

“What’s with you people, I’m Blind!”:  
A Content Analysis of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*

by

Abigaile Grace Weiser

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Major Professor  
Dr. Chardie Baird

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** People with disabilities are increasingly represented in television; however, we do not yet know if these representations depict common stereotypes. In this study, I evaluate the popular animated children's cartoon, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, for the presence of disability stereotypes found in previous scholarship.

**Background:** The stereotypes are as follows: the villain, the supercrip, weakness and vulnerability, and the imagery of madness (Safran 1998; Irwin and Moeller 2012; Ellis 2015; Groggin 2009; Schalk 2016).

**Methods:** Episodes were coded according to frequency of characters with disabilities appearances in episodes, how often the portrayal of these characters were stereotypical, and how often they were not.

**Results:** The results suggest characters with disabilities appear often, in more than half of the total episodes. While they are depicted at times in line with stereotypes found in prior literature, they are often portrayed as what I call "neutrally" in scenes or with no stereotype used.

**Discussion:** These results suggest a need to further investigate the presence of the stereotypes in children's animation and the need to reevaluate their applicability.

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## Chapter 1 - Introduction

“I’ve held books before. They don’t exactly do it for me” – Toph Beifong (DiMartino and Konietzko 2005-2008).

The portrayals of persons with disabilities in television and film created for adult audiences are sparse and often stereotypical (Steele et al. 2005: 78; Müller et al. 2012; Thomas 2021; Callus 2019; Mallett 2009; Oppenheimer 2016; Safran 1998; Elliot and Byrd 1988/84/82). Contemporary researchers and social justice advocates have consistently argued that modern television often fails to include characters who are representative of their socially and culturally diverse audience (Watson 2018; Reedy et al. 2008; Herrera 2007; Stainback and Tomaskovic-Devey 2009; Oppenheimer 2016). Despite some modest increases in representations of those who are marginalized, most are representations of women of color, varying gender identities, and different ethnicities in mass media whose target audience is adults (Watson 2018; Heldman et al. 2020; Reedy et al. 2008). Representations of persons with disabilities on the other hand, have been slow to improve. While most of the literature relating to inclusivity and representation in television and film has focused on racial, ethnic, and gender identifies, sociological literature regarding media representations of persons with disabilities is sparse, particularly of children’s media such as television and movies (Watson 2018; Heldman et al. 2020; Reedy et al. 2008; Bond 2013).

Modest changes in the number of persons with disabilities representations have coincided with an increase in disability rights activists fighting for accurate representations and inclusion of people with disabilities on television, an increase in social research to understand the portrayals of persons with disabilities in mass media, such as television shows, movies (both live-action and animation), and literature. However, most of this research has focused on media created for adult

audiences and the impact of disability stereotypes on able-bodied audiences, with little research on the impact of these stereotypes on children with disabilities (Cheyne 2012; Reedy et al. 2008; Herrera 2007; Caswell et al. 2017). Additionally, for the purpose of my research, my definition of disability is as a medically recognized illness, whether physical (i.e., physical impairments affecting mobility, coordination, or personal adjustment), psychological (i.e., behavioral disorders affecting intellectual functioning, depression, anxiety, dyslexia, etc.), or chronic (e.g., life-long impairments) affecting daily life and activities (Elliot and Byrd 1998; Safran 1998; Zajacova and Montez 2018).

The social research addressing the depictions of persons with disabilities for adult audiences finds that the depictions often fit into four main stereotypes: the villain, the super-crip, depicted as a burden and/or vulnerable, and the “imagery of madness”, all of which will be explored more in-depth in the literature review section of my thesis (Safran 1998; Irwin and Moeller 2012; Ellis 2015; Groggin 2009). A few examples of the stereotypes, nearly all of the villains within the James Bond franchise (including the most recent movies) are persons with disabilities, whose evilness is linked to their ability status, creating a connection between disability and evilness; Sideshow Bob from *The Simpsons* is portrayed as a “crazy” loner with a physical disability, suggesting a relationship between mental illness and disability; and Barbara Gordon AKA Batgirl from DC comics is often portrayed in a wheelchair with only her intellect to rely on for crime fighting, implying people with physical disabilities are only necessary for support/background roles (Irwin and Moeller 2012; Elliot and Byrd 1982; Kallman 2017; Fink 2013). However, the conceptualization of these stereotypes was from the analysis of film and television with adults as the target audience, therefore, we do not yet know if these stereotypes



apply to characters with disabilities present within television and movies for children, which is the focus of my thesis (Elliot and Byrd 1982/84/88; Safran 1998; Barnes 1992).

To fill this gap in the literature, my thesis asks: do the stereotypical portrayals of persons with disabilities from film and television created for adult audiences also exist in media created for child audiences? There is research on the *presence* of characters with disabilities in children's shows, but social researchers do not yet know whether the depiction of the stereotypes for characters with disabilities in movies and television shows for adults also occur in shows for children (Bond 2013). Thus, we know that there are characters with disabilities within children's television and film, however, there is little research analyzing the depictions of persons with disabilities within children's media.

This research aids in filling the gap on analyzing the depiction of characters with disabilities within children's television. It is necessary to critically analyze the depictions of persons with disabilities in media created for children for multiple reasons. First, children are more susceptible to believing stereotypical depictions are accurate representations about persons with disabilities due to their social and analytical level of brain development (Browne Graves 1999; Wahl 2003; Villani 2001). At this time in their lives, children are particularly susceptible to believing disability stereotypes, since "children are still learning how to discriminate between observed behaviors which should be ignored and observed behaviors to which they should attend, store, and replicate" (Aley and Hahn 2020: 507). Second, characters with disabilities are one of the most underrepresented within children's television and movies, which could lead children to believe disability is a rarity within society, despite 15% of the total population having a disability (Gerbner 1995; Markov and Yoon 2021; Wahl 2003; Parson et al. 2017). Finally, stereotypical depictions of persons with disabilities in children's media impacts how children

with disabilities see themselves and interact with both their able-bodied peers and within society as a whole (Tan, Nelson, Dong, et al. 1997; Kremer and Kremer 2019; Englandkennedy 2008; Wahl 2003; Jordan 2005; Jones et al. 2020). However, much of this research has focused on the impact of the disability stereotypes on able-bodied individuals or the parents of children with disabilities; an extensive assessment of the impact of the disability stereotypes on children with disabilities has not been conducted (Jones et al. 2020; Thomas 2021; Tan, Nelson, Dong et al. 1997; Kremer and Kremer 2019). Though, like adult audiences, the presentation of disability stereotypes to children creates negative assumptions regarding persons with disabilities, meaning analyzing the depictions of persons with disabilities within children's media is necessary (Mullaney 2019; Bond 2013; Klein and Shiffman 2009; Caswell et al. 2017).

The purpose of this present study is to expand upon the existing body of literature by analyzing the depictions of persons with disabilities within television whose target audience is children and adolescents, or General audiences (G) or Parental guidance (PG) television and films. While G and PG media can also connect with persons above 18 years old (adults) the target audiences of a majority of G and PG rated shows are children. Children's access to television and the internet is increasing given the availability and ease of access to streaming platforms, such as Netflix, Hulu, Disney+, etc. (Steele et al. 2005; Kremer and Kremer 2019). Indicating a greater need to critically assess the media created for these child audiences.

To answer these questions, I assess animated media since previous research has indicated it is easier to depict persons with disabilities in animation, and because children's cartoons have existed since the early to mid-1900s within American Culture and swerve as a major socialization agent of children into western culture (Callcott and Lee 1994; Bandura 2001; Aley and Hahn 2020; "Timeline" 2017). To understand the depiction of persons with disabilities

within children's media, specifically assessing the use of disability stereotypes within children's media, I ran a content analysis of one popular children's cartoon – *Avatar: The Last Airbender* created by Michael DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko in 2005. To perform the content analysis, I watched all 61 episodes of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and recorded the number of appearances of characters with disabilities and the number of usages of disability stereotypes in the portrayals of these characters with disabilities. To understand whether the disability stereotypes are being used in the depictions of the characters with disabilities within *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, I am only assessing the usage of the disability stereotypes, I will not be including socio-demographic information (race, age, gender, class, etc.) within this analysis, a point I return to in the conclusion.

Before conducting this content analysis, I expected depictions to fall into two possible categories: 1) be stereotypically negative in their depictions or be, 2) neutral, treating ability difference as a common part of everyday life. The reason for an expected neutral depictions over the course of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* stems from the increased awareness from activist communities to create television which is more inclusive and accurate to the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities. I did not expect the depictions to be non-stereotypical given the high use of the disability stereotypes in films and television created for adult audiences. However, while I did not expect these depictions to be positive, I did expect the disability will not be the only aspect of a character with a disability's story, given the increased awareness surrounding improving disability media content (Heldman et al. 2020; Reedy et al. 2008; Herrera 2007). After finishing the content analysis, I found that most of my assumptions of the depiction of the characters with disabilities were correct – the characters with disabilities in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* are stereotypical depicted (at times), but their depictions also show them going

through common experiences for teenagers throughout the series. Interestingly, only the SuperCrip and the helpless/vulnerable stereotypes were utilized in the depictions of two out of the three characters with disabilities within *Avatar: The Last Airbender*.

In the following chapters, I review disability and media literature. I give an overview of how scholars define disability, mass media, and representation within disability and media scholarship. I also highlight the scholarship on the importance of representation to audiences and accurate depictions of persons with disabilities. Further, I review scholarship assessing children's media. Given the dearth of research on the treatment of persons with disabilities in shows for children, I review the literature on the disability stereotypes identified from media created for adult audiences. Further, I describe my content analysis design used to analyze the children's cartoon *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, which focuses on the use of identified disability stereotypes. In my methods section I provide more information on the cartoons itself, its impact on popular children's animation, and explain the specific questions posed for analysis used to answer my research question. I continue by providing and describing the results computed to aid in answering my research question. Then, I discuss the impact of these results and how my findings connect to already established disability and media literature. Finally, I conclude my thesis with a discussion of the impact of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* on audiences, the limitations within the study, and advice on future research on the disability stereotypes present within children's media.

## Chapter 2 - Literature Review

As mentioned, it is necessary to assess the usage of disability stereotypes within children's media, since there is a gap within disability and media literature on the usage of the stereotypes in children's media. Through this literature review, I answer four main questions to begin filling this missing piece. First, how has previous scholarship defined disability, mass media, and representation? I find much of this work does not explicitly define these concepts; authors often assume an implicit understanding of these concepts by audiences. Second, I ask why representations and depictions of marginalized groups are important. Next, what are the known consequences of inaccurate representations for both people with disabilities and able-bodied individuals with and without experience with persons with disabilities. Finally, what are the stereotypical depictions of disability, their meaning, and the frequency of their use in different media platforms identified by prior research.

