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GENDER ISSUES AND CARTOON CHARACTERS:
THE CASE OF *PHINEAS & FERB*

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ABSTRACT

TV animated series *Phineas & Ferb* stands out as a major icon in today's animation shows for kids and pre-teens. The aim of this paper is to analyse the handling of gender roles in this show with the purpose of evaluating how balanced is the representation of the male and female figures. In order to do so, we will present a theoretical basis in which to situate our work by briefly referring to some ideas from classic feminism, particularly within the so-called "images-of-women school". Next we will conduct an analysis of an episode sample from the series including a quantitative study of male and female characters; the gender-related occupational patterns; the gendered-images projected in crowd scenes; and the specific characteristics of the main characters. The extracted conclusions will establish the way in which the category gender is dealt with in this series.

Keywords: TV-animated series, gender roles, child and pre-teen audiences, stereotypes, images of women, feminist theories.

RESUMEN

La serie de televisión *Phineas & Ferb* ha destacado como un gran icono de la animación actual dirigida a un público infantil y preadolescente. El objetivo de este trabajo es analizar el manejo de los roles de género en esta serie para evaluar cuán equilibrada es la representación de las figuras masculinas y femeninas. Para ello, presentaremos una base teórica en la que situar nuestro trabajo aludiendo brevemente algunas ideas del feminismo clásico, en especial a la cuestión de las imágenes de la mujer. A continuación acometeremos un análisis de una muestra de episodios de la serie que incluirá un estudio cuantitativo de los personajes masculinos y femeninos; los patrones ocupacionales por sexos; las imágenes de género que proyectan las escenas corales; y las características específicas de los personajes principales. Las conclusiones extraídas del análisis establecerán cómo funciona la representación de la categoría género dentro de la serie.

Palabras clave: serie de animación, roles de género, público infantil y preadolescente, estereotipos, imágenes de la mujer, teorías feministas.

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1. INTRODUCTION

‘People share a common nature but are trained in gender roles.’

- Lillie Devereux Blake

Every day millions of children, and people from all ages, sit in front of a screen in order to watch their favourite animated films and TV-series. We, as individuals, do not perceive to the fullest how the storylines and characters of these fictional representations influence us and shape our vision of society. As kids, our minds are being constantly moulded by the exposure to these audiovisual influences which condition our perception of gender roles and relations in ways often underpinned by biased, traditional views of men and women that stand in the way of a more egalitarian gender representation.

The decision to focus on this particular TV show is based on world-wide impact that *Phineas & Ferb* has had over the last eight years (the series officially premiered on February 1, 2008 on Disney Channel). So much so, that nowadays it has become an emblematic representative of contemporary TV animation for a generation of children and teens all over the world. One could argue that, as many other products in popular culture, this one can also be analysed as a social document —one that inevitably showcases and conveys to young audiences values, norms, and beliefs that are active in society at large, including those involving gender issues.

I will start my discussion by briefly approaching a number of concepts that may provide a theoretical framework for a gender-based exploration of this famous cartoon. Next I will more specifically zoom in on the connection between the images-of-woman feminist topic and the stereotypical representation of gender in animated films and TV-series. Having established this theoretical basis, I will proceed to develop my case analysis proper by focusing on the gendered representation of the series’ main characters from several perspectives. Finally, the results of this analysis will be discussed.

The aim of this paper, in short, is to conduct a gender-based (yet at the same time eclectic) exploration of this animated TV series so as to highlight the way in which it handles and presents gender roles. The comparative study of the male and female characters regarding their presence and relevance in the series, role assignment and labour situation, and characterological features will indicate that the depiction of these characters in terms of

gender roles perpetuates to some extent an unbalanced and traditional representation of the latter and still involves negative stereotypes about women.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Gender roles and images of woman: a recurrent topic

Before starting, it is important to define and differentiate some key concepts which are going to be significant for the purpose of this dissertation: gender roles and gender stereotypes. Following the respective definitions provided by Brannon (160), a gender role “consists of activities that men and women engage in with different frequencies [...]”. These gender-related behaviours thus became part of a pattern accepted as masculine or feminine”. On the contrary, a gender stereotype “consists of beliefs about the psychological traits and characteristics of, as well as the activities appropriate to, men or women”. In other words, gender roles are connected to behaviours, and gender stereotypes are connected to commonly accepted beliefs about what masculinity and femininity are. In addition, it is necessary to highlight the importance of stereotypes in our society. As Brannon (179) argues, “gender stereotypes affect how women and men think of themselves and how they evaluate their own behaviours as well as the behaviours of others”.

The aim of this opening section is to present a few basic concepts drawn from feminist criticism in order to situate our case within the framework of gender-based literary and cultural studies. It would certainly be beyond the scope of the present paper to even attempt to summarize the broad range of issues covered by feminist criticism, nor is it possible to boil them down to a particular thesis or a simple definition. Durant and Fabb (43) refer to the plurality of views of the critical approach by defining it as “consequently more a range of interconnected directions of work, seeking to restructure power relations, than a single direction to all aspects of which all feminists are committed”. Feminist criticism is not easily attributable to a single group of critics, but is rather the result of a long collective experience and it constitutes a dynamic and constantly changing critical stream. Despite, however, the many-sided character of the feminist interpretation of literature and culture, all its “waves” (first/second/third) and “schools”

(Anglosaxon/French) have one central point in common, which is to analyse and challenge the culturally imposed binary opposition of gender (masculine/feminine), and its resulting stereotypes. Gender is, therefore, a cultural construction and not a biological given. Simone de Beauvoir's famous line "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (330) aptly summarizes the point: gender is a cultural construction reflecting the differences between the situation of men and women, not an essential category. To put it quite simply, historically the masculine gender has been favoured in culture in most of societies, while the feminine gender has been disfavoured (Durant and Fabb 43).

