HOW DISNEY MOVIES EFFECT ON THE GENDER TYPING OF CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood is increasingly being beset by Disney movies and characters which have a significant impact on gender typing in children. The extensive influence that Disney movies have on children has sparked huge controversy over the potentially strong gender-stereotyped content that these films propagate. A detailed analysis of lead characters in numerous Disney animated films reveals deep-seated languages regarding gender roles in the society. Characters in movies such as Cinderella, Snow White, Frozen, Pocahontas, and Tangled have been shown to have a significant influence on gender typing in children through linguistic influence (England et al. 556). The Disney Princess brand, a collection of female lead characters in numerous Disney movies, is a highly successful franchise with annual retail sales exceeding $4 billion (England et al. 556). This figure is even more astonishing given the fact that this brand primarily targets children aged between 3 to 5 years.

Keywords: children, television, Disney movies, gender typing, social studies.

INTRODUCTION

Children who grow watching Disney movies tend to develop a cult-like following of Disney heroes and heroines. Transmedia brings these characters to life, allowing children to live in character from morning to evening. Children are attracted to the larger-than-life appeal that these characters exude. However, beneath this facade of beauty and charisma lies a shadowy and twisted world that children are oblivious to. This is the world that contains subtle gender stereotypes that have a lasting effect on children as they develop. The princesses in Disney movies distort the line between girls (*Mulan*, Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*, and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*) and women (*Sleeping Beauty* and *Pocahontas*). This distortion is achieved through individual differences in personality traits that range from modest (*Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*) to inquisitive (Ariel) to courageous (Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog*, *Mulan*, and Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*).

Princess characters in most of the films are kind and helpful to others as they strive to improve the environment around them. However, these heroic tales are usually interwoven with disturbing portrayals of race, class, and gender (Lacroix 216). For instance, courageous heroines in films such as *Belle, Ariel, Tiana, Mulan,* and *Pocahontas* accomplish great feats through reverence to a male hero or self-sacrifice (Lacroix, 216). These subtle gender-stereotyped messages imbue children with certain expectations as they grow up to become adults. Children who grow up watching these movies tend to take up and replay gendered messages instilled within their framework. For instance, Disney Princess dolls are usually embedded with anticipated identity expectations for child consumers and doll players through commercial production (Wiserma 4974)). These expectations are carved into film storylines

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and marketing practices. As such, children who possess these dolls tend to become influenced into forming certain stereotypes regarding gender as they grow up.

Disney Princess transmedia create powerful identity texts given the preponderance of material objects to be viewed as subtle stores of meaning. Therefore, not only is Disney influencing gender typing through films, but it is also doing so through toys and dolls. According to Leaper et al. (1658), objects serve to instill intended meaning; this means that Disney Princess dolls concertize gender typing messages spawned by the films. In addition, Disney films bring out gender stereotypes through identity expectations for "girly girls" (Leaper et al. 1660). These expectations are emphasized through the films' presentation of feminine characters in animated fairy tales. The concept of "girly girls" becomes ingrained into children as they grow up, particularly among young girls. Children tend to grow up with preconceived notions that girls need to possess feminine qualities and the opposite for boys. For instance, Disney princesses use girly words such as "Excusmy" and "Gosh" to exude feminism. This has a significant influence on gender typing in early childhood.

Moreover, Disney movies project gender stereotypes that promulgate the concept of femme fatale. Almost all heroines in Disney movies are faced with a female opponent who is usually more cunning and powerful. Villainesses in Disney movies such as Lady Tremaine (*Cinderella*), Ursula (*The Little Mermaid*), the Queen (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*), and Maleficent (*Sleeping Beauty*) are often powerful seductresses coupled with destructive witchcraft (England et al. 560). Most of these villainesses are middle-aged, sour women with an obsession for their absolute power and looks. In every Disney movie starring a princess, the evil queen usually dies at the end in the hands of a male hero. This act projects male dominance over the female domain, a gender stereotype that is entrenched in children.

