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English 106K

7 December 2013

Gender Portrayal in Disney Animation

Introduction

What are gender roles and gender stereotypes?

Gender roles refer to sets of social and behavioral standards that society usually expects males and females to perform based on their gender. They create rigid beliefs of what men and women should comply with. These deep-rooted assumptions have been linked with the concept of gender stereotypes, which describe the qualities that are perceived to be associated with males and females: for example, sensitivity and display of affection are considered feminine whereas aggressiveness and bravery are considered typical for men (“The Malleability of Gender Stereotypes” 636). The stereotypical gender traits appear to make the wish of obtaining equality in gender hard to come true. At the present time, both men and women should receive equal treatment and open perspective of their social roles and positions. It is undeniably important to learn about gender stereotypes since they may involve prejudice against both sides. By having a deep understanding about this issue, people can potentially avoid providing a biased outlook on gendered messages and instead give a more open-minded idea about non-traditional gender representations. Though Gender stereotypes reached their peak in the past, traditional gendered roles are still pervasive and most clearly reflected in media including the press, Internet, radio,

and television, which are regarded as effective conveyors of gendered messages. Since people have frequent exposure to the media, they gradually perceive the concepts of gender roles depicted in news or movies without harsh evaluation.

Impact of media and an overview of Disney animated films

Sociologists have proven that people can be easily affected by the outside experience that they gain. Media is one of the most influential factors that may form how people – especially young people – think, act, and behave. Much of their knowledge is accumulated from the content and images depicted in television, particularly in movies. Since young viewers are regarded as an impressionable group, the messages conveyed by any kind of films can have a certain impact on them. Regarding children's movies, what pops up in almost everyone's mind would be Walt Disney Studios, an extraordinary and creative group of filmmakers. Founded on October 16, 1923, Disney has been one of the biggest film creators ("Disney History"). Nobody can deny the high entertainment value and the rewarding moral lessons about life described in Disney films. On the one hand, Disney has succeeded in nurturing young souls through fairy tale movies. On the other hand, it has made parents and educators worry about the gender stereotypes presented by animated characters. The vast majority of Disney characters are found tightly linked with the traditional gender roles, but in recent times Disney has put remarkable effort into constructing less gender-based messages. Whether stereotypical or non-stereotypical, the images can potentially affect young audiences' perceptions of gendered concepts and behaviors to some extent.

Literature Review

Disney, one of the greatest media corporations in the world, has produced about fifty-three animated movies by now. Released in 1928, the first character, Mickey Mouse, became a big hit and quickly won the audience's affection. A sequence of animated films was then "born" and again marked huge accomplishments such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Beauty and the Beast* (1994). Disney created a formula for its movies' content and characters: good winning over evil, romanticized love, glorious princes and princesses, adorable animals, and catchy songs. However, since the 1980s, Disney filmmakers have made a noticeable attempt to cast aside the traditional gendered content and have produced more innovative movie scripts.

England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek examined the coded feminine and masculine characteristics in Disney movies. According to their study carried out in 2011, the Disney Princess line is divided into three groups – the early movies (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*), the middle movies (*The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, *Pocahontas*, *Mulan*) and the most current movie as of 2009 (*The Princess and the Frog*). These authors explored the Disney's trend of building less and less stereotypical characters in chronological order. They conclude that Disney princes and princesses have advanced in developing cross-gender performances: for instance, female characters transform into brave heroines, while male characters become more emotional.

Certain recent movies still portray the stereotypical gender images and, of course, the older movies show sharper pictures about gender roles. Gillam, Ken, and Wooden focus on the

portrayal of the traditional masculinity of male characters in *Toy Story* (1995) and *Cars* (2006). The authors emphasize the competitiveness and arrogance of typical male characters. Similarly, Elizabeth Bell shows the feminine images which are reminiscent of ballet dancers in the characters Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora. In contrast, Lauren Dundes, the author of “Disney's Modern Heroine Pocahontas,” has explored the strong masculine personalities depicted by Pocahontas, such as fortitude, adventurousness, and independence. Those three journal articles all support the points of stereotypical gender portrayals and less gender-based trends examined in the study of England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek. Lastly, an interview conducted by Alexander Bruce at Florida Southern College in 2005, has provided a lot of interesting facts about the impact of Disney animation on young people. The responses of the interviewees have demonstrated their notion of gender roles. This article helps readers explore deeply negative effects of Disney’s gendered representations on young viewers.

