How submissive are Disney characters?

An investigation into the non-verbal behaviour submissive Disney characters display when interacting with dominant Disney characters.

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Abstract

The aim of this research was to investigate the submissive nonverbal behaviour of Disney characters and whether there was a difference in gender. The nonverbal behavioural cues used in this research to measure submissiveness were divided into three categories with the assistance of the Troisi & Moles Scale, focusing on flight behaviour, submissive behaviour, and mimicry. The experiment consisted of a 2 (gender dominant character: male vs. female) x 2 (gender submissive character: male vs. female) design. Results showed that male submissive characters displayed more submission and mimicry behaviour than female submissive characters, and mixed gender relationships show more flight behaviour than same gender relationships.

Keywords: Disney; flight behaviour; submissive behaviour, mimicry; gender difference.

Introduction

Disney is one of the most influencing childhood cartoons of all time (Wasko, 2001). It is important to know what Disney cartoons are transmitting to children, as children learn and shape their world by watching television, as previous research has shown, with children being able to distinguish stereotypes while watching cartoons (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1997). Trevarthen and Hubley stated that young children learn through non-verbal communication first before understanding spoken language (as cited by Stone, Ousley, Yoder, Hogan, & Hepburn, 1997), suggesting that non-verbal behaviour in cartoons is more likely to have an effect. For this reason, the purpose of study is to investigate nonverbal communication and behaviour used in Disney movies, with the following research question *'How do submissive characters respond/react to dominant behaviour in Disney film? And is there a difference between male and female submissive characters?'*

1.1 Disney (cartoons)

The cartoon characters from Disney were chosen as Disney has made the best-known hand drawn cartoons, and would allow for a multitude of clips for us to choose from. Cartoon characters are not spontaneous, they have been manufactured to represent a character and the corresponding emotions. Therefore, the character's non-verbal behaviour should represent their characters. A variety of researches on Disney movies has been done, but none of it has focused on nonverbal communication. A lot of studies were conducted to investigate gender roles (e.g. Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund & Tanner, 2004; England, Descartes & Collier-Meek, 2011). They all found that even over time Disney still uses a lot of stereotyping in their movies. The use of gender roles also cause for a strong division of dominant and submissive behaviour, in which the male characters are much more dominant over submissive females (Maity, 2014).

The following paragraphs will give an insight into existing literature on nonverbal behaviour in dominance and submission, and how this presents itself in men and women. This literature overview will lead up to the hypotheses of this research.

1.2 Non-verbal dominant and submissive behaviour

The dominance-subordination interaction remains a central dimension of social behaviour (e.g. Horowitz & Vtkus, 1986; Kiesler, 1983). The first feature to consider is that this type of interpersonal relation can be friendly or hostile. Under this premise, "the subordinate behaviours could involve either seeking closeness or seeking and keeping distance" (Allan & Gilbert, 1997). Furthermore, some forms of human submissiveness are *"clearly voluntary (e.g. supporting a leader) and these are not usually associated with distress (e.g. when there is a threatening dominant)"* (Allan & Gilbert, 1997). In the case of animals, according to MacLean (1990), *"the submissive display is the most important of all displays because without it numerous individuals might not survive"*. A passive response to an aggressive display avoids mostly unnecessary conflict.

Many nonverbal communication cues can be observed in dominant-submissive interactions. The cues addressed in this research are the following: facial expression, postural expansion, power moves, mimicry and complementarity. Under the facial expression category, eye gaze has been the object of various investigations. It was found that high-dominant subjects showed increased proxemic behaviour in responding to a direct gaze, while low-dominant subjects showed a decrease (Froome & Clegg Beam, 1974). Additionally, in research comparing humans and primates, Holland, Wolf, Looser, & Cuddy (2015) concluded that humans, like primates, avert their gaze from the faces and upper bodies of individuals displaying dominance compared to those displaying submissiveness.

Figure 1. Example of an averted eye gaze by a submissive character

Another area explored in past investigations involves power moves. *"On average, participants exposed to a dominant confederate decreased their postural stance, whereas participants exposed to a submissive confederate increased their stance"* (Tiedens & Fragale, 2003). In other words, dominance appears to invite submissiveness and submissiveness appears to invite dominance. Dominant individuals tend to show a bigger postural expansion. Butt and Fiske (1968) found that higher dominance in humans was associated with less personal space. Postural expansion can be achieved by moving one's limbs out from oneself (as in arms or legs akimbo), and constriction is achieved by drawing the limbs in or crossing them over one's body and curving the torso inwards (Tiedens & Fragale, 2003).

