

An Analysis of Disney Princesses and their Effect on Young Girls

Janelle Little

Abstract:

Film, television, and media play a crucial role in society. Additionally, they are an integral part of a child's development as children are influenced by the characters and messages on-screen.

Disney Princesses have been a part of many young girls' childhood for nearly one hundred years.

This study includes an analysis of how six Disney Princesses are portrayed and their effect on a sample of first and second-grade girls. Out of this sample of Disney Princess movies, the oldest three movies include traditional gender stereotypes, while the three newest movies have a more modern representation of gender. This research involves how the girls' body image, self-worth, and activities can be influenced by the different types of princesses. The participants will complete surveys after watching the Disney Princess movies to record any bias that they now may have. The results of this study will be compiled into a paper, which can be used to highlight the effects of gender role portrayals in children's media to create characters that promote positive messages for young viewers.

Introduction

For many children growing up in the United States, television is a part of their lives every day. Even as adults, individuals look back at their youth and reflect on the media they watched. In this way, film and television have a lasting impact on humans. It is crucial that individuals watch media that promotes diversity in the years when they are most impressionable. Since humans learn basic norms and how to interact with others while they are young, children's media plays an important role in developing their worldview. The shows and movies children watch growing up can affect how they see people of different races, genders, and disabilities. Within these categories, I will focus on gender stereotypes and the portrayal of female characters on-screen. I plan to show how the portrayal of women in children's media, specifically Disney Princess movies, affects young girls' self-worth, body image, and choice of extracurricular activities. With this research, I hope to find ways to create female characters that will promote self-confidence and body-positive thoughts for the young girls watching.

Related Work and Motivation

Several research studies have been done regarding how female characters are represented in children's media and its effect on young children. While children and teenagers of all genders have been studied, one of the most common groups, and the group that I choose to focus on, is young girls in first and second grade. The main body of work that influences my research is a report published by Common Sense Media titled "Watching gender: How stereotypes in movies and on TV impact kids' development" (Ward & Aubrey, 2017). Common Sense Media is a nonprofit organization that creates detailed summaries of television shows and films based on the messages and explicit content they present. They also produce educational reports that aim to

make visual technology a positive resource for children's well-being. This specific report explains how girls learn from the media that they should scrutinize their bodies and see themselves as sexual objects for others (Ward & Aubrey, 2017, p. 25). Additionally, what children watch affects their career goals, which are often based on gender-specific careers (Ward & Aubrey, 2017, p. 24). While this report does not include any studies that Common Sense Media completed, it draws from a variety of other research to craft an overview of gender and its role in children's media.

Disney movies and television shows make up a large amount of children's media. Specifically, Disney Princesses play an important role in girls' childhood because of the movies' female protagonists and popularity in the media. For example, the Disney Princess movies *Frozen I* and *Frozen II* are the highest-grossing animated children's movies as of June 2021 (Sim, 2021). I chose to analyze Disney Princesses because of their prevalence in girls' media and the effect they may have on the children. My research will see how Disney Princesses affect the young girls watching in terms of their body image, activities, and self-esteem.

Methodology

This project aims to determine how female characters are portrayed in animated Disney Princess movies and how these portrayals affect the young girls watching. I will begin by analyzing the types of princesses portrayed in some of the most-watched Disney Princess movies. These movies include *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Beauty & the Beast* (1991), *Mulan* (1998), *Frozen* (2013), and *Moana* (2016). I will look at the main characters, their genders, and the characteristics they exhibit. I will also explore the relationships between characters, their interests, and how they express themselves. This data will show how princesses

have been portrayed in children's movies and what messages they promote. I chose to focus on Disney Princesses because they often stand as role models for young girls as they grow up.

In addition to this film analysis, I plan to look at the real-world effect of these movies on children. Specifically, my research will involve girls in first and second grade, which is mainly ages six through eight. I would like to focus on this age group because similar studies that I looked at involved children of these ages. This research will explore the girls' body image, self-expression, and choice of toys. This research will be done remotely through the use of online surveys. The participants will include fifty girls in first or second grade attending Long Branch Elementary. There will be twenty-five participants who have seen at least one Disney Princess movie before, and twenty-five who have not seen any. The first twenty-five people in each group to sign-up will be able to participate. Long Branch Elementary is a public elementary school located in Liverpool, New York. I attended this school and know from first-hand experience that the students are from different religious, economic, and ethnic backgrounds. This will provide a well-rounded sample for the study. An interest form will be sent out to the families to be a part of this research.

