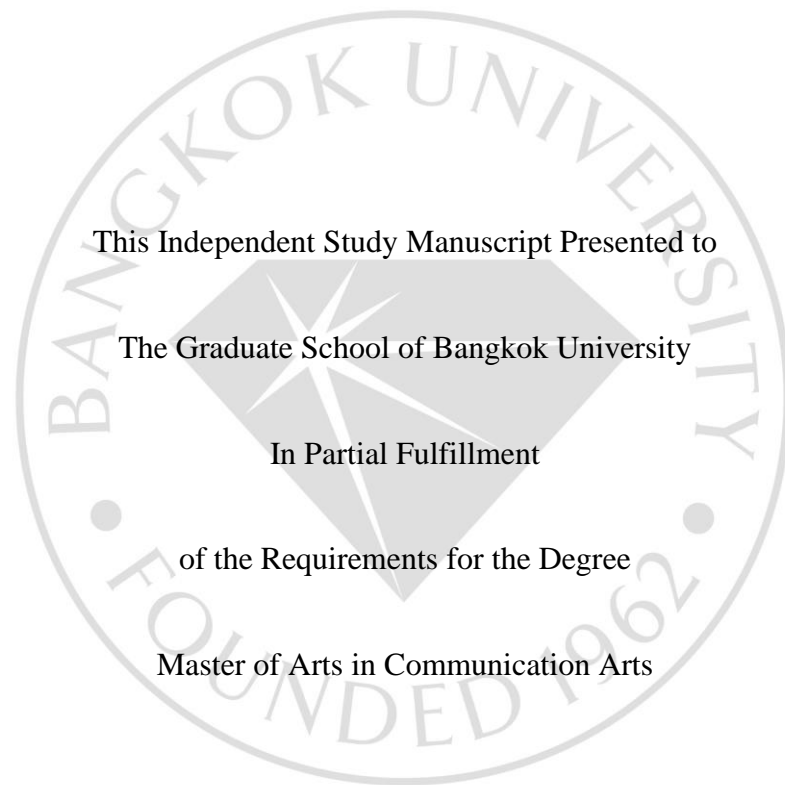


THE GENDER ROLE PORTRAYAL OF DISNEY PRINCESSES AND ITS
IMPACT ON THE AUDIENCE



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Sohani Shahid



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The Gender Role Portrayal Of Disney Princesses And Its Impact On The Audience

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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. Beginning with term definitions, past literature, and analysis of source evaluation, this study will investigate how Disney has affected young minds in terms of their gender identity and roles.

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Lastly, I dedicate this paper to all the women out there who have ever been told that they are not enough because of their gender. You are all strong, capable, and unique magical unicorns and don't let anyone tell you any differently.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale

Gender roles

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).

Disney and gender roles

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)

The idea of being a princess has been around for centuries. Due to the impact of television in the past and with the addition of the internet and social media in recent times, often young girls are seen to replicate the characteristics displayed by princesses on the big screen. As a prominent voice in the entertainment industry, Disney has been playing an essential role in many facets of society. Mcghee and Fruch (1980) had suggested that substantial television viewing may play a role in a child's knowledge and understanding of expected behaviors and characteristics associated with males and females. Barber (2015) citing (Palmer, 2013) stated that the thousands of pictures, audio and, words that the audience view on a screen impacts their interpretations of identities and relationships, blurring the lines between reality and fantasy. The idea of becoming a Disney princess stretches far and wide than just putting on a tiara and playing house, it defines how gender roles in society are defined.

Animated movies of various sorts over the decades have had a lasting impression on kids, teenagers, and the content is viewed worldwide catering to people of different age demographics, including adults. Over the past few decades, Disney has been observed to have transitioned from portraying their female characters as damsels to giving them more defined personas in terms of having their voices who are capable of functioning as independent characters. Even though we have come a long way, many of these movies still give out mixed messages to the viewers, for example, Towbin et al. (2004) in their study cited (Media Education Foundation, 2001) and wrote, "In *Beauty*, the "male" candlestick woos the "female" broom; as she says, "No, no, no," he says, "Yes, yes, yes." This reinforces a

societal assumption that when women say no, they really mean yes; or worse, that her refusal is simply irrelevant”.

