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Illes Balears**

Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres

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Representation of feminist heroism in *Moana* (2016) in the context of fourth-wave feminism

Agustina Boumouchakian Martín

Grau d'Estudis Anglesos

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DNI de l'alumne: 43183746G

Treball tutelat per Dra. Katarzyna Beata Paszkiewicz
Departament de Filologia Espanyola, Moderna y Clàssica

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Abstract

This paper examines the transgressive representation of femininity in Disney's film *Moana*. Drawing on the concept of gender performativity coined by Judith Butler it will analyse the change in female representation that led to heroines like Moana. Key scenes of the film will be studied in connection to Moana's active performance and strong personality to demonstrate that in the context of the fourth-wave feminism, and as a Disney heroine, Moana embodies the enduring feminist values of empowerment and agency constituting a continuity with the feminist agenda. The incorporation of female solidarity as a new component in Disney films will also be considered as the factor that inscribes Moana in the feminist, rather than in the post-feminist discourse. First, it will examine the evolution of female representation that paved the way for the emergence of female heroines in the Disney film industry. Then, it will address the concepts of empowerment and agency to analyse them in relation to the protagonist's performance of femininity. Finally, it will conclude by drawing a parallel between online support communities, characteristics of fourth-wave feminism, and the role of Moana's grandmother.

Keywords:

Moana, femininity, gender performativity, heroism, fourth-wave feminism

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Introduction

Founded by Walt Disney in 1923, The Walt Disney Company is currently “the second biggest media conglomerate in the world by revenue. It made about 55 billion dollars last year alone in revenue” (Brownless 2018). It was designed as a source of entertainment for children to enjoy animated films, acquire merchandise and visit the Disney World theme park. However, Walt Disney Animation Studios has function as a state apparatus that, apart from entertainment, has also delivered patriarchal discourses to children: “these films possess at least as much cultural authority and legitimacy for teaching roles, values, and ideals as more traditional sites of learning” (Giroux 1999, 84). This is especially relevant in the case of female representation due to the extensive scholarly criticism Disney princesses have received in terms of their embodiment of traditional femininity and gender roles. Stone (1975) argues that earlier female protagonists were “not only passive and pretty, but also unusually patient, obedient, industrious, and quiet” (44) and Do Rozario (2004) affirms that they were submissively confined to housekeeping tasks while waiting for some exciting event to take place (37).

Women’s studies as an academic discipline emerged during the women’s liberation movement also known as second-wave feminism in the early 1970s. It triggered a new body of research that evidenced the negatively stereotyped representation of women on TV and claimed for a less conservative adaptation of female characters. In this view, “Disney’s depiction of princesses changed in response to a changing society; in an America that had adapted many feminist precepts, Disney needed to create more modern, more independent princess stories” (Rothschild 2013, 12). Consequently, Disney protagonists have undergone a potentially liberating evolution in their representation by abandoning conservative discourses on gender. This change has resulted in the production of modern films such as *Brave* (2012) and *Frozen I* (2013) starred by heroines rather than princesses who perform proactive roles that enable the progression of the narrative. Following the same path towards a more transgressive Disney female representation, *Moana* (2016) depicts the journey of a young heroine who embarks on a dangerous quest willing to face adverse situations in order to save her community. Additionally, another remarkable feature of the film concerns the non-Western scenario in which the story takes place since except for *Lilo and Stitch* (2002), *Moana* is the second Disney film that dives into the Polynesian culture. This has called special attention among postcolonial scholars who have developed mixed responses. On the

one hand, Anjirbag (2018) states that despite Disney's effort, the corporation is still conveying stereotypical representations of otherness in an analysis of how colonialism is embedded in the narrative through opening, musical and animated texture techniques used to attribute authenticity to the portrayal of a non-hegemonic culture. On the other hand, Hyland (2020) argues that Mana Wahine, a Maori feminist discourse supporting women's "agency, knowledge and mana (or power)" (13), is embodied by Moana as she abandons the traditional representation of Oceanic women as dusky maidens by displaying an athletic female body.