*How is "disability" defined in prior research/studies?*

Within disability literature, conceptualizing disability is often complex. Researchers often refrain from using symptoms to define disability – as many disabilities have a variety of symptoms, so researchers use one of three ways to conceptualize disability: focus on one specific disability, use an overarching label (e.g., Mental/Psychological/Physical) without further clarification, or use an overarching label with further discussion/clarification. In the next few paragraphs, I will discuss how these scholars have defined disability and I will outline how the following terms are used in the literature: disability, physical disability, and psychological disability (also referred to as intellectual or mental).

Most authors do not have explicit definitions of disability, except for authors researching a specific type of disability, such as attention deficit disorder (ADD), Attention

Deficit/Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), and these authors specifically outline the history of these disabilities to define the disability (Englandkennedy 2008). Further, some researchers use the overarching term disability and do not explicitly define what they mean by “physical disability” or “mental illness/intellectual disability” (Elliot and Byrd 1982/84/88; Kallman 2007; Groggin 2009; Cheyne 2012; Haller et al. 2006; Fink 2013; Parsons et al. 2017; Siperstein et al. 2007; Psaila 2016; Ellis 2015; Cheyne 2012; Mallett 2009).

Other scholars use overarching labels to define disability as “fragile population groups” (Kasap and Gürçınar 2018), or people with “physical impairments” without further clarification (Müller et al. 2012). Researchers Markov and Yoon (2021) cite disability researchers, such as Safran (1998) and relevant disability organizations, such as WebAIM, an online non-profit organization which focuses on making websites and organizations more accessible to those with disabilities, for their definitions of physical, cognitive, and mental disabilities. Defining physical as “loss of limited mobility” cognitive as “difficulties with a variety of mental tasks” and mental as “mental health conditions which can affect the way a person feels, thinks, or behaves” (Markov and Yoon 2021: 2756). Many researchers appear to struggle to define “intellectual disabilities”, often highlighting “explanations of intellectual disabilities in terms of what is *not*” and evaluating situational factors to define intellectual disabilities (Callus 2019: 180). Callus (2019) focuses on intellectual disabilities and uses the definition created by the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disability [AAIDD], which is “a disability characterized by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior” (“Definition” 2022). Callus (2019) highlights the evolving nature of intellectual disabilities and the difficulty in defining what is an intellectual disability, stating intellectual disabilities are more-so social constructs rather than fixed diagnosable disorders.

Lastly, some authors have been very explicit in their definitions of disability for their studies. Safran (1998) has the most explicit definition, defining disability as “a reduced function or loss of a particular body part or organ. A disability is not a handicap unless it leads to an educational, social, vocational, or other problem” (229). Safran (1998) does not elaborate on what can be defined as a “handicap”, again assuming audiences will implicitly understand the distinction between disability and handicap. He also specifies two types of disability. First, is “physical disability” which he defines as “bodily impairments which interfere with an individual's mobility, coordination, communication, learning, or personal adjustment” (229). He also refers to “psychiatric disability” (interchanging the term with “mental disability”) “a behavioral or psychological pattern that genuinely impairs functioning, and that “either distresses or disables the individual in one or more significant areas of functioning”” (229).

As mentioned, I have conceptualized disability as a medically recognized illness, whether physical (i.e., physical impairments affecting mobility, coordination, or personal adjustment), psychological (i.e., behavioral disorders affecting intellectual functioning, depression, anxiety, dyslexia, etc.), or chronic (e.g., life-long impairments) affecting daily life and activities (Elliot and Byrd 1998; Safran 1998; Zajacova and Montez 2018). Due to the nature of this research being centered around the stereotypical representations of disability, rather than an analysis of a specific disability/disability type, one of the more specified definitions is not being used.

Physical disabilities are disabilities which are often identified by sight, while psychological or mental disabilities are typically hidden from sight and not immediately obvious when looking at an individual, and chronic illnesses can be either physical or psychological or both. Physical disabilities include, but are not limited to, people who use wheelchairs, amputees, people with vision and/or hearing loss, dwarfism, multiple sclerosis (MS), etc. Mental disabilities

include, but are not limited to, mental illnesses, such as depression, anxiety, ADD, and ADHD intellectual disabilities, such as learning disabilities, individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), individuals on the autism spectrum, etc. Finally, chronic disabilities include, but are not limited to, individuals with Type 1 or 2 diabetes, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, Alzheimer's disease and dementia, and Parkinson's disease, etc.

In the section, I will outline the use of mass media within previous disability scholarship and outline how mass media has been conceptualized. Which will lead into a discussion around representation, and the importance of representations and accurate depictions of marginalized groups of people.

*How is "mass media" defined in prior scholarship?*

Similar to disability, scholars appear to assume that they share an understanding of mass media with audiences. Using the term mass media interchangeably with specific media types, such as television, film, newsprint, and social media. Early disability studies from the 1980s and 1990s of mass media use the term as a replacement for their media of study such as film, television, and newsprint (Elliot and Byrd 1984/88; Safran 1998; Williams 1981; Mallett 2009). In more recent scholarship, the term has expanded to encompass new types of media such as, social media, e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Snapchat, etc., and comic books/graphic novels (Irwin and Moeller 2012). Typically, studies focus on one form of media (Safran 1998; Elliot and Byrd 1982/84/88; Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick 2019; Heldman et al. 2020; Ellis 2015, Psaila 2016, Quintero and Riles 2018; Bond 2013). For example, Quintero and Riles (2018) focus solely on television, while Heldman et al. (2020) focus on award winning movies – but both use the term media throughout their works as a shorthand way to describe the media of focus.



Therefore, for the context of this research, mass media, unless stated otherwise, is to be understood as television, movies/films, comics/graphic novels, social media (Twitter, Reddit, Facebook, etc.) and newsprint (Elliot and Byrd 1984/88; Safran 1998; Williams 1981; Mallett 2009; Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick 2019; Heldman et al. 2020; Ellis 2015, Psaila 2016, Quintero and Riles 2018; Bond 2013).

No matter which type of mass media a study uses, the stereotypes of disability exist across all types of mass media. Nearly all of the research reviewed for this literature review have mentioned or focused solely on the stereotypical depiction of persons with disability within media. However, before explaining the identified stereotypes, I will examine how previous scholarship has conceptualized representation.

*How has prior research defined “representation”?*

Scholars have not explicitly defined the term “representation.” Implicitly, they are referring to whether or not a group of people is seen in mass media (Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick 2019; Fink 2013; Bond 2013; Haller and Zhang 2013; Rousseau et al. 2019; Markov and Yoon 2021; Mallett 2009). In the workplace/education literature, the representative goal is often to have the same percentage of people in the workplace/education system as they exist in the national population (“Women” 2017; Stainback and Tomaskovic-Devey 2009; Oppenheimer 2016). For example, a business college should compose 48 percent women, 48 percent men, and approximately 4 percent non-binary/gender non-conforming.

Often, there is an acknowledgement that representation is not enough. One must also look at whether the depiction of the group perpetuates a negative stereotype which could be influencing perceptions surrounding a targeted population (Oppenheimer 2016). While representation has not been defined in prior literature, stereotypical representations are

understood as “an overgeneralized belief about a group of people” and while these stereotypes can be positive, negative, and neutral, depictions of persons with disabilities is generally negatively stereotypical (Steele et al. 2005: 78; Müller et al. 2012; Thomas 2021; Callus 2019; Mallett 2009; Oppenheimer; Safran 1998; Elliot and Byrd 1988/84/82).

Within this research, the conceptualization of representation is whether or not a group of people, specifically persons with disabilities, is/are depicted within mass media. Of the research conducted to assess disability representation within mass media, researchers found that from the 1930’s to the 1990’s – analyzing nearly 60 years’ worth of films – only around 10-15 percent of award-winning films had a character with a disability (Elliot and Byrd 1982; Safran 1998). Furthermore, in Heldman et al.’s (2020) study conducted between 2007-2019, found that between 2007 and 2017 less than 1% of leads in top-rated family films were persons with disabilities, however, in 2018 and 2019 the number of persons with disabilities in lead roles increased to 8% for both years.

Overall, representation is a concept most understand, but defining it here will aid in that understanding by being clear in how I am using the term within this research. The next section of this literature review will begin to summarize what previous scholarship has found on why representations of marginalized groups is important. Followed by why studying the depictions of marginalized groups is important. Finally, what are the previously identified stereotypes of persons with disabilities within mass media.

*Why is representation of an underserved/less powerful/marginalized group in the mass media important?*

People connect to stories. We find connection to stories and share those stories through media, which is why media is important to our society (Browne Graves 1999). We all hope to

see ourselves within media, however, there have been many groups of people omitted from media throughout time. The documentation of these omissions began in the 1970s; feminist scholars and activists coined the term “symbolic annihilation”, a concept which is used “to describe the absence, under-representation, maligning and trivialization of women by mainstream media” (Caswell et al. 2017: 4). Symbolic annihilation is the process through which mass media “omit, trivialize, or condemn certain groups that are not socially valued” (Klein and Shiffman 2009: 2). The annihilation of socially devalued identities eliminates imagery and messages surrounding these identities, therefore, promoting exclusion and otherness for those socially devalued (Klein and Shiffman 2009; Caswell et al. 2017; Parsons et al. 2017; Montgomerie 2010). Although the focus of this concept is on women’s representations within media, it also applies to other under-representations and misrepresentations within media, such as persons with disabilities.

There is an important aspect to understanding why representation matters; media is a cultural mirror; it reflects the beliefs and expectations of a culture and influences people’s attitudes and interpretations of given populations (Klein and Shiffman 2009; Englandkennedy 2008; Bandura 2001; Smith 2007; Guizzo et al. 2017; Williams 1981). Without representations “the invisibility of people with ... impairments are assumed to lead audiences to conclude that the marginalization of disability in society is a natural state of affairs. Possible fears and prejudice about this group also remain unchallenged when they remain invisible on television. Regarding misrepresentation of disability, the media are also seen to feed prejudice and disablism through the use of stereotypes.” (Müller et al. 2012: 28.2; Parsons et al. 2017).

Furthermore, understanding media representation is important for three main reasons: how it affects people with disabilities, how it affects people without disabilities who have little to

no experience with persons with disabilities, and how it affects people without disabilities who have experience with individuals with disabilities. For all three groups, media representation represents a “cultural mirror” highlighting and creating the aspects important to society and presenting them to an audience which may deepen their social importance (Englandkennedy 2008; Bond 2013; Cheyne 2012; Bandura 2001; Parsons et al. 2017; Smith 2007; Mallett 2009; Wilson and Scior 2015; Williams 1981; Montgomerie 2010). Specifically, for people without disabilities, under-representation and misrepresentation of people with disabilities lead people to believe that there are almost no people who are disabled in society, despite approximately 15% of the population, or 1 billion people, having a disability (Mullaney 2019; Bond 2013; Wilson and Scior 2015; Markov and Yoon 2021). There is evidence supporting the premise that increased interactions and positive depictions of disabilities aid in improving attitudes towards persons with disabilities, however, these interactions must be consistent for long term attitude changes (Haller et al. 2006; Siperstein et al. 2007; Tan et al. 1997; Wilson and Scior 2015; Mallett 2009).