The same authors provide a list of main issues which constitute the core of feminist literary criticism (46). One such issue, the one that is most relevant to our purposes, is the so-called "images of women school", which is focused on tracing women representations in male literature and questioning such imagery. Additionally, the practitioners of this variety of feminist critique (which was particularly strong within American feminism from the 1970s) proposed the pursuit of new alternative feminine images based on authenticity. Josephine Donovan, for example, claimed that "the primary assumption a critic in the 'images of women' school must make is an evaluation of the authenticity of the female characters" (qtd. in Newton 212). And she added the following:

Much of our literature in fact depends upon a series of fixed images of women, stereotypes. These reified forms, surprisingly few in number, are repeated over and over again through much of Western literature. The objectified images have one thing in common, however; they define the woman insofar as she relates to, serves, or thwarts the interests of men. (qtd. in Newton 212)

Along with Josephine Donovan's work, Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969) can be considered one of the most important texts in American second wave feminism, one which had a seminal social and cultural impact. In this classic feminist text, Millet undermines a patriarchal society in which the female is subordinated to the male, considered inferior and repressed in many orders of life. Regarding the domain of culture and the view of women as the content of literature, Millett argues that novelists like D.H. Lawrence or Norman Mailer (the "prisoners of the virility cult") portrayed their female characters and the relations between men and women in a clearly sexist way. Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker (123) explain that "Millett borrows from social science the important distinction between 'sex' and 'gender', where sex is determined biologically

but ‘gender’ is a psychological concept which refers to culturally acquired sexual identity, and she and other feminists have attacked social scientists who treat the culturally learned ‘female’ characteristics (e.g. passivity) as ‘natural’”. For Millet, the concept “sexual politics” refers to the power relations built and implemented by a male-ruled society in order to perpetuate the domination and subordination of women.

While the “images of women” approach had its heyday in past decades and in no way represents the vast wealth of feminist critical positions that resulted from contributions like *la gynocritique* or the broad range of interests within the so-called “third-wave feminism”, it continues to be relevant in current discussions about the representation of women in popular culture, advertising or the media. Lina A. Riccardelli and Robert J. Williams, for example, have tested contemporary perceptions about women’s and men’s values and countervalues which ultimately descend from the Victorian ethos. At the same time, they call our attention to the fact that such attributes, which were formerly very strict and constrained, are currently changing. They illustrated their results in the present table (qtd. in Brannon 179):

Femininity		Masculinity	
Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
Patient	Timid	Strong	Aggressive
Sensitive	Weak	Confident	Bossy
Devoted	Needs approval	Firm	Sarcastic
Responsible	Dependent	Forceful	Rude
Appreciative	Nervous	Carefree	Feels superior

We will continue scrutinising gendered contents in TV animated cartoon *Phineas & Ferb* in a later section of this graduation paper. Before that, however, we need to briefly consider the representation of women in animation works.

2.2. Woman stereotypes in animated films and TV series

“All television is educational television. The only question is, what is it teaching?” This famous quote by Nicholas Johnson (qtd. in McPherson Shilling, and Fuller 235) exemplifies the importance of TV in the individual’s socialization process: the values, beliefs, perspectives, and social norms which people learn and acquire from their culture. The television medium is considered nowadays an important and powerful agent – among other important players like family and school education - in the enculturation of children, due to the many hours that an average child spends watching animated films and TV series. Considering this, we can conclude that television cannot be left out as a key factor in the process of socialization, since it plays a vital role in the perception of gender roles in society.

For a long time, gender roles have been portrayed stereotypically in the media. Such stereotypes have affected women negatively, including those in either animation or live action films and TV shows; by comparison with men, women have often been underrepresented both in quantitative terms and in terms of their relevance to the storyline. Signorelli summarizes the stereotypes described in several studies concerning gender roles in the media:

Women are seen less often than men. When women do appear, they usually are younger than the men; they are also more attractive, nurturing, seen in the context of romantic interests, home and/ or family, and are more likely to be victimized. [...] Men, on the other hand, are presented as older and more powerful and potent than the women. (51)

More particularly as regards television, there are nowadays a large number of international channels dedicated to animation, the most popular ones being Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon and Disney Channel. Considering that our case study, the *Phineas & Ferb* series, is broadcasted by Disney Channel, it may be relevant to briefly refer to previous animated productions by The Walt Disney Company in connection with our topic of research. For many decades now,¹ Disney has been producing animated series and films in which the range of roles played by female characters has remained relatively

¹ Founded in 1923 by Walt Disney and Roy O. Disney, the company’s original name was Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio. After becoming the leading business in the American animation industry, the firm expanded its operations into other areas: live-action films, television shows, book publishing and theme parks.

stable. Towbin et al. analysed twenty-six Disney films to study how gendered contents and gender stereotypes were portrayed, and concluded that:

Although gender messages in Disney movies have become less obviously prescriptive, the movies continue to portray traditionally limiting images of gender. Men are depicted as physically aggressive, non-expressive, and as heroic saviors, particularly of women. Women are portrayed as beautiful, dependent on men, and engaged in domestic responsibilities. (35)

Also England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek conducted a study about the stereotypical representation of women in nine Disney Princess films: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Mulan* (1998), and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). More particularly, the authors of this study (558-559) coded the characteristics of the prince and princess characters according to the traditional stereotypes involved. These are summed up in the following tables:

Masculine	
Curious about princess	Athletic
Wants to explore	Engaging in intellectual activities
Physically strong	Brave
Assertive	Physically attractive
Unemotional	Leader
Independent	Gives advice
Inspires fear	

Feminine	
Tends to physical appearance	Sensitive
Physically weak	Tentative
Submissive	Helpful

Shows emotion	Troublesome
Affectionate	Fearful
Nurturing	Ashamed
Collapses crying	Described as physically attractive
Asks for or accepts advice or help	Victim

The study characterized the role of these ideal feminine figures and their contribution to the plots' resolution: "each princess showcased her skills as a caretaker and mother, was conventionally beautiful, had or gained social power and wealth, and was adored by other characters. Her stereotypical actions and her compliance within the gendered system [...] help to reinforce the desirability of traditional gender conformity." (565). Even so, the authors of this paper detected a slight progression over time towards more balanced gender representations in the above-mentioned animated movies: "The princess role retained its femininity over time, and was rewarded for that, but also expanded to incorporate some traditionally masculine characteristics." (566)

Other contributions on the same subject focus once more on contrasts between heroes and heroines and differences between female and male villains (Hoerrner 1996); or on the construction of the female self in patriarchal terms—at least in the earlier films— (Henke, Zimmerman Umble, and Smith 1996); but also the potential for feminine empowerment of a film like *Beauty and the Beast* (Downey 1996).

