

## **THE GENDER ROLE PORTRAYAL OF DISNEY PRINCESSES AND ITS IMPACT ON THE AUDIENCE**

Sohani Shahid<sup>1\*</sup> and Rosechongporn Komolsevin<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1\*, 2</sup> Communication Arts Department, Graduate School of Bangkok University  
Bangkok, Thailand

E-mail: shahid.soha@bumail.net<sup>1\*</sup>

### **ABSTRACT**

With the voices from past literature and research, this paper explores areas of Disney princess movies over the decades in terms of the transitional female lead characters and the perceived impact of the said change on the audience in terms of their behavior and decision making. Disney as a global corporation has imposed on the psychological development of children in regards to identity management, gender performance, and racial stereotypes, forming an overall structure society has been reduced to confine in. The primary objective of this study therefore, is to find out how the characterization of gender perception of Disney princesses over the decades has left an impact on the audience and how the transition of Disney princesses and the portrayal of gender roles affect the audience. The research for this study has taken a qualitative approach by conducting interviews of exploratory nature consisting of open-ended question among audiences with the core focus on adolescents. This study contributes to assessing whether young adults identify Disney's transition into creating more gender-balanced characters by addressing a gap in previous literature by exploring both areas of the audiences' reaction and the impact of these changes on their behavioral patterns. Results from this study increasingly suggest that young adults themselves can successfully identify and interpret the gendered representations to which they are exposed and they recognize the change that has occurred in such representations over time. It can be argued that by presenting more gender progressive and balanced gender role portrayals of lead characters, the Disney Corporation has the opportunity to contribute to proper gender representations.

**KEYWORDS:** 1) DISNEY PRINCESS 2) DISNEY MOVIES 3) GENDER ROLE

## **INTRODUCTION**

Gender roles are a perceived set of behavioral “norms” that are usually linked in association to males and females in a social group or construct as Barber (2015) citing Yerby, Baron, and Lee stated. (Gardner 2015) in his study stated that our society tends to draw a structure as to what it means to be a male or a female, and then go on to define which portrayals of normal behavior should be depicted by them. These depictions and traits then get further reinforced through various commodities and the media for what is considered appropriate (Barber, 2015).

In Disney films, gender roles of both males and females are very prominent. Disney films with their 80 years of the franchise have played a huge role in the entertainment industry. They reach out to their audience not only through their movies but through merchandise, toys, games, etc. While looking at Disney princesses, the depiction of their female characters and their gender roles can be described in three ways. The original portrayal of Disney from the time of inception with Snow White, followed by Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty have seen Disney princesses portrayed as stereotypical damsels-in-distress, domestic avatars. The second wave of characters can be seen played by Ariel, Mulan, and Rapunzel where the characters are seen to be more rebellious and ambitious. The third shift in roles has been played through characters like Merida, Anna, and Elsa where the princesses have been seen to be more independent and free-spirited. (Barber, 2015)

### **Problem Statement**

Children learn about societal norms and structures from many sources but the media have been known to leave a lasting impression on them. Disney movies are quite popular among kids and young adults. That is, they look up to these Disney princesses as not only characters they can dress up as on Halloween but also as role models who shape the functionality of their cognitive thinking abilities. This may further affect the way these children behave in their relationships as adults. Hence, it is important to examine the impact these movies have on the younger generation.

The primary objective of this study therefore, is to find out how the characterization of gender perception of Disney princesses over the decades has left an impact on the audience and how the transition of Disney princesses and the portrayal of gender roles affect the audience. The motivation of the study comes from the researcher’s personal experience growing up with Disney characters and their influence on her life in terms of her romantic endeavors.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Gender roles and its implication have had its footprint on our society for a very long time now. Signorielli (1990) in her research stated that television is a common, constant, and vivid learning environment in today’s world, posing as a storyteller. Her paper indicated that “our children are born into homes in which, for the first time in human history, a centralized commercial institution rather than parents, church, or school, tells most of the stories.” Studies by Aktins and Miller (1975) on the effects of television advertising on children found that children who viewed commercials in which females were cast in typically male occupations were more likely to say that this occupation was appropriate for women. Another study by Pingree (1978) on the effects of non-sexist television commercials and perceptions of reality on children’s attitudes about women found that television commercials influence children’s attitudes about gender-role stereotypes.

## **Disney princesses and gender**

One of the most successful types of media and merchandise in terms of popularity and profit for young girls is the Disney princess line. The franchise in 2012 alone exceeded a booming sum of \$3 billion in profit (Goudreau, 2012). But the line of films has also given birth to some public concerns regarding the effects Disney princesses may have on young girls (e.g., Orenstein, 2011).