For people who do not have disabilities, particularly those who do not know any people with disabilities, negative stereotypes of disability likely decrease willingness of able-bodied individuals to form interpersonal relationships with disabled individuals (Kallman 2017; Browne Graves 1999; Siperstein et al. 2007). As mentioned, in television the portrayal of people with disabilities are often stereotypically negative which creates an association for both able-bodied and people with disabilities, that disability is a negative personal attribute, and one should strive to not become disabled or overcome the hardships of disability to live a “normal” life, which is the basis for multiple of the disability stereotypes to be discussed (Müller et al. 2012; Thomas 2021; Callus 2019; Mallett 2009). Kallman (2017) conducted an Implicit Association Test (IAT)

to assess individuals' implicit biases towards persons with disabilities after being presented with various media depictions of disability, finding college students showed a higher preference towards able-bodied individuals due to unconscious biases learned through stereotypical depictions of disability. Additionally, Kallman (2017) found short, positive depictions of disability did not create a significantly positive attitude towards persons with disabilities, suggesting longer exposure to positive disability depictions is necessary for implicit attitude change, meaning "able-bodied individuals' implicit bias was more entrenched than the literature suggests (653)."

Representations are powerful. They can impact how everyone sees marginalized groups of people, including how marginalized people see themselves (Caswell et al. 2017). The importance of representations has been established, however, the question now is, once in mass media, why is understanding depictions of marginalized groups within mass media important? Moreover, why is it necessary to understand the stereotypical depictions of persons with disabilities within mass media? This leads into a discussion of how depictions of marginalized groups, specifically persons with disabilities, affect those groups – particularly how it affects children.

*Why is it necessary to study the depiction of marginalized groups within Mass Media?*

Depictions of marginalized populations in mass media are necessary to study for two main reasons, one – the impact of inaccurate depictions on those not in the marginalized groups, and second – how inaccurate depictions affect those within the marginalized population. Previous scholarship assessing the impact of television on people's perception of minority groups finds that those who watch television more regularly find it easier to identify disabled characters and recognize the disability as part of the character, and those who identify these

characters see them stereotypically, reporting disabled characters as crazy, violent, helpless, and angry (Quintero and Riles 2018). Quintero and Riles's (2018) study also concluded that participants were able to recall character with disabilities based on the stereotypes used to depict them, indicating a created mental connection between disabilities and the stereotypes used. People learn through observing events, attempting to see its realism and then internalizing the actions of the said event. If an individual consistently sees villains who have disabilities, this may form an association between evilness and ability status; this is what researchers have called "value acceptance" in regard to socialization and the affects it can have on children (Tan, Nelson, Dong, et al. 1997).

Furthermore, Haller and Zhang (2013) found that able-bodied individual's attitudes towards persons with disabilities is generally negative, but able-bodied individuals without connections to persons with disabilities see unrealistic depictions of persons with disabilities compared to actual disabled people's lives (Haller and Zhang 2013). Therefore, able-bodied people are viewing caricatures of people with disabilities experiences, and conclusions and assumptions regarding the lives of individuals with disabilities are being drawn based on the stereotypical misrepresentations of disability (Thomas 2021; Haller and Zhang 2013). Furthermore, subsequent studies have come to similar conclusions, finding the more contact individuals have with people with disabilities and seeing more positive representations of disability correlate with more positive attitudes towards people with disabilities (Eichinger et al. 1992; Safran 1998; Tan et al. 1997; Schwartz et al. 2010; Bejoian and Connor 2016).

Therefore, understanding that the negative depictions of persons with disabilities does have an impact on adult populations is incredibly important, but what is more important to this research is the impact of the disability stereotypes on children. The section below with dive

further into how disability stereotypes can affect persons with disabilities and their families. After, I will give a description of the disability stereotypes identified from media created for adult audiences.

*Why is it necessary to assess disability stereotypes in children's media?*

Particularly important to understanding the impact of media is to assess media targeted towards children (Vandewater et al. 2005; Gerbner 1995; Kremer and Kremer 2019; Roberts 2000; Browne-Graves 1999; Williams 1981; Jordan 2005). From an early age, children can replicate actions and beliefs they view, including actions and beliefs towards minority groups learned through family, peers, and television (Steele et al. 2005; Kremer and Kremer 2019; Williams 1981; Browne Graves 1999). Previous literature assessing the consumption of television by adolescents has found that a majority of households, 97% of households, have televisions, and a majority of children, 65%, have a television in their bedroom (Roberts 2000; Browne-Graves 1999; Vandewater et al. 2005). Kremer and Kremer (2019) found that adolescents with a disability view television significantly more than their able-bodied peers, with an average of 5 hours per day versus 3.65 hours. This difference shows the importance of televisions “cultural mirror”, if children with disabilities never see themselves on television or only see themselves in stereotypical ways, there will be negative consequences (Kremer and Kremer 2019; Englandkennedy 2008; Wahl 2003; Jordan 2005). These negative consequences can include learned negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities, a perceived less-than status of persons with disabilities, and a decreased desire to befriend children with disabilities (Siperstein et al. 2007; Kremer and Kremer 2019; Steele et al. 2005). While the impact of those negative consequences is not the focus of this thesis, the acknowledgement of this impact is necessary and will be discussed further in the discussion chapter.

Prior research analyzing characters with disabilities in children’s television and movies, which is media rated PG (Parental Guidance) or G (General Audiences), found that when compared to able-bodied characters, characters with disabilities are twice as likely to fail in tasks/goals, and they are more likely to be exploited, killed, or injured (Wahl 2003; Gerbner 1995). Other scholars have found that in children’s media, persons with disabilities are one of the most under-represented, and along with failing, are often physically disabled older men (Gerbner 1995; Markov and Yoon 2021; Wahl 2003; Parson et al. 2017). Furthermore, while an assessment of the impact and interpretation of these stereotypes on children with disabilities has not been conducted, parents of children with disabilities find the stereotypical depiction of their children’s disabilities worrisome and thought the depictions were being “used for commercial advantage” (Thomas 2021: 699). Of the parents interviewed in Thomas’s (2021) research, many were concerned about the depiction of persons with disability in children’s media for a multitude of reasons. First that the representations were built from the stereotype of persons with disabilities being helpless/vulnerable, that the writing was lazy and failed to capture the complex nature of disability, and that the representations reinforced negative attitudes towards their children with disabilities (Thomas 2021). These parents “wanted their child’s differentness to fade into the background rather than being a plot device or character trait” and wanted the portrayal of variation in ability to be as normal rather than dramatizing disability (Thomas 2021: 700).

Understanding media, television and movies, directed towards children, aids in our knowledge of beliefs and attitudes children learn through media consumption. While we understand how stereotypical depictions impact adults, specifically here adults with children with disabilities, missing is how often these stereotypical depictions are presented to children and how



they impact children with disabilities. Children with disabilities are not asked how they would like to see themselves depicted, therefore, we do not yet know if children with disabilities interpret these stereotypes as negative or do not want the stereotypes used in mass media to depict them. I will discuss further the lack of literature on children with disabilities' interpretations in the discussion chapter. In the final section of this literature review, I will examine the identified stereotypical depictions of persons with disabilities.

*What are the stereotypes of disability depicted in mass media?*

While the representations of disability in mass media have increased slightly in the last decade, the main presentations of disability can be summarized with the following stereotypes which will be further explained below: 1) the villain, 2) the super-cripple (or super-crip), 3) people with disabilities are vulnerable, laughable, easy targets of violence and/or are social burdens on families and peers, and 4) disability equals insanity which is shown through the "imagery of madness" (Irwin and Moeller 2012; Elliot and Byrd 1982/88; Safran 1998; Groggin 2009; Schalk 2016; Mallett 2009). Below I will explain each stereotype, provide example of each type, and discuss the harm these stereotypes do to all communities.

First, in books, comic books and graphic novels, some of which also become films and/or television shows, disability is largely linked with villainy or evilness (Irwin and Moeller 2012; Safran 1998; Mallett 2009). The villain stereotype associates disability with being evil, by framing a character's path to villainy through their disability (Safran 1998; Barnes 1992). This stereotype connects a characters' drive to be a villain with their disability status, and this could be shown as a character like Captain Hook, the main villain in *Peter Pan*, who became a villain focused on hurting Peter Pan after Peter contributed to the loss of his limb. Other characters include Gollum from *Lord of the Rings*, who went insane after contact with magic, and the Joker

from DC comics who is portrayed as having various unnamed mental illnesses, etc. In comic books, disabled characters are villains or evil 57 percent of the time, heroes 43 percent of the time, and never have a “neutral” status (e.g., not a hero or villain) (Elliot and Byrd 1984/88; Irwin and Moeller 2012).

Second, the depiction of persons with disabilities are as a “SuperCrip” or someone who “demonstrates extraordinary abilities to overcome his or her disability” (Safran 1998: 5; Irwin and Moeller 2012; Schalk 2016; Barnes 1992). The SuperCrip stereotype has connections to roaming “freak shows” throughout history, specifically, the nature of both the freak shows and the super-crip emphasis of the “visual rhetoric of wonder” (Schalk 2016: 73). The SuperCrip stereotype serves as a way to amaze audiences by showing the performance of feats by a person with a disability that able-bodied audiences could not imagine performing themselves (Schalk 2016; Garland-Thomason 2002; Barnes 1992). A prominent use of the SuperCrip stereotype is Matthew Murdock, known as Daredevil, a man who becomes blind as a child, and once blinded, his other senses become enhanced to a degree in which he can hear miles away from him, allowing him to overcome his blindness to fight crime (Irwin and Moeller 2012; Thomas 2021). While the SuperCrip image, at first glance seems positive scholars still consider it an inaccurate representation because it is an unrealistic portrayal of disability. Representations like the SuperCrip create conceptions people might have about the blind or those without limbs, and while disability does not have to be debilitating, creating accurate images of disability is important for those who do not interact with a person with a disability regularly because the paired association would then be more accurate to real life (Thomas 2021; Dorfman 2019; Safran 1998; Irwin and Moeller 2012; Schalk 2016).

