

Evolving Gender Roles in Disney Princess Films: Impact on Gender Perception in Young Girls

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Abstract: Disney princess films have long played a significant role in shaping children's understanding of gender roles, beauty, romance, and relationships. While early Disney films often portrayed female characters as passive, dependent, and primarily valued for their beauty, contemporary productions increasingly present princesses as independent, courageous, and self-reliant. This study explores how the evolving portrayal of Disney princesses influences young girls' perceptions of femininity, gender roles, beauty ideals, romance, and marriage. A qualitative research design was employed, using open-ended interviews with 50 female participants aged 16–40 years from different educational institutions and workplaces across the United Arab Emirates. Data were analyzed through qualitative content analysis using open and axial coding techniques to identify recurring themes. The findings reveal that Disney films continue to inspire fantasy, entertainment, admiration for beauty and fashion, and idealized concepts of romance. Participants appreciated the confidence and independence of modern Disney princesses while also recognizing that many films still reinforce traditional beauty standards and romantic expectations. Older participants demonstrated more critical and realistic interpretations of Disney narratives than younger viewers. The study concludes that Disney princess films exert both positive and negative influences by encouraging confidence and resilience while simultaneously perpetuating idealized beauty and romantic stereotypes. The findings contribute to the growing literature on media socialization and highlight the need for parents, educators, and media practitioners to promote critical media literacy among young audiences.

Keywords: Disney princess films, gender roles, gender perception, young girls, media influence, beauty ideals, romance, qualitative research.

1. Introduction

The image of woman these days where media has always represented female as hot cake specially in the case of children programming where the children mind are getting early exposure to opposite gender norms and stereotype can impactfully make the shape for the young audience perception. s (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Johnson & Holmes, 2009) Walt Disney company has played pivotal in elaborating and perpetuating gender role and romantic ideas for generation to generations (Coyne, 2016)

If we talk about animated media Disney has always been criticized by researchers because of the delineation of female characters. (e.g. England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018a). these films were mainly showing that woman is not involve in visible

roles in the movies. Sometimes princess is so quite that she is waiting for her prince to be rescue and on the other hand if woman is getting power, she is becoming evil in her matters. And last but not least princess is always a role model of beauty, appearance and domesticity. (Hine et al., 2018a; Maity, 2014)

Fowler and McCormick (cited in O'Brien, 1996,) has said that the impression of the fairy tales in early age when the difference between reality and imaginary is unclear leads the followers to agree the stereotypical conventions of fairy fictions. Princess is victimized, woman in supremacy is evil, and everybody start living happily ever after.

Disney princesses are being focused and deeply examined in this thesis because of their iconic image in Pakistan, in our society and in the beliefs of our girls. Princesses on Disney movies are not only watched but their picture are also very famous in the form of stickers, dolls coloring charts, books, girls' bags, room decorations, and other figures for mass consumption.

Females of early age not only watch Disney movies but the follow the princesses and inter relate her with the princess as well. Disney movies span over all of 80 years. It reveals that children watching the children watched Disney movies as their mother and their grandmother watch when they were younger. So we can say that Disney industry if followed by generations to generations. This is worthwhile because of the way Disney was winning to hearts of the generations. Disney has the power to inspire from corners to corner different ages. Disney is capable to lead all the important aspects of culture throughout the years because of its continuous and on time presence in the film industry. It is very important to study deeply about Disney influence because this company has such a prominent role in the lives of our younger and mature nation as well.

A. Disney Animation

In the beginning the Disney workshops were taking place with well-known characters like Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse and Goofy in 1930s. This process was done with the help of their Disney animators with a series of Flicks.

With the time animation was improving day by day, then Disney decide to launch the first feature length animated movie with the title of "Snow White and The Seven Dwarves". After the huge success of "Snow White" in 1937 Disney started on to produce other feather films which have taking interest in classics such as Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty to name a few.

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However, it is very easy to examine that how these characters advanced through time.

Disney had produced first animated feature size movie named "Snow White and The Seven Dwarves". In this movie the girl is actual domestic, and need to be rescued by a prince. Similar trend can be seen in Cinderella who is depending on a prince to come and save her. These all are relying on a Prince. But studying the other movies like Aladdin, Pocahontas and Mulan, all the princesses in these movies were more self-governing. Like in Aladdin the princess Jasmine was not hoping to depend on a Prince, and she as more liberated and freer spirited. This was the same with the other princesses like Mulan and Pocahontas.

