Maggie Haynes

King

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The Effect Disney Princesses Have on Young American Females

**Introduction**

Walt Disney Company is one of the most prominent producers of children’s media, with a social monopoly of films, TV shows, games, clothing, lunch boxes, and more. Disney has made and released animated films for decades, influencing several generations. Past research has been done to understand the effect Disney princesses have on a young girl’s self-image and behavior, and how the portrayal of gender, families, and couples also affect a young viewer’s perspective in the real world. Studies have shown that girls with more exposure to Disney have a more positive self-image, lower aggression, higher pro-social behavior, and more female gender stereotyping than girls with less exposure. This literature review will look at the following themes: gender roles, relationship and couple portrayal, body image, and behavior, as well as how traditional fairy tales portray women and how that influenced Disney movies. Lastly, females in their early to mid-twenties, who grew up when Disney began to release films more frequently, were the focus of a short survey to show the potential new research related to Disney films and its viewers.

**Disney Relationships**

There are several themes that are demonstrated in many of Disney’s films, including family relationships, couple relationships and the balance of power in each. In “Images of Couples and Families in Disney Feature-Length Animated Films,” Litsa Renee Tanner and co-authors examine various themes about couples and families portrayed in a select number of Disney movies. Four main themes were identified from 26 Disney movies that were classics or recently released movies at the time of the study (2003): the nature of the princess role, how her personality is maintained, the nature of relationships, and the creation of relationships. Tanner points out that Disney media is in the child’s purview, making it more likely to have some effect on a child: “Millions of people have purchased copies of Disney animated films in the United States…[these are] likely to play a role in the development of children’s culture and may influence children’s and adult’s information about families (366). According to Tanner, family relationships are a strong priority in Disney films. Parents are seen as nurturing and making sacrifices for their children. An example is when in *The Little Mermaid*, King Triton sacrifices himself in his daughter’s place to protect her from Ursula, the sea witch. But Tanner states that there is an imbalance of power in Disney family and couple structures, one example being the power structure and portrayal of fathers and mothers. Disney families are diverse, but oversimplified; stepmothers are portrayed as evil, while stepfathers are good and caring, and there is little explanation when one parent is absent. In “Why are Old Women often the Face of Evil in Fairy Tales and Folklore?” Elizabeth Blair identifies the roles that old women play in fairy tales and uses Disney films as an example, specifically the Evil Queen in Snow White. Old women can be portrayed as evil, which is evident in Snow White with the Evil Queen, Baba Yaga in Russian lore, the witch in Hansel and Gretel. Blair often quotes Maria Tatar, who teaches a course on folklore and mythology at Harvard. Tatar speculates that old women who are villains are scary because, historically, the most powerful person in a child's life was the mother:

Children do have a way of splitting the mother figure into ... the evil mother — who's always making rules and regulations, policing your behavior, getting angry at you — and then the benevolent nurturer — the one who is giving and protects you, makes sure that you survive. (Blair)

So, while Disney might not be responsible for the oversimplification of gender roles in parental authority, they do perpetuate it. Tanner believes this oversimplification of families, which are very complex, will influence a child’s thought process and which can children might internalize the over simplistic, but encourages families watch a Disney film together and “rewrite” it, allowing them to weave their family situation into an alternate ending. The authors used their findings in family counseling to help children and families with relationship issues, such as divorce or death of a parent.

**Princess Portrayal**

The portrayal of the princesses themselves in different roles is key in understanding whether young adults today are influenced by the princesses and how they act.In “The Princess and the Magic Kingdom: Beyond Nostalgia, the Function of the Disney Princess,” Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario analyzes the Disney princess in terms of her position in the kingdom, her relationships to “femme fatales,” fathers, bad boys, and her position in a fairytale that Disney has made into animated musical. Disney princesses also reflect the time period. According to Rozario, Aurora *(Sleeping Beauty)* “is a prototype Baby Boomer. She wanders barefoot in the woods and is uninterested in the affairs of kings, devastated when she learns she is a princess and will not be able to make her date with the boy she met in the wood.” This analogy to the Baby Boomers serves the purpose of illustrating how young adults in the second half of the 20th century rarely cared about status and were more fanciful. But, if Aurora was the Baby Boomer, then Mulan (*Mulan*), Belle (*Beauty and the Beast*), and Pocahontas (*Pocahontas*) are Millennials, though Rozario did not express it as such. Yet, female figures or “femme fatales” are not hidden like they were in the mid-20th century. The example Rozario gives is how it was really the three good fairies who saved Princess Aurora (*Sleeping Beauty*) and the kingdom. They freed the prince, gave him magical weapons, destroyed any threat, such as arrows, trying to kill him, and they even had the last say in the film, when they changed Aurora’s dress color (40). The females control the fate of the kingdom. This is also shown in a later Disney film, *the Little Mermaid*, where women have the most control, and Ariel learns more from the antagonist, Ursula the sea witch, than her own father, King Triton who is essentially powerless the entire film, despite being well-muscled and having control of the magic triton. Ursula is one of the most powerful characters in the film, with the ability to grant wishes and physical transformations, including her own when she chooses:

[Ursula] is a grotesque parody. She doesn’t simply tower, she expands, suffocates and overwhelms…the significance of Ursula's larger-than-life shape…and heavy make-up is that she has it within her power to be a lithe, brunette princess. She assumes this form in order to foil Ariel’s courtship of Eric by bewitching him herself… From Ursula. Ariel learns the tricks of the femme fatale's trade in the number, "Poor Unfortunate Souls," rich in visual and verbal commentary on sexuality, warning "don’t underestimate the importance of body language.” (Rozario 44-45)

According to Rozario, Disney is also becoming more democratic. In early Disney animated films, the princesses are part of the aristocratic life, but wish to escape, such as Jasmine (*Aladdin*), who actually escapes from the palace and disguises herself as a common girl. In later Disney films, the princesses are not always princesses. Two examples are Belle (*Beauty and the Beast*) and Mulan (*Mulan*). They are village girls that stand apart from the common girl, but rise to aristocracy, while previous female protagonists are born into the world, such as Jasmine (*Aladdin)*, Ariel (*The Little Mermaid)*, and Pocahontas (*Pocahontas)* (Rozario 47). Later Disney films, such *Mulan*, celebrate the female identity, instead of taking it for granted as it has been in the past. Rozario supports this idea by giving an example from one of the last scenes in the film when Mulan returns from the war and“…her father responds: ‘The greatest gift and honor is having you for a daughter.’ The father celebrates his daughter. Not one Disney father wishes for a son or remarks on the absence, implicitly condoning the disruption of patriarchy by a daughter” (52). Young viewers can internalize this shift in the male perspective to mean that females are becoming more valuable and prized in society. And it is not by marrying a prince, but by one’s accomplishments at doing something risky, yet self-sacrificing. It is no longer the parent who sacrifices oneself, as Tanner argued, but the daughter who takes risks to keep those she loves safe (Rozario).

In “Gender Role Portrayal and the Disney Princesses," England and co-authors focus on gender role depictions of the prince and princess characters, examining their behavioral characteristics and climactic outcomes in the films. Their study had three hypotheses. The first hypothesis considered the gender of the character, with the expectation that the princes’ and princesses’ gender role portrayals would differ. They expected that the princesses would show more traditionally feminine than masculine characteristics, and the princes would show more traditionally masculine than feminine characteristics. This is true in the older, original Disney films where the prince was credited with saving the princess and kingdom, while the princess simply waited. Feminine traits also correlated with household chores. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Snow White happily cleaned the house, while it was shown the dwarves never expected to, since they were male (England et al. 564). The second hypothesis was that the princes would perform more rescues than the princesses, and the princesses would be rescued more often than the princes. The third hypothesis involved changes in the Disney Princess films over time. They expected the gender role portrayals would become more egalitarian over time. Both the second and third hypotheses were confirmed over time as Disney films underwent drastic changes. No longer did the princesses do domestic chores and marry a prince, but they worked, ended up saving the princes more than the princes saved them, an example being Pocahontas (from *Pocahontas*) saving John Smith from execution, and as Rozario pointed out, Disney “princesses” are not always born princesses or become princesses at the end. Several films that do not have the “princess” actually marry and become royalty include Jane (*Tarzan)*, Esmerelda (*Hunchback of Notre Dame)*, and Pocahontas (*Pocahontas)*, and while Pocahontas was the chief’s daughter, and thus royal, she did not marry the “prince” at the end of the film; instead, they each returned to their native countries. England’s results show that the prince and princess characters differ in their portrayal of traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics, these gender role portrayals are complex, and trends towards egalitarian gender roles are not linear over time.