## **Media Effect Theories**

Media effects include theories that explain how the mass media influence the attitudes and perceptions of audience members. Media effects represent one of the core ideas of communication research (Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011).

## **Cultivation theory**

The premise of George Gerbner's cultivation theory stated that with the increase in viewership of television and its rising popularity, heavy television viewers are more likely to believe that real life is similar to realities portrayed on television. The amount of violence portrayed on television, for example, makes people think of the world to be a much more violent place to be than it is in reality. This phenomenon is typically referred to as "mean world syndrome" (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shahnahan, 2002).

## **Social learning theory**

Social learning theory is based on the idea that we learn from our interactions with others in a social context. According to Bandura (1977), people also develop similar behaviors by observing the behaviors of others. People interpret and imitate the behavior after observing the behavior of others, especially if their observational experiences are positive ones or include rewards related to the observed behavior. Bandura stated, imitation involves the actual reproduction of observed motor activities. (Nabavi, 2012)

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF GENDER ROLE PORTRAYAL AND EFFECTS**

Rubel & Martin (1998, as cited in Lapreore 2016) wrote that children become aware of the existence of gender as early as one year of age and continue to develop their concepts of gender through childhood. Various studies have demonstrated that children can learn from models observed in the media (Lapreore 2016).

In his study, Busby (1975, as cited in Lapreore 2016) concluded that consumers should be concerned about the stereotypical images of men and women in media to which children are heavily exposed. In two consecutive studies, Durkin investigated the relationship between children's television shows and the formation of their sex-role acquiring abilities. Durkin (1985 a, as cited in Lapreore 2016) went on to confirm clear differences are evident in the portrayal of male and female characters. Durkin's (1985b, as cited in Lapreore 2016) second research findings indicated that there is a strong relationship between children's viewing of gender role portrayals on television and their understanding of gender roles.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research for this study was set to have a qualitative approach. An interview of exploratory nature consisting of open-ended questions was conducted among audiences of both genders in 6 different schools with the core focus on adolescents. The purpose of the interview was to understand the perspective and reactions of the audience towards Disney movies over the decades. This research was conducted based on standard basic knowledge of the Disney movies, especially the three movies this research focused on, to draw an

estimated timeline of the movies throughout the different eras. This research was centered on the impact Disney movies with transitioning female lead roles in terms of their characteristics, gender roles, and goals have on the participants' perception and behavior regarding gender portrayal and also note down their reactions to the themes of the aforementioned movies. Through this interview, the overall thoughts and attitudes towards the Disney movies in terms of their transition of female roles were recorded and analyzed.

## **RESULTS**

Disney being one of the biggest corporations in the world remains to be popular among children and adults in America and all across the world. The influence Disney movies have on the audience therefore is crucial as many children get exposed to the world of Disney in the early stages of their lives. The research results present an analysis of the chosen three movies highlighted in the study and discuss the theories that help explain how the issues mentioned in the study affect the audience. The analysis derived from the study is given below. Analysis of findings based on the background of Aurora, Belle, and Moana Sleeping Beauty (1959). Sleeping Beauty released in the 1950s, precisely 1959 is one of Disney's initial releases after Snow White (1939) and Cinderella (1950). This movie introduces princess Aurora and showcases a handsome prince whom Aurora is seen to have fallen helplessly in love with, and the prince like his predecessor in the previous Disney releases is seen to take upon the responsibility of saving the princess's life who's portrayed as fragile and helpless like the princesses before her. Beauty and the Beast (1991) followed by the first era of Disney characters comes a wave of the rebellious era where Disney introduces an avid reader Belle, who is seen to be different from the girls in her village in terms of the common interests they share and is deemed rather strange by the villagers for her love for reading. We see Belle's character to emit less of the 'damsel in distress' aura in comparison to princesses before her but at the same time, she is seen to have lost her independent persona after she becomes a prisoner to the Beast and is seen to have fallen in love with him. This depiction represents a classic case of the Stockholm syndrome, which is a term used to describe a psychological response that occurs when hostages or prisoners form a bond with their captor or abuser. Moana (2016), in the more independent and free-spirited era, Disney introduces Moana, who is seen to disobey her father to venture beyond the reef, into the open seas, given her adventurous and high-spirited nature. This movie along with some of Disney's recent releases around this time demonstrates strong female characters who, with a refreshing spin on the older characters, do not wait for a 'prince charming' to rescue them from their troubles. Moana shifts focus from the romantic angle, emphasizing more on strength, adventure, and a sense of community.