The first Disney princess movies was released in 1937, but a strong advertising agreement was to reinforced the popularity of the Disney princess line (Disney Princess 2010). The Disney princess line was created in 2001 as marketing and advertising campaign straight towards young girls. (Orenstein 2006). Further promotions aim was to attract a huge audience of females with this final goal of inspiring children to personally recognize with character so the people will obtain the related products (Do Rozario 2004). Disney market sale has been increased from \$300 Million in 2001 to \$ 4Billion by 2008 (Setoodeh and Yabroff 2007). Disney license now includes more than 25.000 Disney products. Disney and its princess have given iconic impact on children's media and products consumption, donates a new "Girlhood" that is mostly defined by gender and mass consumption of linked messages and products (Giroux 1997, Lacroix 2004, McRobbie 2008, Orenstein 2006). Although Disney movies have been started making in United states and the phenomenon is America, Disney has a very attractive and strong international presence and advertising efforts (Disney international 2010). Thus, the Disney princess line and its gender role portrayal had powerful effects for international children's media as well. (Hubka *et al.* 2009)

B. Significance

The purpose of the research was to examine the traditional messages that are passed to the females by the production and differently categorized of the family in Disney princess collection's feature films. There are nine Disney animated movies that were studied surveyed the gender roles within the family like Snow White and The Dwarfs, Sleeping beauty, Cinderella, The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Mulan, Aladdin, Pocahontas, and The Princess and The Frog. While studying these messages of the Disney films in which the basic characters tried to find a significant than other. Appearance and character behaviors such as negativity, confidence, and competitiveness have been observed in this study focus fully.

The study has explored on the modern unexamined princess from Frozen and Tangled" while more research on Disney princess group has been shown on themes on feminism and patriarchy has been lead on roles with in families. The purpose of the study was to fill the research gap. Importantly, the satisfied analysis studied themes of family type symbols, siblings, biological and non-biological parents, princess

presence and the completion of a family life by the awareness of gender and love.

C. Objectives

1. To examine the effects of Disney movies on the feminine beauty ideals of the young girls.
2. To examine the views of the young girls who watch Disney movies about the typical patriarchal hierarchy of genders.
3. To examine the ideas of the young girls who watch Disney movies about the romance and marriage.

2. Review of Literature

This reviews existing literature related to television viewing, learning models, gender-role development, representations in Disney films, dominant themes and messages communicated through these films, and their effects on gender perceptions and beliefs about love. The purpose is to provide a theoretical foundation for understanding how media, especially Disney animated films shape children's understanding of gender, relationships, self-identity, romance, and societal expectations.

According to Bandura's social learning theory, observational learning enables children to imitate gender-appropriate behaviors modeled by media characters (Papalia *et al.*, 2003). Because Disney films are consumed repeatedly, their impact on children's understanding of romance and gender roles becomes amplified.

Erikson's concepts of identity and intimacy further suggest that media shaping of romance ideals may affect how young viewers construct selfhood and interpersonal relationships (Montgomery, 2005).

Gender stereotypes are deeply embedded in television and media. Adams and Coltrane (1997) note that societal gender roles significantly influence children more than family-based gender cues. Television consistently portrays male and female characters in stereotypical ways (Coltrane & Adams, 1997), reinforcing expectations such as men being assertive and women being passive, attractive, and relationally dependent.

Research confirms that children pay closer attention to same-gender characters (Burton & Maccoby, 1984), increasing the likelihood that they internalize gender-stereotypical depictions prevalent in animated stories, including Disney films.

Disney's foundations are rooted in patriarchal values, reflective of Walt Disney's personal beliefs and the cultural norms of early 20th-century America (O'Brien, 1996). These values continue to influence Disney's portrayal of female characters, often depicting them as passive, dependent, or in need of rescue.

Financially and culturally, Disney dominates the children's media landscape. Disney films rank among the highest-grossing animations globally and are widely distributed through theaters, television, and home media (Tanner *et al.*, 2003).