Femininity

Disney has been criticized for generalizing the concept of femininity by designing a stereotypical image of female characters in regard to their physical appearance and personalities. Bell remarks that “Within the language of Disney animation, the constructed bodies of women are somatic, cinematic and cultural codes that attempt to align audience sympathies and allegiance with the beginning and end of the feminine life cycle” (109). Indeed, people can easily notice the traditional gender depiction and the embodiment of Barbie dolls hiding behind Disney princesses. The first princess, Snow White, gave rise to a series of beautiful and emotional princesses afterwards. She is often described as the “fairest in the land” with short hair as black

as ebony, full lips as red as a rose, and flawless skin as white as snow. Cinderella is praised for her classically beautiful features with a softly shaped face, pink lips, and twinkling blue eyes. Disney portrays Aurora in *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) as a princess possessing an immortal beauty. She seems to be dead, but “the trance has not taken away the lovely color of her complexion. Her cheeks are flushed, her lips like coral” (109). Bell makes a sharp observation that the physical beauty of the early Disney princesses resembles the typical images of classical ballet dancers (110).

Aside from stereotypical physical beauty, Disney princesses undergo the “same plots and personality requisites” (112). They are associated with domestic tasks and suffer from the dangers caused by evil powers, but then they are magically rescued by the courageous and strong-willed princes and fall into a romanticized love. Snow White sends the clearest gender role messages. When she lives in the cottage of the dwarfs, she cleans the whole house and takes on the mother’s responsibility to cook meals everyday for them. Getting through many troubles, she finally ends up with a gentle prince who brings her back from Death’s hand. Cinderella also embodies a submissive and dutiful young girl image when she lives with her malicious step-mother and two selfish step-sisters, but in the end of the movie she turns out to be an envious princess having a happy life with her lover. In this case, it is noticeable that the prince helps Cinderella to escape from imprisoned life and slave destiny. Like the above princesses, Aurora exhibits a strong rescued role and shows the passiveness of female characters. She has to wait for the first kiss of the man who truly loves her in order to cast away the sleeping spell. Those early Disney princesses present strong gendered content: meekness, obedience, sensitivity, and dependence.

Even though Ariel and Belle are the beginning of modern princesses, they still present the stereotypical trait of dependence and are drawn into romantic relationships. In *The Little Mermaid* (1989), Princess Ariel was rescued from the sea witch Ursula by Prince Eric. Additionally, at the end of the movie, Ariel shows no hesitation to sacrifice her voice and even agrees to leave her father to fulfill her desire of living with her prince. Obviously, she puts more value on romance than on family. In *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), the Beast saves Belle from an attack by a pack of wolves. When living in the castle, Belle persistently isolates herself from the outside world and continuously declines the Beast's invitation for a meal. However, when she spends more time with the Beast, she becomes attracted to his intimate gestures. Belle is moved by his gentleness and warm-heartedness hidden behind his uncouth appearance.

Masculinity

Opposite to the feminine and gentle outward appearance of female characters, Disney has displayed male characters in stereotypical body forms. Their beauty embodies their activeness, fortitude, and masculinity. For instance, the prince in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is portrayed as having short dark brown hair with a gentle smile, good-looking face, and average height. The prince images in Disney movies are often attached to the horse and the sword, which imply the male's strength and bravery. Aladdin (1992) is a handsome and slightly muscular guy with black hair and brown eyes. In addition, John Smith in *Pocahontas* (1995) possesses a muscular body with fair skin and an angular face. Even though Tarzan (1999) does not come from royal family, the filmmakers still portray him as having a well-built body with biceps and

abdominal muscles. Tarzan displays a wild beauty that highlights his strength, adventurousness, and courage.

In the book *The Early Windows*, the authors claim that “In terms of how they behave, TV males are portrayed as more powerful, dominant, aggressive, stable, persistent, rational, and intelligent than females” (163). Indeed, Disney male characters are not exceptions. Reflecting upon the Disney Princess line, people can realize that the princes, although having a lower frequency of appearance than princesses, always display the leading and rescuer role. The audiences regularly catch the scene of fighting between the princes and evil characters. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *The Little Mermaid*, the princes play savior roles and join battles that require strong physical qualities. Additionally, Aladdin is described as a fearless man who fights against a giant snake with just one small sword. This model also applies to Prince Philip in *Sleeping Beauty*, who struggles with a cruel witch to rescue Princess Aurora from danger. Although he fights against the heartless witch without any weapons near the end of the battle, he still gains the victory over her.

