

## **ANALYSIS OF THE AUDIENCE'S MEANING MAKING PROCESS TOWARDS THE MOVIE DISNEY CARTOON MULAN (1998) AND DISNEY LIVE ACTION MULAN (2020)**

Gabriella Joselyn Krisnawan<sup>1</sup>, Nia Amelia Ridwan<sup>2</sup>, Dewi Meyrasyawati<sup>3</sup>,  
Nadya Afdholy<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>Faculty of Humanities, Airlangga University

E-mail: <sup>1</sup>[gabriella.joselyn.krisnawan-2021@fib.unair.ac.id](mailto:gabriella.joselyn.krisnawan-2021@fib.unair.ac.id), <sup>2</sup>[nia.amelia.ridwan-2021@fib.unair.ac.id](mailto:nia.amelia.ridwan-2021@fib.unair.ac.id), <sup>3</sup>[dewimeyrasyawati@fib.unair.ac.id](mailto:dewimeyrasyawati@fib.unair.ac.id), <sup>4</sup>[nadyaafdholly@fib.unair.ac.id](mailto:nadyaafdholly@fib.unair.ac.id)

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article explores the portrayal of Mulan as a symbol of women's empowerment in Disney's animated "Mulan" (1998) and live-action adaptation (2020). Drawing on Stuart Hall's theory of reception study, the study examines how both films depict Mulan's defiance of traditional gender roles and her journey towards empowerment. Through qualitative analysis of audience responses, it reveals that respondents from diverse backgrounds perceive Mulan as a bold, intelligent, and resourceful heroine who challenges societal expectations. In the 1998 animated film, Mulan's valor in replacing her father in battle resonates with themes of courage and sacrifice, while the 2020 live-action adaptation emphasizes her personal growth and mastery of chi, focusing less on romance and more on self-actualization. The findings underscore the films' success in conveying messages of female empowerment across cultural and cinematic contexts, reflecting shifts in societal attitudes and interpretations of gender roles.

*Keywords* : Mulan, Disney, Reception, Audience Meaning, Societal Expectations, Gender Roles

### **INTRODUCTION**

Mulan, the legendary Chinese tale of a young woman who disguises herself as a man to join the army in place of her father, has captured the imaginations of audiences worldwide for generations. Disney's animated adaptation in 1998 brought Mulan's story to a global audience during a time known as Disney's animation renaissance. The film's vibrant animation, catchy songs, and empowering narrative made it a beloved classic, resonating with viewers by challenging traditional gender roles and celebrating courage and honor. Beyond its entertainment value, the film sparked discussions about

representation and cultural authenticity, setting a benchmark in storytelling for its time.

In 2020, Disney revisited *Mulan* with a live-action adaptation, aiming to present a more realistic and culturally grounded interpretation of the tale. This adaptation arrived in a contemporary landscape where issues like cultural sensitivity, gender representation, and authenticity in media portrayal were more prominent than ever. Unlike its animated predecessor, the 2020 film opted for a more serious tone, focusing on martial arts prowess and the internal struggles of its protagonist. This creative departure prompted varied responses, with some praising its attempts at cultural authenticity while others missed the whimsical charm and musical elements of the animated version.

This article explores how audiences perceive and interpret the stories told in both the 1998 animated film and the 2020 live-action adaptation of *Mulan*. By examining the historical and cultural contexts in which each film was created and received, we aim to uncover the factors that shape audience engagement and emotional resonance with these cinematic renditions. This comparative analysis sheds light on how societal changes, advancements in filmmaking technology, and shifts in storytelling approaches influence how audiences connect with iconic narratives like *Mulan* across different generations. Through this exploration, we aim to deepen our understanding of cinematic adaptation, cultural representation, and audience reception in contemporary media landscapes.

Central to our examination is an analysis of how each film portrays *Mulan's* character, her journey of self-discovery, and her defiance of societal norms. The 1998 animated film depicted *Mulan* as a spirited and resourceful young woman who challenges gender stereotypes to protect her family's honor and serve her country. This portrayal resonated with audiences for its message of courage and sacrifice. In contrast, the 2020 live-action adaptation portrayed *Mulan* in a more introspective light, emphasizing her inner strength and martial arts skills within a narrative that sought to align closely with historical and cultural contexts. This shift in characterization reflects broader trends in contemporary storytelling, where adaptations strive for authenticity while navigating the complexities of cultural representation and audience expectations.