Disney strongly reinforces romantic idealization. Love-at-first-sight narratives appear in most classic films (Tanner *et al.*, 2003). Adolescents, who are more susceptible to fantasy, may develop unrealistic expectations of effortless romance (Montgomery, 2005).

Disney's three-phase storyline, falling in love, getting married, and "living happily ever after" promotes unrealistic visions of lifelong romance (Tanner, 2003). Researchers caution that such portrayals downplay the real-world requirements of compromise, effort, and communication in healthy adult relationships.

Classic Disney princess films from the 1930s to 1960s consistently depict female protagonists as passive and dependent, with narratives centered on beauty, romance, and rescue by male heroes. England et al. (2011) analyzed 25 Disney films and found that early princesses exhibit limited agency, spending significant screen time in domestic roles or awaiting salvation, which reinforces traditional gender hierarchies. Similarly, Elborae (2025) identifies the "damsel in distress" archetype as pervasive, where female characters' problems are resolved through male intervention rather than personal initiative.

Contemporary scholarship documents a shift toward more empowered representations in post-2000s princess films. Hine et al. (2018) examined characters like Merida and Moana, noting increased displays of assertiveness, physical strength, and rejection of marriage as the ultimate goal, reflecting broader cultural moves toward gender equity. However, critics argue this evolution remains incomplete, as even modern princesses often conform to heteronormative resolutions and idealized beauty standards.

Empirical studies link repeated exposure to Disney princess media with reinforced gender-stereotypical behaviors in children. Coyne et al. (2016) conducted longitudinal research showing that girls with high princess media engagement displayed greater emphasis on appearance and relational dependence over time. Boys, conversely, exhibited avoidance of princess-themed play, highlighting media's role in segregating gender norms.

These patterns extend to relational expectations, where romanticized "happily ever after" tropes foster unrealistic views of love and partnership. Dundes and Streiff (2016) found that such narratives correlate with adolescents prioritizing physical attractiveness and male dominance in relationships. Despite empowerment in newer films, mixed messaging persists, potentially confusing young viewers about autonomy versus traditional roles.

Feminist scholarship critiques Disney princess films for perpetuating patriarchal norms through beauty standards and romantic dependency, even in modern iterations. Analyses reveal that classic and Renaissance-era princesses embody "toxic royalty," where female worth ties to physical attractiveness and male salvation, fostering self-objectification among young viewers (Inquiries Journal, 2014; Global Media Journal, 2023). Fourth-wave feminist lenses highlight how villainesses like Ursula reinforce stereotypes by linking female power to monstrosity, while princesses remain confined to domesticity or superficial empowerment (Yekum, 2020).

Recent studies on live-action remakes argue that apparent feminist progress confidence, independence, and "girl power" proves superficial, reverting to heteronormative resolutions and imbalanced gender structures. Thematic analyses of remakes

from 2014-2023 identify repetitive visual styles and plot devices that simulate empowerment but ultimately channel narratives back to traditional hierarchies (Intellect Discover, 2024). This corporate strategy leverages contemporary feminism for market appeal without substantive ideological change (EUR Thesis, 2023).

Post-2009 "Revival" princesses reflect feminist waves by prioritizing autonomy, career goals, and resistance to oppression over romance. Characters like Tiana and Elsa model hard work, self-reliance, and non-male-centric dreams, aligning with evolving norms where women challenge racism, sexism, and victimhood (Yekum, 2020; Harvard Politics, 2022). Films such as *Frozen* and *Moana* demonstrate women solving their own problems, reducing reliance on princes and emphasizing sisterhood or community (Global Media Journal, 2023).

However, remnants of stereotypes persist, including idealized body images and subtle male dominance in resolutions. Scholars note that while princesses now exhibit masculine traits like assertiveness, narratives often reward conformity to beauty ideals, sending mixed messages to children (Inquiries Journal, 2014). This partial evolution mirrors societal feminism but limits full agency, particularly in merchandising that reinforces femininity (JSTOR, 2015).

