



The Transformation of Gender Representation in Pixar's *Toy Story* Franchise

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Abstract. The *Toy Story* franchise deserves an in-depth gender analysis due to its commercial influence, technological contribution, and achievement in the realm of animated film. This research may contribute to a relatively complete representation of gender in animations. It argues that the *Toy Story* series shows a process of power transformation, namely, male power declines while female power increases. Image analysis and comparison are deployed to investigate the depiction of power relationships between male and female characters under Foucault's theory. During the process of analysing, this paper chooses the male protagonist cowboy Sheriff Woody Pride and his girlfriend shepherdess Bo Peep as the primary research subjects. It finds that the female characters were generally placed in a subordinate position compared to males in the 1990s which indicate that the portrayal of independent female characters in animated films was neglected during this period. However, the significant and dramatic change in the 2010s reveals the film market attaches more importance to female image shaping. Additionally, this could be seen as a trend of emphasizing gender equality in the animation market, that is, women and men are portrayed equally.

Keywords: *Toy Story* franchise · Gender representation · Image analysis · Power relationship

1 Introduction

As a film genre, animated film is an indispensable component of the film realm, and some of them are influential broadly. The *Toy Story* franchise is the third most popular film among animated films series as it has grossed \$3.2 billion worldwide [1]. In addition to commercial achievement, *Toy Story 1* is the first feature-length animation that adopts computer-generated imagery technology while *Toy Story 3* and *Toy Story 4* are the winners of the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature Film in 2011 and 2020 respectively [2–7].

The *Toy Story* franchise has a total of four films from 1995 to 2019. This long-time span enables the observation of particular characters' transformation as well as consistency, in terms of their self-development and relationships with each other. In addition to that, it could also provide more opportunities to observe the change in image representation in the animations. Moreover, it could be more convincing than comparing multiple

princesses with different personalities, as the mainstream research on the representation of gender in animated films has done, focusing on the Disney Princesses series [8–12]. Previous studies on the *Toy Story* franchise generally pay attention to its storytelling ways, such as its anthropomorphic character setting, friendship construction, and the concrete plots in *Toy Story 3* and *Toy Story 4* [13–15]. However, the in-depth analyses of the gender representation and the transformation of characters are limited, though Clark mentions the female protagonist's change [16]. The most instructive research is from Gillam and Wooden [17]. They analyse three famous Pixar animated films and draw a conclusion that Pixar consistently promotes an alpha-male model in their productions. Nevertheless, these papers do not systematically observe and analyse a particular character. This article focuses on the protagonists of the *Toy Story* series, cowboy Sheriff Woody Pride and his girlfriend shepherdess Bo Peep. It uncovers the representation of these two characters and illustrates the change of the power relationship between them.

According to Foucault, power is exercised, not possessed, and it must be analysed as something which circulates, so there is a shift of power [18, 19]. Additionally, power exists only when it is put into action [20]. Thus, Woody and Bo's interaction is mainly considered under the guidance of Foucauldian theory. The methods of image analysis and comparison are utilised to address the following questions: 1) How does the *Toy Story* franchise depict the image of Woody and Bo? 2) What are their power relationships with the other characters? 3) What is the power relationship between Woody and Bo? How is the power relationship changed throughout the *Toy Story* franchise? Bo does not appear in *Toy Story 3*, but she returns and transforms significantly in *Toy Story 4*. This situation is noteworthy, because she may be a sign of how the era has changed since the release of *Toy Story 1* after 24 years [16]. Moreover, the change of power relationship between them could be better observed since they are a couple. This paper argues that Woody's power gradually decreases throughout the franchise while Bo's power increases. This is a process that female characters are depicted as more independent women while male characters are less manipulative.

2 To Be the Hero or to Be the Self

The premier male character, Woody, gradually loses his power from the initial one of the *Toy Story* franchise to the last one. This process of change is not merely related to the fact that his 6-year-old boy owner Andy has grown up and his living environment has changed. It is also about his changing philosophy and personal choices.