Furthermore, our analysis delves into the thematic and symbolic elements that define each film's narrative structure and emotional impact. The 1998 animated *Mulan* employed vivid imagery, musical motifs, and humor to convey themes of bravery, honor, and family duty. Songs like "Reflection" and "I'll Make a Man Out of You" became cultural touchstones, reinforcing *Mulan's* journey of self-discovery and empowerment. In contrast,

the 2020 live-action adaptation opted for a grander visual spectacle and emphasized themes of duty, sacrifice, and familial piety against expansive landscapes and intricate martial arts choreography. This stylistic departure underscores the filmmakers' intent to offer a fresh interpretation of Mulan's legend while addressing contemporary sensibilities and global audience expectations in the modern media landscape.

### **RESEARCH PROBLEM(S)**

The focus of this article's study is to analyze how Disney's 1998 "Mulan" and its 2020 remake influence the audience's interpretation and meaning-making process, particularly in navigating the complexities of feminism within cross-cultural narratives. The essay specifically aims to answer the following questions:

1. How does the portrayal of Mulan differ between Disney's 1998 animated film and the 2020 live-action adaptation in terms of character development and cultural representation?
2. What extent does the cultural context of each film 1998 vs 2020 influence audience perception and interpretation of Mulan's story?
3. What are the prevailing gender stereotypes depicted in Disney's Mulan films, and how do they influence audience expectations and interpretations?

### **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative descriptive analysis methodology based on Cresswell's (2007) approach to extensively assess and describe events depicted in Disney's "Mulan" films from 1998 and 2020. The research utilizes content analysis to examine the films' imparted meaning, context, and portrayal of feminist themes and character depictions. A comparative analysis methodology is also employed to systematically evaluate and contrast the narrative emphasis, character development, and cultural representation between the two versions of "Mulan". Data sources include screenplays, visual materials, and critical reviews to analyze character interactions, story progression, and audience reception. An academic literature review supplements the analysis, providing theoretical insights into gender stereotypes, cultural representation, and audience interpretation in media. This methodological approach aims to offer a nuanced understanding of how these films shape audience meaning-making processes regarding feminism and cross-cultural narratives, acknowledging potential interpretive

biases inherent in cinematic analysis.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Reception Theory***

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall founded reception theory, which focuses on how producers encode media messages and how audiences later interpret (decode) them. Hall's theory, developed in his major work *Encoding/Decoding* (1980), transformed our understanding of media communication by emphasizing the active role of the audience in interpreting media messages. The key concepts are the encoding/decoding process. Encoding is the process where media producers encode communication to convey specific meanings or goals. This process is influenced by the creators' respective social, cultural, and ideological backgrounds. Meanwhile, decoding is a process where audiences decode these messages depending on their social context, experiences, and cultural backgrounds, which can lead to different interpretations of the same media text.

Hall identified three key ways in which consumers decode media messages:

1. Dominant hegemonic reading

The audience adopts the producer's preferred reading. This means that they perceive the message exactly as it is encoded, in accordance with prevailing cultural and ideological attitudes.

2. Negotiated reading

The audience accepts the selected reading but adapts it to their personal experiences and social circumstances. This reading consists of a combination of acceptance and resistance to the encoded message.

3. Oppositional reading

The audience completely rejects the preferred reading and interprets the message in a way that is opposing the intended meaning. Their background reason is often ideological or cultural resistance to the producers' point of view.

Hall stressed that media texts are intrinsically polysemic, which means they may be read in a variety of ways. The variety in audience perceptions reinforces the concept that meaning is flexible and context-dependent. Hall's reception theory has had a significant influence on media studies, communication, and cultural studies by turning emphasis away from media producers' motives and toward the audience's interpretative practices. It emphasizes the intricate link between media texts and their users, as well as

the power dynamics and social contexts that shape this interaction.

### ***Traditional Gender Roles***

A gender role is a set of culturally defined behavioral norms associated with males and females, respectively, in a given social group or system (Connell, 1987, p. 165). Gender roles are the behaviors that men and women display in both the private and public spheres and are prevalent in families around the world. In many nations, parents give their sons a greater ability to travel and participate in outdoor activities compared to daughters. This encourages boys to see themselves as independent and girls as dependent (Tong, 2012). As a result, parents expect girls to undertake more housework and childcare than boys, generating a social expectation that women should prioritize caring for their children over working. Moreover, women are associated with doing household activities and getting married. On the other side, men are identified by doing adrenaline-challenging activities as a form of masculinity.