A. Research Gap

While many studies have examined traditional gender stereotypes in classic Disney princess films, limited research explores how the modern evolution of princess characters—such as Moana, Merida, and Elsa—impacts young girls' current gender perceptions. Most existing work focuses on film content rather than how children today actually interpret these changing portrayals. There is also a lack of comparative analysis between classic and modern films in shaping attitudes toward femininity, independence, and relationships. Therefore, further research is needed to understand how evolving gender roles in contemporary Disney princess films influence the present generation of young girls and whether these portrayals reinforce or challenge traditional gender norms.

3. Methodology

The sample was taken from fifty females from different states of UAE like Dubai, Sharjah and Ajman, Ras al- Khema, and Khorfakkan, from different educational institutes and other working places like offices etc. Sample was tried to cover all kind of variety like study group to working women and the age group was from 16 to 40.

Each respondent was clearly identified that they have well Disney knowledge or not? Respondent have given the answer sheets for their much interest in Disney film line, whether that was old Disney films or the era of new Disney movies.

The sample was focused only on females because the past and the present researches are giving this sign that fairy tales influence the young girls' perception of love and gender. females from the age of 14 to 50 are focused and the majority of young females were specially focused due to the availability and their young thought and mind views to know freely that what they actually feel about love and gender? And how they

took Disney movies and cartoon fictions or influenced them in any way in their real life.

"Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct" (American Psychological Association, 1992).

Because females are more associated with gentle emotions and relationships. As compare to men their lives are dominated by notions of love, care and relationships. That's why the influence of Disney was examined in the study.

It is worthwhile to study whether their attitude/notions of love/relationship changed over time as in present time when life has become more calculated and mechanical.

The respondents were selected by choosing their interests in Disney movies and by observing their nature as well.

Each of the respondent was asked question while making sure that all her answers kept confidentially. That's why their names were not asked. Only their age and study or is work focused. All the interviews were collected individually. Some written instructions were also given to them in the beginning of the interview.

The females have given very free hand to answer what they actually felt, helped them ensure that their views regarding love and gender were surely confidential. In the mid or last few questions the respondents were seems to get tired and want to close to interview that why being a researcher I have done the interviews by myself that they don't get bore enough to leave it. Or try to facilitate as I can.

As the research is qualitative but the questionnaire was taken from a little similar in the past research that was done in America by Theresa Tonn in 2008. But again, the suggestions and opinion from the expert and my supervisor "Dr. Tonny" who had given this topic to apply the same research in UAE after America. A sample of written questionnaire is given with all instructions, can be seen in the Appendix.

The interview was based on 14 open-ended questions related to the idea of love and gender. They were also asked to answer freely that how they perceive the view that either it was positive or negative.

The other most important part was the questions based in the perception of love and from where these perceptions have come from, did these perceptions changed over time? Or if these have changed then how and why might these perceptions have changed? Question regarding the princess and her idealizing the romance and perceiving romantic stories. How the romance, prince and the princess in the movies are perceive by females now a days in Pakistan. They were asked to reply and give freely answer regarding their love and romantic perceptions.

Qualitative content analysis was performed on the questionnaire comprising open ended questions obtained from the participants. Open coding was done to label the important ideas and thoughts of the participants in the responses. Then second coding or axial coding was done to extract the various themes appeared in the interview text. The major themes that appeared after performing the whole process of coding are discussed below separately

The data found through qualitatively by categorizing similar responses of the students. Similar responses were then matched to past research on love and gender perceptions. The researcher

looked for similarities between student responses and previous research that argued the medium of television (or in this case of Disney movies) negatively affected female's perceptions of gender and love. The researcher also analyzed if older perceptions of love had changed through the experiences of dating.

4. Results

A. Thoughts about Old Disney Films

Disney movies have great influence on one all girls in the world not only United Arab Emirates. Girls are always more associated with love and romance. Disney old movies had also given the same impression of prince and princess love and their happily ever after life. The most common response to what emotions these films produced was " Fantasy, Entertainment, Match with them-feel like princess, identify me, went into past while less than quarter think that not realistic, time wasting".