Third, a vast majority of the depictions of disabled characters is they need help, are vulnerable, and/or laughable. In non-animated media like commercials and telethons the portrayal of disabled people is often pitiful, in need of help, and without the ability to live on their own (Thomas 2021; Safran 1998; Ellcessor and Kirkpartrick 2019; Groggin 2009; Callus 2019; Barnes 1992; Mallett 2009). Also, characters with disabilities portrayed in crime dramas often reflect weakness and victimization. Writers use this as a narrative device to show the motivation of criminals, by increasing the vulnerability of the victims' audiences support the investigators and are more sympathetic to the victim (Ellis 2015). Therefore, the portrayal of persons with disabilities as helpless allows able-bodied audiences to associate disability with inability to live a life without independence. Callus (2019) dubs this the "clock of incompetence" (181) and states the portrayal of individuals with disabilities is one of uselessness and an inability to be anything more than helpless. While some might have extreme difficulty living in a society only designed with able-bodied individuals in mind, that is a reflection of the society not individuals with disabilities (Thomas 2021; Callus 2019; Klein and Shiffman 2009; Wahl 2003).

Finally, the "imagery of madness" is a literary trope used to show the "dangers" of mental illnesses (Safran 1998). It is often used in live-action television and movies due to the relative ease of depicting mental illness and invisible disabilities, due to not needing prosthetics or computer-generated images (CGI) of disability (Wahl 2003; Safran 1998; Groggin 2009). The imagery of madness creates "violence, suspense, and drama generally prized by Hollywood filmmakers and the public" therefore, decreasing the likelihood of public acceptance of mental disabilities due to the associated violence and drama (Safran 1998: 231; Wahl 2003; Barnes 1992). In live-action crime dramas the portrayal of a suspect is as not being in control of their actions due to mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia or dissociative identity disorder

(previously known as multiple personality disorder) (Callcott and Lee 1994; Elliot and Byrd 1988).

While the depictions of some characters only use one stereotype, sometimes these stereotypes overlap with characters exhibiting multiple stereotypes. The overlap of stereotypes is either at the core of who the character is, or characters will exhibit multiple stereotypes in different social situations (Wahl 2003). A character such as The Joker from DC comics, exhibits multiple stereotypes at the core of the character. He displays both the villain and the imagery of madness stereotypes. There is a connection between this character's path, and drive, to villainy and unnamed mental illnesses, meaning The Joker is showing the "dangers" of unchecked mental illnesses and shows his motivations for being a villain.

The examination of these stereotypes aids our ability to identify them within children's media. Further allowing us to pinpoint the portrayal of persons with disabilities within children's television and movies. The stereotypical depictions of persons with disabilities will appear within *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, but I seek to understand the frequency of their use and if we see all of the stereotypes outlined above. In the next chapter, I describe why *Avatar: The Last Airbender* was chosen for analysis and describe the basic plot of the cartoon. Further, I outline the methods I used in the content analysis. After, I will explain my analyses used to answer my research question. Then I provide the results from the statistical analysis and conclude by discussing the implications of the stereotypes used throughout the cartoon.

## Chapter 3 - Methodology

To answer my research question about the presence and usage of stereotypes from television and film targeted towards adult audiences in children's cartoons, I watched *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, created by Michael DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko. My approach to answering this research question is to perform a content analysis of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and record the use of the disability stereotypes. I did not record demographic characteristics (such as, race, gender, age, class, etc.) of the characters with disabilities. I am assessing *Avatar: The Last Airbender* for the number of uses of disability stereotypes to assess the usage of disability stereotypes throughout the show. Within this methodology section I will why I chose *Avatar: The Last Airbender* for study, how I collected my data for analysis, and how I analyzed the data collected.

### *Avatar Cartoon*

The show I chose to analyze for disability stereotypes was *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. This show was chosen through the Full Internet Movie Database's (IMDb) list of the top rated 100 animated cartoons beginning in the 1980s. I chose IMDb because their rating system is based on the rating of both professional critics and IMDb fan users rating votes on popular shows. While this list is not exhaustive, it does include many popular cartoons over time; however, I restricted my choice to a show which aired within the last 15 years (i.e., 2005-2006 to present) to assess the content of more recently created shows, as many past scholarship has focused on shows and movies from the 1980s and 1990s and scholars/activists have been raising concerns about the presence and depictions of persons with disabilities within mass media created for adult audiences (Elliot and Byrd 1982/84/88; Safran 1998; Barnes 1992; Bond 2013;

Watson 2018; Heldman et al. 2020; Reedy et al. 2008). Additionally, I limited the rating of the animated cartoons to PG to assess shows to those which children have easy access.

*Avatar: The Last Airbender* is set in a mythical civilization centered around the four elements, water, earth, fire, and air. Some people, known as “elemental benders”, but not everyone, have the innate ability to control or “bend” one element, earth, fire, water, or air, but they still have to learn proper techniques and how to control these elements. There is one special individual, known as the Avatar, who can learn to bend all four elements. There is only one Avatar in the world at a time, because the human Avatar is connected to a spiritual being (named Raava – the spiritual manifestation of all that is good), that is set in a cycle of reincarnation. Therefore, when an Avatar dies, the spirit of Raava is reincarnated into the next Avatar. Due to this cycle of reincarnation the new Avatar can spiritually connect with their past Avatar lives. Old Avatars are often spiritual guides for the new Avatar. The newest Avatar is born not knowing they are the Avatar, typically they learn once they are sixteen years old. The Avatar in this world is meant to bring balance to all of the elemental nations and the spiritual beings (based on different mythological stories/cultures from our own world).

The cartoon I am watching chronicles the first introduction into the Avatar civilization and follows the newest avatar, Aang. Aang is a young monk air-bender who learns he is the Avatar at 12 years old, he learns this earlier than sixteen due to rising tensions within the four elemental nations, fire, earth, air, and water, and the need for the next Avatar to bring balance to the nations. Aang, out of fear, runs from his duty as Avatar and is physically frozen in the ocean for 100 years, only to return and find the world out of balance and the different elemental nations at war due to his departure. While on his journey to learn how to bend all the elements, because he only knows how to bend air, he meets many different people and possible teachers, some

joining his purpose to stop the war. Some of the people Aang meets have disabilities. First, Aang's earth bending teacher, Toph, is blind. Other than Toph, there are two identified characters with a disability within the show. One is an ally named Teo, and he is without the use of his legs. The last disabled character is an assassin named Combustion Man (named by Aang, and his friends, Sokka, Katara, and Toph), a fire-bender who sent to kill Aang. Combustion man has a prosthetic arm and leg.

This show aired from 2005-2008 and was a massive success in child animation, reached a large audience, and has had lasting significance within western animation. The show ranks highly on multiple websites, the full movie internet database (IMDb) has an audience score of 9.3/10, based off 287,000 user votes ("Avatar" 2021; "Ranking" 2021). On Rotten Tomatoes, a website that ranks shows and movies on a percentage scale, 100% being very positive and 0% being terrible, based on film and television critics reviews, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* has critics ranking of 97%. When *Avatar: The Last Airbender* began airing it was the highest rated animated show within its demographic (children and teens, ages 8-14), averaging 3.1 million viewers, and its series finale pulled in its highest ratings with 5.6 million viewers (Clark 2018). This show has had a lasting effect, it is on Netflix and still gaining fans, there was a sequel that aired from 2012-2014, a live action movie released in 2010, an in-production live action Netflix show, and announced in early 2021 the creators received a studio within Nickelodeon called Avatar Studios to continue expanding the world (Sandler 2020).

### *Data Collection*

To answer my research question, I performed a content analysis of the cartoon *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. I watched the cartoon in order. I recorded the season number and the episode number. I assigned each character with a disability in the show a number, Toph – 0, Teo

– 1, and Combustion Man – 2. These characters are all depicted with physical disabilities and have their disability status revealed through conversations in the show, or through the use of assistance devices, i.e., a wheelchair and prosthetic limbs, and through comments made by the characters with disabilities and those around them.

I count each use of each disability stereotype. While coding the episodes I continually counted the number of stereotype usages for each disabled character. I broke down each episode by each character with a disability and counted the times their depiction was stereotypical to ensure that each character was assessed individually and not as a group. By counting and specifying the use of each disability stereotype, I account for stereotype overlap. Additionally, I kept a count of how many times the disabled character appears within each episode. During coding, there was an assessment of each situation with a character with a disability as per how the stereotype has been understood from the literature, and the appropriate stereotype was chosen to describe the depiction of the character. In instances where the characters with disabilities were in the background of a scene or not portrayed stereotypically, these were coded as no stereotype used. While I also paid attention to the possibility of stereotype portrayals that differed from the scholarship on adult audiences, I did not find any additional stereotypes not depicted in media created for adult audiences.

My units for this study are character sightings per season episode. When coding, I enter the season and episode number. If there are no characters with a disability in that episode, I do not enter any other data (i.e., have missing data). If one of the three characters with a disability from the series enters a scene, I begin analyzing the scene for the stereotypical depictions found in prior research. If that character leaves a scene and returns, I code that as a separate sighting of



the character and analyze it for stereotypical depictions. I did not record demographic characteristics of the characters with disabilities.

For each sighting of a characters with a disability, I count any instance when one or more of the 4 stereotypes found in prior literature is used. So, for example, the first time we see any character who is disabled in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, is season 1, episode 17. We see Teo 16 times in that episode. Of those 16 times, Teo, who is not an elemental-bender, acted in a manner that aligned with the helpless/vulnerable stereotype one time. In this sighting, Teo and his father are explaining to Aang and friends how difficult life was before Teo's father created his wheelchair. The other 15 times we saw Teo, his behavior did not align with any other stereotype. For example, Teo and the other characters, such as Aang, his friends, and Teo's father were seen discussing the changes made to the air-temple they were currently residing in, and Teo is seen using gliding technology created for air-bending along with Aang and others at the air-temple.

To further explain my units, I explain more of the data structure here. If more than one characters with a disability is in an episode, I create an additional row for that season/episode. For example, in season 3, episode 42, both Toph and Combustion Man are in the episode (Toph is the episode 12 times and Combustion Man is in it 1 time). Interestingly, the characters with disabilities (Teo, Toph, and Combustion Man) are only in episodes together 8 times out of the total 61 episodes I watched (13 percent) and this does not happen until season 3 or episode 42 out of 61. Of those 8 episodes where there are more than 1 characters with a disability, all 3 characters with a disability are only in the same episode one time (season 3, episode 52). The remaining 7 times, Toph is always in the episode with another disabled character (Teo 3 times and Combustion man 4 times).

Once we get to season 2, episode number 27, there is at least one character with a disability in every episode (Toph). Table 1 in Appendix A shows how many times we see each of the characters with a disability over the course of 3 seasons. We see Toph the most (36 times) and Teo and Combustion Man the same amount, only 5 times.

