

The Reciprocal Relationship of the Content and Social Values in Disney Princess Films: An Analyze of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, the Little Mermaid, and Frozen

Zijun Huang^{1,a,*}

¹*UCLA, Los Angeles, CA, 90024, United States*
a. kerryhuang2024@g.ucla.edu

**corresponding author*

Abstract: It has become common practice to criticize Disney princess franchises and contrast the leading female characters with the more mature, highly socially conscious female characters in the present. However, these criticisms may forget to take other factors into consideration, such as social development. The progress of society will lead to changes in people's thinking and cognitive renewal. Today's popular views might not be viewed the same as in the past. So it would be harsh to rely on today's connotations to conclude that popular Disney princesses are failed child models. Through a literature review, this study analyzes the characters in Disney movies under the social background conditions of different film-making periods, using Disney princesses as the research center, and draws a conclusion on the relationship between the characters and the historical social background.

Keywords: Disney, social influence, sociology, Snow White, Mermaid, Elsa, Frozen, film

1. Introduction

As one of the largest production companies in the film industry, Walt Disney Pictures has been producing content for the public since the 1930s. An influential force in mass media, Disney's productions constantly strive to make an impact on the audience. Their light-hearted storylines, often reaching a happily-ever-after ending, are ideal for a family night. Disney's creations have influenced generations of children all over the world. Disney+, the company's new online streaming platform, has approximately 164.2 million subscribers spread across 108 countries [1]. The first full-length animation, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, was the highest-grossing animated film until today [2].

Out of all of Disney's IPs, Disney princesses is one of the longest-running lines. Since gender has been a hotly debated topic in recent years and princesses are the symbolic representation of women, no doubt they are being viewed as the poles of critique. Many studies concentrate on the princesses themselves, analyzing them separately from the social context of the film. The theme of analysis is often about princesses pursuing romantic love as the goal or being willing to sacrifice themselves in return for the love of a prince. However, from the 1930s to the 2010s, the Disney princess series has also undergone a phased change from Snow White to Elsa. For example, the concept of love is expanded, and the focus of the plot shifts from romantic love to female friendship and sisterhood. The pursuit of the princesses has also changed. They are independent, have power in their own hands, and no longer depend on others. On a larger scale, these changes reflect changing production values.

Most of the time, people choose movies as their form of entertainment because it is one of the most accessible one. As people began to realize the power of mass media, the purpose of film was not just to entertain. It began to undertake the delivery of information that the production team believed was important to the audience.

This paper discusses film as a product of social change and analyzes the relationship between characters and their embodiment of social values. To address the relationship between Disney's films and social influence, three films will be discussed: the 1937 production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the 1989 production of the *Little Mermaid*, and the 2013 production of *Frozen*. Through analyzing other academic sources, it sheds light on the reciprocally influencing relationship between Disney's products and popular social trends. This paper's purpose is not to justify any values, but rather to provide its readers with a fresh perspective.

2. Movies

2.1. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*

Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is an adaptation of Grimm's tale published in 1812 [3]. Disney himself was influenced by his childhood experience of watching the theater version of *Snow White* [3]. In addition to humor, Disney's "Snow White" is a romantic comedy that explores love and sentiment [4]. Love and sentiment are popular topics in film history and might seem too cliché now. However, the original Grimm's work had a gloomier storyline and seemed unsuitable for a first try or audience seeking entertainment. Moreover, America was enduring the Great Depression at the time, and it wouldn't be wise to add to that depressed atmosphere [3].

However, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* isn't just family entertainment. The spirit of the 1930s is fully presented in the production, including elements of escapism and socialism [5]. In the 1930s, morale in the United States was decimated by the Great Depression. Escapist and inspirational cartoons are popular on the worst days because people need something to cheer them up. Film is ideal because it is a medium that reaches the masses with the purpose to entertain. Even when it is intended to be educational, it reaches the audience informally, making the message more accessible. Disney employs what is called hyperrealism, a mode of animation that strives for 'realism' despite the apparent artifice of the medium's presentation [5]. The emphasis on realism and art in this Surrealist style creates an interesting paradox in which reality and fantasy are explored. It also means striking a balance between the artistic part and the social values that *Snow White* seeks to convey.

The Prince's falling in love with *Snow White* and the magical kiss that brings her back to life also corresponds to audiences' comments that "magic intervenes on behalf of the downtrodden to improve the dreary lives of the downtrodden. A comforting dream of deliverance" [4]. But while the prince brings comfort and hopes to *Snow White*, *Snow White* herself is also trying to live the life of an ordinary person within her means. During the Great Depression, the film praises a character who maintains a positive attitude even in difficult circumstances, living with passion and possessing a high degree of self-reliance [3]. The seven dwarfs in the film more directly represent the working class in society. Their musical compositions, such as "Heigh-ho," belong to labor songs, and the messages convey the need for solidarity and cooperation during the Great Depression, namely The Creed of Socialism [4]. While bringing comedic effects to audiences, Disney still seeks to embody social values through fairy tales, creating magic and reality at the same time.