On the topic of gender roles, Zipes (2013) stated, “Fairy tales written during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were intended to teach girls and young women how to become domesticated, respectable, and attractive to a marriage partner and to teach boys and girls appropriate gendered values and attitudes (p.714)” (Ebere-Anaba, 2016).

Hine, Ivanovic, and England citing (England et al. 2011) stated that previous studies have also highlighted numerous issues concerning gender representation in Disney animated movies. These studies show that women are predominantly feminine in terms of their traits and behaviors, (England et al. 2011), usually placed in traditional, domestic roles (Towbin et. al. 2004), and are seen to remain passive during plot progression for the most part. (Davis, 2006; Towbin et. al, 2004).

Over time there have been some changes in the representations of the female characters and to explain further, Stover (2013) citing (Women’s Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor 2011) stated that Disney went through a shift to a “new wave” of princess films, which gave a renewed persona to the female characters by transforming the voiceless damsel into a somewhat independent heroine. This new era introduced proactive princesses with progressive personalities highlighting assertiveness, ambition, and a sense of adventure (Stover, 2013).

From 2009 onwards, female characters in Disney movies have been analyzed to display more positive messages by demonstrating a more androgynous (i.e. possessing both masculine and feminine characteristics) and have been seen to play the role of the hero in their own stories through the act of taking part in rescue behaviors, and have been seen to

display variation in their romantic endeavors, sometimes rejecting the notion of romance altogether (Hine, Ivanovic, & England, 2018).

Hine, Ivanovic, and England (2018) stated in their study that the gender-focused content presented by Disney may be an important factor that impacts the gender development of young children due to the significant commercial reach of the organization globally. The two important components that play a role here are the colossal amount of financial success, with approximately \$55.1 billion global revenue in 2016 (The Walt Disney Company 2017) and \$5 billion box office sales for animated feature films released since 2008 (Box Office Mojo 2011, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2010), followed by a significant amount of popularity with young children worldwide (Koonikova 2014; Gomez 2014; Rivas 2016).

Garabedian, (2015) stated, Disney also owes its success due to its ability to sell products in correlation to the movies it produces. This is another key factor that plays a role in influencing gender roles in the audience. According to Forbes' 2011 list of best-selling character-based merchandise, the Disney princess line ranked number one, making \$1.6 billion (Goudreaeu).

Such observations have been welcomed considering the impact they leave on the development of thought processing behavior of many girls and young adolescents. However, few studies have investigated how this certain type of media exposure and the transition from 'old' and 'new' characters have impacted the audience. Such exploration is important considering the influence of Disney princess movies specifically on growing adults' understanding of gender norms and stereotypes.

This study, therefore, aims to reinstate that stereotyped gender roles teach young girls to believe in the one-dimensional roles within which they need to confine themselves in, and through the storytelling that leads them to believe that their own stories require a man to

give it a happy ending. The study also wants to find out if the contemporary Disney movies have succeeded in shaping young minds to understand the underlying issue of gender-stereotyped roles and how they feel about the refreshing take on the lead roles being independent and goal-oriented females in the recent movies.

1.2 Problem Statement

Children learn about societal conforms 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.

Binkley, (2016) cited (Strasburger, Wilson, & Jordan, 2014) and wrote that the definition of childhood entertainment has been modified and reformed throughout the years of civilization, with the advancement of technology and the shifts in society standards as well as changes in entertainment. A newer age has been directed to the aura of consumerism and entertainment as children are constantly learning from mass media sources as opposed to their previous generations who have been raised without common terms like television or Google (Collier, 2014; Giroux, 2010; Strasburger et al., 2014). An issue has thus begun where innocence collides on the terms of ethicality, as instances of gender roles, race stereotypes, and sexuality have made themselves a part of the definition of Disney in a subtle, concealed form (Ajayi 2011; Giroux 2010; Lugo, 2009; Wohlwend 2012) (Binkly, 2016).

