

The Psychological Impact of the Changing Images of Female Characters in Disney Animated Films on Teenagers

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Abstract: The animation film is an art form that reflects human social life and meets the needs of spiritual life. As a forerunner of popular culture, Disney animated films record many social changes. This article discusses the presentation and impacts of female characters in Disney animated film on young people. The evolution of its classic animation themes and female princess images reflects the change in women's status and the development of the feminist movement. The continuous enrichment of the female image in the identity, appearance and personality of Disney animated films reflects its diversified development and the establishment and promotion of female status in personal growth, marriage and love. Social learning theory considers how both environmental and cognitive factors interact to influence human learning and behavior. Through the social learning process, young people accept the values expressed in Disney animated films.

Keywords: Gender Culture, Disney Animated Film, Youth Culture, Feminist Movement

1. Introduction

With the continuous development of society and the improvement of female self-consciousness, the image of female characters in mainstream American animated films has also changed. Take the world-famous Disney animated films as an example. From the first animated film, "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs", released in 1937 to "Zootopia" in 2016, to today's Disney films, the female characters have experienced changes for more than eighty years. They gradually transformed from male accessories into independent women. These new characters are brave enough to pursue their dreams and female images in the new era and can show their value and charm. The improvement of the status of American women can be reflected in the themes and changes in female roles in these films.

An examination of female characters in Disney animated films from the earliest days to the present will show the psychological impact of the transformation of female images in the films on young people. Watching animated movies is an indispensable part of the growing process of children. The concepts that the film wants to convey, and their characters and characteristics will greatly influence teenagers when they have yet to produce the correct values.

As Alan King pointed out, all fairy tales are adult fairy tales in nature, and what fairy tales include is not the psychological needs of children, but the psychological metaphor of adult society. In fact, animated films are not only a way of recreation but also a way of life, a way of thinking and a social concept. Therefore, they have significant influences and reflect many social situations.

This research is significant because movies are the channels for modern people to obtain information. Through movies, one can learn knowledge and principles, improve personal aesthetics and learn correct values. Nevertheless, inappropriate values in movies will have a great influence on teenagers. For example, violence in movies can have a severe impact on teenagers. They might imitate the violent behaviors in the movies and think that their actions are appropriate. Meanwhile, there are few studies on the influence of gender perception, which can also hugely impact teenagers.

2. The Classic Princesses from Disney Animated Movies

In patriarchal societies, women are considered marginal and subordinate to men. In Disney's first few princess films, such as "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs", "Cinderella" and "Sleeping Beauty", marriage was the most essential factor in determining the adult lives of the princesses [1]. Take "Cinderella" as an example. Its connotation is that marrying a good man is the guarantee for a woman's happiness. To win a happy marriage with their beauty, they rely on others in order to rescue themselves from the sea of hardship. In the early Disney princess animations, the princesses were usually beautiful, graceful, kind and good at singing and dancing. These characteristics fully met the aesthetic requirements of men for women in the social environment at that time [2]. However, their character is simple and fragile, with contradiction, hesitation, and a serious lack of independence. In "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs", Snow White faced the queen's jealousy and persecution. She had no choice but to escape and hide. After eating the poisoned apple from the queen, she could only lay in a coffin waiting to be kissed awake by the prince. Although she has the purest soul and the kindest nature, she did not show any resistance or independent spirit in the film and was in a passive state from beginning to end.

Similarly, "Sleeping Beauty" in 1959 reflected the image of a princess passively waiting to be rescued by a male hero, which fully catered to the male-dominated social environment and put the fate of women in the hands of men. Jealousy and hatred between women became the direct source of conflict in the story, and the morally dominant woman will win with the rescue of men, and the vicious witch will be punished.

In addition, sociological experts point out that the animation of scenic spots passed down from generation to generation promotes the wrong idea of judging people by their appearance, which easily mislead children or teenagers and brings them fixed ideas.