2.2. *The Little Mermaid*

Disney takes a long pause for thirty years after the box office crash of *Sleeping Beauty*, and returns with the *Little Mermaid* in 1989. This period in between allows the production company to ponder. The 52-year span between *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and the *Little Mermaid* marks a new

transformation in the overall style of the characters and the intention of the movie. If Snow White's focus is to direct its audience to think on a united social level, the *Little Mermaid* aims to enlighten individual development.

There is no doubt that the *Little Mermaid* is a successful commercial product. In the 1980s, society entered an era of materialism and consumerism [6]. The number and scope of shopping centers increased, and as a by-product, films began to be gradually commercialized, which were designed to capture the teenage market [6]. Disney's goal was to create new consumption communities around its products to capture this adolescent market [6]. The film needs to resonate with the target audience to be commercially successful. This might also mean that the film and its characters must symbolize something big. Therefore, the content of the film becomes a marketing strategy. With the capitalist social-economic system, Andersen's literature work was transformed into a commodity [7].

Ariel can be seen as an embodiment of individualism. The wave of postfeminist thinking emerged in the rather conservative 1980s [6]. Postfeminist thinking is when there was a mix of individuality and conservative traditional roles of women. There is a need for individuality and a desire for independence from the constraints of society [6]. With the focus on individualism, there are more characters' expressions of emotions and complexity. Ariel's fantasy of the human world, her cheerful and brave personality, and her relationship with her protective family, all speak to the emerging idea of searching for one's identity and the obstacles along the way. Ariel aspires to be more than a mermaid and when she realizes she is more interested in a different world. Though that one is dangerous to the mermaids, Ariel doesn't back off.

Ariel is also interpreted as addressing the social dilemma of gender roles, which is still debatable. According to Spencer, the film "may be understood as a story about a character's struggles between her desire to perform a human identity and the societal and familial pressures she feels to perform" as a mermaid [8]. Sebastian is created as a foil to Ariel when he compares Ariel to "all the normal fish" [8]. He believes Ariel's identity should be connected to the body in which she was born. Otherwise, Ariel will deviate from social norms.

This also shows the reexamination of values and the welcome of new understanding. Later, Sebastian realizes that being a human is what makes Ariel her true self. This is also what Ariel's father, King Triton, accepts: he realizes that Ariel identifies as a human [8]. Perhaps the social values that the creators of the production believe in could also influence the film's message. Two of the creators of *Little Mermaid*, lyricist and producer Howard Ashman, and animator Andreas Deja were interviewed about their work. The social message of identity is verified when Deja points out that his sexual orientation has affected the development of the characters [8]. Whether or not the focus is leaning more heavily towards addressing individuality or the gender dilemma, Ariel does a successful rendition of a princess with a marked personality, which represents a change in characters.

2.3. *Frozen*

This unconventional princess is even more different when Disney moves to the 21st century. Business organizations are seeking ways and crafting marketing strategies to attract millennials as customers [9]. The millennials grow up under a diverse range of influence. Technology integrates into their lives and connects them with all kinds of social and cultural exposures. This global perspective and experience mean that they are open to new possibilities and the film industry must find new approaches [9]. Thus, when *Frozen* was produced and premiered in 2013, it incorporated a lot of new elements that soon become the new signature for Disney, such as female companionship, reversed villainy, and women's power.

As entering the 21st century, the classical Disney style of love has become dull for its audience. The love story of a prince and a princess seems too old school. Especially in the age of the millennials,

their greater access to social and political experience brings them to think more outside the box and want to make changes. *Frozen*'s change is a reflection of the changing audience values.

Based loosely on Andersen's fairy tale, "The Snow Queen", Disney's *Frozen* focuses on telling the story of sisterhood. Andersen's fairy tale is about how evil and black magic surrender to good, Christian action [10]. This religious theme doesn't qualify what a mainstream entertainment medium has to offer, which is why Disney turns it into a simple yet universal solution: Love. However, this time it is not romantic love that leads to happily ever after. The prince isn't the savior anymore. From a fresh point of view, the bond between sisters is the "cure" for potential villainy [11]. More importantly, Elsa's self-transformation sets her apart from Disney's predecessors [11]. Elsa is highly progressive in that she is the one who possesses the power that is capable to destroy, yet her transformation is done to herself and for herself [11].

This interesting twist of Andersen's evil Snow Queen into Elsa innovatively changes the dynamic of traditional fairy tale structure and offers a new perspective for the audiences to understand their characters. The Snow Queen of Andersen is luring and personifies adult sexuality [10]. That is standard female evilness. Disney changes its whole character formula when it rehabilitates Snow Queen into what is termed the "misunderstood witch trope" [10]. "Misunderstood witch trope" is when the audience is aware that the antagonist in the story is in fact a good character and actually a victim of malicious framing by others [10]. In *Frozen*, Elsa has both the frightening power but also the underlying good heart, unseen by others [10]. Her people view her power as sorcery and see her as a monster. Hans also enforces that fear through conspiracy, in order to take Elsa's throne.