To conclude, there is a whole body of research on the impact of gender stereotypes in animated films and TV series and its repercussion on the socialization process of children. More specifically, contributions have been made on gender relations and feminine roles in animated motion pictures produced by Disney (the creators of the *Phineas & Ferb* franchise). At the risk of oversimplifying, these studies point at the presence and perpetuation of sexist stereotypes in these films, even though some of them also recognize that in the later productions the imbalance between male and female representations has somehow shifted towards more equal terms. However, even recent research work on contemporary animated cartoons like the one we propose to explore, continue to claim that: "while sometimes one glimpses a ray of evolution, in general terms we can talk about

a stereotyped transatlantic animated female who still bears on her shoulders an outdated concept of femininity” (Sánchez-Labela Martín 583, our translation).

3. METHODOLOGY

In order to carry out my analysis of Disney’s *Phineas & Ferb* in a way compatible with the length of this dissertation, I have selected a sample which only includes the first ten episodes of the series (see Table 1 in the Appendix), which ran for four seasons and no fewer than 222 episodes (leaving aside a TV movie, a theatrical film in progress, crossovers and other spin-offs). The episodes were viewed and studied from the official DVDs, which included the original audio and English subtitles. Having chosen the animated series and episodes to work with, we will proceed to explain the analysis.

In the first place, I carried out a quantitative gender-based analysis of the main characters and the episodic ones. Taking into account the large amount of background characters that feature in each episode, we only qualified them as episodic if they met two requirements. The first one is that the character must appear physically in the episode, not only to be mentioned. The second one is that the character must participate in a dialogue, either talking directly to someone or being talked to by another character. Characters not meeting these two requirements were ignored for the purpose of this analysis. A special case is the group of characters called the Fireside Girls, a female scout group that appear regularly in the series. They have been treated as one single character since they usually appear as a unity and do not act individually. In addition, their individual names are never mentioned, and the number Fireside Girls vary from episode to episode. Whenever a member of this group spoke individually, she was considered an episodic character for the purpose of this study.

For the second part of the analysis I focused on the series’ background characters. A table was drawn up compiling all the jobs performed by these characters throughout the ten episodes in order to study gender differences in terms of what we may perhaps call sexual division of labour. We looked for gender stereotypes in relation to the jobs presented. In addition, we selected some specific scenes to illustrate the relative presence of male and

female characters when they appear in big groups or crowds, and the gender clichés they embodied if any.

I then moved on to conduct an analysis of each one of the series' main characters in terms of their psychological traits, involving a thorough description of their personality features and their characteristic behaviour and actions so as to discern the roles they serve and compare them with the stereotyped features described by England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek.

The endpoint of this analysis is to determine whether the animated series *Phineas & Ferb* is better suited than older Disney animations to the mindset of the younger generations and reflects a more realistic and at the same equitable society. Conversely, the alternative hypothesis would claim that this audiovisual product perpetuates traditional old-fashioned and unfair representations of gender. The purpose of this paper is to answer these questions.

4. GENDER ROLES IN TODAY'S ANIMATION: *PHINEAS & FERB*, THE SERIES

Phineas & Ferb is an American animated comedy TV series created by Dan Povenmire and Jeff Marsh, and originally broadcasted on *Disney Channel*, the major children-oriented cable channel of The Walt Disney Company. It was originally released on 17th August 2007, and stopped being aired on 12th June 2015, which means a total screening life of seven years and ten months; to date it is the longest running series of Disney Channel.

The main plot of the show follows the adventures of the stepbrothers Phineas Flynn and Ferb Fletcher, two kids who spend each day of their summer holidays creating a different grand project with their friends. Their sister, Candace Flynn, is obsessed with their projects and wants her mother to bust them, as she characteristically puts it. Meanwhile, in the secondary plot, we have Perry, the family pet platypus who reveals himself as a secret agent from O.W.C.A. (the Organization Without a Cool Acronym), fighting against evil mind Dr Heinz Doofenshmirtz. Almost every episode ends according to a fixed

pattern: the destruction and physical disappearance of Phineas and Ferb's project just before being busted by their mother due to Perry's accomplishment of his mission, thus frustrating Candace's plans of catching her brothers.

4.1. Quantitative analysis: male-to-female character ratios

For the first part of the analysis, I constructed a complete numeric table (Table 2 in this dissertation's Appendix) comprising both the main and recurrent characters of the ten selected episodes, and also the episodic ones in order to quantify the gender roles they perform. The results drawn from these data are significant. Regarding the main and recurrent characters, in total there were 60 males as against 43 females featuring in our ten-episode sample, the average per episode being 6 males versus 4.3 females, which means a male-to-female ratio of 1:0.7. These numbers point at an unbalanced representation of male and female characters. Regarding the episodic characters, the figures are a total of 49 males and 17 female, the average distribution per episode being 4.9 males as against 1.7 females. Following these data, we may posit a male-to-female ratio of 1:0.35 among this group of characters. The numeric imbalance is here even more significant than in the group of main players, and the underrepresentation of female characters is quite remarkable.

If we combine these figures, the total number of characters recorded and analysed (main, recurrent and episodic) is 109 males and 60 females. This means an average per episode of 10.9 male and 6 female characters, the resulting male-to-female ratio being 1:0.55. Such an unbalanced situation was not expected before our quantitative analysis, but it shows an undeniable gender difference in purely numerical terms, since there are almost twice as many masculine characters as feminine ones. This would make our series a typical example of the underrepresentation of women in TV animated series: an otherwise not uncommon situation as reflected in the above-mentioned analysis by Signorelli.

4.2. Analysis of gendered occupational roles

The following step in our gender-based scrutiny consists in the analysis of gender differences regarding the occupational roles played by the episodic characters (Table 3 in the Appendix). As we explained in the section on methodology, the main characters were not taken into account for the purposes of this analysis. We may claim from the start that *Phineas & Ferb* exhibits a gender gap as regards the distribution of labour between male and female characters. We identified 45 different jobs performed by women as against 88 jobs performed by men. These numbers reflect a clear underrepresentation of working women, but the imbalance becomes even more noticeable if we take into account that 31 of the 45 jobs carried out by women are the same: fashion models. Only 4 men work as fashion models out of the 88 different jobs computed in our ten-episode sample. Indeed, if we excluded this particular occupation, the labour equality gap that we are discussing would be even bigger, leaving us with 14 different jobs done by women by contrast with 84 different jobs done by men.

