

Evolution of Disney Princesses and Its Impact on Young Girls

Yige Zhai^{1,a,*}

¹Miss Porter's School, 60 Main Street, Farmington, Connecticut, United States

a. zygannie923@gmail.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: From 1937 to the present, Disney produced 13 princess movies in total. Many gender portrayals in these movies are stereotypical, inaccurate, and/or problematic. To explore the effects of these stereotypes displayed in Disney's princess movies on its viewers, this paper reviewed 25 sources to first demonstrate if and how Disney princesses has changed throughout the years. It will then analyze how the evolving portrayal of female characters casts influences on young girls. Results of the study shows that Disney princesses have advanced in terms of their decision-making abilities and leadership skills, but not in their body images and representations. Research also reveals that princess media in-take can cast negative influences on young girls' body esteem, while it is still unclear how young girls will be influenced in terms of their self-confidence as the Disney princess line continues to progress. Possible intervention includes the concept of media literacy and what adults can do to minimize the manipulation of the media on their child.

Keywords: Disney, princess, movie, media, young girls, body esteem, gender portrayal, self-confidence

1. Introduction

The media casts huge influences on its recipients and shapes one's schema of the real world. It can influence one's perceptions surrounding appearance, gender, and love. It can also impact one's behavior and personality. Out of all recipients of today's mass media communication, children are more prone to being influenced due to their high exposure to media [1].

Based on previous research data, in the United States, 96 % of girls have viewed Disney princess media [2]. Being the leader of the entertainment industry, Disney composes a large part of children's media, especially for girls. From the very first Disney princess to the most recent one, there have been 13 Disney princess movies. These movies along the Disney princess line could be categorized into three different eras: the Classics era, the Renaissance era, and the New-age era [3]. The Classics era includes Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty. The Renaissance era includes The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin, Pocahontas, and Mulan. The New-age era includes The Princess and the Frog, Tangled, Brave, Frozen, and Moana. These movies, especially early ones, embody many stereotypical portrayals of women in terms of both appearance and character representations. They are especially prevalent in princesses from the Classics era but exist in all three eras, even right now.

Since Disney princesses are such an important part of many girls' childhoods but still perpetuate many stereotypical gender norms, it is important for the audience to recognize this issue. As such,

this study will explore how and if the portrayal of Disney princesses has changed over time and what might be its potential effects on young girls.

2. The Evolution of Disney Princesses

From the first Disney princess movie *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937 to the most recent *Moana* in 2016, the Disney princess line underwent significant change and alteration. One of the aspects of change is the portrayal of gender roles in Disney movies.

The portrayal of Disney princesses can be categorized under two major themes: body image and the ability to make decisions and become leaders. This research will analyze these two aspects separately, examining if and how these representations have changed over time.

2.1. Body Image

From the Classics era to the New-age era, the body image portrayal of female characters on the Disney princess line remained mostly consistent. From *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* to *Frozen*, Disney continues to impose unrealistic beauty standards on its audiences [4]. These standards include unreasonably tiny waists, slim bodies, large eyes, long lashes, etc. Even though audiences can observe some changes in the Disney princess image across princesses, throughout the three eras, the imagery of the princesses largely remains stereotypical [5].

During the Classics and the Renaissance era, Disney princesses had the perfect body determined by the male gaze. They have slim bodies and pale skin. Even though they might have endured bad conditions, such as escaping from danger or performing chores, they remain pretty and their outfits flawless [6]. Princesses such as Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* also wore clothing that accentuated body figures, covered few parts of the body, and appealed to the male perspective.

In the final New-age era, Disney princesses are still portrayed mostly in the same way. Only *Moana* and *Merida* have less stereotypical body images. *Moana* is relatively chubbier and has darker skin tone, while *Merida* has smaller eyes and a round chin. However, considering that most princesses still remain skinny and have stereotypical facial features, *Moana* and *Merida* could just be outliers instead of setting a new trend.