Disney is apparently aware of itself making subversive changes to its princess. During marketing, *Frozen*'s trailer has Elsa for only a few seconds, compared to Anna, who makes up the majority of the trailer [10]. It is easy for the audience to have the impression that Anna is the protagonist of the feature film. Whether it is a purposeful or a cautious attempt to test the market is unknown, yet it shows how *Frozen* marks a huge difference in its character development. These changes align with the prominent social themes of the Millennials and feminism, as well as Disney's strong awareness of their own creations of previous stereotypes.

3. Discussion

To see Disney's princesses on a macroscopic scale is to separate its productions by time period. Throughout history, each period is marked by social changes. Society is made up of people. Entertainment relies on people, and mass media is inseparable from its audience. With the current wave of feminism, it becomes a hot topic to criticize Disney for its renditions of princesses and the storylines that gendered characters: Snow White is too submissive, and Ariel would sell part of herself for love. These are valid points. However, while admittedly there are long-standing traditions that are no longer suitable now, films should also be examined in a social context regarding their respective period. Media often works in a reciprocal way with social context. Films operate under the same scheme. It is encouraged to look at films with a critical eye, but it is equally important to see the traits of the films in their own respective time periods. Otherwise, the recorded social history of the past would be forgotten.

The simplification of the original tales in the three films does not mean that the productions lost powerful messages. It beautifully balances the need to appeal to the audience seeking entertainment as well as appeal to the social environment. To this end, it is successful. Society induces certain values in every different period. Media, or film, bears witness to the values' existence. Moving forward, these are necessary questions to be considered.

4. Conclusion

This paper aims to discuss the reciprocal relationship between film and social environment. People resonate with characters because of shared emotions, and those emotions come from what they experience in their social lives. By alluding to those social values, such as the positivity that is needed in *Snow White*, the rise of individualism in the *Little Mermaid*, and the redefinition of Disney classic in *Frozen*, all offer the audience a new perspective that is an advancement from before. Hopefully, this paper offers a neutral perspective on both the reasonings and the social background that guided the movie-making process. Of course, one limitation of this research is the focus is solely on one media franchise of Disney, which might be narrow. Another limitation might be no primary historic sources for reference. In the future, the research could expand more on other female characters other than the Princess line in the Disney world, as well as some primary sources for more complex interpretation. This would provide a more balanced and comprehensive viewpoint.

Reference:

- [1] Ruby, D. "Disney Users (2023) - Latest Facts and Figures." Demand Sage, 10 Jan. 2023, <https://www.demandsage.com/disney-users/>.
- [2] Terzigni, C. "These Are the Highest Grossing Animated Disney Movies Ever (You Won't Believe #1!)." AllEars.Net, 3 July 2022, <https://allears.net/2020/07/03/these-are-the-highest-grossing-animated-disney-movies-ever-you-wont-believe-1/>.
- [3] Inge, T. (2004) *Walt Disney's Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 32:3, 132-142, DOI: 10.1080/01956051.2004.10662058.
- [4] Wright, T.M. (1997) *Romancing the Tale: Walt Disney's Adaptation of the Grimms' "Snow White"*, *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 25:3, 98-108, DOI: 10.1080/01956059709602756.
- [5] Pallant, C. (2010). *Disney-Formalism: Rethinking 'Classic Disney.'* *Animation*, 5(3), 341–352. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1746847710377567>
- [6] O'Brien, P.C. (1996). *The Happiest Films on Earth: A Textual and Contextual Analysis of Walt Disney's Cinderella and The Little Mermaid*, *Women's Studies in Communication*, 19:2, 155-183, DOI: 10.1080/07491409.1996.11089811.
- [7] Hastings, A. W.. "Moral Simplification in Disney's *The Little Mermaid*." *The Lion and the Unicorn*, vol. 17 no. 1, 1993, p. 83-92. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/uni.0.0281.
- [8] Spencer, L. G., (2014). *Performing Transgender Identity in The Little Mermaid: From Andersen to Disney*, *Communication Studies*, 65:1, 112-127, DOI: 10.1080/10510974.2013.832691.
- [9] Weber, J., (2017). *Discovering the Millennials' Personal Values Orientation: A Comparison to Two Managerial Populations*. *J Bus Ethics* 143, 517–529. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-015-2803-1>
- [10] Myren-Svelstad, P.E. (2022). "The Witch in the Closet: Disney's *Frozen* as Adaptation and Its Potential for Queer and Feminist Readings." *Scandinavian Studies*, vol. 94 no. 1, p. 1-23. Project MUSE muse.jhu.edu/article/848330.
- [11] Lester, C. (2019), *Frozen hearts and fixer uppers: villainy, gender, and female companionship in Disney's frozen*. in AM Davis (ed.), *Discussing Disney*. John Libbey & Company/University of Indiana Press, Bloomington, Indiana, pp. 193-216.