2.1 Save the Day Again

Woody is not a character whose goal is to seek power, but he is desperate to pursue his master's love. This ideological concept attaches him a strong sense of responsibility to his owner and happens to be inseparable from power. Gallagher indicates that the larger scale of power might influence or shape the powers exercised at smaller scales [20]. In *Toy Story 1*, Woody as Andy's favourite toy, is given the highest status among the other toys and possesses more privilege and power, so he becomes the commander of all toys naturally. For instance, the difference in power is apparent when Woody sends green

plastic toy soldiers to detect the sorts of gifts at Andy's birthday party. He sits on Andy's bed and in close proximity to the interphone, while all the other toys are huddled in the space next to the bed [2].

However, the newcomer astronaut toy Buzz Lightyear deprives Andy's love for Woody and replaces him unconsciously. Thus, Woody dislikes Buzz awfully out of envy and attempts to beat him in an ignominious way, aiming to defend his own uniqueness. Nevertheless, though their relationship is strained, Woody never aims to hurt Buzz. On the contrary, Woody tends and rescues Buzz in most cases when they are caught by the villain violent kid Sid. It needs to confess that Woody's purpose is to regain the trust of Andy's toys at first, but after he acknowledges Buzz as a friend, his sense of responsibility should not be ignored in this process. Woody is represented as an indispensable hero who possesses numerous novel ideas and always saves the day in *Toy Story 1*. However, in the last scene of this film, Woody and Buzz sit together on Andy's bed to listen to the information about Andy's Christmas gifts [2]. This consequence indicates that Woody's power in this system declines when he shares his privilege and power with Buzz, but he also obtains the friendship that completes him.

In *Toy Story 2*, Woody's power is not restrictively determined by Andy's love, because the place where the story takes place has changed [21]. In this instalment, Woody meets his same series of toys, cowboy girl Jessie, the horse Bullseye, and Prospector, who are merchandising toys from the cancelled show called Woody's Roundup. They will be sold to a museum in Tokyo, but they will not be accepted and stay in dark storage unless Woody goes together [21]. In other words, Woody's presence is the most important element of constituting a whole set of toys for the museum to collect, so he is the one who controls the power to decide whether they can go. Woody is portrayed as a crucial hero again because he holds the power to decide the fate of the other toys. However, this power of deciding is not respected as the Prospector refuses to accept Woody's eventual choice and forcibly takes him away. Foucault stresses that the purpose of power is reflected in its effect, not in the conscious intention of those who exercise it [20]. Thus, even though Woody still owns the power to some extent, the effect of his exercise of power is not as expected. In this case, Woody's power is subverted.

2.2 The Glory as a Hero Fades

Starting from *Toy Story 3*, the power relationship between Woody and other toys weakens as they have already recognized each other as families. Although Woody is still the commander and mastermind of the plan, he is no longer the save-the-day hero which is granted by Andy. When he gathers at the staff meeting, Andy's toys seem to be indifferent [4]. Because all the toys are in the box, and Woody loses his privilege as Andy grows up and stops playing with toys. His power over others declines. The green plastic toy soldiers even disobey Woody's command and leave [4]. Additionally, the conceptual conflict between Woody and other toys also reduces his status in toys. When Andy is going to college, all the toys consider that their purpose is fulfilled and decide to go to Sunnyside Daycare, but Woody strongly suggests that they go home with him [4]. The result is that no one is under Woody's power anymore, and they all refuse to adopt his advice. This could exemplify that Woody's leading power is gone.

Woody forfeits his power on leading completely in *Toy Story 4*. At the end of *Toy Story 3*, Andy gives all his toys to a girl named Bonnie. In Bonnie's room, the native toys have already owned a doll leader called Dolly. Thus, in the new environment of the power system, Woody is subordinate. For example, during a house cleaning, the toys are put in the closet [5]. Dolly instructs Andy's toys on how to behave, but Woody cannot help himself from interrupting Dolly and commanding. However, the result is that Dolly, as the more experienced toy, is the one that can be trusted with her leadership and advice. Additionally, in Bonnie's favour, Dolly becomes more special and powerful in the toys. At the end of the film, Woody sends his sheriff badge to Jessie, which represents his power and honour. This power shift from male characters to female characters needs to be noted because this means that Woody finally forgoes his responsibility for his owner and chooses to live his own life as a lost toy.