Although analysing *Moana* from a postcolonial perspective is extremely relevant given the non-Western context of the film, this paper will focus mainly on gender because, even though some publications address Moana's female body, in fact, there has been little discussion about Moana's performance of femininity in connection to her heroic behaviour. Interestingly, scholars have frequently focused on male figures to explore hypermasculinity, phallic symbolism and masculine competitiveness (Streiff and Dundes 2017) or misogyny (Hollowell 2020). Other authors have analysed the representation of feminine beauty in terms of hair style (Leader 2017) or Moana's performance within an androcentric atmosphere that continues to prevail in the narrative (Seybold 2020). However, they did not focus only on Moana; they studied her together with other modern Disney heroines and often from a post-feminist point of view (Leader 2017; Seybold 2020). The concept of post-feminism emerged as parallel to the third-wave feminism during the 1990s and generated different definitions of the term. According to Angela McRobbie (2004), it "positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force" (255). Nevertheless, more recently, scholars have considered *Moana* in the context of the development of a fourth-wave feminism, that began around 2010. Anders (2019) examines *Moana* as a coming of age fourth-wave film in which the protagonist gains her own independence challenging traditional gender expectations and Pérez (2019) considers Moana as an independent fourth-wave princess due to the absence of a love story and the secondary role of male characters.

This paper stems from these debates, raising several questions: Can Moana be considered a post-feminist or a feminist heroine? What type of heroism does she represent? Does this representation reflect changes in the feminist movement itself? Through a close examination of selected key scenes, this paper aims at analysing the characteristics of Moana's personality to show that the film portrays her as a representative of certain changes in representation that took place in the last decade and that originated a new wave of feminist

heroines coinciding with the resurgence of fourth-wave feminism after post-feminism.¹ Therefore, this paper contends, Moana can be inscribed in the feminist, rather than in the post-feminist discourse. Drawing on the concept of gender performativity coined by Judith Butler (1990), this paper will further argue that in the context of the fourth-wave feminism, and as a Disney heroine, Moana embodies the enduring feminist values of empowerment and agency constituting a continuity with the feminist agenda while the narrative incorporates a new component in Disney films: female solidarity. The spirit of loyalty and community among women has been present in feminism since the first wave. However, while this female solidarity is not new in feminist movements, it is new in Disney films as observed in a tendency started around 2010 in which the relationship between female characters is governed by friendship rather than rivalry as illustrated by *Brave* (mother-daughter relationship) and *Frozen* (sisters relationship). In this respect, the paper will consider feminist film theory scholars such as Laura Mulvey (1975) and her male gaze theory as well as Yvonne Tasker's (1993) examination of action film. It will also contemplate Naila Kabber's (1999) definition of empowerment and Kathryn Abrams' (1999) description of agency. Finally, it will look at Ealasaid Munro's (2013) explanation of online dynamics associated with the fourth-wave feminism and at Sidney Cobb's (1976) view on social support theory to analyse the recent incorporation of female solidarity in Disney films as a cinematic response to online support communities.

In what follows, this paper will examine the evolution of female representation in Hollywood films towards a more progressive portrayal that paved the way for the emergence of female heroines like Moana in the Disney film industry. Then, the second part will address the concepts of empowerment and agency and will analyse them in relation to the protagonist's performance of femininity. Lastly, a parallel will be drawn between the implications and effects of digital aid communities and the role of Moana's grandmother.

