stage in the short film *Out*, and 2022 saw a breakthrough with *Strange World*, where a key character openly expressed his homosexuality.

In earlier years, specifically in 1997, film critics and members of the LGBTQ+ community identified non-heteronormative characters in the series *Pepper Ann* and *Recess*. However, Disney never officially recognised these characters as LGBTQ+. Their inclusion was inferred based on their personalities, attire, or stereotypical actions.

Figure 1 illustrates the years Disney showcased LGBTQ+ characters, whether officially recognised by the company or not. The chart displays the years when films were released and when the series premiered, highlighting a time gap of up to five years between the series' debut and its adoption of gender diversity. The first appearance was in 1997, with subsequent appearances in 1998 and 2003. After a decade-long hiatus, representation resumed in 2013. From then on, characters from this group

have been featured regularly, with one or two appearances per year in both series and films, peaking in 2022 with a total of five audiovisual productions.

**Figure 1.** Year of appearance of LGBTQ+ characters.



Source: Authors elaboration, 2024.

#### 4.2. LGBTQ+ Characters in Disney-Related Series and Films

LGBTQ+ characters are not always officially recognised as such by Disney. Of the 42 characters analysed, 32 (76%) are identified by the company, while the remaining 10 (24%) are recognised based on the identification by film critics or members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Tables 1, 2, and 3 detail the animated content across series, films, and short films produced by Disney that feature non-heteronormative characters. These tables include the title, the character's name if provided in the film, whether Disney officially recognises the character, the year of release, the year the LGBTQ+ character appears, and the production or, if applicable, the distributing company (as in the case of *Peppa Pig*, where Disney is not involved).

**Table 1.** LGBTQ+ Characters in a Series

Series	LGBTQ+ Character Name	Identified By Disney	Year Of Diffusion And LGBTQ+ Character Appearance	Producer
<i>Recess</i>	Spinelli	Unidentified	1997	Disney Television Animation
<i>Pepper Ann</i>	Moose Pearson	Unidentified	1997	Disney Television Animation
<i>Lilo and Stitch</i>	Pleakley	Unidentified	2003	Walt Disney Television Animation
<i>Doc McStuffins</i>	No name (couple)		2012-2017	Brown Bag Films Walt Disney Pictures
<i>Star vs. The Forces of Evil</i>	Framework Jackie Lynn Thomas Chloe Group		2015- 2019	Disney Television Animation
<i>The Owl House</i>	Luz Noceda Amity Blight		2020 - 2021	Disney Television Animation
<i>The Rescue</i>	Unnamed (pair of vehicles) No name (couple)		2022	Disney Television Animation, ICON Creative Studio, Skydance Animation
<i>Peppa Pig</i>	No name (couple)		2004- 2022	Disney Junior Broadcasting

Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

**Table 2.** LGBTQ+ Characters in Films

<b>Films</b>	<b>LGBTQ+ Character Name</b>	<b>Identified By Disney</b>	<b>Year Of Diffusion And LGBTQ+ Character Appearance</b>	<b>Producer</b>
<i>Mulan</i>	Mulan (Ping) Li Shang	Unidentified Unidentified	1998	Walt Disney Pictures Walt Disney Feature Animation
<i>Frozen</i>	Elsa Oaken Unnamed	Unidentified	2013	Walt Disney Pictures Walt Disney Animation Studios
<i>Finding Dory</i>	No Name (Couple)		2016	Walt Disney Pictures Pixar Animation Studios
<i>Zootopia</i>	Bucky Oryx-Antler Pronk Oryx-Antler		2016	Walt Disney Pictures Walt Disney Animation Studios
<i>Toy Story 4</i>	No Name (Couple)		2019	Walt Disney Pictures Pixar Animation Studios
<i>Onward</i>	Specter		2020	Walt Disney Pictures Pixar Animation Studios
<i>Luca</i>	Luca Paguro Alberto Scorfano	Unidentified Unidentified	2021	Pixar Animation Studios Walt Disney Pictures
<i>Red</i>	Miriam Priya	Unidentified Unidentified	2022	Walt Disney Pictures Pixar Animation Studios
<i>Strange World</i>	Ethan Diazo		2022	Walt Disney Animation Studios Walt Disney Pictures
<i>Lightyear</i>	Alisha Hawthorne Ms. Hawthorne		2022	Walt Disney Pictures Pixar Animation Studios
<i>Nimona</i>	Nimona Ballister Blackheart Ambrosius Goldenloin		2023	20th Century Animation (A Subsidiary Of The Walt Disney Studios)