## **ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS FROM KEY RESPONDENTS**

From the findings, it can be concluded that the transition of Disney in terms of how they portrayed female lead characters in recent times has been positively accepted by the key respondents. The older movies have noticeably left an impact as to how the participants viewed romance in most cases but they are consciously aware of how the characters have been portrayed in the previous movies and they have actively highlighted a lot of the problematic areas displayed in these movies. Disney remains a popular expression of media among children. The older portrayals of women do not hold a strong ground when it comes to young people setting a benchmark for themselves as to how they should behave but the newer movies are more accepted among them as they reflect independence, sense of adventure, and freedom in the recent female characters.

Gerbner's cultivation theory stated that long-term television viewing does not only pose to be a danger because of its ability to form a perception about a specific issue but also has the power to shape one's moral values and general beliefs about the world. The cultivation theory also suggests that the media children consume do have an impact on their views about gender.

Viewing traditional films with gender stereotypes are known to leave psychological imprints on children. Elizabeth England, citing Sherryl Graves, stated, "the constructivist approach and cultivation theory both suggest there may be an effect of viewing gendered stereotypes upon children." England further explained that "constructivist approach proposes children develop their beliefs based on their interpretations of observation and experiences." These observations and experiences can be formed through watching media such as film and television as well as life (Morrison, 2014).

Bandura and Walters' (1963) stated in their social learning theory that children learn gender roles as they are taught by parents, school, and the media. (Lamanna & Riedmann, 1997). Lefkowitz and Huesmann (1980) stated that this theory examines the role of modeling in a child's social development. It posits that viewers, especially children, imitate the behavior of television characters in much the same way that they learn social and cognitive skills by imitating their parents, siblings, and peers (Singer & Singer, 2000).

This study contributes to assessing whether young adults identify Disney's transition into creating more gender-balanced characters by addressing a gap in previous literature by exploring both areas of the audiences' reaction and the impact of these changes on their behavioral patterns. Results from this study increasingly suggest that young adults themselves can successfully identify and interpret the gendered representations to which they are exposed and they recognize the change that has occurred in such representations over time. It can be argued that by presenting more gender progressive and balanced gender role portrayals of lead characters, the Disney Corporation has the opportunity to contribute to proper gender representations.

## CONCLUSION

The results obtained from this study indicated that the key respondents were not in favor of the way Disney has portrayed women in the earlier movies. They agreed upon the fact that newer movies had depicted a more ideal representation of female characters and they could relate more to the way they were presented. It was also noted that they did think the older movies left an influence on them in terms of how they viewed romance in the earlier stages of their lives.

The description of female lead characters and the portrayal of romance were in accordance with past research. They did mostly refer to the 'damsel in distress' phenomenon which was more common in the earlier movies but have been shown less in the recent motion pictures. The idea of 'happily ever afters' remains a strongly held belief but the participants do agree that the portrayal of romance is not realistic in the said Disney movies.

Since the beginning of Disney movies with Snow White in 1937, the Disney franchise has gained extreme popularity on a global scale reaching audiences of various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Disney has made some progress in the characterization of its lead roles but it still has a long way to go. As Disney presents itself as a protector of innocence and holds high values in terms of creating nostalgia with their films, the only party held responsible for the impact their movies may have on children and growing adults should not be limited to them alone. Parents, guardians, and educators should also set an example as to how they present Disney in front of their children, and expose them to these movies responsibly by educating them about stereotypical gender norms and roles. By creating an

open platform for dialogue, parents and caregivers can use the awareness of Disney's lack of proper gender portrayals as an essential tool to educate children so they become more capable decision-makers when it comes to their perceptions of romance and gender as they grow up.

As media continues to play an essential role in our lives, coaching parents and educators regarding the type of content they expose their children should be given more importance. Disney films can be used as a medium for family discussions. Parents can watch the movies with their children and ask questions before, during, and after to increase their children's media literacy and to understand the power media holds in sending the messages it does with the aid of the movies. By asking questions to children regarding their thoughts on gender representation and portrayals, the hope that they will be less influenced by the media and its messages as they mature into adulthood is strengthened. Disney can also be a medium to discuss topics like racism, sexism, and diversity in terms of the characters and their representations which would help raise awareness regarding these issues at an earlier stage of life.