The problematic beauty representations not only occur in the protagonist of the movie. Audiences can often find female antagonists being exactly opposite from the idealized beauty standards, such as Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* as well as Mother Gothel from *Rapunzel* [7]. These characters typically display fatter bodies and more masculine traits. This representation sends off the wrong message that villainesses are determined based on body image.

2.2. Decision-making and leadership

Disney princesses, especially earlier ones, are often portrayed as being submissive and weak. They often take on roles similar to those of housewives.

Princesses from the Classics era lack decision making skills. They usually wait to be rescued and saved by princes. They are helpless themselves and are objectified into nothing more than objects of affection [8]. This sends off the false message that female characters cannot rescue and help themselves, further promoting toxic masculinity.

During the Renaissance era, with the release of *The Little Mermaid*, princesses start to have individual goals [9]. Their whole purpose of existence is not just for the prince to rescue them. Princesses, such as Belle and Jasmine, start to have dreams of their own and strive to achieve them [10]. However, since these movies are still evolving, eventually, princesses still need a strong male character to help them achieve what they want [10]. An example would be in the movie *Aladdin*; although princess Jasmine demonstrated courage and wisdom in many parts of the movie, eventually,

she was trapped again and had to wait to be saved. It was Aladdin, the prince in the movie, who tricked the antagonist of the film and defeated him in the end.

Finally, in the latest movies, the New-age era, princesses began to demonstrate the characteristics of an independent woman. Disney released princesses with androgynous personalities and traits such as Moana and Merida [11]. Disney princesses of the New-age era do not need men's aid to succeed. They are more goal-oriented and independent compared to princesses from the first era [12]. Some of the princess movies such as *Brave* completely abandon romantic encounters and focuses on the coming-of-age of the princess.

In the study done by England in 2018, we can see that princes and princesses are starting to show a combination of both traditionally masculine and feminine traits. Audiences can also see that some traditionally masculine traits are more dominant among princesses than princes. For instance, princesses are more athletic and physically strong than princes. Princesses in the latest era demonstrate 13.42% assertiveness, 12.81% athletic traits and 6.05% physically strong traits while princes only demonstrate 9.27%, 12.45% and 4.55% of each [11]. This indicates that newer princesses are becoming more and more independent. They are assertive, strong, and curious, which are all important components of leadership skills. These princesses often make important decisions in the movie and express their own will with greater confidence. In short, these princesses are good representations of what audiences are looking for in young women of the 21st century.

Study shows that princesses from the New-Age also perform about the same number of rescues as the princes [13]. This means that princes are no longer the only ones saving the day. Princesses can also stand up for themselves and take on responsibilities to make decisions and contribute to the happy ending of the fairytale.

The primary change in the leadership and decision-making ability representations throughout the three eras is that the later princesses possess more independent personalities. The plot of the newer movies is crafted by princesses alone, rather than with the assistance of princes or male characters. New-age movies focus more on Disney princesses' dreams and aspirations and their coming-of-age.

3. How the Portrayal of Disney Princesses Influence Young Girls Aged 3 to 10

Children aged three to 10 are an important demographic of the mass media communication culture. According to research, children between the age of two to eight spend an average of two hours per day on screen media, while children between the age of eight to 12 spend approximately four to six hours per day on screen media [14]. Media has become an important aspect of children's daily life. Thus, these inaccurate and stereotypical representations of gender roles in Disney princess movies could potentially influence young children's perspectives of gender roles and themselves. The impacts could be measured in two different ways: body esteem and self confidence in terms of young girls' willingness to take on leadership roles. The following section will analyze the effects Disney princess movies cast on young girls aged three to 10.

3.1. Body Esteem

According to previous analysis in the 1.1 section of this study, Disney princesses' body image and facial appearance did not undergo much evolution except for two princesses (Moana and Merida). This implies that Disney is still setting singular beauty standard to sending off unrealistic body image to young children.

According to the study published in 2010, young girls, starting from the age of three to four, begin to develop perceptions and concerns about their body image and looks, and they can display dissatisfaction towards their body as young as the age of six years old [15]. As one of the most influential children's media, Disney sends a problematic beauty standard regarding body image [16].