Source: Authors elaboration, 2024.

**Table 3.** LGBTQ+ Characters in Short Films

<b>Short Film</b>	<b>LGBTQ+ Character Name</b>	<b>Identified By Disney</b>	<b>Year Of Diffusion And LGBTQ+ Character Appearance</b>	<b>Producer</b>
<i>Out</i>	Greg Manuel		2020	Pixar Animation Studios Walt Disney Pictures

Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

#### 4.2.1. LGBTQ+ Characters Not Identified by Disney

Of the 10 LGBTQ+ characters not officially recognised by Disney, 5 are from audiovisual content released between 1997 and 2003. These include *The Backyard Gang* (1 character, 1997), *Pepper Ann* (1 character, 1997), *Mulan* (2 characters, 1998), and *Lilo & Stitch* (1 character, 2003). This is followed by *Frozen* (1 character, 2013), *Luca* (2 characters, 2021), and *Red* (2 characters, 2022).

Sexual orientation has been analysed based on the classification by the American Psychological Association (2015), including gay or lesbian, bisexual, and asexual characters, as well as transgender and intersex individuals (GLAAD, n.d.).

Of the 10 LGBTQ+ characters not recognised by Disney, their genders are not clearly defined and are presented as transgender. Moose Pearson (*Pepper Ann*, 1997) is a girl who dresses and adopts a male personality. As the protagonist's sister, Moose struggles with her identity, expressing that she does not feel she fits the girl role society expects her to be (Prats, 2019). Spinelli (*Recess*, 1997) is a young girl who rejects traditional femininity and enjoys watching wrestling with her father. She feels embarrassed by her first name, Ashley, because she associates it with stereotypical feminine interests (La Razón, 2020). Mulan (*Mulan*, 1998) disguises herself as a man named Ping to take her father's place in the army, as the emperor has decreed that one male from each family must join the military due to the threat of the Huns. Pleakley (*Lilo and Stitch*, 2003) is an alien sent to Earth who, during his mission, takes on the appearance of a female human and discovers a preference for this gender. Lacking appropriate clothing, Pleakley borrows women's clothes.

Li Shang (*Mulan*, 1998) is classified as homosexual (gay), he falls in love with Mulan when he does not yet know that she is a young woman.

Elsa (*Frozen*, 2013) is portrayed as a complex character, marked by fear and self-doubt, largely due to accusations that her powers are harmful. Her father, the king, gives her gloves that symbolise her self-loathing and guilt about her true nature. When Elsa finally removes them, she embraces her true self in an act of bravery. The song "Let It Go" has become an LGBTQ+ anthem, representing a coming out from within, symbolising the act of stopping hiding and accepting oneself (Ceballos, 2019). Miriam Guijarro, Culture Coordinator of the State Federation of Lesbians, Gays, Transgender and Bisexuals (FELGTB), views it positively that Elsa does not have a partner and does not need to be saved (Borraz and Zas Marcos, 2019). However, *Frozen II* (2019) disappointed those who hoped Elsa would come out as a lesbian in the sequel. In both films, her sexual ambiguity is evident, though it does not necessarily imply anything specific.