### ***Masculine vs Feminine***

Hofstede (2001) stated Masculinity and Femininity as “the distribution of emotional roles between the genders”. Competitiveness, aggressiveness, material achievement, ambition, and power are highly valued in masculine societies. In contrast, female cultures place a higher importance on relationships, quality of life, and compassion for marginalized populations. In the both films of *Mulan*, masculinity is represented by swords and war, which can only be carried out by men. To keep their family's grace and reputation, women must be graceful, humble, and dedicated to household duties.

### **FINDING(S)**

We collected four responses using Google Forms, two of which were male and two of which were female. Male respondents are classified as M1 and M2. Female responders are categorized as F1 and F2. All respondents are active university students aged 20 to 22 and have female siblings. The study results show that respondents' personal experiences, backgrounds, and societal preconceptions influence how they encode the messages of both films. Ethnically, traditional gender role norms persist in Indonesia. Therefore, respondents have connection to the concerns highlighted in the film *Mulan*.

No.	Participant's Code	Sex	Age	Ethnicity	Social Status
1.	M1	Male	21	Javanese	Student
2.	F1	Female	20	Javanese	Student
3.	M2	Male	22	Ambonese	Student
4.	F2	Female	21	Javanese	Student

## DISCUSSION

### ***The Portrayal of Mulan as the Symbol of Women in Disney's Cartoon Mulan 1998***

Regarding the storyline, respondents M1, M2, F1, and F2 shared similar responses. They declared that Mulan had to battle in place of her ailing father. Mulan beat the Huns and saved the emperor. She is depicted as a bold, brave, intelligent, and resourceful woman. However, there are interesting findings on the response of M2 and F1. M2 responded by pointing out that Mulan, as a woman, is expected to be an ideal woman and nice wife, that demonstrating the existence of societal expectations.

*"As asian, Mulan was expected by her parents to be "perfect woman" and a good-wife. on the other hand, mulan feel different. She often feel she's not what she meant to be, which means what her family wants. (M2)"*

In addition, F1 mentioned that women are limited to staying at home, being wives, and taking care of children. This remark emphasizes traditional gender roles and women's inferiority.

*"young woman that living in century where woman can't do anything but just stay in home and as a wife or mother. Instead to agree with the rules, she bravely participated with a battle group and disguise as a man in order to save her father. Back with the reality condition for that past century, which mulan forbidden to take a deal something bigger just because she's a woman, so that's how the problem started. (F1)"*

It's interesting to note that F1 was motivated to respond this way by identical events she experienced as a female in her environment. The context and experiences of F1 shaped her understanding of Mulan's gender role throughout that period. Meanwhile, the other respondents stated that they never experience similar treatment.

*" yes I have some but only once or twice for in my life. (F1)"*

### ***The Portrayal of Mulan as The Symbol of Women in Disney's Live Action Mulan 2020***

Regarding the plot, three of the four respondents mentioned there were a few distinctions.

*"Actually not that different with the old version but there are things that slightly distinct. In example, the dragon changed with a phoenix and the portrayal of Mulan become more realistic in a way honoring the culture, it's more central in the china's value until the sense of romantic is gone. (F1)"*

*"Almost as same as Mulan 1998, but this time, she have a sister, doesn't have a sidekick like mushu, Witch is her enemy. (M2)"*

*"sama aja kayanya kurang lebih tapi live-action version has a serious and dramatic tone, focus on realism and action."*

*"It's more or less the same but the live-action version has a serious and dramatic tone, focusing on realism and action. (F2)"*

Nonetheless, M1 claimed that the plot remains the same because the challenges that she has to face remain the same.

*" Same as the Disney one. She faces challenges. (M1)"*

In this version, instead of emphasizing the gender stereotypes Mulan encountered, respondents concentrated more on the women empowerment part of Mulan's persona. Mulan is presented as being more brave, wise, and chi-skilled. There is less emphasis on the romance aspect and a greater focus on Mulan's journey toward self-actualization.

