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Disney Said To Foster Ageism

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LONDON — Even the Seven Dwarfs are guilty. Well, two of them anyway. Grumpy and Dopey are no longer just the loyal friends of Snow White but must now line up with the likes of the Wicked Queen and Cruella de Vil to be accused of fostering negative images of elderly people.

According to academics, Walt Disney's seemingly ageist cartoon depiction of older people as evil or incompetent risks adversely influencing children.

Grumpy and Dopey join the assorted hags, crones, and villains in the dock because they might lead some youngsters to think older people are bad-tempered or dim-witted in real life.

A study by American researchers at Brigham Young University, Utah, looked at 93 characters who appeared to be aged 55 or older from 34 Disney films going back 70 years.

A majority of older characters, such as Maurice in "Beauty and the Beast" or Rafiki in "The Lion King," were portrayed as wise or kind, such as Pinocchio's father, Geppetto.

But a significant minority were portrayed as unintelligent, nasty, bad-tempered, or useless, giving children a bad impression.

Apart from films set in other cultures, such as Hawaii-based "Lilo and Stich," the elderly characters are also stereotyped in terms of race and gender. Two thirds of older characters — excluding animals — from films ranging from "Dumbo" to "The Aristocats" were male; 83% were white.

A quarter were shown as grumpy, 12% evil or sinister, 8% helpless, 3% senile or crazy, and 2% the object of ridicule.

Evil or nasty characters include Madame Mim in "The Sword in the Stone," the Wicked Queen as an old hag in "Snow White," Smee in "Peter Pan," and Cruella de Vil in "101 Dalmatians."

Typical portrayals of elderly people included showing them as toothless, hunched, and with cracking voices. Many were depicted with "saggy breasts," the researchers said in an article for the medical publication Journal of Aging Studies.

The academics, who recognized that many Disney creations were based on Brothers Grimm fairy tales, added: "Some of the films (15%) contained only negative portrayals of older characters, and 71% of the films contained at least one negative portrayal of an older character."

Their study concludes: "Why the portrayals of older people seem more negative when the consumers are children is uncertain.

"Disney films may not be the primary source of children's negative perceptions of older people. However, there is evidence that the media do influence children's perceptions."