The physical appearance of the princesses in Disney movies embodies a form of "thin-ideal" representation, where only unrealistically slim women are attractive [2].

When researchers interviewed a group of children and asked them their opinions on the appearance of Disney princesses, they mentioned mostly Disney princesses who had stereotypical beauty representations such as being slim and light skinned. Princesses such as Moana, Tiara, and Merida from later eras were much less mentioned [17].

Luckily, a lot of young girls have detailed perceptions of beauty. They are also capable of distinguishing the fictional characters from reality [17]. However, when a group of 10 children aged four to six years old were asked to identify each princess using the common ideal definition of beauty in an experiment, Merida and Moana had the least votes in almost every beauty aspect. According to one participant, "Merida hair so messy. She is not beautiful" [17]. Even though kids do use their critical thinking skills while watching the media, they are also inevitably influenced by the image they view. Their standards of beauty are still influenced by the media greatly.

According to another experiment involving 10 young girl participants, when the girls were asked about their appearance, most girls displayed general satisfaction. Nevertheless, one-third still expressed their wishes to change something about their appearance, and half still worried about getting fat [15]. This shows that the influence Disney princess movies cast on young girls could be buried deep within. Their body anxiety can easily go unnoticed and ignored by adults. Even though many of these participants recognize the severity of body anxiety, meaning that they have been educated on these issues, data shows that they cannot help to feel negative or develop concerns towards their own body and appearance. This situation stresses the importance of finding the right way to educate children on media literacy.

3.2. Self Confidence and Willingness to Take on Leadership Roles

Exposure to media from an early age negatively influences young girls' self-esteem. It causes them to feel less of themselves and more insecure about what they can accomplish.

Coyne's study in 2016 shows that young girls' princess culture engagement is positively associated with the gender stereotypical behavior that they display [2]. Even though demonstrating feminine behavior is not a negative thing, it can potentially become a problem if the stereotype starts damaging young girls' self-esteem and their ability to complete tasks. For instance, according to Coyne's study, "girls who strongly adhere to female gender stereotypes feel like they can't do some things. They're not as confident that they can do well in math and science. They don't like getting dirty, so they're less likely to try and experiment with things" [2].

Young girls who accepted gender-typed characteristics tend to believe that they should avoid leadership positions and maintain gentle and affectionate behaviors [18]. This will cause increased lack of self-confidence and in severe cases, even depression. It is also proven that gender stereotypes in children's media could also discourage young girls' will to pursue scientific fields [19].

As a large part of children's media, Disney is responsible for upholding positive values to children. However, research shows that the submissive and dependent female characters in Disney princess movies cast negative impacts on young girls imperceptibly.

There is, however, an exception to these research. One study shows that watching Disney princess movies could also be beneficial to young children [20]. The study included 307 children from preschool to kindergarten in a five-year period. Results of the study indicated that young girls' engagement level in princess culture is positively associated with the level of progressive attitude they have towards women and gender equality. They tend to and are less likely to be influenced by hegemonic masculinity [20]. Results also suggested that princess movies have only a very small impact on children's gender perception development [20].

Researchers of the study also suspect that the positive influence Disney princess media leaves on young girls is associated with Disney's progressiveness in recent years [19]. There are many Disney princesses and, therefore, young girls are likely to identify with princess culture as a whole rather than with one specific princess. Given that each princess has her own story and later princesses are less stereotypical protagonists, young girls might not adhere as strong to gender stereotypes [19].

4. Conclusion

4.1. The Portrayal of Disney Princesses

The portrayal of gender roles in Disney princess movies underwent significant change in terms of female characters' ability to make decisions and act independently. However, the anticipated change did not occur to the same degree in the body image and appearance of Disney princesses.

4.1.1. Body Image

Even though slight changes can be perceived in terms of the body image of the Disney princesses in two of the movies (Brave and Moana), these changes cannot be guaranteed to last as a positive trend. Disappointingly, Disney princesses did not make a sufficient positive effort in terms of changing the body features and appearances. Princess images continued to promote stereotypical representations of body image and beauty standards with few exceptions. The majority of princesses, even the ones in the New-age era (such as Elsa and Anna from Frozen), are unattainably slim and have unreasonable facial features such as huge eyes and small chins.

