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GROWING UP WITH DISNEY: GENDER REPRESENTATION AND SPECTATORSHIP OF FAIRY-TALE CINEMAS.

Abstract:

This is an old fashioned lesson from Disney movies: the happily ever after romance is gained from a long term pain-bearing and a passive rescue-waiting of a young, pretty and sweet princess. As children are being exposed to Disney homogeneous and highly repetitive princess genre - these stories slowly gain a foothold in the development of young children and eventually become the first gender teacher of global children since 1937 when the Snow White was introduced. Children are raised with stereotypical gender expectation: the princess plays the passive role of the lonely, timid, and waiting for the courageous prince to rescue her from the complicated family affairs or free her from her life imprisonment, immortality curse, and the abusive stepfamily. However, over the years of typical fairy-tales, it is observed there is a shift in female characters and storyline development in Disney genre. This new wave of female characters or princesses in recent fairy tales convince researchers that a breakthrough of gender stereotypes in film making is well underway. It also reflects a substantial weight of feminism ideology injected into message of these films, constantly challenging the relevance of conventional masculine-superior characters in today's reality context. From a passive role, the new princesses are now portrayed in the light of independent and self-determine gender ideology providing an awareness, insight and stimulation towards viewers' feminism development in their girlhood. By following the discussion, this work analyses the development of gender portrayals of Disney movies, by studying the changes of female representation through characters and storylines; and the influence of Disney's princesses in female spectators' development. Also, the progression of gender concept of classic and modern princess movies will be identified, the reflection of feminism in traditional and contemporary children cinemas, and the elaboration of the gender identification that developed in Eastern female society will be explored.

Keywords:

Disney, princesses, gender, portrayal, spectatorship, females, films.

Introduction & Objectives.

This paper is designed to explore gender identity in Disney productions and the influences on female spectators through two objectives: to identify the development of Disney feminism through Study I; and to analyse the spectatorship of Disney film among female spectators through Study II.

Methodology & Findings Study I.

Study I is to identify the development of Disney's feminism in the period of 1937-2014. A content analysis is conducted to evaluate characters and stories in 9 selected films: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Tangled* (2010), *Brave* (2012), *Frozen* (2013), and *Maleficent* (2014). Based to the findings of study I, 3 types of female portrayal and story are coded:

Type A – The Snow Princesses & Stereotypical Stories.

This group is characterised by the early princesses of Disney: *Snow White*, *Cinderella* and *Aurora* (*Sleeping Beauty*). By identifying the external portrayals of above-mentioned princesses, common and traditional feminine traits are found presented repeatedly in the selected films: princesses are pretty but cursed or imprisoned; they live with an abusive stepfamily and tolerate unfair treatments; they can sing well and talk to animals; and finally they are rescued by the almost perfect first male figure they met. From the analysis of the princesses' internal identities, noticed that they are deprived of choices, freedoms, problem solving abilities and constructive relationships. The princesses are being the silent victims of another dominant force which is stereotypically characterised as a malicious and jealous older woman, and princesses are likely to get married as an escape to all these problems. For *characters*, princesses' obedience and submission are promoted but feminism is demoted. For *stories*, princesses submit to the 'fate' of life, wait for a sudden appearance of a prince, and believe a mystical power of life-saving's true love kiss. Through a repetitive and consistent portrayal of the external symbols and internal representations, these selected early Disney films segregate women into two stereotypes of age and outlook; objectify women as a source of problems by emphasizing many conflicts in the feminine world; symbolise women with negative emotions by projecting timidity, fearful, envious, greedy, unkind; and exaggerate the unfriendly women relationships by highlighting feminine violent such as bullies, hates, lies, pretentious, use of inferior tricks of poison, curse or black magic.

Type B – The Beauty Princesses & Semi-feminist Stories.