Minor (2014) citing Zipes (1986) wrote, in the first chapter of Zipes' book "Don't bet on the Prince" he wrote about the centuries-long debate among various educators, literary

critics, psychologists, theologians, and librarians if children should be exposed to the world of fairytales. Fairytales play a crucial role in the perception of children in their earlier days, providing them with a fabricated sense of reality through the depiction of their content. England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek, (2011) stated, “Disney and its princess phenomenon have been identified as a powerful influence on children’s media and product consumerism, contributing to a new girlhood that is largely defined by gender and the consumption of related messages and products (Giroux 1997; Lacroix 2004; McRobbie 2008; Orenstein 2006).” Regardless of Disney princess movies being produced in the United States, and the phenomenon being American, Disney has a stronghold on the international market due to their marketing efforts (Disney International, 2010). Therefore, the Disney princess line and its gender role portrayals are a necessary component for international children’s media as well (Hubka et al. 2009).” (Minor, 2014).

Towbin et al. (2004) citing Swindler (1986) stated that exposure to media contributes to a child’s values, beliefs, dreams and expectations which play a role in shaping the adult identity a child will carry through the span of his or her life. (Swindler, 1986. p.311). Minor (2014) stated that these accumulated experiences of media culture can leave a potentially negative impact which may result in traits like premature sexualization, risk of depression, and rising rates of narcissism. Parents, on the other hand, can effectively counterbalance its influence in their daughter’s lives through awareness and recognition. (“Cinderella Ate My Daughter,” front flap, 2011). Minor (2014) wrote, repeatedly transmitting those fairy tales to little girls in the form of bedtime stories is likely to increase the influence on the young brain while it sleeps and dreams. (Maass, 27)

In recent years, more positive gender-role representations have been seen to exist within the Disney franchise, with princesses providing more balanced behavioral profiles

(Hine, Ivanovic, & England, 2018). As this statement establishes the fact that Disney is bringing forward changes in their movies, it alongside also makes it a necessity to understand how this transition plays a role in the cognitive-behavioral patterns of young adults.

Past studies have not thoroughly explored the areas of audience reaction to the transitioning state of Disney characters while simultaneously focusing on their behavioral pattern and thought processing capacity. This study aims to do both to understand the correlation between media consumption and thinking patterns among young female and male audiences. The reason why this study aims to be gender-inclusive (both male and female) is to understand if/how the gender portrayal in media has also shaped the way young boys view the gender roles of women around the house and in school.

The primary objective of this study 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.

Research Objectives

The study will investigate the audiences' responses to Disney movies and how their thoughts and behavioral patterns may have been impacted because of them.

The research objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To investigate the audience's reaction to the transition of Disney focusing on more female lead roles.

2. To explore the perceived impact of these female lead roles on the behavioral pattern and thought processing of the audience.

1.3 Research Questions

The research questions that will be explored in this study are as follows:

RQ1: What is the audience's perceived reaction to the transition of Disney focusing on more female lead roles?

RQ2: What is the perceived impact of these female lead roles on the behavioral pattern and thought processing of the audience?

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study is important because it contributes to the existing literature on Disney and its influence on society. The knowledge attained through this study can give parents, educators, and viewers an idea of how exposure to said media may affect the behavioral pattern of the audience.

The contribution of movies stretches far and wide and often plays a vital role in shaping the minds of young adolescents. This research aims to reinstate how structured gender-roles in movies leave an impact on the way young adolescents view gender roles in real life. This study hopes to raise awareness among parents and educators regarding the concept of exposure of such content to kids, explaining to them that 'specified gender roles' is a primitive concept so that it gives the children a platform for analyzing these various roles and be more aware of the influence these movies may have on their minds so that the emergence of any potential negative impact can be minimized.

1.5 Scope of the Study

The study will draw an analysis of three Disney movies of three different transitional periods (post-world-war 2, before the millennium, and the modern time) that have females in lead roles. This aims to further understand how the transition of the movies into more female-centric characters over the decades has impacted both male and female adolescents. The three movies are *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), and *Moana* (2016). The criteria upon which these three movies have been selected are the film's release year (3 different decades and eras), the film's current popularity (IMDb rating: 7.2/10, 8/10 and 7.6/10), representation of gender roles (with Moana's character having a more adventure-driven persona as opposed to Aurora in *Sleeping Beauty* who had a more toned-down innocence about her), and the transition of the female-centric lead roles. The study will be conducted with the help of a list of open-ended questions to interview a group of twelve Bangladeshi adolescents (both male and female) from different schools.