1. From the object of the gaze to an active heroine

The definition of gender (cultural) as necessarily opposed to sex (biological) has been questioned in the late 1980s. While Simone De Beauvoir (1949) claimed that gender is a cultural construction composed of social meanings and values associated with being male or

¹ I consider *Brave* the first Disney film to incorporate these changes in representation triggering a set of films that belong to this new wave, being *Raya and the Last Dragon* the latest film released currently in 2021.

female, Judith Butler went one step further and argued that gender is a performance constituted by the repetition of acts: “a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (1999, 179). Being gender a binary category, certain performative practices have been identified as masculine or feminine by ideological state apparatuses that reinforce hegemonic discourses on gender roles. Such is the case of the film industry in which Joanne Hollows (2000) informs about the inaccurate “assumption that the media acts as a ‘window on the world’, that media images are, *or should be*, a reflection or representation of society” (22)². Instead, she states that “the media do not represent or misrepresent gendered identities but work to construct and structure the meaning of gender” (22). Therefore, cinema actively participates in the construction of gender attributing feminine or masculine value to negotiated performances. Moreover, the way gender is performed and legitimated through cinematic productions has enabled the perpetuation of conservative performances of femininity. Claire Johnston (1999) describes Hollywood as a machine that constructs myths about feminine practices: “Myth then, as a form of speech or discourse, [...] transmits and transforms the ideology of sexism and renders it invisible – when it is made visible it evaporates – and therefore natural” (32). Considering the Disney film industry, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) are primary examples of traditional femininity embodied by their protagonists. On the contrary, *Moana*’s opening scene paves the way for debunking myths about femininity among Disney princesses. A frightening narration about monsters threatening Moana’s island, Motunui, is told causing fear among children while expectation and intrigue in the protagonist. In this instance, she is reflecting her bold spirit being both an infant and a female, an aspect that predicts her challenging performance of femininity in the rest of the film.

The fact that *Moana* can be read as transgressing the traditional performance of femininity is connected to the display of the female body on the silver screen. Building on Beauvoir’s view of gender as cultural, Butler (1988) describes the body as a “cultural sign” (522) that follows gender expectations from a particular moment in time: “the body is always an embodying of possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention” (521). In this respect, at the outset of the film industry, the depiction of the female body was constructed according to the conservative gender discourse of the era. Employing Freud’s theory of scopophilia, Laura Mulvey (2006) developed the male gaze theory to explain the

² In this study, “media” refers more specifically to Hollywood films.

representation of the female body as the object of male pleasure: “in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (346). In animated Disney films, this theory alludes to the passive and objectifying performances as delicate and vulnerable characters represented by classical Disney princesses³ who yearn to be rescued by the long-awaited prince. Nevertheless, second-wave feminists claimed for a change in female representation that originated a new performance of femininity in which female characters actively participate in the development of the plot in action genre films. Yvonne Tasker (2002) affirms that “action heroes and heroines are cinematically constructed almost exclusively through their physicality, and the display of the body forms a key part of the visual excess that is offered in the muscular action cinema” (35). Accordingly, rather than a happily ever after Disney story, *Moana* is considered an action film due to the active performance of the protagonist in connection to the athletic display of her body. Moana’s heroic nature is rooted in her destiny since her childhood dream of discovering what is beyond the reef becomes her mission the moment she decides to navigate the unknown seas to guarantee the welfare of her people.

Moana’s action performances that depict her as a heroine are reflected in three different fighting scenes. In her quest to restore the heart of the goddess of nature, Te Fiti, she confronts supernatural creatures accompanied by Maui, a demigod guilty of endangering Moana’s village. Firstly, instead of finding refuge in the boat, the heroine’s unconscious reaction is to fight side by side with Maui in their encounter against Kakamora, a coconut pirate army. Although the demigod surrenders and escapes, Moana cannot concede a defeat and ignoring Maui’s words “they’re just gonna kill ya” (Clements and Musker 2016, 47:57) she confronts the coconuts and recovers the heart. Later, when they oppose Tomatoa, a giant crab, Moana manages to escape from a prison to help Maui and faces the giant creature on her own; she tricks him to finally defeat him. As a result, not only does she retrieve Maui’s magical hook, but she also saves his life. The third fighting scene involves Moana’s ability in sailing as she uses the boat to trick Te Ka, the lava monster, and successfully cross the barrier islands to arrive to Te Fiti. Concerning the dynamics and significance of these events, in the last two scenes, it is by virtue of Moana’s mental astuteness in misleading the monsters that they triumph, a characteristic trait in heroines considered by Elizabeth Hills (1999): “as female characters who take up the central spaces in the traditionally ‘masculine’ genre of