There were 24 episodes out of the total 61 episodes, or 39 percent, in which there are no characters who are disabled in the episode (see system missing value). The total value of 70 is showing the total character/season/episode units. There are 61 episodes in the 3 seasons. There is an additional row for each of the 7 episodes with two characters ( $61+7=68$ ) and two more additional rows for the 1 episode with all three characters in it ( $68+2=70$ ).

### *Analysis*

The data collected will help answer the overarching question regarding the use of the four stereotypes found in media created for adult audiences. In doing so I address five specific questions about the use of these stereotypes:

1. How many stereotypes depicted of individuals with disabilities are there for all analyzed characters across all seasons?
2. Taking into account how often we see a character, how often are they portrayed in a stereotypical way?
3. Are there certain stereotypes that are more dominant?
4. Are there any (and how often) are multiple stereotypes applied to one character?
5. Do certain stereotypes increase or decrease over the course of the series?

Below I will explain the calculations I performed to answer the questions. To answer the first question posed above, I created a new variable that is the sum of the count of all stereotypes used. Then I used descriptive statistics and frequency distributions, such as means or medians and modes to measure the frequency of each disability stereotype throughout all seasons. To answer the second question above, I created a new variable that is the sum of the total number of

stereotypes used throughout the show. Then I calculated the percent for each stereotype used for each character, by taking the sum of each stereotype divided by the number of times we see the character in an episode. For the third question, I used the frequencies calculated and an ANOVA comparing the total stereotypes used to the total number of each individual stereotype to assess which stereotypes are used significantly and if there is a dominant stereotype used throughout the series. To answer the fourth question, I computed a new variable that is the count of the times a character exhibits multiple stereotypes. I will describe these findings with frequency distributions and descriptive statistics such as means or medians and modes. For my fifth question I used the variable of the total uses of stereotypes and assess the use of stereotypes across all seasons for each character. I used frequency distributions and performed an ANVOA to evaluate if there is significantly more or less stereotype usage throughout the seasons of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. This was done by comparing the total use of stereotypes by season for each stereotype.

## Chapter 4 - Results

To reiterate, my research question is, are the stereotypes identified in shows and films for adults also found in animated cartoons whose target audience is children and teens? Furthermore, to answer this question as completely as possible, the guiding questions for this results section are:

1. How many stereotypes depicted of individuals with disabilities are there for all analyzed characters across all seasons?
2. Taking into account how often we see a character, how often are they portrayed in a stereotypical way?
3. Are there certain stereotypes that are more dominant?
4. Are there any (and how often) are multiple stereotypes applied to one character?
5. Do certain stereotypes increase or decrease over the course of the series?

*How many stereotypes depicted of individuals with disabilities are there for all analyzed characters across all seasons.*

Table 2 through 4, also in Appendix A, show the frequencies for each stereotype used throughout *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. I only show the frequencies for the helpless/vulnerable and the SuperCrip stereotypes since neither the villain stereotype nor the “imagery of madness” stereotype were used in the depiction of any character with a disability in any episode. The total number of times a character behaved in manner aligning with the stereotypes found in prior research ranged from 0 times to as many as 19 times per episode. Table 2 in Appendix A answers the question about how many stereotypes are used to depict characters who are disabled in an episode. Within twenty-six percent of the episodes, a character did not behave in a manner that aligned with *any* stereotypes found in prior research, but that means within a majority of episodes, seventy-four percent of episodes, in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* the characters with disabilities are depicted in a way aligning with at least one disability stereotype. However, the

total number of stereotypical depictions was not larger than non-stereotypical depictions. In analysis not shown, the total number of stereotypes used to depict characters with disabilities was 212, or approximately 34% of the time. The total number of non-stereotypes used was 416, or approximately 66% of the time, so while stereotypes were used within every episode containing a character with a disability, a majority of their appearances were not stereotypical. Fifteen percent of the time, a disabled character displays stereotypical behavior in an episode 5 times, followed by 13% of the time displaying 3 stereotypical behaviors in an episode. Fifteen percent of the time, characters with a disability behaved in stereotypical ways in the double digits in one, 30-minute episode. The median number of stereotypes a character depicts in an episode is 3.50. Therefore, we know that throughout a majority of the episodes of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* the characters with disabilities are depicted stereotypically.

The helpless/vulnerable stereotype was utilized in the depiction of the characters with disabilities very infrequently – this stereotype was only shown one or more times in about 17% of the episodes with a character who is disabled. This stereotype was used once within 4 episodes, once to depict Teo as helpless without his wheelchair, and within three episodes depicting Toph as weak due to her blindness or weak due to her lack of earthbender. It was utilized twice within one episode and three times within another episode in the depiction of Toph, again being used to show people’s assumptions of Toph’s “weakness” due to her lack of sight. In two episodes, it was utilized five times in the depiction of a character with a disability, again depicting Toph. Within the show, Toph is a part of the main cast and is Aang’s Earthbending teacher and has been blind since birth, however, she “overcomes” her blindness with her Earthbending ability. Toph uses her ability to earthbend to “see” where everyone is through the vibrations within the ground. In scenes, she uses this ability to walk around cities

similar to a person with vision, using it to find underground tunnels/pathways, and in fight scenes to find and attack enemies. Throughout these scenes, specifically when she is with her parents, she acts helpless because her parents assume her helplessness due to her blindness. When Toph makes formal introductions to Aang and his friends they are in her family home, her parents state her weakness and that she is a novice earthbender who does not know much or learn more because she is blind.

The SuperCrip stereotype was utilized in approximately 72 percent of the episodes with a character with a disability in them. The stereotype was used five times in approximately 15% of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* episodes, as shown in Table 4 in Appendix A, followed by 3 times per episode. In approximately 10% of the episodes the SuperCrip stereotype was applied in the depiction of a character with a disability 10 or more times. In analysis not shown, we find the median usage of the SuperCrip stereotype is per episode 3.50, the median was chosen to understand the variation in the SuperCrip usage due to outliers within the data. Interestingly, the SuperCrip stereotype was only ever utilized in the depiction of Toph, as she uses her ability to earthbend to “overcome” her blindness.

*Taking into account how often we see a character, how often are they portrayed in a stereotypical way?*

Toph is the character with a disability in the most episodes. She is in 36 episodes of the 37 episodes with a character with a disability. Toph’s appearances throughout the show range from 3-42, with a majority being between 11-18 appearances per episode, as shown in table 5 in Appendix A. Toph’s stereotypical depictions range from 0-19 throughout *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. The majority of her appearances are not stereotypical. While a stereotype was used in to depict her in nearly every episode she appeared, only 211 out of 573 of her total appearances, or 36.82% of her appearances are stereotypical, with a majority of these being the SuperCrip

stereotype, with few being the Helpless/Vulnerable stereotype. Her introduction as a character, not formally to Aang and friends, was in an underground fight arena under the pseudo-name The Blind Bandit, as the stereotypical SuperCrip – she was incredibly strong, beat many muscled men and used Earthbending to “overcome” her blindness to fight. Aang and friends were in disbelief that a young blind girl could be this powerful, fitting the SuperCrip stereotype of an individual “overcoming” their disability and amazing able-bodied individuals.

Throughout all of her appearances within episodes, as shown in table 6 in Appendix A, 91.7% of these episodes use at least one stereotype to depict Toph, though, the total number of stereotypical depictions is not larger than the total number of her being portrayed non-stereotypically, in tables not shown, 211 stereotypical depictions, compared to 362 non-stereotypical depictions. There are three episodes where the depiction of Toph is not stereotypical. The portrayal of Toph was with a stereotype 5 times within 7 episodes, or approximately 20% of the time, with her depiction being stereotypical 3 times within 6 episodes or approximately 17% of the time. Interestingly, the range that Toph is portrayed non-stereotypically is 1-24 times per episode, shown in table 7. She is depicted non stereotypically 8 times in 5 episodes or approximately 14% of the time within episodes.

Teo and Combustion Man both appear within 5 episodes of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Teo appears 5 times within three episodes or 60% of his total appearances, shown in table 8 in Appendix A. Tables 9-10, also in Appendix A display Teo’s stereotypical and non-stereotypical depictions. Throughout his appearances in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, Teo is only depicted stereotypically once within his five episodes, as previously explained. Teo is depicted non-stereotypically in a majority of his appearances, or 80% of the time, and appears 5 times within 3 of his 5 episodes, 60% of his episodes. Teo is a minor character who the audience only knows

little about this character's background and goals. After his stereotypical depictions, which was one of the first interactions with Aang and his friends, the depiction of Teo is as a carefree teenager who is helping Aang and his friends when needed. On the other hand, Combustion Man is never depicted stereotypically. The character himself is a side villain, introduced in the third season as an assassin sent to kill Aang and his group. However, despite him being a villain within the show, he does not fit the villain stereotype. His path to villainy, or his motivation to be a villain is in no way connected to his disability, because the only aspect of the character's motivation that is known is him being hired as an assassin, nothing more. He has two prosthetics, his left arm and leg, but we as the audience do not know how or why he lost his limbs and how he got his prosthetics. Therefore, we cannot assume that his path to villainy is through his disability, which is why the coding of his appearances is not as the villain stereotype. Tables 11 through 13 in Appendix A show Combustion Man's appearances throughout his five episodes in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, he appears 5 times within two episodes, or 40%, and appears once, four times, and six times in his other episodes.

*Are there certain stereotypes that are more dominant?*

The percentage use of stereotypes, SuperCrip 71.7% compared to Helpless/vulnerable 28.3%, indicates that the Supercrip is the dominant stereotype throughout the series, and the ANOVA test supports that conclusion as well. As previously established, the SuperCrip stereotype was used approximately 72% of the time, while the Helpless/Vulnerable stereotype was used approximately 28% of the time. As shown in table 14 in Appendix A, an ANOVA comparing the total use of stereotypes by the use of each individual stereotypes found that the SuperCrip stereotype was used significantly throughout the series,  $f(14) = 56.623$ ,  $p = <.001$ , and the helpless/vulnerable stereotype was also used significantly,  $f(14) = 2.045$ ,  $p = .044$ . While both are statistically significant in their use throughout the series, (which makes sense when two



of the stereotypes were not used) the SuperCrip stereotype stands out as more dominant than the helpless/vulnerable stereotype. In both the significance output,  $<.001$  compared to  $.044$ , and the f-value  $56.623$  compared to  $2.045$ , the SuperCrip stereotype is the dominant stereotype throughout *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, given its higher significance value and larger f-value total.