B. Fantasy

In the response of the question to the participants what emotions they feel when they watch Disney movies. Half of girls respond that the Disney them to the fantasy world. Other refers Disney like imaginary world. it seems that girls are more associated to the fantasy or imaginary things in life. Girls with very normal dressing like fully covered Jeans Top Hijab and scarf have shown their emotions in fantasy that whenever they watch Disney films they still feel fantasy while watching old Disney films. Girls from TV channels have shown their emotions in fantasy world. Being researcher I felt that girls from the age of 20 plus age where more clear that they felt fantasy in present time when they watch Disney films today.

One lady who was above 30 studying in Masters level of Private University said that she like Disney old and new movies rather than other Bollywood movies and dramas. she feels great when she use to watch Disney movie because it took her to fantasy and innocent life.

Girls from ages of all middle class social background explained in a very frank way that they love to live in fantasy world,". They love to have dreams like fairy tales, they felt great with this thought that keep good in life and everything will be fine at the end". It gives them escape from the real world for some time.

One girl from middle class Islamic family background wearing Abaya and hijab or scarfs by covering their hairs also stated that she found escape from the bitter realities of the world and found fantasy in Disney movies.

C. Feel Like Princess

Less than quarter of the respondents were saying that they fell like "they are in the movie when they watch old Disney movies today". I cannot say that any specific class or age group or any specific social background candidate had answered this. But it was interesting that some girls from Media said that they identify them in the Disney movies. On the other side other girls from middle class status were also saying that they also feel like princess in Disney movies that why Disney movies. And whenever they watch Disney movies they feel like this is their

story. Princess is representing them. Being a researcher the opposite look the girls who answers like that were quite simple soft nature and kind in behavior. They were looking like they were having some more dreams and wishes too. Apparently they were shy reserve and not very much attractive in looks. Some were sitting along with her friends. But they were very polite.

One respondent from age 21 University going student was saying that, "she is the princess of her life that's why whenever she watch old Disney movie she felt they the princess can do anything she can also do anything".

D. Source of Entertainment

Quarter of the respondent said that they found recreation when they watch old Disney movies. Mostly girls from Master Degree and above age of 22 said that they watch Disney films today because they found entertainment. They describe their emotions like, "fun, good to see, colorful, excitement". I can also say that they were from middle class or lower class. By looking their Dresses were bit common. Some were in traditional and casual dressing like shalwar kameez and Dupata or scarf and abaya. According to the respondent who are above 20 of age they said that Disney movie provide truly entertainment. They never get bore by watching Disney movies. Different females from different ages describe entertainment in different ways like o level Girls said that they watch for the sake of fun.

Girls above from 20 have expressed their feelings like they found entertainment and fun. But the girls from 15 to 20 of age group from O Levels and 12th standard felt like Disney movies brought more excitement to them.

"One respondent from a News channels who was wearing nice branded top and jeans and said that she watch Disney films has full package of entertainment like Princess, dress, magic, graphics, happy ending, music."

E. Glamour and Animation

More than half of the respondents were agree that they watch Disney movies today because they felt it glamorous, out of the real world. Respondents like 18 to 30 of different ages, idealize that they watch new Disney movies because of glamour in it. From different education institutes like girls of school and Colleges said that they watch new Disney movies because of glamour and animations in new Disney Movies. The research become quite interesting when more practical and mature girls who are above 22 were also liking glamour, fantasy in Disney movies as well as teen age girls who don't even have idea about real and calculated world.

A girl with a smiley face and shine in her eyes. She was looking sober in her dressing wearing traditional fully covered long maxy. She was a studying from a private School respond, "because real life is quit dull, boring and color less. she found only glamour in Disney movies".

F. Dresses

Round about half of the girls showed their liking that they like dresses of the princess. This was also interesting because girl of all ages and both upper and lower class, modern dressed

up girl and girl with hijab and abaya was responding that they like dresses, hairs of the princess. It was not about they also want to wear gowns of princess but they love their dresses... long flairs and colors of dress, glitter in that.

A girl who was doing masters in Business Administration wearing simple fully covered jeans and shirt who were looking like she belongs to lower class said that "this is my wish that I could wear a princess dresses in my real life, and could feel the charm of being princess".

Mostly girls from O Levels of Grammar School and school system Lahore with high profile have also shown their interests in the dresses of the princess.