Another side to this unequal situation is the absence of working women in three of the ten episodes studied. On the other hand, there is an abundant presence of working men throughout the ten episodes, with at least two men working in each one of the latter. The underrepresentation of women at work in purely quantitative terms is more than sufficiently confirmed by these data.

Leaving now figures aside, we will next focus on the types of jobs represented in the episode sample from the standpoint of gender roles and expectations. The jobs performed by male characters can be roughly classified under the following categories: 1) jobs which engage leadership and authority (jury member, lifeguard, national park employee, and policeman), 2) sports or athletic activities (boxer, car race pilot, gym worker, limbo presenter, boxing presenter, surf competition presenter, car race commentator, car race worker, wet-ski rentals worker, cowboy, horse-riding worker), 3) activities involving with mechanics and construction (car factory worker, carny worker, car wash worker, construction worker, demolition worker), 4) cinema and music (radio DJ, rock band member, TV presenter, music producer, music records executive, film producer, film assistant, dialogue coach, lighting assistant, sound assistant, cameraman, photographer, singer, musical dancer, orchestra member), 5) fashion (fashion show presenter, fashion

designer, fashion assistant, model, clothing store employee), and 6) others (croissant vendor, gift shop assistant, photography shop assistant, butcher, postman, cook, cowboy shop assistant, lorry driver).

The jobs performed by women are less varied and may possibly fit into the following classification: 1) jobs which engage leadership and authority (jury member), 2) cinema and music (catering employee, swimming stand-in, music records executive, jazz musician, orchestra member), 3) fashion (model), 4) beauty-related professions (masseuse, hairdresser, manicurist, pedicurist), and 4) others (grocery store assistant).

An important observation concerning the above occupations is the fact that those which involve a higher status or position in a hierarchy are performed by men. There are more females working in the fashion category, but even there the designer (the senior post) is a man. The producer in charge of the film crew, the music producer who chairs a meeting, the policemen, etcetera, they are all men. By contrast, all the jobs performed by women reflect a lower status in the workplace (the manicurist, hairdresser or pedicurist are subordinated to a male superior).

By comparing the above classifications, we can observe that there are no women working in the categories of sports or athletic activities and activities involving mechanics and construction, while no male characters can be found working in the health & beauty sector. This occupational segregation perpetuates the kind of stereotypes traditionally assigned to men and women which we discussed in our theoretical framework: men are in general stronger and athletic so they are fitter for the kind of jobs mentioned above, while women are typically concerned about their physical appearance, which “naturally” predisposes them to pursuing beauty-related careers.

As said before, another expectation traditionally assigned to men is their involvement in intellectual and artistic activities. Our analysis shows that in the episodes under scrutiny there is a large amount of male characters whose occupations may be related to this expectation (producer, designer, musician, jury member, and a long etcetera). However, the only women performing this category of jobs are the jury member, the record company executives, the jazz musicians and the orchestra members.

Furthermore, on three of these four occasions when women are shown performing occupations related to intellectual or artistic activities, they do so as members of a group where the majority are males. In one short scene we can see a surf competition jury formed by three people in which two are men and one is a woman (episode 1x02). On another occasion, illustrated in the picture below, a record company meeting is attended by six company executives of which only two are women (episode 1x03). The second screen capture reproduced below shows a classical music ensemble consisting of eleven members in which only two are women (episode 1x07).



Finally, the last scene in our sample where women can be seen performing an intellectual or artistic occupation shows a curious situation belonging to episode 1x06: three female music performers in an all-female jazz band play for an all-female knitting audience: the members of the sewing club where Linda Flynn-Fletcher, Phineas and Ferb's mother, recorded her first CD with her Free-Form Jazz Band. This scene is illustrated in the following picture:



To conclude this discussion on artistic and intellectual occupations, mention must be made of the fact that in our ten-episode sample the female characters who appear performing such tasks do so in mixed sex groups where women are the minority, with the sole exception of the scene captured just above these lines, where the task is performed in front of an all-female audience. Bearing the previous observations in mind, we can argue that from the occupational point of view, episodic female characters in *Phineas & Ferb* appear in task-performing settings where their status is marginal or subordinate to male co-workers.

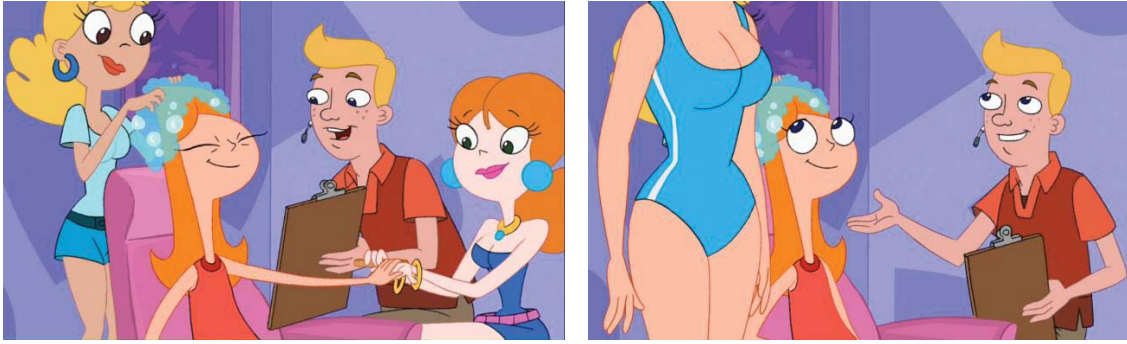
Let us move on now to jobs where physical appearance plays a prominent part and are typically associated to the feminine gender. Indeed, the large majority of the jobs performed by women in our selection of episodes belongs to this category (thirty-five out of forty-four occurrences: hairdresser, manicurist, pedicurist, fashion models, and masseuse). We need to acknowledge, however, that there is a fair amount of male characters who also appear performing occupations related to physical appearance, but the proportion of these occurrences in relation to all the jobs performed by men in our episode sample is remarkably small (seven out of sixty-nine: fashion show presenter, fashion designer, fashion assistant, and models). Even so, our last observation may somehow challenge the perpetuation of the traditional gender stereotype which portrays men as unconcerned about their physical appearance (Brannon 174). Yet it is important to emphasise that all the male characters involved in this occupational sector hold high positions (designer), while the lower positions (hairdresser, manicurist, pedicurist, etc.)

are occupied by women. Even in a predominantly female occupation, therefore, we again see a pattern of subordination of women to their male co-workers.