3 From Dress to Jumpsuit

3.1 Changes in Appearance and Relationship

Bo's image reflects the objectification of women and the worship of heroes in *Toy Story 1* and *Toy Story 2*. She is a ceramic toy figurine on the baby's lamp wearing a doll-like outfit, which is a white shaggy dress with pink spots and a layer of tulle at the waist. The low neckline exposed a large space of skin on her chest and permits Bo to be coquettish and satisfy the male gaze. Moreover, it could also be observed from her seductive behaviours towards Woody. At the beginning of *Toy Story 1*, when Andy's heist game is over, Bo uses her walking stick to pull Woody to her side, and thanks Woody for saving her sheep flock [2]. This is Bo's flirtation because her thanks are based on a roleplaying game, but Woody does not reject it and even says that is merely a trivial matter. Then, Bo offers Woody a cryptic invitation to meet her that evening. Woody accepts while shrugging his shoulder [2].

In this scene, Bo is the one taking the initiative and seems to be the dominant player in her relationship with Woody. However, their love relationship is not shown here, and Bo's initiative cannot be used to judge her higher power status in their relationship. On the contrary, Bo's attractive, flirtatious image is created to show that her status is so weak that she needs to objectify herself. It can even be said that her invitation to Woody is not motivated by their love relationship, but by the worship of men and the pursuit of more powerful and stronger men. She thanks Woody's help in the role-playing game, which is ridiculous. It seems that she uses this excuse to seek something else. Bo's image of worshipping males is reinforced by her subsequent reaction to Buzz. After Buzz defuses the toys and successfully "flies" around Andy's room for a week, Bo puts her hand over her chest and shows her approval of Buzz as her moving partner [2].

However, a dramatic makeover happens to Bo in *Toy Story 4*. A blue jumpsuit and a cloak are Bo's new attire, and her arm is bound with duct tape to reconnect her broken arm. However, her broken arm in this instalment enables her to become an inspiring and courageous female because she overcomes her instinct as a vulnerable ceramic doll. This could be seen as a proof that Bo is brave and powerful enough to overcome her body defect and live unknown life alone as a lost toy.

Additionally, the romantic relationship between Bo and Woody is reconstructed. The relationship between Bo and Woody is more equal, and the interaction between them is not just Bo's admiration for Woody and her active flirting. For instance, when Woody meets Bo's new friend officer Giggie and tells her about the tender times Bo used to spend with Andy's sister Molly, Bo is so embarrassed that she pops a rubber band in Woody's face [5]. This frolic scene illustrates that Bo stops idolizing and seducing Woody unilaterally and she is no longer an objectified female character in a romantic relationship, instead, Bo is placed in an equal position with Woody. Moreover, when Bo is sent away, Woody braves the rain to make her stay [5]. This is the first time that Woody uses his initiative in their relationship. It could state that the love relationship of mutual support between Bo and Woody is established in *Toy Story 4* eventually. Before this instalment, Bo has been an accessory to Woody.

3.2 The Vulnerable Girl Starts to Save the Hero

The representation of Bo in the first two instalments is a lady who desperately needs males' help in times of crisis. She is frail, like most female characters in animations [22]. The opening scene of *Toy Story 1* proved this point. When Andy, plays a role-playing robbery game with the toys, Bo's first appearance is a kidnap victim. All she can do is to put her left hand to her forehead in a frightened look, begging and cursing. However, the robber's response to Bo is to shout at her and threaten her flock, under the manipulation of Andy [2]. In this case, Bo expresses her wish and implements the right of confrontation, but the effect brought by the language is weak. As Bo is powerless and ignorant in this situation, she appears panic-stricken and hopes that someone would be the saviour.