This group is characterized by *Belle* (*Beauty and the Beast*), *Rapunzel* (*Tangled*) and *Tiana* (*The Princess and the Frog*). In this category, princesses are maintained with

stereotypical external portrayals: long hair, domestic tasks, beautiful face, imprisoned (*Belle and Rapunzel*) and cursed (*Tiana*). However, particular feminist characteristics are observed through their internal representations: *Belle* loves reading, *Tiana* wants to own a restaurant, *Rapunzel* dreams to see the world. They have hobbies and dreams, and they make it at the end. These princesses are not waiting to be rescued, hoping for romance, or falling in love with men immediately. On the contrary, they help people, explore the new world, respond to the threats, and involve in rescue actions. They live their life by expressing personal feelings, refusing unfair treatments, and making their own decisions. They say “no”, leave home, save life, and break curses with their own efforts. In the combination of a stereotypical external images and feminism internal identities, *Belle*, *Tiana* and *Rapunzel* are the early icons for feminism in Disney.

Type C – The Brave Princesses & Feminist Stories.

This group is characterised by *Merida (Brave)*, *Elsa (Frozen)*, and *Maleficent (Maleficent)*. In these films, princesses are presented with innovated personalities. They contribute at climatic rescue, fight for freedom, and become a leader. The conflictive relationship of women that constantly appears in *Type A stories* are faded off and replaced by motherhood and sisterhood, which is observed between *Merida* and her mother, *Elsa* and *Anna*, *Maleficent* and *Aurora*. In addition to that, revolutionary changes are found in these films: a dysfunctional of true love kiss (*Maleficent* and *Frozen*); a diminution of female-villain (*Frozen & Maleficent*); a moderation of prince charming (*Frozen & Maleficent*); a reduction of women conflicts (*Brave, Frozen & Maleficent*); and a suggestion of female-leadership (*Frozen & Maleficent*). In these films, princesses solve their own problems and break free from masculine domination. In *Brave*, *Merida* challenges the patriarchal structure by disobeying of traditional arrangement, and changes her own destiny eventually. In *Frozen*, the real identity of *Elsa* is finally accepted by others and herself, and the given power is controlled, embraced and praised at the end. In *Maleficent*, instead of highlighting the betrayal of true love and failure of masculine true love kiss; it emphasizes on understanding, acceptance and forgiveness. In these *Type C* films, princesses restructure female traits with more decision making power; plots rewrite female destinies by providing a new feminist identity; and Disney upgrades feminism by granting female characters in Disney a happily ever after without much support of effortless and dramatic romance.

Methodology & Findings Study II.

Study II is to measure the effects of Disney films by conducting 3 focus groups of female based on different age – children, young and adult. To make detail analysis of the viewing reactions (spectatorship) of the female spectators toward Disney selected films in study 1, an eight-stage spectatorship model (Table 1) is designed.

Table 1: Eight-Stage Spectatorship of Disney Films

<i>Spectator</i>	<i>Stages</i>	<i>Reactions</i>	<i>Reflections</i>
Female children	1. Accepting	Action	Consumerism
	2. Decoding		
	3. Recalling		
	4. Imitating		
Young females	5. Expecting	Perception	Expectation
	6. Identifying		
Adult females	7. Justifying	Identification	Stereotypical/ Feminism
	8. Developing		

Source: Own developed table.

Spectatorship 1: Action of Children – Consumerism.

In a group of 5 female children aged between 6 to 12 years, the viewing reaction and viewing result of Disney films reached a consistency. These viewers are coded as *visual spectators* in this study as they have a common fascination toward Disney's audiovisual as their viewing reaction, and similar consumption behaviours as the viewing result. An action-based spectatorship could be explained by all 5 children reacted and met the primary four stages of spectatorship model above: spectators accepted [stage 1] Disney films, then decoded [stage 2] and recalled [stage 3] films through repeated viewing, and ended the viewing process with an imitation [stage 4] and a consumeristic action. *Visual spectators* showed tendency of transferring a fictional idolisation (towards princesses) to a realistic action in collecting the characters-relevant merchandise. They decoded and remembered on explicit message such as characters' names, costumes, songs, dialogues better than implicit messages such as characters' emotions, reactions, experiences and relationships. In other words, this group focuses more on external images of princesses, where these images are mostly remained stereotypical (young, thin and pretty); but unaware the internal representations of these female characters. And this surface viewing habit could/would turn children the victims of Disney capitalism through their direct reactions of imitating and buying behaviours.