G. Disney Movies

More than 1/3 of respondents said that from Disney movies they got the idea of romance when they were younger. Mostly females who were above 20 age like their interests in Disney movies romance. Some females from Media TV channels and RadioFM also said that they got their ideas about romance from Disney movies Interesting thing was that girls above 20 show their interests in Disney romance inspiration. Although respondent from age 16 to 20 don't show their interest in Disney movies.

The respondent was sitting in a cafeteria near a private college was doing lunch which she brought from her home. She was sitting alone in the table. She was dressing in very casual jeans and shirt like lower class. She said, "she like the perfect girl in Disney movie get the perfect prince in her life with happy ending".

One respondent who was radio Jockey in a private Radio Station of Ajman. She was in some funky style like more jewelry and nail art said that she got her romance inspiration from Disney fairy tales. She said, "she like Disney movies for the Prince and Princess, Magic and all about dream coming true. She idealized Disney movies and inspired the romantic thoughts with happily ever after concept as well. She said this fantasy make us alive and full of wishes and passion to face to realities of real life".

H. Beauty

More than 3/4 of the girls showed their interest in the beauty of the Princess. Girls from early ages like O-Levels from private Schools in Ajman where the girls were in jeans and top. This class Belongs to upper class in our social back ground. All the girls respond that they like the beauty of the leading role in Disney Female characters. They found all the girls beautiful and like the outer beauty of the leading character in Disney Movies as well. when the question was asked that what was most common in Disney female character you have find. Some girls said she is beautiful like everything. Why girls like the princess most because of the extra beauty and extra sweet look and perfect body language

One respondent from Education department in University in Sharjah said, "She is always attracted to the beauty of the Princess. She was sitting in a very chill and relax mood said "Every princess is perfect in herself as she is beautiful by heart and soul. Because of beautiful personality she watched every

Disney movie”.

I. Understanding

of the respondents from Fs.c and O-levels b/w the age of 15 to 20 said that there should be understanding in each and every relationship. They seem to belong from upper class wearing jeans and tops seems bit relax and in kind of light mood.

Mostly girls from media T.V channels like HD (news channel) and TV channel and Radio FM) wearing kurtas, tops and jeans or tights, with strong looks and heavy or sharp make up and smart looks working with males in offices said that they feel like understanding is very important in a healthy relationship. They seem to be more practical in real life. They were also looking clear in their views about relationships.

One of the girl from HD (news channel) said briefly this quote, “understanding is very important in a new relation when you are going to get married and start a new journey of life. And they feel life less of patience in acceptance in partners that’s why a relation could not be a healthy relation without understanding other partner”.

One respondent from a private University in Ajman. She was studying M.A. She was just walking out of the ground of the department apparently she was looking sensible and decent in her dressing. She said, “I believe in long term relationship. I have very few people in my life. And I feel that any relationship could be failed without understanding”

Another respondent from private company while sitting in restaurant and having juices she said “understanding is the only key that could make a normal relation a very healthy relation”

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Disney princess films remain an influential source of gender socialization among young female audiences. Although the representation of princesses has evolved considerably from passive and dependent heroines to more confident, courageous, and independent female characters, traditional stereotypes surrounding beauty, romance, and ideal relationships continue to persist. Participants generally viewed Disney films as a source of entertainment, fantasy, and inspiration while acknowledging that these films shaped their perceptions of beauty, femininity, and romantic relationships during childhood.

The findings indicate that younger participants were more likely to idealize princess characters, beauty, magical worlds, and "happily ever after" narratives, whereas older participants interpreted these themes more critically and emphasized qualities such as mutual understanding, respect, and equality in relationships. Modern Disney princesses were appreciated for portraying independence, determination, and self-confidence; however, physical attractiveness remained an important characteristic associated with female protagonists.

Overall, Disney films present a mixture of progressive and traditional gender messages. While recent films encourage female empowerment and personal agency, they continue to reinforce certain cultural ideals related to appearance and romance. Therefore, media literacy education should accompany children's exposure to animated films so that young viewers can critically evaluate fictional portrayals rather than internalize unrealistic expectations. Future research should employ larger and more diverse samples, include participants from different cultural contexts, and compare the effects of classic and contemporary Disney films using mixed-method or longitudinal approaches to better understand their long-term influence on gender attitudes and identity development.

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