The two areas this research aims to explore are the perceived reaction to the transition of Disney princess characters and how it may have affected the audience in terms of their thinking patterns.

The main research method will be in the form of a list of interview questions designed to further understand the audience's experience with Disney based content. The results from the participants' interviews will help determine the impact viewing Disney movies have had on their lives.

The research will be done to address the impact (positive or negative), viewing Disney princess movies may have had on the audience. Current and past literature relating to Disney and its gender role portrayal of women will also be taken into consideration for review and direction forward.

1.6 Definitions of Terms

1. Gender role: Gender roles are based on the different expectations that individuals, groups, and societies have of individuals based on their sex and based on the society's values and beliefs about gender. (Blackstone, 2003)
2. Gender stereotype: Gender stereotypes are known as the categorization of different character attributes to men and women. (Krueger et al., 2003)

Gender stereotypes have been portrayed in Disney movies throughout its existence from its time of inception and this research aims to delve into how these stereotypes have left an impact on the minds of young adults.

3. Media consumption: The media consumption was defined broadly in usage of any form of entertainment ranging from watching TV, using IPTV services, and entertainment devices. (Bernhaupt et al., 2010)

Information obtained through media leaves a lasting impact on the minds of viewers and it has been known to shape the minds of young adults in the capacity of their thinking ability. This study aims to find out how much of an impact a specified media platform (Disney Movies) has made on the minds of the research subjects.

4. Disney Movies: The Walt Disney Company is Hollywood's third largest movie producer (Reel Run-down, 2014) and is worth over \$90 billion (Carillo, Crumley, Thieringer, & Harrison, 2012) (Hefner et al., 2017).

Disney movies franchise being one of the most successful corporations, popular not only in the United States but all over the world to children and young adults have been a source of entertainment for decades. Through qualitative research, this study aims to find out how Disney has managed to capture the minds of young people with its movies and how the

transition of their female lead roles in terms of their changed personas over the years has affected the audience.



CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Gender role and gender stereotype in Media

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.

Girls and women are often stereotyped and sexualized in the mass media (e.g., Collins, 2011; Smith, Pieper, Granados, & Choueite, 2010). A meta-analysis of 30 studies has found that children's behavior regarding gender stereotypes can be developed and reinforced through the act of television viewing (Herrett-Skjellum & Allen, 1996). In addition to that, exposure to gender-stereotypical media can alter children's perception of gender appropriateness of toys as stated by Pike and Jennings (2005), and it is also associated with more gender-typed play among preschoolers (Coyne, Linder, Rasmussen, Nelson, & Collier, 2014).

Morawitz and Mastro (2008) in their study stated that children identify with the norms of a media-dominated society where media consumption has a measurable influence on people's perceptions of the real world. This in turn aids in their development of attitudes, judgments, and actions, regardless of the accuracy of those said perceptions.

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).

The Disney princess line's popularity can very well be understood by looking at the remarkable profitability of the franchise. (Disney Consumer Products, 2011). So far there are 13 female characters identified as princesses (either through birthright or wedlock) in the Disney Corporation. Disney goes on to further engage with the younger population through toys, clothing, and other merchandising items in addition to their films. Orenstein (2011) had mentioned that parents generally prefer Disney Princesses as "safe" content over other sexually suggestive or provocative media models. Yet others have raised questions regarding the sense safely these movies emanate, speculating that young girls may be particularly vulnerable to the potentially negative effects being exposed to these movies may cause (Best & Lowney, 2009; Ehrenreich, 2007). The princess line in particular has drawn criticism for glorifying characters that are portrayed as passive damsels in need of being saved by their potential male partners (Ehrenreich, 2007; Orenstein, 2011).