*Are there any (and how often) are multiple stereotypes applied to one character?*

Throughout the show, Toph is the only character to portray multiple stereotypes within the same episode, but the stereotypes never occur simultaneously. As shown in tables 5-7 in Appendix A, which show Toph's total appearances, her total stereotypical and total non-stereotypical appearances, in nearly of episodes with her appearances in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*,  $N = 36$ , Toph is portrayed, at least once, with the SuperCrip Stereotype. Within 7 episodes, specifically, episodes 26, 30, 31, 32, 34, 47, and 52, Toph is depicted with both the SuperCrip stereotype and the helpless/vulnerable stereotype. These instances of stereotype overlap are not central to the character Toph herself, for example, Toph's parents assume her helplessness and when on family property have Toph followed around by guards because she "cannot" do anything on her own. This in contrast to how Toph presents herself to Aang as friends, which is as a strong, blind earthbender. Tables 15 and 16 in Appendix A break down each stereotype used in the depiction of Toph, which is more often with the SuperCrip stereotype (as previously established). She was depicted with the helpless/vulnerable stereotype once within three episodes, five times within two episodes, twice within one episode and three times within one episode.

*Do certain stereotypes increase or decrease over the course of the series?*

After running frequencies and descriptive statistics assessing stereotype usage throughout the three seasons of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, from table 17 in Appendix A, the second season

used, on average the most stereotypes, with a mean of 5.80 stereotypes used throughout the second season with a standard deviation of  $SD = 3.668$ . While the total number of stereotypes used within season two was 87, compared to season three with a total of 106 SuperCrip stereotypes used. Interesting, the mean usage of the SuperCrip stereotype was 3.53 with a standard deviation of  $SD = 4.361$  of Supercrip stereotypes per episode in season 3, as indicated in table 18 in Appendix A. Therefore, season two had a higher average use of the SuperCrip stereotype, there was less variation between the episodes, when compared to season three, but season three had a higher amount of variation between episodes, likely due to a negative skew in season three. To explain this, season three is the only season with multiple characters with disabilities on screen,  $N = 30$ , and in these instances, the depiction of Teo and Combustion Man are not stereotypical, meaning more zeros within the data, which skewed the data negatively. With the removal of these negative outliers from the data, the mean and median shifted to more closely resemble season two, as shown in table 19 in Appendix A, the mean became 5.05 and median 5.00 and a standard deviation still higher than season two,  $SD = 4.421$ . Overall, the usage of the SuperCrip stereotype did increase throughout *Avatar: The Last Airbender*.

On the other hand, displayed in tables 20-22 in Appendix A, the Helpless/Vulnerable stereotype was used only once in season 1, used 10 times in season two and 8 times in season three. Within 5 episodes in season two, this application of this stereotype had a mean of .67 times per episode, and in two episodes in season three had a mean usage of .27 per episode. Therefore, indicating the use of the helpless/vulnerable stereotype increases between season one and season two – likely due to the introduction of a main character with a disability – but decreases from season two to season three.

After running an ANOVA to test the average differences in the stereotypes uses throughout the seasons, presented in tables 23-25 in Appendix A, I found that the uses of stereotypes within the first season was not significantly different than the other seasons,  $f(44) = .623, p = .434$ . The average usage of stereotypes in season two was not significant, but was very close to being significantly different than the other seasons  $f(44) = 3.855, p = .056$ , and the total uses of stereotypes in season three was also not significantly different than the other seasons  $f(44) = 2.768, p = .103$ . Despite these tests showing non-significance differences throughout the seasons, there is an interesting spike in the mean usage of the stereotypes used in season two compared to seasons one and three.

## Chapter 5 - Discussion

Within this discussion section I will highlight the main take-aways from the analysis of the usage of the disability stereotypes within *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and assess their overall presence within this children's show. I connect each character with a disability's presence within the show to the stereotypes used, and not used, to depict them, and discuss how their presence within the show could affect audience interpretation of their ability. I do this by breaking down each character's depiction and then break down *Avatar: The Last Airbender's* use of disability stereotypes overall. I will conclude this section by addressing the implications of this research before continuing with my conclusion.

### *Combustion Man*

Throughout his 21 appearances in five episodes of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, the portrayal of Combustion Man, again named by the Aang and friends, is never stereotypical. Combustion Man's disability is not the focus of his character within the show, it is his role in attacking Aang and the group that defines him. Overall, the lack of connection between Combustion Man's disability and his villainy, meaning his depiction is not connected to a previously identified stereotype, is note-worthy. I expected, before watching *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, for the stereotypes to appear, and was surprised the villain stereotype was not employed due to its common usage in media created for adult audiences (Elliot and Byrd 1984/88; Irwin and Moeller 2012; Safran 1998; Mallett 2009). It will be necessary for further research to assess whether other characters with disabilities in children's media are portrayed in a similar manner and explore the impact of depictions similar to Combustion man's to assess whether children associate disability status and disability stereotypes with this character, given that his disability is, seemingly, not central to his character and motivation.

### *Teo*

Teo is the only character with a disability in season one and makes 34 appearances throughout his five episodes within *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Teo himself uses a wheelchair after an accident as a child. The only time his portrayal is stereotypical is in recalling this memory with his father, before he had his wheelchair, which is used as a way to show Teo's freedom, despite not having the use of his legs. It is also note-worthy that his portrayal is only stereotypical once throughout his appearances; his portrayal is only helpless/vulnerable when he and his father are recalling the time before the creation of his wheelchair. Similarly to Combustion Man, Teo's depiction as non-stereotypical should be a focus for future researchers to assess the impact this depiction has on younger audience. From the literature review, this depiction could fall in line with how parents of children with disabilities want the depiction of their children's disabilities to be – as natural variation in ability that is able to drift into the background (Thomas 2021).

### *Toph*

Toph is the character with a disability who is in the show most often. As established a majority of her appearances are non-stereotypical; however, it is unknown what attributes of this character draw audiences to her – meaning despite a majority of her appearances being non-stereotypical, audiences may only remember her as the blind Earthbending teacher of Aang.

When Toph is depicted as helpless, often it is others assuming her helplessness, such as her parents or other adults interacting with her. This is striking given the historic use of the helpless/vulnerable stereotype, which was to depict individuals with disabilities as less than and unable to complete basic task due to disability (Thomas 2021; Safran 1998; Ellcessor and Kirkpartrick 2019; Groggin 2009; Callus 2019; Barnes 1992; Mallett 2009). While this

stereotype was used within the show, it was never the character directly that was weak, it was others assuming this about Toph (and Teo), which is an interesting reflection of the stereotype in comparison to its established use in other films and television. Obviously, more often when the portrayal of Toph is stereotypical it is with the SuperCrip stereotype. As mentioned, a majority of Toph's appearances, within *Avatar: The Last Airbender* are not stereotypical, 63.18%. She is shown traveling through life as a blunt, powerful blind girl. Even having episodes dedicated to her grappling with what it means to be blind in a world where people can bend elements.

The portrayal of Toph is unique in multiple ways, at times it is as a SuperCrip, at time Helpless/Vulnerable, but most importantly as a young girl, of course, in a world where people can bend the elements. While the depiction of Toph was stereotypical, it is important to recognize that most of the time she was not, though stating the true impact of that cannot be done here. Similar to Teo, Toph's disability status could be seen as a background character trait, one that fades to highlight other important aspects of the character/characters journey throughout the show (Thomas 2021). The depiction of Toph is one researchers should evaluate further. Given the growing reach of the *Avatar: The Last Airbender* universe the exploration of the impact of Toph on young audiences is one that needs to be done. Because the question now becomes, how has the depiction of Toph (and other characters like her) impacted young audiences?

interpretations of persons with disabilities?

#### *Disability Stereotypes in Avatar: The Last Airbender*

Within the 37 episodes with a character with a disability in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* every episode with these characters uses a disability stereotype. However, the only stereotypes used throughout the series are the SuperCrip and the Helpless/Vulnerable stereotypes. Therefore, while two are, not all of the disability stereotypes identified from film and television created for

adult audiences are present within this children's show. This could be due to the nature of the show itself, a fantasy world where a portion of the population has a superhuman ability, but it is interesting that the Villain and the Imagery of Madness never make an appearance within the show. As mentioned, since we do not know the motivations of Combustion man, his label within the show cannot be as the villain stereotype. Meaning children watching this show will only ever see persons with disabilities as helpless/vulnerable and as a SuperCrip. However, more often than not, children viewing this show will see characters with disabilities as not traditionally stereotypical. The total number of the SuperCrip and Helpless/Vulnerable stereotypes used was 212, compared to 416, or the total number of times the portrayal of these characters with disabilities were with no stereotype.

In assessing the five questions posed to aid in answering my research question, there are multiple take-aways I want focus on for discussion. First, as per the third question from the results section, the use of the SuperCrip stereotype was dominant throughout the series, mostly due to the nature of Toph's blindness and Earthbending ability, being used 72% of the time, whereas the Helpless/Vulnerable stereotype was used 28% of the time. It is clear that the SuperCrip stereotype was the dominant stereotype throughout the series, which is further supported with the ANOVA test. Therefore, a majority of the exposure to the disability stereotypes for children watching *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, will be to the SuperCrip and slightly less as the helpless/vulnerable stereotype and never to the villain and imagery of madness stereotypes.

The final question, assessing if the stereotypes increase or decrease throughout the series, had interesting results. The descriptive statistics show that while season two had the highest mean usage of the SuperCrip stereotype, season three had a larger total sum of usage, 106 in

season three compared to 87 in season two. In evaluating the ANOVA tests assessing the mean differences in stereotype usage through the three seasons, none of the differences in the stereotype uses are statistically significant. The increase from season one to season two is largely due to the introduction of a main character with a disability. Additionally, the high mean usage of stereotypes in season two combined with a lower standard deviation indicates that the use of stereotypes was more consistently throughout season two, whereas season three had many lower outliers which resulted in a higher standard deviation but a lower mean. However, there was a consistent increase in the use of the SuperCrip stereotype throughout the series, indicating that creators of children's media, regardless of intention, display disability stereotypes to young audiences.

Therefore, the use of the stereotypes increases with the introduction of characters with disabilities and consistently rises throughout the series itself. However, while there was an expectation to see usage of the disability stereotypes, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* does not rely on the stereotypes as a defining characteristic of Toph, Teo, or Combustion Man, their disability is a part of who they are, but their disability is not the only aspect of the character important to this story, which is an interesting deviation from prior literature (Safran 1998; Irwin and Moeller 2012; Ellis 2015; Groggin 2009). While Toph's introduction is as a SuperCrip, the development of her character goes far beyond the SuperCrip stereotype or the Helpless/Vulnerable stereotype. In comparison to the portrayal of other SuperCrip's, such as Matthew Murdock, Toph's character uses Earthbending like someone would use a guide dog, which is why I agree with Schalk (2016) that the supercrip stereotype needs to be reassessed, reimagined, and renamed for the creation of new characters with disabilities. I would further suggest that all of the disability stereotypes need reassessing, given the increases in persons with disabilities within mass media and the lack of all



disability stereotypes within this show (Heldman et al. 2020; Cheyne 2012; Reedy et al. 2008; Herrera 2007; Caswell et al. 2017).