This paper will focus on how the Disney Princess group of movies use language to influence gender typing in children. Moreover, the constructivist approach and the cultivation theory will be applied to describe how these movies affect gender typing in children. These theories explain how children are able to figure out gender-typed languages in Disney movies subconsciously. Gender stereotypes are prevalent in Disney films according to research by several psychologists and sociologists (England et al. 555). These studies reveal that Disney movies are packed with stereotypical languages of femininity and masculinity. This paper will zero in on these linguistic elements while integrating the constructivist approach and the cultivation theory to describe how these linguistic elements affect gender typing in children. This paper will examine nine Disney Princess movies classified into three groups: the earlier movies, middle films, and the most current film. The earlier movies were released between 1937 and 1959 and include *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). The middle movies include *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), and *Mulan* (1998). The current Disney Princess movie is *The Princess and the Frog* (2009).

Theoretical Basis of Gender Stereotypes

It seems certain that children are consciously aware of gendered portrayals. According to Thompson and Zerbinos (656) animated content for children is usually targeted towards one gender, and that children are well aware of the gender undertones of such media. In fact, children used in this study were able to use background knowledge to predict which cartoons boys or girls would identify with and prefer. Thompson and Zerbinos (657) also found out that children who recognized more gender stereotyping in cartoons had similarly gender expectations for themselves and others. Gender role images that are consistently portrayed may be interpreted as "ordinary" by children and become intertwined with their concepts of morality and socially acceptable behavior. For instance, when children see villainy in a

character demonstrated through gender misdemeanor, they may develop permanent negative associations with non-stereotypical gendered manners (Thompson and Zerbinos 659).

The cultivation theory was developed by George Gerbner and Larry Gross while the constructivist approach was developed by Jean Piaget. These two theories provide a good description of how gendered linguistic elements found in Disney movies are picked up by children (Fought 243). The constructivist approach and the cultivation theory both point out that there may be an effect of viewing gendered stereotypes upon children (Williams 187). According to the constructivist approach, children develop beliefs regarding the world around them based on their experiences and observations. As such, viewing stereotyped or egalitarian portrayals of gender roles will influence children's ideas concerning gender.

On the other hand, the cultivation theory postulates that exposure to television content affects the development of concepts regarding social behavior and norms in children (Williams 188). For example, *Cinderella* cultivates in young girls the concept that that being special comes from outward beauty. Hence, children's media may affect a child's socialization process. Additionally, the gendered information that children view may have a direct impact on their cognitive understanding of their behavior and gender. The cultivation theory also theorizes that higher levels of exposure to gendered messages are likely to be associated with stronger effects on children's gender socialization (Klein et al. 314).

The animated cartoons that children are regularly exposed to may influence their gender role acquisition according to the cultivation theory and the constructivist approach. Many children have access to Disney animated movies, as they are particularly popular for this age group. Moreover, parents typically view Disney movies as quality family entertainment (Hoerrner 214). These factors coupled with the marketing power of the Disney Princess brand enhances the probability of children seeing one or more of these films. As a result, the perception of children regarding social roles and gender identity may be influenced by this media experience and gender stereotypes portrayed.

Media and Gender Stereotypes

Several studies have been conducted to address how gender roles are portrayed in children's media. Thompson and Zerbinos (652) conducted a study that involved the analysis of 175 episodes of 41 different cartoons broadcasted on the American television network. This study revealed that the programs had underlying gender stereotyped messages. According to the study, male and female characters were presented in a stereotypical manner. However, cartoons produced after 1980 showed less stereotypical gender behavior compared to those produced before 1980 (Thompson and Zerbinos 654). Several studies have also been conducted to assess the implications of televised media on gender typing. According to Williams (182), higher levels of exposure to television have been associated with more traditional ideas concerning gender roles. This influence is carried forward to cartoon movies. In particular, Disney films have been identified as a significant source of social influence on gender concepts instilled in children (Leaper et al. 1660).

Disney Films and Gender Stereotypes

Disney films have mainly been shown to harbor some stereotypical representations of gender. A study of six Disney heroines revealed a focus on their sexuality and the "exotic," especially in characters of color ((Lacroix 221). The author cited some examples of racism and sexism in the movies, mainly remarking on the heroines' small waists, extremely pale skin tones, full breasts, and delicate limbs. A review of 16 Disney films revealed that gender images were not consistent with present developments in gender equity (Wiserma 4974). In addition, this analysis highlighted the tendency of female characters to perform domestic chores. Towbin et

al (19) studied gender constructs in 26 Disney films. This study noted the presence of gender stereotypes throughout the films, but with less stereotyping in later movies. Put together, these studies are a testament to the extensive work that has been conducted to assess gender role stereotypes and portrayals in Disney movies.