How children view the influence of the media largely depends on the environment surrounding them and their upbringing [20]. Thus, it is parents' and mentors' jobs to guide these young girls to view the media critically.

4.1.2. Decision-making and Leadership

As the 21st century approaches, the personalities and power of Disney princesses have changed greatly. From the Classics era to the New-age era, princesses are no longer waiting to be saved. Princesses now demonstrate strength and leadership skills just like male characters. They have aspirations and dreams of their own.

The power princesses possess has also changed throughout time. From Snow White and Cinderella to Merida and Elsa, Disney princesses are demonstrating fewer traditionally feminine traits, such as being gentle and caring, and progressing to be more androgynous. They have evolved from servants and housewives to queens and warriors. They have demonstrated increased power and courage.

Audiences also notice that romantic storylines occupy less and less of the plotline. Movies in the New-age era tend to focus more on the personal growth and coming-of-age of the princess, rather than the romantic encounters. Many princesses, such as Moana and Merida, stand alone in their story. They advance their own stories without the help from male figures.

4.2. How the Portrayal of Disney Princesses Influence Young Girls Aged 3 to 10

Children start to form perceptions of the world around them starting as early as the age of two to four years old. A big part of this includes their self-perception, such as one's personality, self-confidence, body esteem, etc. As a big part of children's media, Disney can easily impact this process for young kids, especially young girls. The gender roles portrayed in Disney princess movies greatly influence young girls' body esteem and self confidence in a variety of different ways, both positively and negatively.

4.2.1. Body Esteem

The problematic body image representation present in Disney princess movies casts a significant negative influence on young girls aged three to 10. This is because female protagonists in princess movies all conform to a certain type of stereotype, i.e., the thin bodies, big eyes, small chins, flawless skin, etc. In contrary, all antagonists are portrayed as exactly the opposite, having fatter bodies, smaller eyes, wrinkled skin, crooked figure, etc. Too much of this type of information can send off the wrong message to young girls, who at those early ages tend to possess singular views on beauty. These unrealistic body image can induce self-consciousness and unnecessary self-scrutiny or concern.

Even though studies show that young girls can recognize that some of these body images are stereotypical and problematic, when it comes to themselves, they are still unable to escape the social pressure [15]. They can still develop concerns about weight gains and unsatisfactory views about their appearance. This shows that Disney princesses are influencing young girls in this generation imperceptibly.

4.2.2. Self Confidence and Willingness to Take on Leadership Roles

The early ages of Disney princesses influence young girls' self confidence negatively. Princesses in the Classics era are often similar to housewives [8]. For instance, when Snow White was hiding in the house of the Seven Dwarfs, she immediately took on the responsibility of completely daily chores. In addition to their actions, the princesses often have the personality of being affectionate and gentle. After young girls watch those princess movies, they tend to think of princesses as their role model. This will impact young girls to act the same way. Many will become less likely to take on leadership roles. They will avoid standing out and are less likely to have dreams or aspirations.

However, on the positive side, as Disney becomes increasingly progressive, its princesses are starting to become more and more independent. This casts positive influences on young girls.

4.3. Implications and Media Literacy

As an entertainment company aiming to produce commercial films, Disney's ultimate goal is to make profit through its productions. Therefore, Disney's characters are constructed specifically to fulfill the taste of the audiences. In other words, the Disney princesses are only products of the mass media culture. Unfortunately, the popular interest does not always necessarily align with what children should learn. Therefore, these stereotypical representations reveal the equally problematic taste of the audiences. As a result, even Disney, an exemplar mass media with content designed for children, can send off problematic messages to young girls and children in general.