The representations of persons with disabilities in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, is important and a step in the right direction, but the depiction of two out of three of the characters with disabilities is still stereotypical. There were multiple findings in this content analysis consistent with findings from prior literature, such as the presence of two out of the four disability stereotypes identified from film and television created for adult audiences, the depiction of these characters with disabilities is still negative (in the sense that their portrayals are stereotypical), and while there are characters with disabilities within the show, in comparison to all of the able-bodied characters there is still little representation of persons with disabilities (Safran 1998; Irwin and Moeller 2012; Ellis 2015; Groggin 2009; Stainback and Tomaskovic-Devey 2009; Oppenheimer 2016; Bond 2013; Fink 2013).

Despite the portrayal of two out of the three characters with disabilities in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* being stereotypical, there are positive deviations within the show from the negative depictions outlined in the literature review (e.g., being exploited, failing their goals, etc.). Some of these deviations include the depiction of characters with disabilities as neutral (non-stereotypical); these characters are often shown exploring the complexities of teenage friendships and relationships, grappling with what it means to be disabled, and respecting the ability status of everyone around them. These kinds of depictions are more in line with how parents of children with disabilities (not children with disabilities themselves) wished depictions of their children's disability status were within mass media (Thomas 2021). It is important to note that the children within the show – not the adults – are respectful of Toph and Teo difference in ability and do not belittle them. The other children do not “other” Toph or Teo for

their ability status throughout the show, in fact, there are conversations throughout the show where these characters grapple with their ability status and being seen as less than by their adult counterparts.

In the last section of this discussion, I will outline the implications of this research. Discussion what conclusions can be drawn from the data I have collected and how this research connects to the larger picture of disability representation within mass media.

### *Implications*

Given that the majority of appearances of the characters with disabilities in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* are non-stereotypical this could indicate a shift within children's media creation to create more well-written characters with disabilities. The purpose of this research is to create a foundation for assessing children's media for disability stereotypes, and in assessing children's media for the disability stereotypes, only found two of the four outlined in the literature review (Safran 1998; Irwin and Moeller 2012; Ellis 2015; Groggin 2009). Despite all episodes with a character with a disability using a disability stereotype, a majority of the time the characters appearances on screen are not stereotypical, or do not fit the current definitions of disability stereotypes (Elliot and Byrd 1982/84/88; Safran 1998; Irwin and Moeller 2012; Ellis 2015; Groggin 2009; Schalk 2016). This indicates a need for further content analyses of children's media to create a more well-rounded picture of disability stereotypes within children's media, and a need to study the impact these depictions have on their target audiences (children), those who are still in that age group and those who have aged out.

Furthermore, studies need to be conducted to assess how children with disabilities interpret the usage of these stereotypes. The focus of much of the research on depictions of persons with disabilities in media has been on the impact of these stereotypes on able-bodied

individuals (Haller et al. 2006; Siperstein et al. 2007; Tan, Dong, Nelson et al. 1997; Wilson and Scior 2015; Mallett 2009). Studies have been conducted evaluating the impact of the disability stereotypes on able-bodied children's willingness to engage with children with disabilities, but research has not been conducted on how children with disabilities view these stereotypes about themselves (Siperstein et al. 2007; Tan, Dong, Nelson, et al. 1997). Therefore, research needs to include children with disabilities to evaluate how they interpret these stereotypes, since we do not know if children with disabilities interpret all of the stereotypes as negative.

The stereotypes themselves, specifically their presence within this children's cartoon, indicate the overarching usage of the stereotypes throughout media with different target audiences (adult verse children). While the presence of the disability stereotypes within television and film created for adult audiences been established, their usage within children's media is only now being discovered (Bond 2013; Safran 1998; Irwin and Moeller 2012; Ellis 2015; Groggin 2009; Thomas 2021). As mentioned, disability and media scholars have recognized the existence of characters with disabilities within children's media, specifically television and movies, but an analysis of their depiction was missing from the literature (Bond 2013). After performing this content analysis, I found that these characters are still subjected to disability stereotypes. The depictions of the characters with disabilities in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* do fall in line with previous findings that characters with disabilities, specially SuperCrip depictions of these characters are background/support characters to the main protagonist (Irwin and Moeller 2012; Elliot and Byrd 1982; Kallman 2017; Fink 2013).

Disability and media scholarship has established that the portrayals of characters with disabilities are often negative and has less depth than their able-bodied counterparts (Steele et al. 2005; Müller et al. 2012; Thomas 2021; Callus 2019; Mallett 2009; Oppenheimer; Safran 1998;

Elliot and Byrd 1988/84/82). However, there is a stark difference between the level of complexity of the characters with disabilities in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and previously analyzed media, such as the depiction of Barbara Gordan as background support in DC comics and Toph, who, while still depicted stereotypically, grapples with the complexities of her disability and being a young blind girl moving through a world not designed for her (Irwin and Moeller 2012; Elliot and Byrd 1982; Kallman 2017; Fink 2013). This increase in character complexity could be an anomaly due to the creative team creating the show (this I cannot be certain on though), or this could indicate a change in how characters with disabilities are being created. Which further supports the conclusion that this research can be a foundation for future research on the use of, and reimagining of, disability stereotypes within children's media.

## Chapter 6 - Conclusion

The portrayal of all of the characters with disabilities in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* are not more than their disability, their disability is a part of who they are but not their entire story, which makes them compelling characters. Throughout the series, Toph jokes about her inability to see – “you’ve seen nothing once, you’ve seen it a thousand times” – which, as a person with a disability myself, was uplifting to see. From the literature, we know that the portrayal of persons with disabilities is often negative and makes disability sad or evil or unordinary, so having a character with a disability poke fun at, not themselves being disabled, but others for insinuating their lives are less than is refreshing (Müller et al. 2012; Thomas 2021; Callus 2019; Mallett 2009; Kallman 2017; Browne Graves 1999; Siperstein et al. 2007). *Avatar: The Last Airbender*’s inclusion of and depiction of persons with disabilities was both in line with previous disability and media findings and out of line with these previous findings. Indicating the need to study more media similar to *Avatar: The Last Airbender*.

To reiterate my research question, do the disability stereotypes from film and television created for adult audiences also exist in media created for child audiences, the answer to this question is yes, the stereotypes do appear within *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. However, only two out of the four stereotypes are present within this children’s cartoon. We now know that this children’s cartoons used the disability stereotypes in their depictions of persons with disabilities, but within *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, the characters with disabilities are more often depicted with no-stereotype, which is a step in the right direction for media. Children watching *Avatar: The Last Airbender* are seeing these characters with disabilities non-stereotypically a majority of the time. Which aids in limiting the harm disability stereotypes do to all communities, but specifically to children (e.g. believing stereotypes as truth, believing persons with disabilities are

scarce within society, etc.) though the impact and interpretation of the stereotypes on children with disabilities still needs to be assessed (Browne Graves 1999; Wahl 2003; Villani 2001; Gerbner 1995; Markov and Yoon 2021; Wahl 2003; Parson et al. 2017).

Overall, this study aided in expanding the disability and media literature by examining the depictions of persons with disabilities in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Scholars knew that persons with disabilities were present within children's television, but my content analysis has shown that these characters with disabilities are also depicted stereotypically – just like characters from film and television created for adult audiences (Bond 2013). Further, my expectations for the depictions of persons with disabilities were mostly correct, characters with disabilities were subjected to some of the stereotypes but these characters were more often depicted neutrally (meaning not negative) or with disability presented as a natural variation in humanity. In the remainder of this conclusion, I will highlight the limitations within this research below, and provide advice for future research on this topic to further our understanding of the depiction of persons with disabilities in children's media.

### *Limitations*

There were limitations in this research that future disability and media studies should account for. The first being only assessing one child's show for the disability stereotypes. While evaluating *Avatar: The Last Airbender* has illuminated both the high use of the SuperCrip stereotype and the high use of no stereotype use in the portrayal of persons with disabilities in one children's cartoon, any conclusions can only be drawn in regard to the show itself, not children's media in general. Therefore, it would be beneficial to evaluate more children's media, such as other cartoons, movies, and live-action television.

Although outside the scope of this project, another limitation of this research was the lack of intersectional analysis of socio-demographic information about in the characters with disabilities evaluations. Specifically, including age, gender, race, and class into the analysis of children's cartoons. Including a character's age, race, gender, and ability status would increase understanding of the common depictions of these overlapping identities. Previous research based on television and movies for adult audiences found that older characters are often more likely to be depicted as having disabilities, so conducting this research without an intersectional lens lessens the generalizability (Gerbner 1995; Markov and Yoon 2021; Wahl 2003; Parson et al. 2017). Though this does prompt future research, which I will discuss how future research can integrate more children's media and focus with a more intersectional lens.

#### *Future Research*

As mentioned, a limitation within this research is being nongeneralizable due to only evaluating *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and not recording demographic characteristics. Therefore, the inclusion of *Avatar: The Last Airbender's* sequel show *The Legend of Korra* (which also has characters with disabilities) can be incorporated into the analysis of disability stereotypes in children's media. *The Legend of Korra* aired more recently, 2012-2014, and it would benefit the understanding of the presence of the disability stereotypes to include *Avatar: The Last Airbender's* sequel show. Similarly, other popular children's cartoons, such as *Adventure Time with Finn and Jake* – whose main character Finn becomes disabled, *She-Ra and the Princess of Power*, which has multiple characters with physical and intellectual disabilities, and *Raising Dion*, whose main character's best friend is in wheelchair.

Additionally, including an intersectional component to future disability and media research on the depiction of persons with disabilities in children's media will be beneficial to the

scholarship as a whole. Many of the shows listed above include characters of different races, ages, genders, and ability statuses. Therefore, the inclusion of a more in-depth description of characters with disabilities race, gender, and age will be valuable in understanding the stereotypes attributed to these characters. This will be important to the literature in multiple ways. First, including these identities will allow for greater generalizability. Second, using an intersectional lens could illuminate stereotypes for persons with disabilities not yet considered because of researcher bias (such as researchers being able-bodied themselves). Third, this will allow for a reevaluate of the disability stereotypes – which is needed for disability and media scholarship. In this reevaluation, character’s age, gender, and race need to be considered when deciding which/if stereotypes apply to certain characters. There may be researcher biases we have not yet considered in the formation of these stereotypes and working with an intersectional framework could illuminate these preconceptions.