³ I refer to the protagonists of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*.

action cinema, they derive their power from their ability to think” (39). Regarding physical features, the protagonist possesses strength and agility, traditionally attributed to heroes, which allow her to defend herself and deftly attack the enemies as reflected in each fight. Similarly, Gladys L. Knight (2010) asserts that although “men – not women – have set the standard for toughness” (xiii), the representation of heroines like Moana “illustrates that toughness and action are not exclusive to men” (vii). Maui and Moana’s team evinces that both are equally prepared to defy the monsters since their action performances are balanced respecting their fighting skills. In addition, “the heroine’s move from her position as a subsidiary character within the action narrative, to the central role of *action heroine*, a figure who commands the narrative” (Tasker 2002, 132) becomes appreciable the occasions in which Maui abandons the fight and Moana is not intimidated by having to continue the confrontation individually, showing her courageous and determined behaviour.

Apart from portraying Moana as a heroine, action scenes play a major role in questioning the conservative representation of femininity in older Disney films. The change in female body representation that led to the emergence of female action characters is linked to Butler’s (1999) performance of gender. Moana’s active development in action scenes challenges performative practices traditionally considered masculine. This unconventional way of performing gender evokes images that “disrupt the conventional notion [...] that women either are, or should be, represented exclusively through the codes of femininity” (Tasker 2002, 132) as reproduced in classical Disney films⁴. In like manner, the myths on femininity analysed by Johnston (1999) are deconstructed through Moana’s heroic performances in fighting scenes. Action sceneries involve continuous movement of the protagonist in jumping, running or dodging to confront the enemies. These confrontations prevent Moana from embodying conventional feminine traits present in classical Disney princesses such as “docility, delicateness, [...] emotionalism, physical weakness, dependency (and) gullibility” (Knight 2010, xv). Instead, she “represents a potentially transgressive figure capable of expanding the popular perception of women’s roles and abilities” (Brown 2011, 43). Furthermore, *Moana* also succeeds in challenging Mulvey’s (2006) theory of female objectification. Considering Butler’s (1988) notion of the body as “an embodying of possibilities” (521) Moana’s dynamic body display distances from being the object of the male gaze. The fact that the protagonist is a female who actively participates in action scenes alongside her male partner contradicts the traditionally passive role of women in films.

⁴ I refer again to *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*.

Opposing to conservative cinema, her performance throughout the film is not centred on men's interests but on the overcoming of dangerous situations. The only moment in which Moana consciously attracts the gaze of other characters occurs in fighting scenes to defeat the enemies. Accordingly, characters like Moana “transgress both cinematic genre codes and cultural gender codes” (Hills 1999, 38) when blurring the line between feminine or masculine cultural practices with her liberal performance. Hence, she evinces the arbitrary distinction between gendered behaviour, showing that women are equally capable of performing action roles traditionally assigned to men, as well as the change in representation that transformed Disney female characters from damsels in distress into active heroines.