It is thus important to recognize that the princess culture is not where the issue lies. It is not wrong for young girls to be obsessed with princesses. The issue is that this type of culture has become overly dominant and only portrays a single version of girlhood [22]. In recent years, Disney has become more and more progressive in terms of correctly depicting gender roles. Positive progress has been made in more recent princess movies. However, disappointingly, the toys and related products licensed by Disney betray its positive messages. Many princess dolls produced by Disney keep or even enhance the slim ideal body image. The media exemplifies unrealistic body image and regressive gender roles and sell these problematic concepts to the audience to gain attention and profit.

Blindly banning young girls from princess media to protect them from stereotypical gender roles is not the perfect solution. In fact, overprotection could harm young girls' chances to practice becoming more media literate. When they grow up, they will eventually have to face more controversial media content. It is crucial that young girls understand how to think independently and critically about content in the media.

The key solution lies in how parents and adults can make sure young children, especially young girls, obtain a critical view on the media they receive every day. It is important that young girls do not conform to the stereotypical gender roles portrayed in princess movies and learn to view the media critically. According to the book *The Princess Problem: Guiding Our Girls Through the Princess Obsessed Years*, it is suggested that parents and guardians use the method of "pop culture coaching" to address these stereotypical portrayals and educate their children to be more media literate [22].

Pop culture coaching aims to help children understand how the media work and think critically about the media content. Apart from monitoring screen time and content, which most parents might already do, the most important part of this technique is sitting down and having conversations with young children about the media content and the creation of media. Parents can start with simple open-ended questions that evoke and prompt critical thinking from kids such as "do you think it is a good idea for her to do that?" Once they receive responses from the child, they can advance and start a discussion. In the end, parents should conclude the discussion by teaching children logistics behind each media creation. It is important that parents point out that media is created by people, so it is totally normal to disagree with it. Parents can also emphasize that anyone can be creators and encourage their own children to create their own media. This technique is applicable to all types of media including but not limited to television, film, video games, social media, and magazines.

Research shows that proper guidance from parents and mentors can significantly alleviate the manipulation that popular media culture cast on young children, especially young girls. As almost every child in the United States is influenced by the mass media communication culture, this work is of critical importance to the next generation of the US population. Even children-directed media such as Disney conveys problematic messages as a major leader of children's media and the film industry, and yet there potentially exists all sorts of unfiltered content across the media sources children receive. Therefore, it is crucial for every child to receive media literacy education from a young age so they can gain a critical view of the media they receive to protect themselves from being manipulated.

4.4. Limitations

Some of the limitations of this study could occur due to insufficient reference article collection. There is little previous research on Disney princess movie's gender role portrayal of its effects on children.

Conclusions of the 2.2 section could be biased or inaccurate due to not enough supporting evidence. Two of the four references come from the same author. Some of the supporting evidence is not entirely close knit with Disney princess movies' impact on young girls, rather the mass media culture's impact on children in general. This could cause potential biases and inaccuracy in my research.

4.5. Future Areas of Study

Looking at my research paper, there are three future areas of study that could be continue explored. The limitation of my research shows the lack of research on Disney princesses' impact on young girls' self-esteem. Researchers in the future should continue to explore how princess media and media in general can cast influence on young girls' self-confidence.

After studying the dire effects media leave on young girls and children in general, it is important that we seek useful solution to alleviate and solve the problem. Future study is also advised to focus on how parents and guardians could limit overprotection while providing proper guidance to young girls. Apart from pop culture coaching, what are some other ways that parents could use to train their kids to be more media literate.

Finally, one aspect of my conclusion turned out to be fascinating to me. When I conducted my research, I realized that young girls are imperceptibly influenced by problematic gender portrayals of the media despite knowing the harmful potential effects. Even though most girls in the experiment

conducted by Hayes and Tantleff-Dunn in 2010 acknowledged that inner beauty is more important, one-third of the sample still developed concerns about their appearance and half about their body weight [14]. Therefore, researcher could focus on exploring the reason behind why girls understand that princess media is not the reality, but they are still overly conscious about their own body.