Figure 2. Example of large postural expansion by a dominant character

Tiedens and Fragale (2003) investigated mimicry and complementarity as two types of responses to dominant behaviour. They found that people most often show complementarity when encountering dominance. By complementarity behaviour they mean engaging the opposite of the behaviour confronted with. Mimicry behaviour is heightened when people perceive themselves as similar (Cappella & Palmer, 1990; Gump & Kulik, 1997), have aligned goals (Lanzetta & Englis, 1989), share attitudes (McHugo, Lanzetta, & Bush, 1991), like the target (Bernieri & Rosenthal, 1991; Noller, 1984), want the actor to have positive perceptions and like them (Bavelas, Black, Lemery, & Mullett, 1986), or have the desire to empathize with the actor (Hoffman, 1984) or with people in general (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999), but these attributes are not necessary (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Hatfield et al., 1993). Based on this, it is expected to find more complementarity than mimicry in this research. This results in the the following hypothesis:

H1. *Submissive Disney characters show more complementarity behaviour than mimicry behaviour.*

1.3 Dominant and submissive behaviour in gender

When the dominant-submissive interaction is studied from the gender point of view, two main tendencies are clear. First is that dominant behavior is closely related to male, while submissive behaviour to female. "The male style is aggressive, competitive, structured, and includes little intimacy. In contrast, female language works to facilitate interpersonal interactions. The female style is emotional, cooperative, and fosters intimacy" (Tannen, 1990). Authors have distinguished dominant and powerful people with features of "aggressive language male style", meanwhile subordinate and powerless people are described with "facilitative female language style" (Lakoff, 1990; Leffler et al., 1982; Mulac et al., 1998).

However, these premises do not mean females cannot be dominant. Highly feminine women are more likely to have weak body boundaries that are more androgynous women (Richard & MacAlister, 1993). Although results of the same study revealed no significant difference in the body boundary indicators of dominant and submissive subjects. One study stated that submissive women tended to "wrap themselves in materials" more than dominant women (Richard et al., 1991). According to Leffler, et al. (1982) gender affects nonverbal behaviour. In a research were dominant and submissive individuals were randomly assigned showed males took more horizontal space, pointed to possessions more often, touched more frequently, and laughed less than females. It is important to take into account that findings showed women use more expressive nonverbal behaviours than men, and are more skilled at sending and receiving nonverbal messages. While men were louder and more interruptive, and displayed more nervous, dysfluent behaviors (Briton & Hall, 1995). Therefore, it is expected that women will show more submissive behaviour than men. The following hypothesis is proposed:

H2. *Female Disney characters will show more submissive behaviour than male Disney characters.*

1.4 Animals and humans

In the Disney world, a lot of the main characters are animals. Russian theorist and filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein stated that "in Disney's works on the whole, animals substitute for people. It's interesting that the same kind of 'flight' into animal skin and the humanization of the animals is apparently characteristic for many ages." (Wells, 2008) Because of the equality, no difference is expected in the submissive behaviour between animals and humans, thus coming to the next hypothesis:

H3. *There is no difference in submissive behaviour between*

animal characters and human characters.

Method

Design

For this research, the dependent variable was the non verbal response behaviour of the submissive Disney character. Additionally, the research contained two independent variables. The first independent variable was the gender of the dominant Disney character and the second variable was the gender of the submissive Disney character. Therefore, this experiment consisted of a 2 (gender dominant character: male vs. female) x 2 (gender submissive character: male vs. female) design. In total, there were four conditions in this experiment. For each condition three different dominant-submissive Disney character relationships were coded in which the independent variables (genders) were manipulated.

Stimuli Collection

To answer out research question we needed clips that presented submissive-dominant interactions between Disney characters.