At Bo's cry for help, Woody appears and repels the robbers [2]. This plot setting is designed for the hero to save the beauty, aiming to shape Woody as a hero while Bo is depicted as a brainless victim. The same role-playing game and a similar scene also appear in *Toy Story 2*. Woody is the hero who saves the beauty and gains kisses for that [21]. Under this power system, though Bo provides vital assistance, her importance is overlooked. For instance, she uses her walking stick as a rope to rescue Buzz when the toys mistakenly believe he falls into the bush, but no one notices [2].

Nevertheless, Bo becomes the vital character who helps Woody to accomplish his growing-up process. According to Allison, *Toy Story 3* is an ending for Andy of his time with the toys, but *Toy Story 4* is conceived to accomplish a more complete image of Woody [23]. Since *Toy Story 1*, Woody's whole identity has been attached to his value as a responsible toy, whose duty is to be liked by his master and to return that favour with loyalty. Based on this creed, Woody can easily feel frail and scared of being thrown away. In *Toy Story 3*, when Andy's toys intend to start a new life in the Sunnyside Daycare because Andy is going to college, Woody considers their opinions and behaviours as a betrayal. However, Woody's philosophy and loyalty lead him to a confused and helpless path when he is not loved by the master. Eventually, his fear is overcome with the help of Bo. In *Toy Story 4*, Bo pushes Woody to find the meaning of life at his bottom.

3.3 The Subversion of Power

Bo's weakness and her unequal power with men are also reflected in the situation when no toys care for her opinions. There is a stand-out example. When Buzz falls out of a window, Woody's authority over other male toys is gradually disappearing as he is under suspicion due to a misunderstanding [2]. At this point, the power relationship in the room has shifted. Woody is no longer the one who possesses the right of speech, so his leadership has been denied and taken away by the other toys. Bo acts surprised and amazed the whole time, covering her mouth with her hands. When Woody is about to be punished by the male toys, she requests them to stop, but there is no response to her trivial suggestion [2]. Foucault acknowledges that power is intentional because it is always exercised to satisfy a series of aims and objectives, but he also stresses that the purpose of power is reflected in its effect, not in the conscious intention of those who exercise it [20]. Bo's opinions are not respected and valued because of her unequal relationship with these male toys.

However, the power relationship between Bo and Woody has taken a subversive turn, and the imbalance of power tends to disappear. In *Toy Story 4*, she is independent and starts to be in a dominant position among male toys. Woody starts to finish the mission with the help of Bo. At the beginning of the film, there is an operation to save the car toys forgotten in the side yard on a stormy night. Bo is no longer an unnoticeable tool but an indispensable helper of Woody. They work well together, and Bo even finds a way to solve the problem when Woody encounters obstacles and dangers on the way. Moreover, Bo's survival ability empowers her, so that she can blame Woody when he breaks the operation plan because of his recklessness, and all Woody can do is apologize repeatedly. Additionally, *Toy Story 4* unfolds in the surroundings which Bo is more familiar with. It is a free environment without an owner. The status of toys is no longer determined by their masters' affection because they start to depend on themselves. In other words, in this structure, Woody has entered Bo's life, and she is the one who controls power and is in charge. This could be perceived as a complete shift in power.

4 Conclusion

To conclude, this paper argued that Woody's power gradually decreases while Bo's power increases throughout the *Toy Story* franchise. It illustrated the process of Woody's declination of power based on the story sequences. Then, it demonstrated the transformation of Bo's representations. In the first two films in the series, there are not adequate portrayals of Bo, and most of them are stereotypes and lack innovation. Bo is objectified, acts vulnerable, and is placed in a subordinate position compared to the male characters. On the contrary, Woody is a hero in most cases. This phenomenon shows that the depiction of male characters is inclined to be crucial and powerful while the representation of positive and independent female characters in animated films was neglected in the 1990s. However, the dramatic makeover of Bo in *Toy Story 4* reveals the film market attaches more importance to female image shaping and gender equality. This research could be meaningful to enrich the case study of animated films and contributes to further exploration. The method of observing the particular characters in the series film may

provide reference value as well. Continuing studies could consider audiences' attitudes towards the transformation of gender representation.

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