Maculine qualities like fierceness and belligerence in Disney movies are repeated in many later products. For instance, Buzz Lightyear and Sheriff Woody from *Toy Story* both “base their worth on a masculine model of competition and power, desiring not only to be the favorite toy of their owner, Andy, but also to possess the admiration of and authority over the other toys in the playroom” (Gillam, Ken, and Wooden 3). This presents an authoritative mind and patriarchal desire. Besides, Lightning McQueen in *Cars* represents the next generation of typical Disney male characters. Not having achieved the “King” status, he claims, “Speed. I am

speed...I eat losers for breakfast” and he courageously races forward to get closer to the finish the line (3). The images of bellicose, competitive, and arrogant male characters have pervaded Disney animated movies.

The trend towards less gender-based messages

Feminists would likely assume that Disney filmmakers have exacerbated the prejudice against women in society since the female characters are often associated with the home-caring role, obsequiousness, and tentativeness. On the contrary, there are a great number of women in real life displaying the male characteristics. Disney movies have come under a lot of criticisms for their consistent gendered images. However, people have gradually perceived a transformation from more to less gender-based construction of Disney characters, especially in and after the period of the 1980s.

Researchers have observed the downward trend in the ratio of feminine characteristics delineated in Disney princesses over time. The feminine traits of princess characters in the early films show the largest percentage with 86%, but this figure significantly drops by 58% in the middle movie group and slightly reduces to 53% in the most current films (England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek 558). According to this study, the first three Disney movies in the 1930s and 50s were more affected by the notion of traditional gender roles than the second group of movies produced in and after the 1980s (562).

Looking at the transition from the early to the middle princesses, people can detect that there existed a tendency toward the non-stereotypical images of female Disney characters. Belle

is not only described as a sensitive and nurturing princess, but she also embodies the image of an intellectual, smart, and independent girl. Belle is characterized as a book lover. She overtly declines the proposal of Gaston, who wants to marry her for her beauty. Furthermore, Disney filmmakers focus on displaying her bravery when she rushes to the Beast's castle to rescue her father. Belle agrees to be imprisoned in exchange for her father's freedom.

The unprecedented activeness and adventurousness of Disney princesses are exhibited clearly by Pocahontas. She is seen running, climbing trees, and moving swiftly through the woods. Her strong physical appearance contrasts with the graceful beauty of her predecessors. Dundes remarks that Pocahontas "breaks the mold for Disney heroines, providing a role model sharply divergent from the submissive Snow White of 1937 who concerns herself with domestic duties and later waits passively to be rescued" (354). Indeed, when she realizes the need to stop the execution that may trigger a battle between the Native Americans and the settlers, she immediately rushes to the scene and calls out for natural sources to help her get there in time. In the ending of movie, Pocahontas has made a hard decision to stay with her villagers instead of following John Smith. Dundes asserts that Pocahontas "traverses with ease the often tumultuous transition from self absorption to self-denial" (354). Pocahontas identifies herself as a warrior and regards the community benefits as her personal benefit. Contrary to Pocahontas, her predecessor, Ariel, is willing to leave her father behind to pursue her dream of living beside Prince Eric. Ariel makes decisions based on a romantic relationship, which is less focused on in the later princesses. Compared with Ariel, Pocahontas obviously represents a new generation of daring, assertive, and rational princesses.

The female characters in the most recent Disney movies have sent the clearest message of non-stereotypical gender constructions. Even though Tiana in *The Princess and the Frog* exhibits stereotypical culinary skills, she still demonstrates the attempts of Disney to follow the non-traditional gender role representation. While her mother tries to fit her into the stereotypical gender role of a young woman, Tiana persistently claims that she wants to be “her own person, to place hard work over romance” (Turner 88). She also replies to her mother that she has enough ability to make her own fairy tales without resorting to any prince’s help. Tiana is delineated as an independent, ambitious, and career-oriented girl who takes two jobs at a time to save money for paying for a building, in which she opens her own restaurant. In this film, Disney highlights a female character’s workplace role instead of the caretaker role from the previous movies. Furthermore, princess Merida in one of the most recent movies *Brave* (2012) stands out from all of the previous princesses. Merida is described as a tomboyish, stubborn, and adventurous girl. She discovers wild nature by climbing a steep mountain to drink water from a waterfall. She is reminiscent of Pocahontas, a girl who loves experiencing wildlife and freedom. When Merida’s mother tells her about the betrothal, she gets extremely angry and reacts impetuously. She storms out of the hall and rushes to her bedroom. She strikes her bedposts with a sword. Merida never wants to accept arranged marriage, and above all she thinks that she herself will decide her destiny.