Clips In order to address the research questions the clips included in the present research must fulfill certain characteristics. First, clips needed to be produced by Disney. Second, the content of the clips required to have scenes with one of the four instances explained above, in the design section. Third, based on previous knowledge, ten different movies were selected to obtain the 60 clips. No animated or 3D films are in the final list. The four conditions were analyzed through three different couples per relationship. For each pair, five clips were coded. In total, 12 different pairs representing the four conditions formed part of the research. Each clip had a duration of at least 5 and a maximum of 28 seconds (M = 12.40, SD = 4.88) to avoid any bias, for example a longer clip has a higher chance of showing submissive nonverbal behaviour. Since the clips are cropped from the movie, it was determined that the specific fragments will begin when the dominant character starts an interaction (e.g. a dominant character screams) and it will end when the submissive character finishes their reaction (e.g. looks down and doesn't say anything). This allowed us to select multiple clips from a scene where a lot of interactions occurred. The videos were not edited and were rather fragmented into limited seconds of time that corresponded with the data needed to answer the research question i.e. the clip had to be a submissive-dominant relationship that fitted one of the four conditions.

Figure 3. Screenshot of Disney movies. Top left: male-male condition; top right: female-female condition; bottom right: male-female condition; bottom-left: female-male condition

Codebook Other materials of the research consisted of the coding scheme (appendix A). In the coding scheme there were several variables that needed to be coded. First of all, some general information of the scene and the characters was coded. These variables consisted of release year of the movie, gender of the characters, time in the movie, number of seconds of the clip and which movie was coded. After that three different response behaviour categories were identified. These categories were flight behaviour, submissive behaviour and mimicry behaviour. Each behaviour category consisted of a number of subcategories that the submissive category could display as a response to the dominant behaviour. The coding scheme was based on the ESCI scale of Troisi and Moles (1999).

Troise & Moles Scale In order to label all nonverbal cues in the following study, the scale proposed by Troisi & Moles (1999) was used as reference point, focusing on flight (look down, look away, big eyes, shut eyes, chin low, smaller posture, freeze), and submission (nod, lips in, mouth corners back) as complementarity behaviour. In their study, they examined gender differences in the interpersonal behavior of depressed patients by using ethological techniques which involve direct observation of behavior. Thirtyseven behavior patterns were observed and defined. The behavioral categories and patterns are the following. From flight behaviour: look away, looking away from the interviewer; look down, looking down at fee, lap or floor; shut, the eyes are closed; chin, the chin is drawn in towards the chest; crouch, the body is bent right forward till the head is near the knees; and still, a sudden cessation of movement, freezing. From submission behaviour: nod, the normal affirmative gesture; lips in, the lips are drawn slightly in and pressed together; mouth corners back, the corners of the mouth are drawn back but not raised as in smile (Troisi & Moles, 1999). Along with the Troisi & Moles scale, another category was included in the research. The aim was to identify mimicry nonverbal gestures. This category included: verbal, repeating phrases or words said by the dominant character when responding; facial, making the same facial expressions as the dominant character posture;

eye gaze, copying the eye gaze (look) of the dominant characters; posture, copying the posture of the dominant characters; and gesture, copying the gestures of the dominant character. These patterns are a new proposal for the literature in this area of study.

Procedure

Once the materials were selected, they were coded using the coding scheme illustrated above. There were four coders, one coder for each condition. The coders manually annotated the clips, marking down the appearance of any non-verbal behaviour that coincided with the coding scheme. The coding was done manually in Excel. The annotators would watch the clips and check the boxes when submissive behaviour was presented by the submissive character.

Prior to the experiment, the codebook was pre-tested with all the researchers to check for difficulties and confusions. Together with all researchers, five different scenes from another Disney movie were coded and the codes were discussed. After the pretest, the codebook was adjusted in order to make the coding more reliable and consistent amongst the researchers.

25% of the clips were double coded so each other's work within those conditions could be checked, in order for the coding to be more reliable. Cohen's Kappa was measured per item to check this intercoder reliability. For look away, big eyes, nod, lips in and, all five items of mimicry the reliability was almost perfect (k > .84). Chin low, smaller posture, freeze, and mouth corners back had a substantial reliability (Kappa ranging from .67 to .79). The last two items, look down and shut eyes, had a fair reliability (k = .49 and k = .53). After taking a closer look at these two items, it turned out the movements looked quite similar, which caused for interchangeability. However, since the items both measured flight behaviour, it was decided to leave the items in tact.

Results

To test the hypotheses mentioned in the introduction, several statistical analyses were conducted on the data set. First of all, a number of independent t-tests were performed. This independent t-test examined whether there are differences in type of behaviour between male and female submissives, between same gender and mixed gender relationships and between animal characters and human characters.