A few content analyses have revealed that Disney princess movies have sent out strong messages regarding gender. One analysis of Disney princesses of the period between

1937 and 2009 found that there are still traditional gender role stereotypes (e.g. physically weak, passive, submissive, etc.), although in recent years the portrayals have become more complex over time (England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011). Recent years have seen a shift in the plots of Disney princess movies (e.g. Merida) to a more progressive and varied direction (England et al., 2011) and are more feminized for Disney merchandise (Samakow, 2013).

2.2 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).

A brief history of media effects

Historically, according to Bryant and Thompson (2002), McQuail (2010), Noelle-Neumann, (1973) and Wartella and Middlestadt (1991), media effects had tended to emphasize a three or four phase model with each of the phases characterized by either ‘significant’ or ‘minimal’ media effects. The boundaries of each phase are fluid and are generally defined by advancing media technologies, cultural environment, types of methods, perspectives, and ideologies of the researchers.

The first phase which is a significant effect phase took birth in the 1920s and 1930s and it demonstrates a very direct send and receive approach. This approach was also commonly referred to as using metaphors like “magic bullet” and “hypodermic needle.” This stage had people fear the massive effect of emerging media, film, radio, and such in shaping the opinion, attitude, and behavior of people due to the rising popularity of the press, film, and radio. Harold Lasswell (1927) is often cited as and given credit for being the main

figure of the first phase of media effect. Lasswell used the arguments of Freudian psychology, pragmatism, and political science to argue that an individual and a society can be effectively steered in a direction by a minority with the aid of propaganda.

At the beginning of the 1930s, a more minimal and second phase consisting of more sophisticated scientific methods was being developed in communication theory (McQuail, 2010). This phase of research questioned the findings of past research and argued that the effects of mass communication reinforced predispositions and did not directly influence them. This phase came to be known as limited effects model and culminated with the work of Joseph Klapper (1960) who carried forward the research of his teacher Lazarsfeld who, along with Katz, began to define media effects theory (1955) in what they called the theory of “personal influence.”

The third phase coincided with the rise in the usage of viewership of television, and with Noelle-Neumann (1973)’s development of the spiral of silence theory, returned the focus to cumulative change and the powerful mass media and its long-term effects. The 1950s and 1960s brought back the attention to the concept of powerful mass media which went on to break the “no myth” effect previously argued by researchers in the previous phase.

At the beginning of the 1990s, a potential fourth phase emerged (McQuail, 2010), placing special emphasis on constructivist models. This approach argued that much of what the media does involves the construction of reality, where the public decides whether or not to adopt the media’s world view.

While many researchers have worked on the advancements of these phase models, some have opposed it. Lang and Lang (1993) focused on emphasizing investigations of cumulative effects. An alternate model was also introduced by Perse (2001) which was based on four types of media effects: direct, conditional, cumulative, and cognitive transactional,

focusing on media content variables and audience variables irrespective of time or media. Neuman and Guggenheim (2011) analyzed 50 years of communications research and argued that media effects should be characterized not by phases but by using six broad theoretical areas: persuasion theories, active audience theories, social context theories, societal and media theories, interpretive effects theories, and new media theories (Borah, 2016).

A brief overview of the theory

“Media effects” is a broad concept and several theories fall inside the spectrum of this vast arena. Some theories that fall under the umbrella are cultivation theory, exemplification theory, uses and gratification theory, third-person effect, effects of media violence, etc. As this study is set out to find the perceived effect Disney princess movies have on the behavioral pattern of the audience, a brief overview of the cultivation theory, which focuses on the impact of television and also its relevance to new media is given below.

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).

Cultivation theory stated the long-term effects of television viewing do not only pose to be a danger due to its ability to shape a perspective about one specific issue, but it holds the power to shape one’s moral values and general beliefs about the world. The theory stands on several concepts: the symbolic environment, story-telling, the symbolic function of

television, the television traits, the cultural model, the cultivation of value system, the multidirectional process, and the cultural indicator.

New Media

The way we receive media has evolved from the 1950s and 1960s from strictly broadcast television, theatrical films, radio, and print media to the current broad-based electronic digital media environment. Cable or satellite systems along with the emergence of the Internet have given a plethora of options for the avid viewer. Cultivation remains most concerned about overall messages and what large communities are exposed to in a time of more fragmentation and less collective consciousness. Shanahan and Morgan (1999) in their study stated “the content of messages is more germane than the technology with which they are delivered” (p.201).