More specifically about the job of fashion model, there is a clear overrepresentation of women in Povenmire and Marsh's series (thirty-one women in contrast to four men). Furthermore, the female fashion models are clearly more sexualized and idealized than their male counterparts. As the following screen captures show (episode 1x09), women follow a strict beauty canon (postures, body shapes) than men, whose sexual appeal is not foregrounded in the same way.



Regarding the beauty canon itself, we can say that not only followed in the case of the female models, since the majority of working women in the animated series are presented in an idealized and overtly sexualized manner. In the next screen capture from the same episode, both the hairdresser and the manicurist exhibit slim and curvy figures which reflect the women's beauty standards prevailing in our society. In the second picture in the next page, the stand-in double for Candace —Phineas and Ferb's sister— appears in a swimsuit, clearly showing a sexualized representation deliberately meant to underline a contrast with Candace's looks. In the context of this scene, the underlying message is that for a woman it is extremely important to be very fit and attractive if she wants to appear on screen: a view that can be questioned given the fact that it is being conveyed in a successful oriented animated series targeted at a child audience.



4.3. Analysis of crowd characters

This section of our analysis focuses on the background characters who appear as large groups once again from the point of view of gender stereotypes. There are several scenes in our selection of episodes worth discussing in this light. In the following screen captures we can see how women and men appearing as anonymous characters in such scenes are respectively depicted in very different ways according to traditional gender stereotypes.

We find two significant moments where a group of characters or a crowd consists exclusively of women. The first one (reproduced in page 18) shows an all-female audience engaged in knitting—an activity traditionally associated with women and (it goes without saying) not performed by any male character in the series. The second scene (captured in the first image in page 21) shows us a crowd of frenzied women in the grip of shopping hysteria. We can see them stepping on a male clothing store employee as they rush into a department store to secure the best bargains on the opening day of the sales season. This is in tune with the representation of women as obsessed with material objects (especially clothes), a recurrent character trait in our ten-episode sample and one that matches the women-love-shopping stereotype. No men are seen buying or trying on clothes in the series, which in turn matches the opposite men-hate-shopping stereotype.



In addition, there are also some crowd scenes where the presence of men is clearly prominent. In the episode dedicated to the boxing competition (episode 1x06), it can be seen that the large majority of the audience is male. Furthermore, they are characterized as really extreme fans, while the boxer is presented almost as a deity (even Ferb, one of the show's protagonists, appears wearing a Roman toga and ready to throw rose petals over him). This exaggerated caricature emphasizes the traditional features of athleticism, interest in sports and leadership in relation to the masculine gender (England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek 558-559). The scene has been captured in the following picture:



The next example of a group scene featuring a clear majority of male anonymous characters is found in the episode in which the protagonists build a rollercoaster (episode 1x01). In the scene, all the passengers are male with the only exception of Isabella, who

follows Phineas unconditionally because of her intense love towards him. There are eleven men and one woman. Roller-coaster riding is an activity associated with being brave, fearless and taking risks, which concurs with the traditional masculine stereotype about men as risk-takers (England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek 555-556). The scene is presented in the picture that follows:



Another crowd scene in our sample shows a large group of people having fun in a beach (episode 1x02). In the particular moment shown in the picture below, a group of four children are playing with the sand. The two girls are clearly more sexualized than the two boys, being depicted as slim, attractive, with long hair and curvy. In comparison with the boys they are playing with, the girls even look more mature and look rather like teenagers. Once again, women fit into the physical attractiveness stereotype: a gendered trait that plays a much bigger role in female than in male characters.



The last scene of this part of our analysis features a group of six anonymous characters in another moment of the boxing combat (episode 1x06), only one of which is a woman —another example of women being underrepresented in this Disney’s animated show. The female character is wearing sexy clothes and ornaments, and shows once again a slim and curvy figure; on the contrary, the majority of men in the scene are overweight, two of them are bald, and they are generally presented with unattractive physical features.



The above selection of scenes and images in this section on background characters, illustrates remarkable gender differences, particularly as regards the importance of physical appearance, which ranks high in the case of female characters, but remains pretty much unseen in the case of men. For the latter, other qualities like physical courage or interest in athletic activities are foregrounded.

4.4. Analysis of the main characters

Finally, we will put the lens of ours on the series’ main characters and the study of their characterization under a gender perspective. The title roles are played by half-brothers Phineas Flynn and Ferb Fletcher, two kids who want to have “the best summer ever” and develop all kinds of ideas and inventions to this purpose in what constitutes the main storyline in each episode. Isabella and the scout group of the Fireside Girls always help them in their adventures. At the same time, their sister Candace appears as their counterpoint trying to inform their mother about Phineas and Ferb’s larger-than-life projects and get them caught. On a secondary level, Linda and Lawrence are introduced

as their patient parents. The protagonist of the parallel plot is Perry, the family's pet platypus, who is a secret agent fighting against evil (yet also clumsy) Dr Doofenshmirtz under orders from Major Monogram.

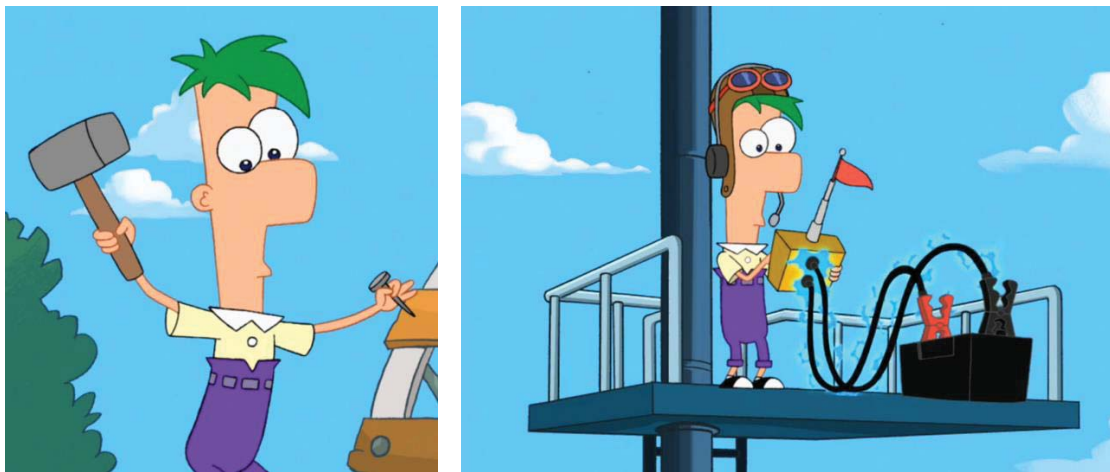
The character of Phineas stands out from the rest due to his multiple masculine traits. His most prominent feature is his leadership over the rest of the group. He is always in charge of the activity they are carrying out, appearing as the centre of the action. At the same time, he is the creative mind; he is normally the person who suggests the project of the day and organizes the plan's implementation. His catchphrase, "I know what we're gonna do today", summarizes both qualities. He appears involved in different types of intellectual and creative activities, from engineering to composing music, film directing, and a large etcetera. The two pictures below exemplify his leadership and initiative as a filmmaker and project planner (episode 1x05 and 1x08).