The results show that on average, male submissive characters show more submission and mimicry behaviour than female submissive characters. These differences are significant, $t(58) > 2.106$, $p < .040$. However, on average, female submissive characters show more flight behaviour ($M = 3.10$, $SE = 1.18$), than male submissive characters ($M = 2.93$, $SE = 1.05$). This difference, -0.17, BCAa 95% CI [-0.74, 0.41], was not significant $t(58) = -0.577$, $p > 0.5$.

It was also examined whether there was a difference in behaviour between mixed gender relationships and same gender relationships. On average, mixed gender relationship showed more flight behaviour (M = 3.47, SE = 1.11), than same gender relationships (M = 2.57, SE = 0.94). This difference, -0.90, BCa 95% CI [-1.430, -0.371], was significant $t(58) = -3.404$, $p = .001$. Additionally, mixed gender relationships show more submissive and mimicry behaviour than same gender relationships. However, these differences were not significant, $t(58) < -1.201$, $p > .235$.

Furthermore, the results show that human characters show more flight behaviour ($M = 3.13$, $SE = 1.07$), than animal characters ($M = 1.80$, $SE = 0.84$). This difference, 1.33, BCa 95% CI [0.34, 2.34], was significant $t(58) = 2.686$, $p = .009$. Whereas, on average, animal characters show more submissive behaviour ($M = 1.00$, $SE = 0.00$), than human characters ($M = 0.75$, $SE = 0.67$). This difference, -0.25, BCa 95% CI [-0.436, -0.073], was significant $t(54) = -2.0806$, $p = .007$. On average, animal characters show more mimicry behaviour ($M = 1.60$, $SE = 1.14$), than human characters ($M = 024$, $SE = 0.69$). This difference, -1.36, BCa 95% CI [-2.767, 0.040], was not significant $t(4.273) = -2.631$, $p = .054$.

In addition to the independent t-test, also one-way ANOVAs were conducted to examine whether the difference in behaviour per condition was significant. First, the variables of each type of behaviour were computed into means. There was a significant difference on the different conditions on levels of flight behaviour, F(3, 56) = 4.661, p = .006. This implies that male dominant and female submissive relationships show the most flight behaviour (M = 0.53, SD = 0.17), followed by female dominant and male submissive relationships (M = 0.46, SD = 0.14). Male dominant and male submissive relationships (M = 0.38, SD = 0.15) and female dominant and female submissive relationships (M = 0.35, SD = 0.12) showed the least flight behaviour. There was no significant difference on levels of submissive behaviour and mimicry behaviour on the different conditions, F(3, 56) < 2.577 p > .063. Table 1 gives an overview of the means and standard deviations of each type of behaviour per condition

Table 1. Means and standard deviations per behaviour type per condition

	Flight behaviour (7 items) M (SD)	Submissive behaviour (3 items) M (SD)	Mimicry behaviour (5 items) M (SD)
Male-Male (*N* = 15)	0.38 (0.15)	0.29 (0.17)	0.12 (0.20)
Male-Female (*N* = 15)	0.53 (0.17)	0.22 (0.16)	0.05 (0.21)
Female-Female (*N* = 15)	0.35 (0.12)	0.16 (0.21)	0.11 (0.15)
Female-Male (*N* = 15)	0.46 (0.14)	0.36 (0.27)	0.00 (0.00)
Total	0.43 (0.16)	0.26 (0.22)	0.07 (0.16)

Conclusion & Discussion

The aim of this research was to investigate the submissive behaviour of Disney characters and whether there is a difference in gender. The nonverbal cues used in this research were divided into three categories with the assistance of the Troisi & Moles Scale (1999), focusing on flight behaviour (look down, look away, big eyes, shut eyes, chin low, smaller posture, freeze), submissive behaviour (nod, lips in, mouth corners back), and mimicry (mimicking of verbal, facial, posture, gesture, eye gaze). Concerning the levels of submissive behaviour and mimicry behaviour on the different conditions, there was no significant difference. The results show also that in all conditions they show the most flight behaviour, followed by submission and the least mimicry behaviour. This could be because for this paper, the relationships of the pairs wasn't taken into account. The dominance-subordination interaction can be either friendly, with the subordinate seeking closeness from the dominant, or hostile, with the subordinate keeping their distance from the dominant. In addition, a subordinate may voluntarily support a dominant if they perceive them as their leader. For future research, this could be an interesting topic.