Gerbner had stated in his study that “people learn best not what their teachers think they teach or what their preachers think they preach, but what their cultures in fact cultivate” (Gerbner, 1963, p. 42). Morgan, Shanahan, and Signorielli stated that much of Gerbner’s ‘new state religion’ argument rings relevance today. Even with new diversity and inclination towards video entertainment or some other term or concept replacing television, it still provides an organically related synthetic symbolic structure that presents a total world of meanings for us (1977, p.149). In today’s expanded and immensely complex media environment, this theory still therefore remains relevant (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signolielli, 2015).

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)

According to Bandura's elements of this theory, there are three general principles associated with this theory which are observation, imitation, and modeling. Behaviors learned through modeling involves individuals shaping their behavior after the actions of models. Bandura identified three basic models of observational learning which are:

A live model, which involves an actual individual demonstrating or acting out a behavior.

A verbal instructional model, which involves descriptions and explanations of a behavior.

A symbolic model, which involves real or fictional characters displaying behaviors in books, films, television programs, or online media.

Bandura stated that the modeling process requires four components for an individual to successfully imitate the behavior of someone else. The four components are attention (the person must pay attention to the model), retention (the observer must be able to remember the behavior that has been observed), reproduction (the ability to replicate the behavior demonstrated by the model) and motivation (learners must want to demonstrate what they have learned). (Nabavi, 2012)

2.3 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.

Kimball, (1986, as cited in Lapreore 2016) used a longitudinal study to investigate the effects of media consumption in a small town before and after they have access to television. His study went on to conclude that, after getting access to television, girls and boys both demonstrated stereotypical behavior patterns and resorted to traditional gender norms in terms of conducting daily tasks and expressing emotions.

Buckingham (1997, as cited in Lapreore 2016) further stated that the Disney Corporation is consistently listed as one of the top producers of children's entertainment and is a major source of media that children consume. The Disney Princess collection owes its success to the use of stereotypes of femininity and the subliminal gendered messages underlying the products. (England et. al., 2011; Lacroix, 2004; Orenstein, 2006, as cited in Lapreore 2016).

Dundes (2001; Lacroix, 2004; Ono & Buescher, 2001; Whelan, 2012, as cited in Lapreore 2016) mentioned that many researchers have used qualitative methods to analyze the content of Disney princess movies. Many of these studies compare the qualities between earlier princess films (e.g. Cinderella, Snow White, etc.) to movies released after the 1980s. Princesses in the earlier movies have been described as domestic and passive (Dundes, 2001, as cited in Lapreore 2016). The newer or renaissance princesses were praised for their adventurous behavior and goals. Even though the newer princesses were observed to be progressive and assertive compared to their predecessors, they have still been noted to exhibit traditional feminine characteristics. (England et al., 2011).

2.4 Elaborated research questions

RQ1: What is the audience's perceived reaction to the transition of Disney focusing on more female lead roles?

1.1 What are the audience's reactions to Disney princesses in terms of the changes in the portrayal of their characters from Sleeping Beauty in 1959 to Moana in 2016?

1.2 To what extent does the portrayal of characters in terms of their gender roles, behavioral patterns, and overall thinking capacity have impacted the audience?

RQ2: What is the perceived impact of these female lead roles on the behavioral pattern and thought processing of the audience?

2.1 How do the changes in the characterization in terms of the gender roles of Disney princesses affect the behavioral patterns of the audience?

2.2 Are more of the popular, older Disney movies still the benchmark that is set for young girls who feel the need to behave a certain way to come across more "feminine" in nature or

has the newer movies taught the girls to be more self-independent, devoid of traditional gender roles?



CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

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.

3.2 Key Informants

Key informants were 12 adolescents within the age frame of 16-19. Out of the 12 participants, 10 of them were female and 2 of them were male. The 12 participants consisted of three 16-year-olds, four 17-year-olds, two 18-year-olds, and three 19-year-olds. The key informants were educated about Disney movies, have watched at least one of the three given movies enlisted to be analyzed for the research, or have watched a movie from the same timeline as the enlisted movies to give the research a more even and fairground. The participants were chosen from six different educational institutions focusing solely on

adolescents. The key informants were selected through a virtual snowball sampling technique.