In *Luca* (2021), a similar situation unfolds with the story of two sea monsters, Luca Paguro and Alberto Scorfano, who embark on adventures on land and share a special friendship. Both characters conceal their true identities as sea monsters. Alberto, more daring, expresses to Luca how exhilarating it is to be outside and not hidden. Luca eventually leaves home to join his friend. Alberto decides to reveal their true nature, choosing not to hide their monster identities any longer. This revelation leads to a significant conflict in the village, with some residents repulsed by the boys and others accepting them (Mira, 2021). Critics have noted that their relationship could be interpreted as a gay allegory, though this was never explicitly addressed.

In *Red* (2022), the film similarly avoids overtly representing the LGBTQ+ community. There was anticipation for a transsexual narrative (Rodríguez, 2022), which led viewers to speculate about hidden meanings. In a party scene, Priya's close interaction with a girl outside the group has been interpreted by some as suggesting bisexuality. Additionally, Miriam, a friend of the protagonist, raises questions due to her masculine appearance (Corona, 2022). However, Disney has not made any official statements regarding these interpretations.

Characters from different LGBTQ+ series, both recognised and unrecognised by Disney, are detailed below in Figure 2.

Figure 2. LGBTQ+ characters in a Disney series.



Sources: 1) Spinelli (*The Yard Gang*, 1997); 2) Moose Pearson (*Pepper Ann*, 1997); 3) Pleakley (*Lilo and Stitch*, 2003); 4) Marco, 5) Chloe and 6) Jackie Lynn Thomas (*Star vs. The Forces of Evil*, 2015); 7) Luz Noceda and 8) Amity Blight (*The Owl House*, 2020). Walt Disney.



#### 4.2.2. LGBTQ+ Characters Identified by Disney

It was not until 2013 that Disney introduced characters with non-heteronormative sexual orientations in brief sequences. In *Frozen* (2013), the character Oaken, a salesman, is shown being greeted from a window by his male partner and their children. In *Zootopia* (2016), a gay couple makes a subtle appearance; they are identified in the film's credits with the same surnames. Bucky Oryx-Antleron, a male kudu, shares an apartment with his husband, Pronk Oryx-Antleron. They reside in the Grand Pangolin Arms apartment building, where they are neighbours to Judy Hopps, the main character.

In *Finding Dory* (2016), a lesbian couple shares a kiss in a brief sequence. The series *Doctor Toys* (2015) also features a lesbian couple with their two children, a detail that was first highlighted two years after its premiere in 2017. *Star vs. The Forces of Evil* (2015) takes a more pronounced step towards inclusion, showcasing Marco (transgender) as a supporting character dressed as a woman, as well as Jackie Lynn Thomas and Chloe as bisexual. It also features a special moment where a large group of non-binary couples kiss at a party. *Toy Story 4* (2019) briefly depicts a female couple hugging their child. In the series *The Owl House* (2020), the protagonist Luz Noceda is bisexual, and Amity Blight is a lesbian. Their "innocent and awkward" romance is depicted, though this content did not appear until 2021. In *Onward* (2020), a Cyclops policewoman mentions her girlfriend.

It is not until the short film *Out* (2020) that Disney makes a more significant commitment to representing the LGBTQ+ community. In this film, the central plot revolves around Greg and Manuel, a gay couple, as they navigate how to communicate their relationship to their parents.

*Strange World* (2022) continues this trend with its protagonist, Ethan, who is openly homosexual. Ethan is in love with a schoolmate named Diazo and hopes for reciprocation.

In *Rescue Squad* (2022), there are subtle references to LGBTQ+ characters. The series features a couple of talking vehicles who are parents to a baby girl and a lesbian couple who are the mothers of a character in the series.

Similarly, *Lightyear* (2022) includes a brief sequence featuring a lesbian couple sharing a kiss.