Gendered Characteristics

The first three Disney movies, produced in the 1930s and 1950s, generally portrayed more gendered attributes for both princes and princesses than films produced in the 1980s and beyond (Hoerrner 215). Also, they utilized more traditional gender roles. The princesses in these movies were usually pretty, affectionate, fearful, troublesome, tentative, and helpful. Even when an early princess showcased a seemingly masculine characteristic, such as assertiveness, such a trait worked to further traditional gendered messages (Hoerrner 216). For example, in Sleeping Beauty, Prince Philip's song to Briar Rose implies that he expects her to fall in love with him no matter what.

> *But if I know you, I know what you'll do*
> *You'll love me at once*

As much as princesses in the first movies displayed more assertiveness than the princes, they tended to be more assertive with children and animals and not with other people. This brings out a relatively submissive and limited way of being assertive. It postulates that women cannot assert themselves with other adults, but only with those under their control. The princess rarely, if ever, asserted herself with the princess in the early movies. For example, after being ambushed by Prince Philip, Princess Aurora stammers throughout the ensuing conversation, "We... we have?"

The women only tended to be assertive about the attempts of their fathers at controlling them. On the contrary, the princes often lacked a father figure to assert themselves against. Furthermore, those princes with parents were not controlled in the same manner as the princesses were. Contrary to the earlier films, the princesses in the middle and later movies were more assertive towards both people and animals. The princes in the first three Disney movies also depicted traditional gender characteristics as well. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, the prince was absent most of the time thereby leaving his behavior to the benefit of doubt (Klein et al. 295). Snow White's presence is accentuated by the high pitch of her voice. It was not apparent how or why the princess fell in love with him. It seemed that the princess had been chosen by the prince and obligingly fell in love. Likewise, in *Cinderella*, the prince played a minor role as well. In *Sleeping Beauty*, the prince manifested many traditional masculine features such as being masculine, physically strong, brave, athletic and captivated by the princess (Klein et al. 297). For example, after Prince Philip ambushes Briar Rose, he says "I'm awfully sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you." This projects strength and confidence.

The shift from early Disney films to those produced in the 1980s carried with it gendered behaviors and stereotypes (Hoerrner 219). However, the depiction of these stereotypes has become more sophisticated over the years, reflecting the changing roles and expectations of the American society regarding gender. The rise of feminism in the 1970s through current times has been primarily responsible for this increase in complexity. The princesses in early films such as *Cinderella* and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* showcased the roles of women during that time such as taking care of children and the house (Thompson and Zerbinos 662). For instance, Cinderella sang:

> *Night and day it's Cinderelly*
> *Make the fire, fix the breakfast*

> *Wash the dishes, do the moppin'*

However, women in the current society are expected to maintain such feminine traits while being able to incorporate certain masculine traits such as assertiveness. This change in the role of women was reflected in middle Disney Princess movies such as *Pocahontas* and *Mulan* (Towbin et al. 32). Princesses in these movies took part in traditionally masculine activities such as war and diplomacy. Pocahontas' song, for instance, brings forth themes of adventure and self-identity. Yet, the plots stuck to traditional outcomes for women such as being paired with the prince and choosing to return to family life instead of pursuing novel opportunities.

> *The rainstorm and the river are my brothers*
> *The heron and the otter are my friends*
> *And we are all connected to each other*

In *The Princess and the Frog*, the most recent film, the princess was career-oriented. Initially, this prevented her from socializing and seeking romantic opportunities. In the movie, this was presented as a somewhat troublesome characteristic. This is in keeping with a society that is still cautious about women's greater role in the workplace and what that means for family life (England et al. 563). However, at the conclusion of the movie, she is able to continue pursuing a successful career while at the same time, marrying the prince. The role of the prince also became more complex. In *Aladdin*, for instance, the prince was the primary focus of the movie for the first time (Wiserma 4976). In The Princess and the Frog, the prince was the first character of his kind to be depicted as naïve, incompetent, and financially incapable. Moreover, both princes displayed more masculine than feminine characteristics.