3.3 Research Tool

The research tool consisted of Disney feature films and interview questions. Disney movies have been chosen as the medium of media exposure as the movies are globally well recognized by a broad spectrum of audiences of various backgrounds and cultures. The questionnaire was based on three Disney films which are: *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) and *Moana* (2016). The three Disney movies belong to three different transitional periods (post-world-war II, before the millennium, and the modern-time) that have females in lead roles. The criteria upon which these three movies have been selected are the film's release year (three different decades and eras), the film's current popularity (IMDb rating: 7.2/10, 8/10, and 7.6/10 respectively), representation of gender roles (with Moana's character having a more adventure-driven persona as opposed to Aurora in *Sleeping Beauty* who had a more toned-down innocence about her), and the transition of the female-centric lead roles. Two questions were allocated per movie totaling six questions excluding the general and open-ended questions. The interview questions began with a few basic ones regarding knowledge about Disney, followed by questions directed towards understanding the perspectives of the respondents regarding the change of transitioning Disney characters and the impact it may have made on them.

To understand the responses from each participant and to aid the interpretation of the information obtained from the research better, the interview question pattern included some general information like gender, age, educational background, nationality, etc., followed by personal movie preferences, thoughts about the Disney franchise and questions related to the plot of the chosen movies and their impact on the participants and lastly an overall impact

regarding the influence of TV/movies. This combination of questions guided the interview process for the participants. The questions aimed to find out how the female-centric leads make the participants feel regarding stereotypical and progressive gender roles. The questions also explored the areas of comparison Disney movie characters may draw with the real-life characters of the female participants and how the male participants perceive female characters both in reel and real life. This will reflect upon the impact these movies have had on the audience members.

3.4 Data collection

All the interviews were conducted through a virtual platform. The data was acquired virtually via digital communication tools used for conducting meetings and interviews called “Zoom” and “Skype”. The questions were shown on a shared screen to willing participants and the audio data was recorded on the platform. The acquired data was then transcribed to further analyze the research objectives.

3.5 Data Analysis

The collected data of the research was transcribed and later analyzed using the content analysis method, focusing on the information given in the interview by the participants. Non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, pitch variations, voice projections, and gestures were not taken into account. Data were analyzed by categorizing similar responses of the participants, which were later matched with previous researches in a similar scope of research to prove the conceptualization and relevance of the ‘Cultivation Analysis’ and ‘Social Learning’ theories.

LIST OF QUESTIONS

1. Please state your gender, age, educational institution, and nationality.
2. Do you enjoy watching movies? Please state why or why not.
3. What is your favorite genre of movies? Please state your reason(s).
4. How often do you watch a movie? Please also mention specifics of your movie-watching habit. Do you watch movies alone? Where?
5. Please state the inception of your Disney movie watching experience. Did you watch Disney movies growing up?
6. Please state your opinion regarding Disney movies. For example, for women, do you think Disney's portrayal of women is healthy? Did Disney influence your ideas of romance growing up? For men, did Disney princess characters influence the way you viewed women in real life?
7. Which of the movies from the given list of three have you watched?
 - 7.1 Sleeping Beauty (1959)
 - 7.2 Beauty and the Beast (1991)
 - 7.3 Moana (2016)
8. The following questions will examine the extent you remember details from the three Disney movies: Sleeping Beauty, Beauty and the Beast, and Moana. The questions aim to check your familiarity with the said Disney movies. It's OK if your answer is not correct.
 - 8.1 What is one of the gifts bestowed upon Aurora in Sleeping Beauty?