*"The old Mulan cartoon from '98 is more about her journey to save China by dressing up as a guy, mixing in jokes with messages about bravery and family love. The 2020 live-action one gets more serious, focusing on Mulan growing as a person and dealing with duty versus who she really is. It's got real-looking scenes and dives deep into honor and sacrifice in a big way. (M1)"*

*" It takes greater emotion between her itself. She's more brave, wise, focus on what her goals are, and the skills of her abilities showed more with the completion of chi. Not like the old version where Mulan's romance relation looks become the subplot. (F1)"*

M2's answer revealed an intriguing finding when he brought up Mulan's connection with the witch. Mulan was able to encourage the witch to transform into a better person because they share the same feeling as a woman and the owner of Chi. This is interesting because this statement was only expressed by M2, who is an Ambonese male. This may be caused due to having female siblings in the family with a closer and intense relationship

intensity. Ambonese believe maintaining meaningful relationships with others are essential in life.

*“ Not only she fight for her kind, she also understand the witch, which is women and make the witch walk-out from her dark path. (M2)”*

Furthermore, F1 claimed that in her society, she had gone through similar experiences as Mulan.

*“ Though in the live action Mulan showed beyond the old version, I could still see Mulan is a brave wise smart young woman that not appreciated enough. (F1)”*

### **The Existing Gender Stereotypes in The Respondent's Society**

Three of the four respondents reported encountering gender stereotypes in their environments.

*“The expectation that men should be strong and assertive, while women are often seen as nurturing or expected to focus more on domestic responsibilities. (M1)”*

*“as a leader, men are prioritized when woman take a move first, like chat, she will called as a ‘murahan’ a woman will be the one to blame when the house or the child not taken care rightly which actually those are together assignment a woman must to be able cook. (F1)”*

*“women should fulfill the domestic roles such as household chores, childcare, and maintaining home, a woman should stay at home and not go to war like Mulan. (F2)”*

It is known that respondents' decoding process is influenced by their understanding of stereotypes in society, which is then linked to Mulan's function, and resulting in the responses listed above.

Table 1. Analysis Result

No.	Respondent's Code	The Portrayal of Mulan as the Symbol of Women in Disney's Cartoon Mulan 1998	The Portrayal of Mulan as The Symbol of Women in Disney's Live Action Mulan 2020
1.	M1	Dominant	Dominant
2.	F1	Dominant	Dominant
3.	M2	Dominant	Dominant
4.	F2	Dominant	Dominant



## **Dominant**

According to Hall (1980), dominant hegemonic is the phenomenon where the audience adopts the producer's preferred reading. This means that they perceive the message exactly as it is encoded, in accordance with prevailing cultural and ideological attitudes. In the terms of *The Portrayal of Mulan as the Symbol of Women in Disney's Cartoon Mulan 1998*, all respondents agreed that she is a bold, brave, intelligent, and resourceful woman. Despite being pressured by her parents to get married, she opposed traditional gender roles and fought to replace her father. In the end, she defeated the Huns and saved the emperor.

It goes the same regarding *The Portrayal of Mulan as The Symbol of Women in Disney's Live Action Mulan 2020*. In the 2020 version, respondents concentrated more on the women empowerment part of Mulan's persona. Mulan is presented as being more brave, wise, and chi-skilled. There is less emphasis on the romance aspect and a greater focus on Mulan's journey toward self-actualization. It is inline with the meaning that *Mulan 2020* delivered.

## **CONCLUSION**

Analyzing Disney's "Mulan" movies from 1998 and 2020 shows how Mulan is seen as a strong symbol of women's empowerment. People from different backgrounds see Mulan as brave, smart, and tough, going against what society expects of her. Both films succeed in making audiences understand Mulan's character as intended by the filmmakers – a brave woman who breaks norms to achieve great things.

In the 1998 animated film, Mulan's bravery and sacrifice to protect her family stand out. She challenges traditional roles by joining the army disguised as a man, showing courage and loyalty to her family. The 2020 live-action movie focuses more on Mulan's journey to discover herself and her unique powers, downplaying romance. This adaptation reflects modern ideas about gender roles and empowerment.

Audiences' views of Mulan are shaped by their own cultures and experiences, making the films meaningful across different societies. Disney successfully portrays Mulan as a powerful symbol of empowerment, resonating with people who value stories of courage and identity in a changing world.

In summary, Disney's *Mulan* movies go beyond entertainment, challenging stereotypes and inspiring viewers with Mulan's courage, empowerment, and the universal quest for self-expression and fulfillment.

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