After signing up for the research, the participants who have previously seen Disney Princess movies will be Group A, and those who have not will be Group B. Group A and B will then answer three surveys. The first survey (Survey 1) will ask them to rank the six Disney Princesses in the order of who they most want to be like. Since Group B has not seen the films before, their response will be based mainly on the appearance of the characters. The next survey (Survey 2) asks them to record what toys they currently play with. Additionally, they will be shown images of toys and asked to group them into ones they want to play with and ones they would not play with. These toys will include a doll, makeup, toy car, nerf gun, doctor kit, and a

puzzle. The purpose of the toy survey is to see if the girls prefer traditionally female-stereotyped activities. The last survey (Survey 3) will ask the participants to rank the six Disney Princesses in terms of prettiness. Over two weeks, half of Group B (Group B1) will then watch *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Beauty & the Beast* (1991), while the other half (Group B2) will watch *Mulan* (1998), *Frozen* (2013), and *Moana* (2016). These groups are divided into Group B1 watching the movies with more traditional and stereotypical depictions of women and Group B2 engaging in films with an emphasis on strong, independent women. Group B1 and B2 will then retake the survey on toy preferences (Survey 2) before watching the remaining three Disney Princess movies they did not watch in the next two weeks. After viewing the six films, they will complete all three surveys again. If anyone in Group A did not see all six Disney Princess movies, they will watch the ones they haven't seen and take the surveys again after viewing them. Each participant who completes the surveys will receive a \$15 compensation.

Expected Results

From this research, I plan to write a report detailing the portrayal of Disney Princesses. This would include how they interact with other characters, the role of love and familial relationships in their life, the main goals they are working towards throughout the film, and how they express themselves. These results are necessary to the study because they show what message the characters are expressing to the children watching.

Additionally, I will include in the report the results from the surveys. I predict that Group B1 will have more stereotypical female views after watching the first three movies assigned to them, while Group B2 will have more neutral views towards toys. The results of all the surveys will show how Disney Princesses affect the girls' beauty standards, self-image, and

extracurricular activities through toy preferences. I plan to use this data to create a film idea involving a princess that promotes positive messages, such as female independence and beauty going beyond appearance, for the young viewers.

Conclusion

Overall, this research will consist of film analysis of six Disney Princess movies and a series of surveys to be answered by girls in first and second grade after watching these movies. The results will include a paper detailing the representation of women in Disney Princess movies and how it affects girls' body image, self-worth, and extracurricular activities. These results will help me create a princess film that will empower the young girls watching. With media continuing to be an important part of our society, I believe it is crucial to make content with positive messages. This research can lead to creating children's media that promotes diversity and female empowerment while inspiring children of all backgrounds to accomplish their goals.

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Budget

This project requires a budget of \$758. \$8 will go to a one-time payment for a one-month subscription to Disney+. Participants will use the same login information to watch the six movies within one month. The remaining funds (\$750) will go to compensating the participants.

Compensation will be \$15 per person, with fifty participants total.

Stage	Deliverables	Budget
Preparation (Week 1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create the three Surveys 	N/A
Contact & Organize (Weeks 2 & 3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Send out the sign-up form to girls in first and second grade at Long Branch Elementary • Organize them into groups of who have (Group A) or have not (Group B) seen any Disney Princess Movies 	N/A
Initial Surveys (Week 4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Groups A and B will complete all three surveys 	N/A
1st Watching Period (Weeks 5 & 6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buy one Disney+ account for all participants (\$8) • Group B1 will watch 3 older Disney Princess Movies • Group B2 will watch 3 newer Disney Princess Movies • Groups B1 & B2 will retake Survey 2 	\$8
2nd Watching Period (Weeks 7 & 8)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group B2 will watch 3 older Disney Princess Movies • Group B1 will watch 3 newer Disney Princess Movies • Groups B1 & B2 will retake all three surveys • Members in Group A who have not seen all 6 selected Disney Princess movies will view the movies they have not seen and retake all three surveys 	N/A
Results (Weeks 9 & 10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compile results into a paper • Thank and compensate participants (\$15 per participant, 50 participants) 	\$750