Spectatorship 2: Perception of Young Females – Expectations.

By studying 12 young females between the ages of 18 to 25, the influence of Disney films are more reflected on spectators' perception, and it could be observed in two groups – *usual spectators* and *new spectators*. *Usual spectators* (habitual viewers of Disney films, who show loyalty towards Disney princesses) expressed high expectations toward love, marriage, life, men and women. They tended to be more dependent, indecisive, and expected help from males. They pursued higher appearance achievement on themselves and hoped for better financial condition on males. However, *new spectators* (light viewers of Disney films, who are less familiar with Disney characters and stories than the *usual spectators*) showed less expectation toward romance. They acted more independent and decisive, they put more efforts in study or work, and pursued self-achievement. From the result, the different gender expectations [stage 5] have been developed from the different viewing habit of Disney films in childhood. Each gender expectation could influence viewers' further development of gender identification (stereotypical or feminism) [stage 6] in practical world.

Spectatorship 3: Identification of Adult Females – Stereotypical or Feminism.

Two groups are categorized among female spectators above 30 years old and coded as *non-feminist spectators* and *feminist spectators*. *Non-feminist spectators* preferred Disney stories with romance and rescue but focused less on representations of princesses. Specifically, spectators performed a selective perception on Disney films, spectators deliberately selected or filtered princesses and stories which consistent or against their existing gender concept and current lifestyle. Consistently, they showed low awareness to the films' feminism message. A spectator (background: 35, single parent family, loyalty viewer of Disney films, secondary educational, a mother and a housewife) expressed: “*I prefer Type A princesses. I don't understand why people relate feminism to Disney. A beautiful young woman is having trouble, and a handsome young man is rescuing her with love and care. That is a simple love story. It gives hope to our life. We really don't need to make the story complicated.*” In another group – *feminist spectators*, able to observe the changes of gender context in Disney films. This group showed excitement and agreement on *Type C princesses* [study 1]. A spectator (background: 38, occasional viewers of Disney films, master degree educational, a mother and a lecturer) expressed her optimistic expectations to Disney's future: “*new princesses are more confident now. They are able to overcome problems. They have dreams, fight for freedom and stop crying. Finally I can discuss the stories with my kids by telling them Merida [Brave] is brave enough to decide her own destiny, and love at first sight [Frozen] is not so reliable.*” With the above-mentioned two different spectatorships in adult group, study found that the specific gender justification (stereotypical or feminism) could be developed in relevant to spectators' (1) primary contact with Disney's princesses, (2) viewing habits, (3) perception of romance, (4) external factors such as family, education, environment, and life experience. This specific gender justifications [stage 7] could further affect the development [stage 8] of series pragmatic gender rules in reality.

Conclusion.

In this study, two results are found in selected films and spectators: the representation of female characters in Disney films has a developmental and evolutionary change from stereotypical images to feminist images; and spectatorship of Disney films is closely relevant with spectators' ages, viewing habits, and other contextual factors. Although Disney is not the absolute reason to affect spectators' gender concepts, Disney princess films still have its influence on gender development among female spectators. The Disney's portrayal of princesses and arrangements of stories could contribute children's primary understanding of gender roles and eventually shape their gender behaviours; it could increase young females' fantasy and expectations which could further affect the development of their gender schema; finally, it could create consonance among adult female society and enhance their existent gender beliefs. With this concern, the Disney's effort in making its characters and stories a positive shift from stereotypical to feminism portrayals is much encouraged. By creating modern princesses who are not merely challenging the "waiting to be rescued" princesses, but also as icons of problem solver, symbols of independence, and standpoints of feminists, Disney has its impressive change gradually. This revived gender perception provides young girls a better societal reference model as they grow up; and also navigates parents to realise the power of the Disney's messages. Moving from decades of stereotypical and conservatives towards new feminism millennium, today Disney finally allows the variety of princesses, the revolutionary feminism wave, and the on-screen-gender-equality to be witnessed in contemporary productions. The new gender value could be soon celebrating in spectators' society if Disney continues to raise the flag of animated feminism in global children cinemas in the upcoming days.

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