The male characters in Disney are not the exception. Some of the princes in the middle group demonstrate the less gender-based construction. Aladdin is sentimental but decisive, courageous, and physically strong. The Beast plays a hero role when saving the princess from the wolves, but he is as emotional as she. In contrast, Prince Naveen in *The Princess and the Frog* is

the first male character portrayed as incompetent, immature and unable to financially support himself. He leads a dependent and spoiled life. From childhood to adulthood, he always has his servants wait on him hand and foot. He is so lazy that the King and Queen decide to cut him off the royal family and force him to earn a job. England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek point out that prince Naveen is rescued three times but only rescues twice, which is considered an unusual male characteristic in Disney (564).

Impacts of Disney characters on young people's perception of gender images and roles

Both traditional and non-traditional gendered constructions of Disney characters have profound effects on the young audiences' gender acquisition. The stereotypical descriptions of prince and princess influence them to shape a rigid idea of how a boy or a girl must look like. Firstly, children's views of male and female physicality are affected by Disney characters. A lot of female children wish for slender bodies, flawless skin, rosy lips, and twinkling eyes like Disney princesses. They assume that those are the standards of girls' beauty. Moreover, many of them share the same interest of wearing skirts, flowery blouses, high-heels, and earrings like Disney princesses, and they do not want to wear boy clothing because they presume that girls wear dresses and boys wear pants. The more they are exposed to Disney characters, the more they are affected. Children watching TV at a high frequency tend to exhibit the more traditional gender beliefs that girls should play with dolls and dishes, while boys should play with trucks, guns, and tools (Liebert, Sprafkin and Davidson 167). The notion of femininity and masculinity that Disney defines likely makes children develop a negative perspective of cross-dressing and

cross-gender tasks. Children are susceptible to any external factors, so they may perceive every gendered message described in movies as stable rules without posing any questions.

What children subconsciously learn carries on well into adulthood. In accordance with Bruce's interview at Florida Southern College, the male students reflected upon the mainstream attractiveness of Ariel, Jasmine, and Belle when they were asked to comment about the physical qualities of Disney princesses. Most of them responded that "They are all portrayed as beautiful...They are all thin...They are like Barbie dolls" (Bruce 10). Those replies indicate that the male students only reflected on the supposedly standard beauty of women, including slim bodies like models or good-looking faces. They did not bring to mind the manlike appearance of other princesses such as Pocahontas, who possesses a strong physical beauty with broad shoulders. They just found themselves familiar with the stereotypical images of Disney princesses, which are always deemed as the standard of beauty.

Other than physical characteristics, the young audiences depend on the gendered construction of Disney characters to provide the notion of stable roles of male and female. Gwendolyn Limbach asserts that "Becoming a man is an active process, requiring some physical or sexual prowess on the part of the subject. Becoming a woman, in contrast, is a passive process, to be enacted upon a silent object" (119). Indeed, the models of domestic and dependent princesses cause the young group to develop a firm belief that men should become breadwinners and earn powerful jobs such as doctors, managers, and politicians, while women should become housewives or office staff, jobs which require less professionalism and fewer skills than men's tasks. This kind of stereotype may prevent the female children from dreaming about gaining high

positions in the workplace and taking leading roles. Gender stereotypes reinforce the traditional belief that men build a house and women make it a home. When Bruce asked the male students to imagine their future life ten years from now, he figured out that they had a tendency to identify with the traditional roles shown in Disney (13). All of the interviewed males associated themselves with careers. Some of them admitted that “My wife would probably be a stay-at-home mom until the kids are like ten” (13). Similarly, another commented, “The wife can work if she wants, but if we have kids she needs to stay at home. I’ll take care of the bills until then” (13). The responses imply that the male interviewees want to become the breadwinners and take the leading roles in the family. They were heavily impacted by the traditional notions that women should take home-caring roles and financially depend on their husbands. According to this research, those male interviewees were exposed early and overwhelmingly to Disney movies. They admitted to watching princes and princesses Disney films after they became adults. This explains why Disney movies had such a long-term influence on their gender awareness. They developed a deep-rooted belief in women’s domestic and traditional roles, which restricted them in their ideas of womanhood.