2. Moana’s embodiment of empowerment and agency

The protagonist’s heroic character is linked to feminist values represented in her transgressive performance. One of the attributes that define Moana as a feminist heroine is her empowered attitude. According to Naila Kabber (1999), empowerment “is inescapably bound up with the condition of disempowerment and refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability” (437). In this context, Motunui island only follows one strict rule repeatedly reaffirmed by Moana’s father: “no one goes beyond the reef” (Clements and Musker 2016, 14:30); however, Moana has always felt a strong attraction to navigate the ocean: “I wish I could be the perfect daughter, but I come back to the water no matter how hard I try” (16:30). Chief Tui represents an authoritative figure who “makes way for Moana’s eventual succession of his chiefdom by requiring her to remain obedient to his vision for her life and her behavior” (Hollowell 2020, 7). Similarly, Moana’s mother demonstrates to have passively accepted their role in the community: “sometimes who we wish we were and what we wish we could do it’s just not meant to be” (Clements and Musker 2016, 15:55). Despite Chief Tui’s strong prohibition on sailing beyond the reef: “the island gives us what we need and no one leaves” (11:26), the protagonist feels empowered to challenge his authority. Therefore, even though the young heroine was disempowered by her own parents, engaging in her role as the next chief, she chooses to break the rule to stop the spread of darkness in her village: “Moana is not only fearless, independent, and brave: she is also the one who actively decides on her course of action. She does not need saving from others – she does the saving –” (Colombo and Muir 2020, 4). This choice reflects how her altruistic personality boots her decision making while motivating her

to act according to her own principles and the benefits of Motunui. Additionally, the empowering lyrics she sings when departing from the island: “every turn I take, every trail I track is a choice I make, now I can't turn back” (Clements and Musker 2016, 31:11) illustrate that Moana has finally acquired “the ability to make choices” (Kabber 1999, 437) that constitutes the basis of feminist thought.

Being a young and inexperienced girl, Moana’s choice of leaving Motunui is of great significance. “Motunui is paradise, who would want to go anywhere else?” (Clements and Musker 2016, 4:38) asks rhetorically Chief Tui contrasting the island to what is beyond the reef: “storms and rough seas” (4:26). Although Motunui represents a safe place for its inhabitants, the protagonist is willing to sacrifice the idea of paradise, moving out from her comfort zone, and travel beyond the reef to restore Te Fiti’s heart. The villagers assure Moana “you must find happiness right where you are” (9:26) but she feels a strong sense of duty towards her people and “despite the failure of her first attempt to go beyond the reef, she does not let this deter her from beginning her journey to find Maui” (Colombo and Muir 2020, 9). Consequently, she represents “what it means to be free in terms of following one’s passions, choosing for oneself, and taking full responsibility for one’s actions” (Devlin 2019, 115) because, as an empowered heroine, Moana trusts her own physical and mental capabilities to take decisive decisions.

Moreover, agency is another value that characterises her feminist heroism. Building on the concept of self-definition by Diana Meyer, Kathryn Abrams (1999) defines agency as “determining how one conceives of oneself in terms of the goals one wants to achieve and the kind of person, with particular values and attributes, one considers oneself to be” (824). Moana’s goal is to accomplish her mission to save Motunui and it is her sense of duty and determination that lead her to success. Since the beginning, the protagonist is resolute to fulfil her quest as she resists being swayed by Maui’s arrogant attitude and courageously commands him: “you are not my hero [...] I’m here because you stole the heart of Te Fiti and you will board my boat, sail across the sea and put it back” (Clements and Musker 2016, 37:51). Further, Moana’s self-confidence fosters her willingness to perform traditional male activities such as sailing: “teach me to sail” (51:45) she tells Maui but the demigod underestimates her: “it’s called wayfinding, princess” (51:57) he answers implying that Moana lacks the necessary knowledge for developing such skills as a princess would do. However, the protagonist affirms that “I’m not a princess, I’m the daughter of the chief” (52:08) to distance herself from the label of an unskilful princess and indicate that she is as capable as Maui to sail. Such determining attitude demonstrates that “she defines herself as a

strong and independent young woman – capable of living life on her own terms” (Devlin 2019, 116). Moana’s sailing abilities are demonstrated when “she develops an expertise as a voyager, growing from a helpless traveler [...] finally to an independent wayfinder” (113). In addition, Moana’s hesitation before entering the realm of monsters is overcome by her bravery and commitment as she considers herself able to face risky situations. This behaviour astonishes Maui that states: “so, daughter of the chief, I thought you stayed in the village, you know, kissing babies and things” (Clements and Musker 2016, 55:34), assuming that Moana’s role would consist in passive and nurturing tasks rather than embarking on a dangerous adventure. Finally, her willingness to achieve her goal is also reflected in the persistence shown in the occasions Maui gives up, suggesting that she does not consider her partner an indispensable backing figure to confront the enemies.