Throughout the series, Phineas demonstrates a great independence in relation to his parents or other adults. He is constantly working on ambitious projects, especially for a kid of his age, and he never asks for their permission; he enjoys unlimited freedom of action. In this sense, we may safely say that he consistently acts in a very assertive way. He is the one who makes all the relevant decisions, while the rest of the group agrees to work according to his criteria. Furthermore, he proves to be brave when facing up to many difficult situations that emerge in the course of the several episodes. An example of this is his calm attitude when he loses control of the rollercoaster without fearing for his personal safety or when he guides a herd of cows after a stampede (episode 1x01 and 1x10 respectively).

But not all his personality traits are positive. Phineas is also portrayed as an unemotional person: he does not show empathy when another character is feeling angry or sad, and displays a carefree attitude. This is especially noticeable in relation to his sister, who is constantly frustrated, while Phineas consistently remains unaware of her plight.

If we previously stressed Phineas' role as creative mastermind, his half-brother Ferb is depicted as the person in charge of the actual construction of the idea. As Phineas describes him in the first episode, "he is more a man of action". He is the person in charge of the engineering work. A common image in every episode is Ferb designing a blueprint of Phineas' idea. The following screen captures show Ferb working on a project, concentrated on his job (episode 1x01 and 1x04 respectively).



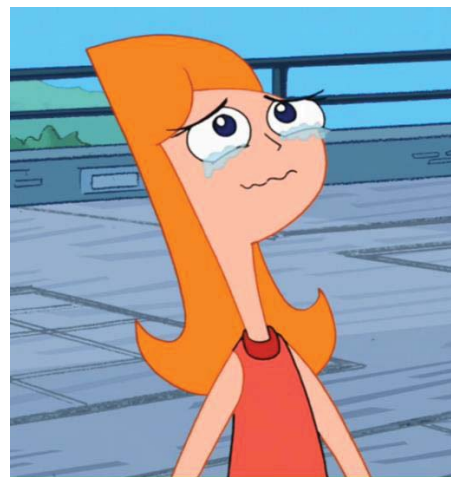
His personality can be described as shy, reserved, and very intelligent. He does not talk much, but when he does, his speech is educated and displays a deep knowledge of a wide range of disciplines such as science, biology or engineering.

Ferb constantly acts as Phineas' right hand, but he is regularly stays somewhat in the background and is not quite in the spotlight, since he leaves the leadership to Phineas. As well as Phineas, Ferb is also described as an unemotional person: he does not show his feelings and always has the same facial expression.

As can be observed, therefore, both Phineas and Ferb gather enough characteristics to be considered clear examples of the traditional masculine stereotype (England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek 555-556): brave, engaged in intellectual activities, and unemotional. Phineas additionally represents other typical traits: leadership, assertiveness, and complete independence. Despite being the main protagonists and consequently having

more screen time for themselves, they do not exhibit any features that we may relate with conventional feminine stereotypes. This means that, while the majority of their personality traits involve positive values, they are ultimately quite stereotypical characters, rather than round or more complex ones entailing egalitarian values in relation to gender perceptions.

If we now turn to another major character in the series, their sister Candace is portrayed as the typical teenage girl. She is constantly speaking on her phone with her girlfriends and has the dream of becoming a worldwide celebrity as a singer or a fashion model. In each episode her objective is to get her brothers busted by their mother, but she fails in all her attempts to expose their wild schemes at the end of every episode. As a consequence of this, her mother never believes her, and Candace ends frustrated and angry. Candace is a very emotional person, and she is constantly showing how she feels verbally or physically. In the several episodes under scrutiny (and elsewhere in the series) she typically breaks down under the pressure and often cries, thus proving that she cannot control her strong emotions. In the next pictures we can see some examples of this recurring feeling of frustration (image on the left, episode 1x01) and her tendency to collapse in tears (image on the right, episode 1x07).



Another aspect which defines Candace is her obsession with her crush Jeremy, a burger restaurant attendant. She is constantly talking about him with her friends, and in his presence she acts in a very silly and embarrassed way. In order to call his attention, Candace looks after him at all times and tries to please him (see the following screen captures from episode 1x02).



Another prominent trait in Candace's personality is her concern over her physical appearance. In the several episodes making up our selection, she is constantly worried about her looks or her clothes. She wants to look neat and beautiful at every moment, and she usually changes her profile picture in the social networks. This aspect of her behaviour is further accentuated when Jeremy, her crush, is around.



In the above screenshots, for example, we see Candace trying on some clothes and wearing fashion accessories (image on the left from episode 1x03) and taking a photo of herself for the profile picture (image on the right from episode 1x04).

The last relevant feature worth discussing about Candace is her role as a victim. Through our ten-episode selection she suffers all kinds of calamities, sometimes caused by accidents and sometimes caused by her brothers' activities. The intensity with which she undergoes these trials provides an element of humour that is much appreciated by the shows' audiences. In other words, the series' creators consistently exploit the ironical

contrast between Candace’s victimization and the physical, nearly slapstick comedy scenes in which she is often involved. Additionally, Phineas and Ferb inexorably succeed in their projects, thus achieving the fame and glory that Candace yearns for and never gets.