Finally, we highlight two pieces of audiovisual content not originally produced by Disney but released by the Disney Channel. In the episode "Families" (2022) from the series *Peppa Pig* (2004), the main character interacts with Penny Polar Bear, who mentions that she has two mothers. Additionally, *Nimona* (2023) is a film originally produced by Blue Sky Studios, a former subsidiary of 20th Century Studios. Following its acquisition by Disney, the project was initially cancelled. However, after Annapurna Pictures took over and retooled it, the film was released on the Netflix platform. *Nimona* features a transgender teenage girl with shapeshifting powers and a gay couple named Ballister Blackheart and his boyfriend, Ambrosius Goldenloin.

Figure 3 displays the most relevant LGBTQ+ characters in Disney films.

**Figure 3.** LGBTQ+ characters in Disney films.

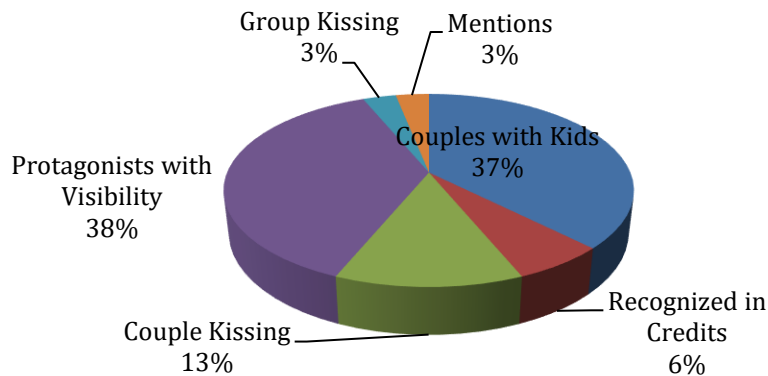


Sources: 1) Diazo and 2) Ethan (*Strange World*, 2022); 3) Ambrosius Goldenloin, 4) Nimona and 5) Ballister Blackheart (*Nimona*, 2023). **Walt Disney.**

The actions depicting gender diversity are varied, as illustrated in Figure 4. There are six instances (37%) where homosexual couples with their children appear briefly and without prominence. Additionally, there is one couple recognized in the credits (6%) and a Cyclops who mentions his

girlfriend (3%). Two scenes feature couples kissing (13%), and another scene depicts a group of people kissing (3%). In five instances across the films, series, and short films analysed, there is a more significant commitment to gender diversity, showcasing 12 characters (38%) with more prominent roles and clearer visibility of their gender identity.

**Figure 4.** Visibility of LGBTQ+ characters.

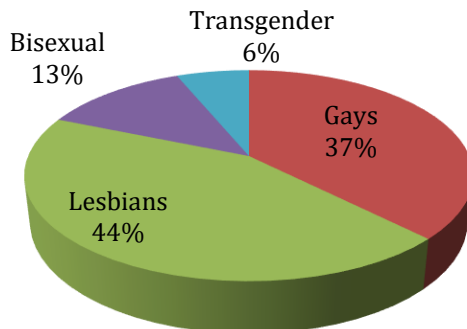


Source: Authors elaboration, 2024.

### 4.2.3. Characteristics of LGBTQ+ Disney Characters

Of the 32 characters analysed and identified by Disney, as shown in Figure 5, the most common are homosexuals: 14 lesbian women (44%) and 12 gay men (37%). This is followed by 4 bisexual characters (13%) and 2 transgender characters (6%). There are no intersex or asexual characters.

**Figure 5.** Genders in Disney Characters.

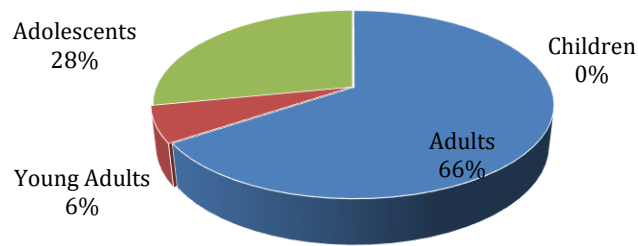


Source: Authors elaboration, 2024.