## REFERENCES

- Arnold, L., Seidl, M., & Deloney, A. (2015). Hegemony, gender stereotypes and Disney: A content analysis of Frozen and Snow White. **Concordia Journal of Communication Research**, 2(1), 1.
- Barber, M. (2016). **Disney's female gender roles: The change of modern culture (Doctoral dissertation)**. Retrieved July 17, 2020 from <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Disney%E2%80%99s-Female-Gender-Roles%3A-The-Change-of-Modern-Barber/4442ddf338e92ac547de7e401672e8271a352322>
- Bernhaupt, R., Pirker, M., Mirlacher, T., & Schwaiger, D. (2010). **Media Consumption is Revolutionized? Cross-Media Usage in European Households**. In Proceedings of International Broadcasting Convention Conference-IBC.
- Binkley, M. (2016). **An argument on Disney and psychological development**. URJ-UCCS: Undergraduate Research Journal at UCCS, 10(1), 11-18.
- Blackstone, A. M. (2003). Gender roles and society.
- Borah, P. (2016). **Media Effects Theory**. Retrieved July 10, 2020 from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/314119579\\_Media\\_Effects\\_Theory](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/314119579_Media_Effects_Theory)
- 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.
- Ebere-Anaba, C. C. (2016). **Children's Perceptions of Gender roles as portrayed in Disney films**.
- England, D. E., Descartes, L., & Collier-Meek, M. A. (2011). **Gender role portrayal and the Disney princesses**. *Sex roles*, 64(7), 555-567.
- Garabedian, J. (2015). Animating gender roles: How Disney is redefining the modern princess. *James Madison Undergraduate Research Journal (JMURJ)*, 2(1), 4.
- Hefner, V., Firchau, R. J., Norton, K., & Shevel, G. (2017). Happily ever after? A content analysis of romantic ideals in Disney princess films. *Communication Studies*, 68(5), 511-532.
- Hine, B., Ivanovic, K., & England, D. (2018). From the sleeping princess to the world-saving daughter of the chief: Examining young children's perceptions of 'old' versus 'new' Disney princess characters. *Social Sciences*, 7(9), 161.

- Krueger, J. I., Hasman, J. F., Acevedo, M., & Villano, P. (2003). Perceptions of trait typicality in gender stereotypes: Examining the role of attribution and categorization processes. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 29(1), 108-116.
- Lamanna, M. A., Riedmann, A., & Stewart, S. D. (2014). *Marriages, families, and relationships: Making choices in a diverse society*. Cengage Learning.
- Liu, Z. (2016). Impact of Soundtrack in Animated Movie on Audience: A Case Study of "LET IT GO" in "FROZEN".
- Lopreore, K. M. (2016). *Gender Role Portrayals of Modern Disney Royalty: Stereotypical or Androgynous?* (Doctoral dissertation, Middle Tennessee State University).
- Minor, B. D. (2014). *Happily Ever After: Is Disney Setting Us Up? A Study on Disney Princesses and Their Influence on Young Women and Their Personal Love Narratives*.
- Morgan, M., Shanahan, J., & Signorielli, N. (2015). Yesterday's new cultivation, tomorrow. *Mass Communication and Society*, 18(5), 674-699.
- Morrison, D. (2014). *Brave: A feminist perspective on the Disney princess movie*.
- Mosharafa, E. (2015). All you need to know about: The cultivation theory.
- Nabavi, R. T. (2012). Bandura's social learning theory & social cognitive learning theory. *Theory of Developmental Psychology*, 1-24.
- Sandlin, J. A., & Garlen, J. C. (2017). Magic everywhere: Mapping the Disney curriculum. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 39(2), 190-219.
- Sharif, U. H. (2016). *From fairy tales to disney movies: gender roles and stereotypes then and now* (Doctoral dissertation, BRAC University).
- Signorielli, N. (1990). Children, media and gender roles: Messages and impact. *Journal of Adolescent Health Care*, 11, 50-58.
- Singer, D. G., & Singer, J. L. (Eds.). (2011). *Handbook of children and the media*. Sage publications.
- Stover, C. (2013). Damsels and heroines: The conundrum of the post-feminist Disney princess. *LUX: A Journal of Transdisciplinary Writing and Research from Claremont Graduate University*, 2(1), 29.
- Tonn, T. (2008). *Disney's influence of females perception of gender and love*.
- Towbin, M. A., Haddock, S. A., Zimmerman, T. S., Lund, L. K., & Tanner, L. R. (2004). Images of gender, race, age, and sexual orientation in disney feature-length animated films. *Journal of feminist family therapy*, 15(4), 19-44.