As a result, the agency present in Moana’s performance challenges gender expectations internalised by Maui and Chief Tui. “Congratulations on not being dead, girlie. You surprised me” (49:13) declares the demigod after their encounter with Kakamora. Addressing Moana as “girlie” indicates that Maui did not expect a young girl to fight and defeat the coconut army the way the protagonist did. Once won their subsequent fight against Tomatoa, Maui adopts a serious tone and affirms: “I appreciate what you did down there. Took guts [...] for a little girl, child, whatever, who had no business being down there, you did me a solid” (1:05:51). This scene reflects how his discourse begins to change; after having ridiculed her at the beginning: “you are gonna stay here with the other chicken” (54:59), now he considers the adequate words to avoid referring to her gender and admits Moana’s courage and agency to act according to the circumstances. Hence, “agency and action may be taken by an act of conscious choice, and, in the case of Moana, it is the eponymous girl hero who seizes the opportunity” (Mouzakis 2019, 73). Considering sailing, both Maui and Chief Tui recognise their initial prejudices towards Moana’s physical abilities and her role in the community. The heroine offers Maui to join her people as a “master of wayfinding” (Clements and Musker 2016, 1:32:55) but he answers: “they already have one” (1:32:58) acknowledging her skills. In the same way, Moana’s father affirms: “it suits you” (1:34:33) referring to her wild spirit in sailing across the ocean. The protagonist begins to instruct her people in wayfinding, reflecting that “it is Chief Tui who gives deference, moral attention, and respect to Moana, rather than her to him” (Hollowell 2020, 8). Consequently, Moana’s agency allow her to occupy an equal position of power with her father instead of being subordinated to him.

3. Female supportive characters

Fourth-wave feminism is characterised by digital activism as a modern practice to engage in the movement. Ealasaid Munro (2013) argues that the internet is central to the fourth wave as it “has facilitated the creation of a global community of feminists who use the internet both for discussion and activism” (23). Social networks, such as Twitter, have contributed to the creation of global communities through hashtag activism. As stated by Tombleson and Wolf (2016), contemporary authors define this new discipline “as the act of fighting for or supporting a cause with the use of hashtags as primary channel to raise awareness of an issue and encourage debate via social media” (2). Feminist discourse has incorporated the use of hashtags such as #MeToo, #EverydaySexism or #NoMorePage3 to benefit from the feeling of solidarity and protection among women that online communities evoke: “the online telling and connecting of personal stories distinguish hashtag feminism from earlier forms of feminist personal politics” (Clark 2016, 2). In the Disney context, the film industry has readapted the relationship among women, abandoning the stereotypical wicked stepmother and female villain reproduced in classical films and favouring a generous treatment among them. Therefore, *Moana* can be considered a fourth-wave feminist Disney film due to the supportive relationship between the protagonist and her grandmother. Empathising with women undergoing difficult situations is paramount in order to make them feel backed up and online communities provide a space for the spreading of such support: “feminist solidarity and collective action are founded on beliefs about the role of individuals in engaging with others to bring about radical, visionary change, standing and acting together” (Sweetman 2013, 217). Moana’s grandmother plays the same role as digital aid communities in assisting her granddaughter to pursue her dream regardless of her father’s strong opposition. Although the community teaches Moana her duties as the next chief, her grandmother positions herself as the only supportive figure of Moana’s authentic dream: “you may hear a voice inside, and if the voice starts to whisper to follow the furthest star, Moana that voice inside is who you are” (Clements and Musker 2016, 10:02), sings the old lady guiding her towards the village’s boats.