Regarding the sex of the non-heteronormative characters in Disney's audiovisual content, females are the most predominant, comprising 13 characters (56%). This is followed by males, with 18 characters (39%), and a group of non-binary individuals, whose exact count is not specified due to their high number.

As shown in Figure 6, the age of the LGBTQ+ characters analysed is not always specified. However, they are predominantly adults, totalling 21 characters (66%) aged between 27 and 59 years. Adolescents make up 9 characters (28%) aged between 12 and 18 years, and young adults include 2 characters (6%) aged between 19 and 26 years. There are no characters identified as children between 0 and 11 years old.

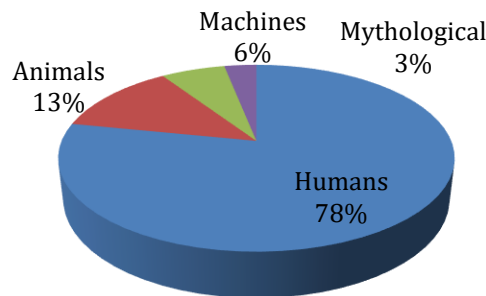
**Figure 6.** Ages of LGBTQ+ characters at Disney.



Source: Authors elaboration, 2024.

Regarding the type of LGBTQ+ characters in Disney content, as shown in Figure 7, the majority are humans, totalling 25 characters (78%). This is followed by animals with 4 characters (13%), which include antelopes and anthropomorphic animals. Additionally, there is 1 cyclops (3%) and 2 machines (vehicles) (6%).

**Figure 7.** Type of LGBTQ+ characters.

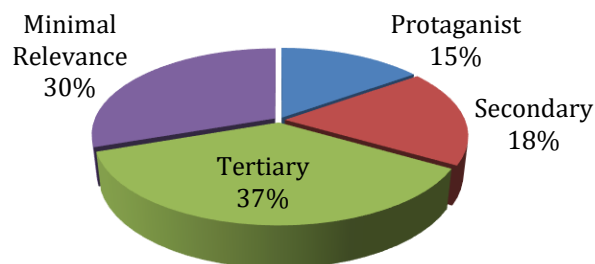


Source: Authors elaboration, 2024.

#### 4.2.4. Protagonism of LGBTQ+ Characters at Disney

Concerning LGBTQ+ characters in Disney's audiovisual content, as illustrated in Figure 8, the distribution is as follows: 15% are protagonists (5), 18% are secondary characters (6), 37% are tertiary or supporting characters (12), and 30% are characters of minimal relevance (9), the latter being understood as having very brief and insignificant roles. Additionally, 37.5% (12) of the characters are unnamed, typically filling irrelevant roles such as homosexual couples who are represented through small gestures that subtly indicate their gender.

**Figure 8.** Prominence of LGBTQ+ characters.



Source: Authors elaboration, 2024.

LGBTQ+ visibility in the content investigated varies. The short film *Out* (2020) is notable for focusing entirely on the homosexuality of its protagonists. Similarly, *Strange World* (2022) delves deeply into the homosexuality of its main character, despite having a different overall plot. The series *The Owl House*, *Star vs. the Forces of Evil*, and *Nimona* each feature characters with different gender diversities. In *Peppa*

*Pig*, a specific episode highlights the lesbian mothers of a supporting character. In summary, among the films analysed, only the short film and one film provide significant visibility, representing 10% of the total. In contrast, the visibility in series is higher, with 4 series representing 20% of the total formats investigated. Notably, the prominence of LGBTQ+ content has become more prevalent since 2019.

#### 4. Conclusions

The methodological approach adopted in this study has enabled us to verify the hypotheses and assess the role of LGBTQ+ characters in children's animation content produced and broadcast by Disney. This includes characters both identified by critics and members of the LGBTQ+ community and those explicitly shown by the company. The total number of television series, films, and short films featuring these characters is quite small compared to the vast number of works produced by Disney over its 100-year history. The debate continues in the film industry regarding what content is considered appropriate or inappropriate for minors, often leading to censorship (Martí López, 2011).