3. The Modern Woman Images in Disney's Animated Films

With modern western female consciousness awakening, American animated movies also have new changes. While the female characters in the love story still exist, their concern is no longer just about love. They begin to have self-awareness, no longer being pushed around, no longer waiting for the prince to rescue them, but actively taking the initiative to help themselves [3]. Ariel in "The Little Mermaid" yearns for land; Jasmine in "Aladdin" yearns for freedom; Princess Tiana in "The Princess and the Frog" runs a restaurant; Belle in "Beauty and the Beast" reflects on her life situation. From the creation of these princesses, we can clearly see that Disney princesses are no longer born and live for love. They began to awaken their sense of independence and pay more attention to realizing self-value. What's more, they are able to complete the realization of self-value and the sublimation of life quality with the help of the conflict with others. This was a natural consequence of the equality of men and women in American society at that time. In this way, the portrayal of the female lead in Disney animation has also changed a lot.

The female image of passively accepting the fate arrangement and waiting for help almost no longer exists, but embodies intense feminist colour, shows the brave, independent, solid and righteous side of women. This shapes the modern new female image who is loyal to the heart,

personality and ideal and has the courage to express themselves. In "The Princess and the Frog" Princess Tiana is a good example. She had no noble status. Before becoming the Frog prince's princess, she was just an ordinary worker who had just started working as a clerk in a restaurant. At that time, Tiana's biggest dream was to run a restaurant by herself and live an entire and happy life. The fact that she met with a frog prince and was changed into the frog didn't let Tiana give up her dream. No matter her identity, Tiana's biggest wish was to rely on her own strength to run her restaurant. So, the spirit of princess Tiana is independence and dedication to work [4]. Ariel in "The Little Mermaid" and Hua Mulan in "Mulan" are the same. They try to get rid of women's passive, weak and dependent status, pursue independent dreams, yearn for free life, and even have a rebellious spirit to get rid of the stereotype of female characters.

After entering the 21st century, the Disney princess images perfectly express the connotation of the new feminism. In "Tangled" in 2010, Rapunzel was kidnapped as a child. Although she was warned that the outside world was dangerous and was deceived not to leave the tower, she had a spirit of adventure and exploration. She had an intense curiosity about the outside world and wanted to find out everything because she believed that only what the eyes see is the most real. During her expedition, she succeeded in discovering her true identity and finally found her birth parents. She broke the bondage of the cage that she was put in. In 2012, the rebellious Scottish princess Merida in "Brave", who fought against traditional female roles from head to toe, boasted long red curly hair. She liked riding and hunting like a boy and disdainfully despised incompetent princes with her exceptional sword skills instead of being a poor princess in the past. She was brave and resolute in the face of her mistakes and finally saved her mother, her family, and herself. They both have the courage to go after what they want and disrupt the status quo.

In 2013, the theme of "Frozen" shifted to the relationship between women. In this film, the sisterhood between Anna and Elsa becomes the main storyline, the princess's love life takes a back seat, and even the villain, Prince Hans, is featured for the first time. The film emphasizes women's self-growth, and that the love between men and women is just a bonus. It is the love of her sister Anna that saves Elsa, and the rescue of women in distress is completed through the rescue of women.

Meanwhile, the roles of women in Disney's animated films have changed a lot. They are no longer princesses at the top level, nor poor girls suffering from misfortune, but independent women with more social attributes. Judy, the rabbit cop in "Zootopia", and Imelda, the robust, independent and brave grandmother in "Coco", both prove this current situation. The animation works of this period depict a variety of female characters who came from thousands of ordinary families and have independent emotional and economic foundations instead of relying solely on men.

4. The Reason and Impact for the Changes in Disney's Female Images

According to Lacan's mirror strategy, the mirror stage establishes the ego as fundamentally dependent upon external objects, on another [5]. As the so-called individual matures and enters into social relations through language, this "other" will be elaborated on within social and linguistic frameworks that will give each subject's personality its particular characteristics. People always look for a specific shape and image and regard them as the "self". The process of "self" formation is the process of identity. Society and partners are two important links for teenagers to pursue identity. In addition, American psychologist Erikson pointed out that young people during adolescence, on the one hand, want to grow from childhood [6]. On the other hand, they cannot quickly integrate into an adult society which is the most prone to identity crises or chaos. Being a teenager is a necessary period in everyone's life to build character and establish an outlook on life. During this period, teenagers gradually grow up and are full of strong curiosity about everything, which is related to how to go in the future. Nowadays, teenagers grow up in the company of movies and

television. The culture of films and television deeply intervene in their socialization and growth process, which has an increasingly close relationship with teenagers. With its vast influence, it exerts a lot on teenagers' values.