References

- [1] Richards, D., Caldwell, P. H., & Go, H. (2015). *Impact of social media on the health of children and young people. Journal of paediatrics and child health*, 51(12), 1152-1157.
- [2] Coyne, S. M., Linder, J. R., Rasmussen, E. E., Nelson, D. A., & Birkbeck, V. (2016). *Pretty as a princess: Longitudinal effects of engagement with Disney princesses on gender stereotypes, body esteem, and prosocial behavior in children. Child development*, 87(6), 1909-1925.
- [3] Alp, A. (2021). *From Snow White to Moana: The evolution of disney princesses. The Stanford Daily*.
- [4] Reilly, C. (2016). *Chapter Four: An Encouraging Evolution Among the Disney Princesses? A Critical Feminist Analysis. Counterpoints*, 477, 51-63.
- [5] Huang, J. (2022, January). *The External Factors That Influence the Image of Disney Movies Characters. In 2021 International Conference on Culture, Design and Social Development (CDSD 2021) (pp. 153-156). Atlantis Press*.
- [6] Yakubovsky, J. (2021, December). *Disney Princess films and their effects on Gender and Body image through the Social Learning theory*.
- [7] Gutiérrez, B. P. (2017). *Breaking the Glass Slipper: Analyzing Female Figures' Roles in Disney Animated Cinema from 1950-2013*.
- [8] Maity, N. (2014). *Damsels in distress: A textual analysis of gender roles in Disney princess films. IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 19(10), 28-31.
- [9] Barber, M. (2016). *Disney's female gender roles: The change of modern culture (Doctoral dissertation)*.
- [10] Azmi, N. J., Ab Rashid, R., Rahman, M. A., & Safawati Basirah, Z. (2016). *Gender and speech in a Disney princess movie. International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 5(6), 235-239.
- [11] Hine, B., England, D., Lopreore, K., Skora Horgan, E., & Hartwell, L. (2018). *The rise of the androgynous princess: Examining representations of gender in prince and princess characters of Disney movies released 2009 - 2016. Social Sciences*, 7(12), 245.
- [12] Powers, L. (2014). *The evolution of the princess: Impact on perceptions (Doctoral dissertation, Southeast Missouri State University)*.
- [13] England, D. E., Descartes, L., & Collier-Meek, M. A. (2011). *Gender role portrayal and the Disney princesses. Sex roles*, 64(7), 555-567.
- [14] Rideout, V. (2013). *Zero to eight: Children's media use in America 2013. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense Media*.
- [15] Hayes, S., & Tantleff - Dunn, S. (2010). *Am I too fat to be a princess? Examining the effects of popular children's media on young girls' body image. British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 28(2), 413-426.
- [16] Xu, M. (2021, August). *Analysis on the Influence of Female Characters in Disney Films. In 2021 5th International Seminar on Education, Management and Social Sciences (ISEMSS 2021) (pp. 327-331). Atlantis Press*.
- [17] Azmi, N. J., Rashid, R. A., & Wahab, Z. (2018). *Young Girls Perception of Beauty in Disney Princess Movies. International Journal of Asian Social Science*, 8(9), 686-693.
- [18] Golden, J. C., & Jacoby, J. W. (2018). *Playing princess: Preschool girls' interpretations of gender stereotypes in Disney princess media. Sex Roles*, 79(5), 299-313.
- [19] Steinke, J., Lapinski, M. K., Crocker, N., Zietsman-Thomas, A., Williams, Y., Evergreen, S. H., & Kuchibhotla, S. (2007). *Assessing media influences on middle school - aged children's perceptions of women in science using the Draw-A-Scientist Test (DAST). Science Communication*, 29(1), 35-64.
- [20] Coyne, S. M., Linder, J. R., Booth, M., Keenan - Kroff, S., Shawcroft, J. E., & Yang, C. (2021). *Princess power: Longitudinal associations between engagement with princess culture in preschool and gender stereotypical behavior, body esteem, and hegemonic masculinity in early adolescence. Child Development*, 92(6), 2413-2430.
- [21] Johnson, M. (2010). *The little princess syndrome: When our daughters act out fairytales. Natural Life*.
- [22] Hains, R. (2014). *The princess problem: Guiding our girls through the princess-obsessed years. Sourcebooks, Inc*.