Characteristics, Gender, and Narrative

Over time, domestic work has been used as a significant theme in the Disney Princess movies. The temporary discontinuation of this theme as a symbol of femininity has represented a substantial shift in Disney's ideology. The first three princesses were regularly shown doing domestic work. For instance, the princess in *Cinderella* accepted the hard labor assigned to her by her step-mother without complaint (England et al. 564). She always sang and smiled pleasantly while working. The men in Disney Princess movies never participated in any domestic labor. For example, the men in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* were not expected to do any domestic work neither did they have the ability to do so (Hoerrner 221). Snow White instead does the cleaning while singing the "Whistle While You Work" song. This is a propagation of domestic work as a prerequisite for women.

> *"Imagine that the broom is someone that you love*
> *And soon you'll find you're dancing to the tune"*

When Snow White cleaned the dwarves' house, she reckoned that the house was dirty because the dwarves did not have a mother. For example, Snow White tells the seven dwarves "Supper's not quite ready. You'll just have time to wash". The dwarves reply in unison, "Wash?" Moreover, she rescued the dwarves in a traditionally feminine way; by cooking, cleaning, and acting as their surrogate mother to stay with them. Princesses in the early movies used domestic work as an expression of servitude and a way to join love. Based on the cultivation and constructivist theories, children become consciously aware of this theme regarding domestic work being a preserve for women.

In the middle films produced in the 1980s and 90s, domestic work was no longer used by Disney to define princesses (Klein et al. 305). However, in the current film, *The Princess and the Frog*, domestic work resurfaced once again as a dominant theme in the movie. The princess was depicted as an excellent cook and a fine waitress. Her mother, in addition, was

described as the "finest seamstress in New Orleans" (England et al. 558). The princess, like her mother, made a living through traditionally feminine labor. Besides, she is shown cleaning and sweeping a couple of times, actions not seen since the early Disney films. Interestingly, race scholars may also find it worth noting that the first black princess is accompanied by the resurgence of domestic work. However, in keeping with the increasing complexity of gendered messages in these movies, the princess learns to cook from her father and is shown teaching the prince how to assist in the kitchen.

With the increasing scope of gender roles depicted in these movies, it could be argued that a viewing child would be exposed to more balanced portrayals of gender roles. Conversely, the middle Disney Princess films till present still retained gender roles reminiscent of traditional stereotypes. In addition, later movies still contain numerous contradictory gender messages that should not be ignored in spite of evidence of improvement in overall egalitarian content. The princess in *The Little Mermaid* was the first to challenge traditional gender roles. This film was released in 1989, approximately 30 years after *Sleeping Beauty*, which was the last of the first three movies (Klein et al. 315). In light of this, a broader range of female behavior was expected and indeed was demonstrated. For instance, the princess encouraged the idea of wanting to explore and was depicted as assertive and independent. However, this movie was still laden with numerous gender stereotypes consistent with the first three movies such as high levels of gendered messages. For instance, Princess Aurora sings a song that portrays women as fragile creatures that need to be saved through love.

> *Will my song go winging*
> *To someone, who'll find me*
> *And bring back a love song to me*

In *Beauty and the Beast*, Belle was equally brave as well as nurturing. Moreover, she was more assertive while the prince was as sensitive as the princess. The princess was also portrayed as having high intellect as she read book frequently. However, this trait was used to depict Belle as strange and served to separate her from the other villagers. The prince in *Aladdin* was shown to be sensitive and emotional, traits that are traditionally feminine (England et al. 567). However, the prince was also physically strong and highly assertive and gave lots of advice compared to the princess. Moreover, as much the princess in *Aladdin* was assertive, she was also shown to be physically weak, troublesome, and highly affectionate. Pocahontas and Mulan presented very conflicting gendered messages as well (England et al. 567). The princess in *Mulan* was more athletic than the prince while the princess in *Pocahontas* was almost as athletic but not as physically strong as the prince. For example, in *Pocahontas,* when John Smith is about to be executed, Pocahontas throws herself over him. He father, Powhatan, says, "Daughter, stand back". Pocahontas replies, "I won't! I love him, Father."

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is evident that Disney films contain both stereotypical and non-stereotypical gender role depictions. While some films showcase some non-stereotypical gender messages, all of them integrate certain stereotypical representations of gender. According to the constructivist approach and the cultivation theory, watching Disney Princess movies may influence the gender development of children. These theories suggest that viewing depictions of gender roles contribute to a child's comprehension of gender (Williams 190). Moreover, media exposure affects the development of a child's concepts of norms and social behaviors.

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