5. The Impacts of Movies on Teenagers

The rapid development of the film industry has greatly stimulated society, especially teenagers in adolescence, who are greatly influenced by film. However, the uneven quality of movies has both advantages and disadvantages for teenagers. As a particular group in the process of individual socialization, teenagers are not mature, and their values and world outlook still need to take shape. They have a strong ability to accept new things and fields and are more curious about the auditioning media based on movies. In his book, "Media and Adolescence", Steven Kelsey, an American psychologist, mentioned how media influences adolescents' socialization. This mechanism involves the theory of media influence, which states that media affects everyone who touches it. Therefore, as an essential aspect of mass media, the film can effectively impact everyone who watches it.

The communication scholar Wilbur Schramm once put forward the notion that the relationship between children and media, such as movies and television, is like the relationship between customers and cafeterias. Children and adolescents choose the "food" they are most interested in according to their own needs. In terms of the shaping and development of female images in Disney animated films, "identity" is always the critical element in shaping their characters. Most female images in Disney animated films are dignitaries, while male images are more abundant. Male characters with different occupations, identities and ages, such as princes, archers, abandoned babies, older people and fathers, can become the focus of animated films. In recent years, female images in Disney films have also begun to show a trend of civilianization. Some female images without prominent backgrounds and special status can also become the main characters of animated films, from typical princesses to female heroes to civilian girls. To some extent, it reflects the deepening influence of feminism on the artistic development and commercial demand of American animated films [7].

Modern Disney movies will also influence teenagers' attitudes toward gender. For example, after watching a movie, they don't perceive women as inferior to men, but as equal. This can make them develop a good concept of gender from an early age and will not cause any sexist behavior.

Film is a comprehensive art, a model of the combination of visual concreteness and reproducibility with auditory abstractness and expressiveness. A good movie includes not only a gripping story and superb acting but also the use of bright and harmonious colors, creative camera language and a film score that fits well with the plot. That is to say, while teenagers enjoy a good movie, they are reading a good novel, visiting a painting or photography exhibition, and enjoying a high-level concert as well. In just two or three hours of a movie, teenagers can learn a lot from it, including values and morals.

Social learning theory, proposed by Albert Bandura, emphasizes the importance of observing, modeling, and imitating the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others [8]. Social learning theory considers how both environmental and cognitive factors interact to influence human learning and behavior. This theory mainly includes three aspects: interaction theory, observational learning theory and reinforcement theory. Especially after watching these recent Disney animated films, teenagers are capable of deepening their understanding of independent and powerful female images and can connect them with their real life. In this interaction, they strengthen contemporary teenagers' cognition of female status.

6. Conclusion

The animation film is an art form that reflects human social life and meets the needs of spiritual life. It is inseparable from human social life. As a forerunner of popular culture, Disney animated films record many social changes. The evolution of its classic animation themes and female princess images reflects the change in women's status and the development of the feminist movement. The continuous enrichment of female image shaping in identity, appearance, personality and other aspects reflects its own diversified development but also reflects the status and realistic situation of women in social life. Teenagers are growing up physically and psychologically. Presenting such female images in Disney animated films helps them to have a correct understanding of female power.

From the early Disney princesses to the exploration of the new feminism and the realization of self-worth, to the breaking of the traditional aesthetic to show the female character, and to the civilian female protagonists, this series of historical evolution fully reflects the constant changes of the female characters in animated films. The continuous enrichment of the female image in the identity, appearance and personality of Disney animated films reflects its diversified development and the establishment and promotion of female status in personal growth, marriage and love.

Minors need to accumulate all kinds of knowledge in the process of socialization. Film culture plays a unique positive role in correctly guiding children to complete socialization, especially the correct concept of gender. Through these movies, they can avoid gender stereotypes and be forced to think about equality between men and women.

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