The introduction of LGBTQ+ characters in Disney's content began in 2013 with *Frozen*. This film featured a homosexual couple whose presence went largely unnoticed due to their minor role and the limited information provided about their gender identity. Over time, and with social progress, such characters have been included more frequently, though often in a very subtle manner.

The emergence of these characters has provoked significant opposition from conservative lobbies and countries where LGBTQ+ individuals face legal penalties (García Baroja, 2023). These pressures have influenced film companies, leading to delays in the appearance of LGBTQ+ characters and their portrayal in roles that could be easily omitted if necessary. In recent years, however, these characters have gained more prominence, with some becoming central to the plot or representing gender diversity as a key theme. This increased visibility can lead to censorship in non-permissive countries, impacting the company's ability to showcase these works on their platforms.

Conversely, large companies also engage in marketing strategies such as pinkwashing and queerbaiting to appeal to LGBTQ+ audiences while maintaining a predominantly heteronormative framework. Despite promoting their inclusivity, these companies often avoid explicit references to sexual diversity in their content to mitigate potential economic risks (Sánchez-Soriano & García-Jiménez, 2020, p. 95).

It was not until 2015, with *Finding Dory*, that Disney first featured a lesbian couple kissing. In 2020, the short film *Out* made homosexuality central to its plot, and in 2022, *Strange World* showcased its main character's homosexuality openly. In 1997, film critics and the LGBTQ+ community itself recognised LGBTQ+ characters in the company's films, however, Disney never confirmed these suspicions.

Disney's portrayal of gender diversity aligns with broader social patterns. Among the characters identified in the study, 81% are homosexual, followed by 13% bisexual and 6% transgender. This distribution mirrors data from an Ipsos report (2023) in Spain, which shows similar figures: 63% homosexual, 34% bisexual, 12% transgender, and 10% non-binary among those who recognise having a family member, friend, or colleague from the LGBTQ+ community.

It is essential to recognise that media, particularly audiovisual content, plays a crucial role in the socialisation, production, and reproduction of gender identity. Media representation is especially significant during childhood and adolescence when behavioural models are adopted and identity is formed (Aguado-Peláez y Martínez-García, 2021; Martínez León, 2020). However, companies have struggled to provide visibility for the non-heteronormative community. In Disney's animation, only 38% of LGBTQ+ characters are presented in a visible and meaningful manner. These characters are typically those with more significant roles. The remaining representations are brief and peripheral, with animated characters often depicted as homosexual couples with children (37%), engaging in brief kissing scenes (13%), or making subtle expressions of their identity (3%).

The characteristics of LGBTQ+ characters within the company do not particularly facilitate identification by children. Most of these characters are adults (66%), followed by young adults (6%), with only 28% being teenagers, and none are children under the age of 11. On the positive side, 78% of these characters are human, with a smaller percentage represented as animals, mythological beings, or machines.

Furthermore, the prominence of LGBTQ+ characters in Disney's content remains limited. Only 15% of these characters are main characters, and 18% are secondary characters while supporting and minor

characters make up 67%. Additionally, 37% of these characters are unnamed and anonymous. This lack of visibility diminishes the impact of diversity representation, as it is crucial for children to see themselves reflected in the main characters.

The findings indicate that, despite Disney's efforts in children's animation, their contribution is insufficient for meaningful representation. The characteristics and roles of these characters do not effectively facilitate identification or normalise diversity. With over 60 countries where LGBTQ+ content is still prohibited, and ongoing controversy surrounding its depiction, there remains significant progress to be made. There is a pressing need for broader and more inclusive representation from an early age, ensuring that all identities are acknowledged and valued.

### **5. Acknowledgements**

This study is part of the Digital Society and Creativity Research Group of the San Isidoro University Centre, part of the Pablo de Olavide University. We also extend our gratitude to Dr. Pablo Martín-Ramallal for his collaboration.

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