Summing up the qualities of Candace that we have just described, she is emotionally unstable and is often on the verge of tears if not actually crying; is overpowered by her infatuation with Jeremy, which causes her to behave awkwardly; has an acute concern over her physical appearance; and consistently plays the role of victim (as a result of her comic failures) in the series. All of which fits into the template of traditionally feminine clichés (England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek 555-556), and places Candace as an example of a stereotypical representation of a female.

Leaving aside the series’ three main protagonists, we will next discuss other regular, yet characters in the show. Isabella is the usual companion of Phineas and Ferb in their adventures. She is introduced to us as a sweet, kind and timid girl, who is deeply in love with Phineas. The latter is the main reason why she is always helping and encouraging him. She always acts as Phineas’ helpful friend and her role is consistently supportive of her friend’s plans. Isabella is also presented as fearless and courageous, and does not hesitate to play an active part in Phineas and Ferb’s schemes. The following screenshot (episode 1x10), for example, shows us Isabella riding a horse alongside the two brothers. Even so, there is a big difference between the siblings’ horses and Isabella’s one. Hers projects an image of *kitsch* beauty, while the half-brothers ride on more realistically portrayed, stronger and more resistant animals. Her appearance as a horse-rider is deliberately “feminine”, i.e., perpetuating stereotypes of triviality, attention to details involving a superficial, flashy conception of beauty, etc.



Again we see Isabella concerned about her physical appearance, when she checks her image in the mirror only to see an idealized and more mature version of herself (episode 1x09). Her reaction is one of clear satisfaction:



Isabella is also the leader of the Fireside Girls scout group, formed exclusively by girls. They take their group quite seriously, and they help Phineas and Ferb in their projects in order to obtain accomplishment patches and gain experience. As it was said in the section on methodology, the number of group members varies from episode to episode, and for the most part they act as an ensemble, without showing individual thoughts or opinions. No personal names for these girl members are ever mentioned (with the exception of Isabella), and they rarely speak. The tasks they perform in supporting the protagonists are very different across episodes and cover a wide range of activities. In the following image we can see them as the pit crew of the car race pilot Phineas Flynn (episode 1x04).



In general, the characters of Isabella and the Fireside Girls can be summarized as helpful and somewhat submissive, notwithstanding their resourcefulness and even their capacity to attain physical prowess. They are constantly depicted as subservient to the protagonists' goals and schemes, never challenging Phineas' instructions and not quite developing their own activities. Isabella can be considered as a leader only in relation to the Fireside Girls, and she is at no time seen giving orders to a male character in the episodes analysed. While it has to be acknowledged that the scout girls are seen participating in activities usually connected to the masculine world, such as car races or boxing, it is also true that on those occasions they always stand in a lower position in comparison to Phineas and Ferb, who largely embody the roles of male heroes (for example in the previous image). As a character with individual traits, Isabella can be described as affectionate and caring, due to her never clearly requited love for Phineas, and to some extent also concerned over her looks. In our view, she would partly fulfil feminine stereotypes as laid down by England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek (555-556), although she, together with the other Fireside Girls is less conventionally "feminine" and possesses supposedly masculine traits like bravery, assertiveness and initiative. The Girls take part in activities that are not suited to their age and, in short, are less conventional and stereotypical than Phineas, Ferb and Candace.

Linda and Lawrence Fletcher represent the parental figures in *Phineas & Ferb*. Linda is a devoted homemaker who always pays attention to her kids. When she is out, she is available on her phone for them to contact her. In the course of the several episodes, we see her busy with several domestic activities, such as going to the grocery store or cooking, and spending time with her children, usually at the mall, as is exemplified in the following pictures (episodes 1x05, 1x01, and 1x07 correspondingly):



Linda is also a calm and patient mother, as is particularly proved by the way in which she regularly has to deal with the hysterical Candace. Linda never loses control with her kids and takes things with self-assured serenity. Another feature worth highlighting about Linda Flynn-Fletcher is her interest in keeping and improving her good looks. We always see her with the hair done and wearing fashion accessories. In these pictures she appears trying on clothes, relaxing in a spa and getting her hair done at the hairdressers (episodes 1x03, 1x02, and 1x10 respectively).



Lawrence, the father, only appears as a character in one episode (1x07) in our sample, when he drives the family to Mt. Rushmore. Interestingly, in the other nine episodes we often see Linda driving, but when the father enters the scene, it is he who takes the wheel. Lawrence Fletcher is only mentioned in one other episode in our sample (episode 1x02), when it is said that he is cleaning up the basement. On that occasion Candace is left in charge of her brothers, because Linda says that Lawrence cannot be disturbed. In the rest of our selection he does not appear again and we expect that he is at work (although his profession is not explicitly mentioned in the ten episodes under examination, we know from other instalments that he is the co-owner of his wife's antique shop).

In the light of the above considerations, we can argue that Linda plainly represents feminine stereotypical characteristics related to nurturing and physical appearance (England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek 555-556). She is seen constantly looking after her children and taking care of her external image, thus representing a traditional feminine embodiment. On the other hand, Lawrence does not show nurturing attributes despite being a father, nor does he even show a particular interest in his children (he is absent-minded and rather naïve about Phineas's and Ferb's schemes) in the one episode where he is simply mentioned and where we learn that he has left Candace in charge of their

brothers. While he is certainly not an example of traditional virility, he does assume the conventional male role of head of the family (and family driver) during the Mt Rushmore trip, where he somehow takes over Linda's motherly initiative.

Lastly, we have the characters in the show's secondary plot. The main character is Perry the platypus, who leads a double life as both family pet and undercover agent. His stories are a parody of famous spy films like the James Bond saga, which means that, while always in the context of caricature, he easily follows the kind of stereotypes about male heroes described by England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek (555-556). Perry is physically strong, brave, athletic, independent, unemotional and assertive as an action hero, and his commander Major Monogram is firm, serious and bossy. The villain of the series, Dr Heinz Doofenshmirtz, is constantly creating inventions with the ambitious purpose of conquering the Tri-State Area. His plans always fail due to the intervention of Perry. Doofershmirtz is certainly an interesting character, presenting both conventionally masculine features (he engages in creative, scientific and intellectual work and is assertive) and feminine ones (he shows his emotions, can experience fear, has changing moods and is physically weak). From this point of view, *Phineas & Ferb's* villain may be one of the most gender-balanced (or perhaps gender-neutral) characters in the series.