**Influence of the Disney Princess**

While the themes of the films drive the action of the movie, they are important outside the animation studios as well, as they influence the minds of children and young adults. Kennedy Bailey, in “"Disney Princesses Have Mixed Effects on Children" writes about a study done by Sarah Coyne, faculty in the School of Family Life. Coyne wanted to find out the effects of exposure to Disney princess- related media on gender stereotyping, body image, pro-social behavior and aggression in early childhood. She and her team sampled three hundred seven preschoolers, from three different schools, as well as surveyed the children’s parents and teachers to understand more about the child’s tendencies. They discovered children who were more indoctrinated into the princess lifestyle had higher pro-social behavior, more female gender stereotyping, lower aggression and better body image. However, they pointed out, “There is mixed evidence: princesses are not great in that they promote gender stereotypes, but we also found some positives — like better body image and more pro-social behavior” (Bailey). Ashley Bispo also discusses the gender role portrayals in many of the films and addresses some of the changing trends in newer princess films from the 1990s and afterward. Bispo claims that Disney princesses became more progressive in the 1990s, explaining that “As societal norms change toward greater equality for women and less of an emphasis on conventional female roles, the media attempts to parallel these changes accordingly, while still adhering to some of the traditional gender depictions” (3). In the past, the men have been portrayed as aggressive and heroic, while women are beautiful, dependent on men and their days filled with household chores. And while the 90s Disney films signal a change from traditional roles, there are still the traditional gender role themes, which is shown in Beauty and the Beast:

Gaston, an arrogant and strong-willed character and antagonist, states his dissatisfaction with Belle’s deviation from ideal female characteristics. He says, “It’s not right for a woman to read. Soon she starts getting ideas, and thinking—”…Gaston’s statement highlights the conventional idea that women are not supposed to concentrate on intellectual behaviors, a strictly male responsibility… Belle is viewed as a highly peculiar individual because of her desire to read and her disinterest with Gaston’s pleas for marriage…his role as the villain in the film may direct many viewers to believe that his ideas about women are wrong. This shows a slight deviation from the older princess films that glorify Gaston’s traditional views. Belle’s feminine and nurturing personality, however, is apparent through her tender care for her father and her later affection for the Beast. These depictions, on the other hand, expose young girls to traditional images of stereotypical characteristics that ideal women are expected to possess. (4)

Bispo describes how Gaston’s actions signal the shift in traditional views of gender. As a villain, his thoughts are considered wrong, and that leads to the idea that a female does not have to be passive, beautiful, and domesticated to be considered feminine. Belle is a smart female who is not afraid to stand up for her belief. An example is when she defies Gaston during the mob scene and calls him the monster, instead of the Beast. Bispo argues that the emergence of positive messages in newer films, which deviate from the older Disney classics, signals the change of social norms in society. This article is appropriate for future research that argues how the personalities of Disney princesses have changed, thus the attitudes and behavior of young females in today’s society have as well in a direct correlation.

**Potential Future Research**

Current research focuses on how Disney affects young American girls. I have done my own basic research ofnthe possibility the affects Disney has on young girls will carry over into their adult life. I created a survey and anonymously polled 143 young women, ages 18 to 27 about how Disney films could potentially affect their daily lives. 142 of those women had seen over 8 Disney films during their lifetime thus far and are satisfied with the films. 60% are satisfied with their bodies, which lends to the idea of a pro-body image. Over 80% feel a “positive” emotion during their daily lives, which supports the theme of lower aggression in girls, over half of the participants have thoughts of Disney every day, either in the form of Disney songs or quotes, and over 71% believe in “happily-ever-after.” Over 35% of the participants identified with Belle, a headstrong, curious heroine. 114 participants identified with Disney heroines/princesses who are known for their curiosity, rebelliousness, headstrong, and pro-active attitude. These characters include Belle (*Beauty and the Beast)*, Merida (*Brave)*, Ariel (*the Little Mermaid)*, Jasmine (*Aladdin)*, Jane (*Tarzan)*, Anna (*Frozen)*, Tiana (*Princess and the Frog)*, and Mulan (*Mulan)*. 10 participants did not respond to the question. I believe that this preliminary survey shows there is potential in research focused on women who grew up watching Disney animated films and how this affects their adult life.

**Conclusion**

Many of the researchers over the years have agreed that Disney has a positive effect on children, though moderation is something to keep in mind. A significant amount of research has been done on the many facets of how Disney films affect children, but through a simple survey, new opportunities for research have been revealed. Disney not only affects only children, but adults as well. Other aspects of possible research include the effects Warner Brothers and Pixar animated films have on children and how they compare to Disney’s animated films.

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