Many feminists would argue that the characterization in Disney movies leads the young audiences – especially the young females – to believe that women should attach their images to passiveness and subservience. On one side, this is true when people take a look at the old Disney movies, in which the pattern of gendered constructions was followed strictly. On the other side, this belief seems to be biased since Disney has built up more confident and decisive female characters. For example, *Mulan* (1998) embodies a strong-willed and rebellious girl who steals her father’s sword and joins the army to save him from death. Her rescuer role, which Disney

does not portray much in the previous movies, demonstrates that women can become as strong-minded and heroic as men. They also have enough ability to take on men's tasks and complete them successfully. Additionally, Tiana is an independent and industrious girl who is going to own a restaurant. This plot shows that girls can achieve whatever they want as long as they set themselves clear goals and work hard. The critics blame Disney princess movies for reflecting too many romanticized love content, which confuses young girls about fantasy and reality. However, Merida in the most current movie *Brave* is the only Disney princess not found accompanied by prince. *Brave* tells a story about maternal love and praises the courage of a young royal girl, who struggles with a wild bear and evil power to gain the peace for her family and her kingdom. Those brave and resolved female characters will inspire the young females to become fearless and assertive young women.

Nature vs. Nurture

Many scientists attribute the influences of gender behaviors on the young people to biological factors. In accordance with most of the research, hormonal difference is one of the most primary reasons for gendered characteristics. The biologists have discovered that human males circulate higher levels of testosterone, which increases aggression, self-confidence, and assertiveness. Meanwhile, estrogen – a hormone that makes people tend to be altruistic and emotionally expressive – is higher in women. Female children have a tendency to develop boys' qualities in their behavior when they are exposed to a high level of prenatal androgens including testosterone (Berenbaum, Blakemore, and Beltz 806). They conclude that those girls show more interests in playing boys' games and express more activeness in their physical play (806).

Furthermore, many scientists persist that the differences in brain structure determine the way people behave. The inferior parietal lobe of males is larger than that of females', which explains why boys generally perform spatial and logical skills better than girls (Bonomo 257). Boys' brains are found suited to pictures, symbols, and abstractions (258). This accounts for the fact that boys like playing video games and joining physical activities (258). They are also often associated with scientific jobs. Unlike boys, girls tend to develop better verbal and writing skills because their left side of the brain develops earlier than boys' (257). Additionally, girls have more cortical areas involved in verbal ability; therefore, they are more expert in artistic ability, sensory memory, listening, and sitting still (258). This contributes to the belief that girls regularly identify themselves with healthcare, counseling, art, music, and literature fields.

However, gender stereotypes that people apply to their real life do not purely come from biological elements, but from environmental input (Berenbaum, Blakemore, and Beltz 809). The environmental input here can be interpreted as historical contexts, family, peers, school experience, and especially television programs, including movies like Disney films. Berenbaum, Blakemore and Beltz confirm that "the brain is plastic, changing in response to environmental input" (809). The adaptation of the brain to external factors makes it sensitive to outside experience, especially young audiences, who are continually exposed to Disney movies but have restrictive awareness of things happening around them. Any gendered content shown in Disney therefore can potentially shape the young viewers' beliefs about gender roles in society. They learn unconsciously through their observation and tend to imitate what they see as consistent patterns. Disney movies have been one of the most familiar entertainment sources for young audiences. The gendered messages conveyed by Disney movies gradually impact the young

people throughout the time from childhood to adulthood and radically shape their views on the images of men and women in both traditional and non-traditional directions.

Conclusion

The traditional gender portrayal was depicted most clearly in early Disney movies. However, over time the watchers have witnessed a sharp transformation of Disney male and female characters into less gender-based beings. Since Disney's main audiences come from the young age group, which is seen as the most vulnerable subject, Disney filmmakers bear a heavy responsibility for educating them about gender roles. The formulas that Disney created in each character all affect the young audiences' awareness of gender notions that may correspond to their behavior and action in their real life.

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