5. CONCLUSION

The study of the characters in the animated TV series *Phineas & Ferb* from a number of different perspectives involving gender issues enables us to reach several conclusions. A careful and thorough scrutiny of a sample of episodes (which we believe sufficiently large for the purpose of this study give the highly patterned and repetitive nature of storylines and situations) largely confirms that this successful animated cartoon, while being more dynamic and realistic than older animated products by Disney, still continues to reproduce and preserve traditional gender roles. *Phineas & Ferb* is no doubt entertaining and witty, and that together with the episodes' convenient running time (ten or eleven minutes each) makes it attractive for child, teenage and even adult audiences. Yet its plots, characters and situations reflect social and more particularly gender issues that, leaving aside the series' entertainment value deserve to be considered from the point of view of values and education.

Candace, as the principal female character in the show, reflects a number of stereotypes that make her presentation biased from the standpoint of gender. She does not create her own projects, and her main goal is to interfere in her brothers' activities. Unlike Phineas and Ferb's, her initiatives are erratic and unsustained and her misfortunes make her into a figure of fun deprived, again by contrast with her male antagonists, of any heroic projection. In addition, when she is not trying to bust her brothers, she is self-consciously obsessed with improving her physical appearance and pleasing her crush Jeremy most of the time. Another interesting female character who partly reinforces gender stereotypes is Isabella. She is a brave, sweet and happy girl, who always wants to offer a helping hand in the boys' summer projects and contraptions. The difference with her male friends is that she participates in these wild schemes with the main purpose of being near Phineas, with whom she is deeply in love. Thus, we see that it is the female characters that continue to be in charge of the emotional part of the story —what we may call the love subplot.

On the other hand, the male protagonists Phineas and Ferb, who are given more screen space and time for their action, are ceaselessly devising new projects in a hugely creative way and enjoying their summer as much as possible. They are confident and assertive, and possess leadership skills which they use to engage the collaboration of the rest of the characters. In addition, they are depicted (clearly so in the case of Phineas) as impervious

to or simply ignorant of sentimental emotions, and do not enter any relationship with females that is not of pure male-like comradeship. After all, the contrast between action and love underpins many conventional male-oriented narratives where the focal hero undergoes a series of adventures and only marries when he has fully accomplished success, so that his full dedication to love and marriage submission family puts an end to his heroic career (Selden 142). For all these reasons we may claim that both Phineas and Ferb do embody masculine stereotypes.

As for the background characters, we observed that the large majority of them were male individuals. In the context of occupational assumptions concerning gender, the fewer females in this category tended to work in professions related to the so-called health and beauty treatments, whereas those who performed more intellectual tasks did so in workplaces where men were a clear majority and enjoyed a higher working status.

Consequently, the analysis of our episode sample shows that even though some gender roles depicted in *Phineas & Ferb* involve developments with regard to traditional gender stereotypes, the female characters in this popular animation TV series are relegated to supporting roles subservient to male leadership or conform, as in the case of Candace, to harsh stereotypes under what we may call a male gaze. By contrast, the male characters are active and full of initiative, and are no doubt the focal heroes/villains in the narrative. These results are not an exception in the context of animated series for kids and teens, where—as we pointed out in an earlier chapter of this dissertation—it is not uncommon to come across imbalanced portrayals of gender roles.

Once again, it is important to bear in mind that, leaving aside the quality of this and other animated series from the point of view of entertainment, the fact that it is broadcasted to huge child audiences through the powerful medium of television justifies studies like the present one. Without going to unreasonable extremes or decontextualizing characters or situations, the fact remains that we still regularly see a reiteration of gender stereotypes in the mass media. Since children are particularly vulnerable to gender misrepresentation in the mass media, it is appropriate that we should stay aware of the latter, counter their perpetuation and defend more egalitarian depictions of gender in those media.

6. APPENDIX

Table 1. List of episodes analysed

Number of episode	Title of episode	Original air date
1x01	“Rollercoaster”	August 17, 2007
1x02	“Lawn Gnome Beach Party of Terror”	September 28, 2007
1x03	“Flop Starz”	February 1, 2008
1x04	“The Fast and the Phineas”	February 2, 2008
1x05	“Lights, Candace, Action”	February 3, 2008
1x06	“Raging Bully”	February 4, 2008
1x07	“Candace Loses Her Head”	February 5, 2008
1x08	“I, Brotot”	February 6, 2008
1x09	“Run Away Runway”	February 7, 2008
1x10	“The Magnificent Few”	February 8, 2008

Table 2. Quantitative analysis: male-to-female character ratios

	Main & recurrent characters		Episodic characters	
Episode	Male	Female	Male	Female
#1	6	3	7	1
#2	7	6	5	1
#3	6	5	5	0
#4	6	5	5	2
#5	5	4	7	3
#6	8	6	5	3
#7	7	4	4	1
#8	5	2	1	0
#9	5	4	7	6
#10	5	4	3	0
TOTAL	60	43	49	17
Average values	6	4.3	4.9	1.7
Male-to-female ratios	1	0.7	1	0.35

	Masculine characters	Feminine characters
TOTAL	109	60
Average values	10.9	6
Male-to-female ratios	1	0.55

Table 3. Analysis of gendered occupational roles

Episode	Man jobs	Women jobs
#1	Carny worker, car factory worker, car wash worker, croissant vendor	Grocery store assistant
#2	Radio DJ, construction worker, rock band (4 members), wet-ski rentals worker, limbo presenter, surf competition presenter, 2 jury members, lifeguard	1 jury member, masseuse
#3	TV presenter, music producer, policeman, 3 record company executives, two demolition workers	2 records company executives
#4	2 car race commentators, 7 car race pilots, car race worker, TV interviewer, 3 cameramen, sound assistant, 4 photographers	
#5	Lighting assistant, film producer, film assistant, dialogue coach	Catering worker, hairdresser, manicurist, pedicurist, swimming stand-in
#6	Boxer, gym worker, boxing presenter, butcher	2 jazz musicians
#7	Singer, 6 musical dancers, gift shop assistant, national park employee, 9 orchestra members	2 orchestra members
#8	Santa Claus, photography shop assistant	
#9	Fashion show presenter, fashion designer, fashion assistant, postman, 4 fashion models	31 fashion models
#10	4 cowboys, singer, horse riding worker, 2 policemen, cook, cowboy shop assistant, lorry driver, clothing store employee	

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