In conclusion, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* is one of the few children’s shows from the mid-2000s to include multiple characters with disabilities and should be included when considering the activism seen today to increase the number of persons with disabilities within mass media. The presence of disability stereotypes in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* is not shocking, but the portrayal of these characters with disabilities is non-stereotypical a majority of the time. The depictions of these characters with disabilities fell into both of the categories outlined in my introduction – they were still stereotypical (in some ways), but there were also depicted as a neutral and an average variation in human ability status. As per my research question – are the stereotypes identified in shows and films for adults also found in animated cartoons whose target audience is children and teens – the answer is within *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, yes, the disability stereotypes identified from television and film created for adult



audiences are present within children's media. However, not all stereotypes make an appearance within the show, most notably the Villain stereotype, the use of said stereotype is well established within disability and media literature in understanding the portrayal of persons with disabilities (Safran 1998; Irwin and Moeller 2012; Ellis 2015; Groggin 2009). The conclusions which can be drawn from this research are foundational for future research on disability representation within children's media. The disability stereotypes identified from television and film created for adult audiences are present within children's media, but there are notable outliers within this one show; Combustion Man is a villain but not a villain stereotype, so what category should he fit into, if any? Knowing there are characters within *Avatar: The Last Airbender* that do not fit the outlined stereotypes supports a need for a reevaluation of the applicability of the disability stereotypes. Toph, Teo, and Combustion Man are characters with disabilities, but are more than a (non-stereotypical) villain, definitely not helpless, and more than a SuperCrip.

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## Appendix A

**Table 1**

		<b>DisCharacterID</b>			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Toph	36	51.4	78.3	78.3
	Teo	5	7.1	10.9	89.1
	Combustion Man	5	7.1	10.9	100.0
	Total	46	65.7	100.0	
Missing	System	24	34.3		
Total		70	100.0		

**Table 2**

		<b>Total Number of stereotypes used</b>				
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent	
Valid	0	12	26.1	26.1	26.1	
	1	3	6.5	6.5	32.6	
	2	2	4.3	4.3	37.0	
	3	6	13.0	13.0	50.0	
	4	1	2.2	2.2	52.2	
	5	7	15.2	15.2	67.4	
	6	3	6.5	6.5	73.9	
	7	2	4.3	4.3	78.3	
	8	2	4.3	4.3	82.6	
	9	1	2.2	2.2	84.8	
	10	2	4.3	4.3	89.1	
	11	1	2.2	2.2	91.3	
	12	2	4.3	4.3	95.7	
	17	1	2.2	2.2	97.8	
	19	1	2.2	2.2	100.0	
	Total		46	100.0	100.0	

**Table 3**

### Helpless/Vulnerable

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	0	38	82.6	82.6	82.6
	1	4	8.7	8.7	91.3
	2	1	2.2	2.2	93.5
	3	1	2.2	2.2	95.7
	5	2	4.3	4.3	100.0
	Total	46	100.0	100.0	

**Table 4**

### SuperCrip

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	0	13	28.3	28.3	28.3
	1	2	4.3	4.3	32.6
	2	3	6.5	6.5	39.1
	3	5	10.9	10.9	50.0
	4	3	6.5	6.5	56.5
	5	7	15.2	15.2	71.7
	6	3	6.5	6.5	78.3
	7	2	4.3	4.3	82.6
	8	2	4.3	4.3	87.0
	9	1	2.2	2.2	89.1
	10	1	2.2	2.2	91.3
	11	1	2.2	2.2	93.5
	12	1	2.2	2.2	95.7
	14	1	2.2	2.2	97.8
	19	1	2.2	2.2	100.0
	Total	46	100.0	100.0	

**Table 5**

### Total times Toph was in episode

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	3	2	5.6	5.6	5.6



4	2	5.6	5.6	11.1
5	1	2.8	2.8	13.9
6	2	5.6	5.6	19.4
7	1	2.8	2.8	22.2
11	3	8.3	8.3	30.6
13	3	8.3	8.3	38.9
14	2	5.6	5.6	44.4
15	3	8.3	8.3	52.8
17	2	5.6	5.6	58.3
18	3	8.3	8.3	66.7
19	2	5.6	5.6	72.2
20	2	5.6	5.6	77.8
22	2	5.6	5.6	83.3
23	2	5.6	5.6	88.9
29	1	2.8	2.8	91.7
31	1	2.8	2.8	94.4
32	1	2.8	2.8	97.2
42	1	2.8	2.8	100.0
Total	36	100.0	100.0	

**Table 6**

**Total Number of stereotypes used - Toph**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 0	3	8.3	8.3	8.3
1	2	5.6	5.6	13.9
2	2	5.6	5.6	19.4
3	6	16.7	16.7	36.1
4	1	2.8	2.8	38.9
5	7	19.4	19.4	58.3
6	3	8.3	8.3	66.7
7	2	5.6	5.6	72.2
8	2	5.6	5.6	77.8
9	1	2.8	2.8	80.6
10	2	5.6	5.6	86.1
11	1	2.8	2.8	88.9
12	2	5.6	5.6	94.4

17	1	2.8	2.8	97.2
19	1	2.8	2.8	100.0
Total	36	100.0	100.0	

**Table 7**

**NoStereotype - Toph**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	3	8.3	8.3	8.3
	2	1	2.8	2.8	11.1
	3	2	5.6	5.6	16.7
	4	2	5.6	5.6	22.2
	5	3	8.3	8.3	30.6
	6	3	8.3	8.3	38.9
	8	5	13.9	13.9	52.8
	10	2	5.6	5.6	58.3
	11	1	2.8	2.8	61.1
	12	1	2.8	2.8	63.9
	14	2	5.6	5.6	69.4
	15	2	5.6	5.6	75.0
	16	3	8.3	8.3	83.3
	17	2	5.6	5.6	88.9
	20	2	5.6	5.6	94.4
	23	1	2.8	2.8	97.2
	24	1	2.8	2.8	100.0
Total		36	100.0	100.0	

**Table 8**

**Total times Teo was in episode**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	3	1	20.0	20.0	20.0
	5	3	60.0	60.0	80.0
	16	1	20.0	20.0	100.0
Total		5	100.0	100.0	

**Table 9****Total Number of stereotypes used - Teo**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	0	4	80.0	80.0	80.0
	1	1	20.0	20.0	100.0
	Total	5	100.0	100.0	

**Table 10****NoStereotype - Teo**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	3	1	20.0	20.0	20.0
	5	3	60.0	60.0	80.0
	15	1	20.0	20.0	100.0
	Total	5	100.0	100.0	

**Table 11****Total times Combustion Man was in episode**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	1	20.0	20.0	20.0
	4	1	20.0	20.0	40.0
	5	2	40.0	40.0	80.0
	6	1	20.0	20.0	100.0
	Total	5	100.0	100.0	

**Table 12****Total Number of stereotypes used – Combustion Man**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	0	5	100.0	100.0	100.0

**Table 13****NoStereotype – Combustion Man**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
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Valid	1	1	20.0	20.0	20.0
	4	1	20.0	20.0	40.0
	5	2	40.0	40.0	80.0
	6	1	20.0	20.0	100.0
	Total	5	100.0	100.0	

**Table 14**

		ANOVA				
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Villain	Between Groups	.000	14	.000	.	.
	Within Groups	.000	31	.000		
	Total	.000	45			
SuperCrip	Between Groups	778.715	14	55.623	56.490	<.001
	Within Groups	30.524	31	.985		
	Total	809.239	45			
Helpless/Vulnerable	Between Groups	28.628	14	2.045	2.077	.044
	Within Groups	30.524	31	.985		
	Total	59.152	45			
Imagery of Madness	Between Groups	.000	14	.000	.	.
	Within Groups	.000	31	.000		
	Total	.000	45			

**Table 15**

		Toph - SuperCrip			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	0	3	8.3	8.3	8.3
	1	2	5.6	5.6	13.9
	2	3	8.3	8.3	22.2
	3	5	13.9	13.9	36.1
	4	3	8.3	8.3	44.4
	5	7	19.4	19.4	63.9
	6	3	8.3	8.3	72.2
	7	2	5.6	5.6	77.8
	8	2	5.6	5.6	83.3

9	1	2.8	2.8	86.1
10	1	2.8	2.8	88.9
11	1	2.8	2.8	91.7
12	1	2.8	2.8	94.4
14	1	2.8	2.8	97.2
19	1	2.8	2.8	100.0
Total	36	100.0	100.0	

**Table 16**

**Toph - Helpless/Vulnerable**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	0	29	80.6	80.6	80.6
	1	3	8.3	8.3	88.9
	2	1	2.8	2.8	91.7
	3	1	2.8	2.8	94.4
	5	2	5.6	5.6	100.0
	Total	36	100.0	100.0	

**Table 17**

**Statistics**

SuperCrip – Season 2

N	Valid	15
	Missing	5
Mean		5.80
Median		5.00
Mode		2 <sup>a</sup>
Std. Deviation		3.668
Range		12
Minimum		0
Maximum		12
Sum		87

a. Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown

**Table 18**

**Statistics**

SuperCrip Season 3

N	Valid	30
	Missing	0
Mean		3.53
Median		3.00
Mode		0
Std. Deviation		4.361
Range		19
Minimum		0
Maximum		19
Sum		106

**Table 19**

**Statistics**

SuperCrip - season 3 – Toph only

N	Valid	21
	Missing	0
Mean		5.05
Median		5.00
Mode		5
Std. Deviation		4.421
Range		19
Minimum		0
Maximum		19
Sum		106

**Table 20**

**Statistics**

Helpless/Vulnerable – Season 1

N	Valid	1
	Missing	19
Mean		1.00
Median		1.00
Mode		1
Range		0
Minimum		1
Maximum		1

Sum	1
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**Table 21**

**Statistics**

Helpless/Vulnerable – Season 2

N	Valid	5
	Missing	15
Mean		.67
Median		.00
Mode		0
Std. Deviation		1.345
Range		5
Minimum		0
Maximum		5
Sum		10

**Table 22**

**Statistics**

Helpless/Vulnerable – Season 3

N	Valid	2
	Missing	19
Mean		.27
Median		.00
Mode		0
Std. Deviation		1.048
Range		5
Minimum		0
Maximum		5
Sum		8

**Table 23**

**ANOVA Table**

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Total Number of stereotypes used * SeasonNum1	Between Groups (Combined)	13.312	1	13.312	.623	.434
	Within Groups	939.644	44	21.356		
	Total	952.957	45			

**Table 24****ANOVA Table**

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Total Number of stereotypes used * SeasonNum2	Between Groups (Combined)	78.400	1	78.400	3.855	.056
	Within Groups	874.400	43	20.335		
	Total	952.800	44			

**Table 25****ANOVA Table**

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Total Number of stereotypes used * SeasonNum3	Between Groups (Combined)	56.407	1	56.407	2.768	.103
	Within Groups	896.550	44	20.376		
	Total	952.957	45			