For gender, the results show that on average, male submissive characters significantly show more submission and mimicry behaviour than female submissive characters. Female submissive characters showed more flight behaviour than male submissive characters however the result was not significant so was excluded. According to previous research, dominant behaviour such as aggression, competitiveness, and little intimacy, is closely related to male behaviour, whereas submissive behaviour such as cooperation was associated with female behaviour (Tannen, 1990). Due to these findings, our hypothesis predicted that females would display more submissive behaviour than males, however this turned out to not be the case, therefore our hypothesis was rejected.

It was also examined whether there was a difference between human submissive characters and animal submissive characters. The results show that human characters show significantly more flight behaviour than animal characters. Whereas, on average, animal characters show significantly more submissive behaviour than human characters. Animal characters also showed more mimicry behaviour than human characters however this result was not significant. This non significant result can be explained by the fact that there were not enough animal characters present to have significant results. Only in one out of the ten movies there was a male-male relationship of two animals. The rest of the couples were all human. Further research should look further into animal Disney characters.

Additionally, it was found that there was a difference in behaviour between mixed gender relationships and same gender relationships. On average, mixed gender relationship showed significantly more flight behaviour than same gender relationships. Additionally, mixed gender relationships show more submissive and mimicry behaviour than same gender relationships. However, these differences were not significant, and therefore no conclusions can be made about this. There was not much literature about this topic, so this could also be interesting for further research .

Finally, the difference in behaviour per condition (male dominant – male submissive, male dominant – female submissive, female dominant – male submissive, female dominant – female submissive) was examined. There was a significant difference on the different conditions on levels of flight behaviour implying that male dominant and female submissive relationships show the most flight behaviour, followed by female dominant and male submissive relationships. Male dominant and male submissive relationships and female dominant and female submissive relationships showed the least flight behaviour. Taking into account that these are fictional characters, the relationship between same gender pairs may allow equality for both agents. When mixed gender pairs confronted each other, the level intimidation might be higher. Therefore submissive characters try to avoid most confrontation. The type of relationship between the dominant and submissive therefore has to be considered when interpreting the results as well as the gender of the dominant and the gender of the submissive.

Male dominant and male submissive condition, and the female dominant and male submissive condition showed mostly voluntary relationships, male dominant and female submissive condition showed mostly hostile relationships, and female dominant and female submissive condition showed only hostile relationships. This implies that male submissives tend to become a submissive voluntarily whereas female submissives are forced to be so.

A reason for all three hypotheses not being confirmed, could be due to the fact the used literature for creating the hypotheses was mainly based on research into human interactions and behaviour and not specifically on Disney character. Human interactions arise mostly spontaneous, whereas the Disney characters and their behaviour in relationships are planned and constructed. This can result in unnatural behaviour which and therefore the hypotheses are rejected.

Another explanation for the rejected hypothesis is that in this research, the fifteen dominant-submissive Disney relationships were very different from each other. The type of relationships differed from friends, to enemies to family. These different relationships could result in different forms of submissive behaviour and divergent results. It is recommended to further research the submissive behaviour differences in these different types of relationships.

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Appendix

Behaviour categories	**Definition of behaviour patterns**	**Explanations**	**Examples**
Flight	look away	Making a movement with the face, looking away from the dominant character	
	look down	looking down at feet, lap or floor (just eyes)	
	shut	the eyes are closed as a response to the dominant character	
	chin/face down	the chin is drawn in towards the chest (entire head)	
	crouch	the body is ~~bending right~~ forward	
	still	a sudden cessation of movement, a freezing → at least one still frame/one second	
Submission	nod	the normal affirmative gesture	
	lips in	the lips are drawn slightly in and pressed together	
	mouth corners back	the corners of the mouth are drawn back but not raised as in smile	
Mimicry	Verbal	Repeating phrases or words said by the dominant character when responding	
	Facial	Making the same facial expressions as the dominant character → all facial characteristics such as eyebrows, mouth, nose (except for the eyes)	
	Posture	Copying the posture of the dominant characters → expanding, moving ~~etc~~	
	Eye gaze	Copying the eye gaze (look) of the dominant characters	
	Gesture	Copying the gestures of the dominant character → hand movements,	