The solidarity expressed by her grandmother enables the protagonist to feel supported and voyage beyond the reef. In agreement with Sidney Cobb (1976), social support refers to the “information leading the subject to believe that he is cared for and loved” (300). This information is transmitted to Moana when her grandmother reveals her where her desire to navigate stems from, showing her the village’s hidden canoes, Moana enthusiastically discovers that “we were voyagers” (Clements and Musker 2016, 26:03). To demonstrate her confidence in Moana, her grandmother entrusts her Te Fiti’ heart and guides her towards the

role of heroine she was born to perform: “I was there that day, the ocean chose you” (27:10), and, even though when she sickens Moana does not want to leave the island, the old lady assures her: “there is no way you could go that I won’t be with you” (30:16). These encouraging and nurturing words arouse the feelings of being “cared for and loved” (Cobb 1976, 300) in Moana, achieving the same objective as online communities in guaranteeing support and security among women. Besides, “Moana brings about a positive change with the introduction of two secondary female characters, Moana’s mother and grandmother” (Colombo and Muir 2020, 11). The role played by her mother is also fundamental since she sympathises with her daughter and rather than prohibiting her journey, she defies her authoritative husband and allows Moana to sail (Clements and Musker 2016, 30:50). Likewise, another defining feature of support includes the “information leading the subject to believe that he is esteemed and valued” (Cobb 1976, 300) present during the heroine’s departure from Motunui. Her grandmother incarnated in a manta ray accompanies her, boosting Moana’s sense of self-worth: “yes I know, that I can go [...] Soon I’ll know, how far I’ll go” (Clements and Musker 2016, 31:37). Avoiding the feeling of loneliness in women is an aim also shared in digital communities as part of the solidarity they promote. Finally, the grandmother reappears to assist Moana in a decisive situation. After Maui abandons her, she questions her role as the chosen one to accomplish such a mission: “I’m not the right person, you have to choose someone else” (1:18:09) laments the heroine offering back Te Fiti’s heart to the ocean. “This moment of doubt in Moana’s journey is instrumental in cementing her status as a female hero” (Mouzakis 2019, 72) since depending on the decision she takes, she may or may not bring prosperity back to her village. In order to solve her granddaughter’s internal doubt, she poses a question to her: “do you know who you are?” (1:20:47). This different approach serves as guidance towards Moana’s awareness of her own potential and self-trust to resume the adventure: “I will carry you here in my heart, you’ll remind me, that come what may, I know the way, I am Moana” (1:21:50). Therefore, the grandmother proves to perform an essential role as the supportive female figure behind Moana’s heroic success.

Conclusion

This paper has analysed the change in female representation within the cinema industry in which women stopped being objects of male entertainment to become heroines and perform active and leading roles in action genre films traditionally assigned to men. Encouraged by

second-wave feminists, this reconfiguration of the female body led to challenging performances of femininity that set into question hegemonic discourses on gender roles. However, it is not until the emergence of fourth-wave feminism that Disney developed a new wave of feminist heroines that provoked a rupture with the earlier Disney princesses. Moana has proven to represent a feminist heroine through the development of her performance and her personality traits. This paper has examined her intense involvement and skilful role in action scenes in connection to her innovative performance as a female Disney character. The feeling of empowerment that guides her to make her own choices in defying her father's authority for the benefit of the community as well as the agency Moana reflects in engaging in male associated practices such as sailing or confronting monsters have also been discussed. Although the features of Moana's heroic performance have been present in Hollywood heroines from previous waves, the caring relationship among female characters has enabled *Moana* to be inscribed in the fourth-wave feminist movement. The incorporation of affection among women in Disney films has demonstrated to be embodied by Moana's grandmother whose role as a supportive figure involves the same objective as fourth-wave feminist online communities: show solidarity and provide protection among women. Therefore, it can be argued that *Moana* succeeds in breaking the mould of a traditional Disney princess and advocates for the feminist movement in stepping towards a more progressive representation of femininity. Interestingly, considering the scope limitations of the present study, it would also be worth analysing in detail the evolution of Maui's conservative perception of gender roles to reflect that not only did the representation of female characters change, but also the attitude of male characters towards this progressive performance of femininity.

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