8.2 What awakens Aurora from her sleep in Sleeping Beauty?

8.3 What was the female lead character in the movie Beauty and the Beast called?

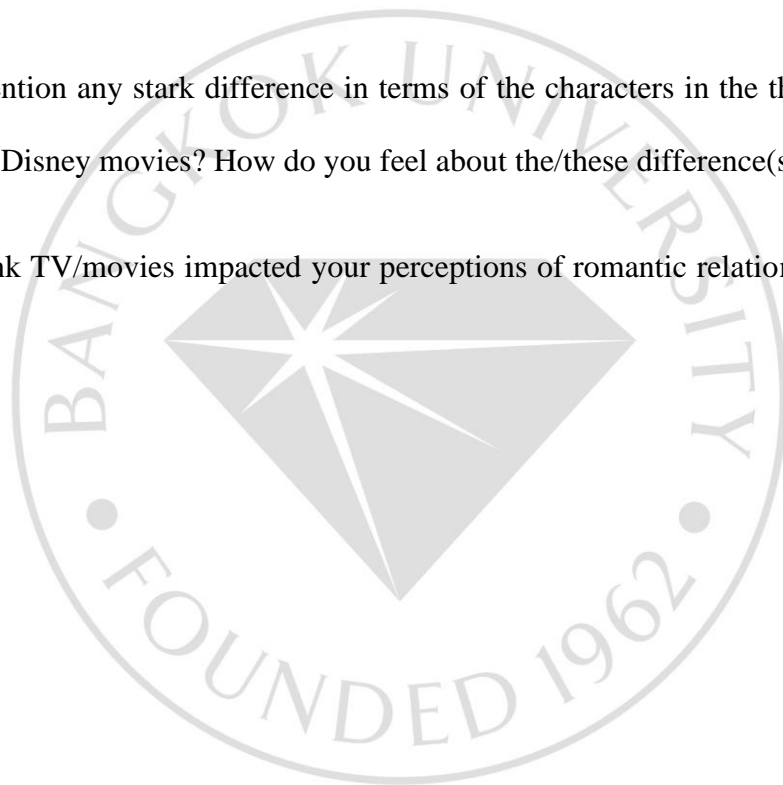
8.4 Why is the lead female character in the movie Beauty and the Beast called strange/strangely?

8.5 What did Moana's dad forbid her to do all her life?

8.6 What traits make Moana heroic?

9. Can you mention any stark difference in terms of the characters in the three lead roles in the three stated Disney movies? How do you feel about the/these difference(s)?

10. Do you think TV/movies impacted your perceptions of romantic relationships? How and why?



CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The research was conducted with the aid of a virtual interview, primarily using the communication application ‘Zoom’ and in one case ‘Skype’ as the face-to-face interview was not possible due to the global pandemic situation of Covid-19. After the interviews were concluded, the answers and comments were analyzed using the content analysis method. The research participants were 12 adolescents within the age frame of 16-19. Out of the 12 participants, 10 of them were female and 2 of them were male. The participants were from 6 different schools, 4 of which are located in Bangladesh, 1 in Malaysia, and 1 in the USA but all the participants were from the same ethnic background in terms of their nationality which was Bangladeshi. The 12 participants consisted of three 16-year-olds, four 17-year-olds, two 18-year-olds, and three 19-year-olds.

The interview was designed to have 10 questions which were segmented into three parts; the first part consisted of basic information like age, gender, educational background, and nationality. The second part of the questions was centered around movie watching habits in general and the final segment consisted of Disney related questions with a short quiz to understand the level of proficiency in terms of the three chosen Disney movies in this study, ending with two open-ended questions. To maintain their anonymity the participants have been addressed alphabetically from letters A to L. Participants A, C, D, F, G, H, I, J, K, and L are female while participants B and E are males.

4.1 Interest in watching Disney’s movies

The first phase of the interview asked the participants for their basic information like gender, age, educational background, and nationality. Gender-related responses were

especially important as the interview questions were customized to be directed towards both male and female respondents.

All participants stated their positive response when asked about their interest in watching movies. This was the second phase of the interview which focused on questions about their movie-watching habits and personal preferences. Participant A, when asked about why she preferred watching movies stated that:

“I do enjoy watching movies because it shows us different stories from different worlds. I am not really into reading that much, so I cover it up with the movies.”

Participant K’s response gave a similar insight with the addition of an entertainment factor and it was:

“Yes I do enjoy watching movies, it brings enjoyment and it also brings learning to us. I always like watching movies.”

Participant I’s response emphasized more on the entertainment factor and she said:

“Honestly who doesn’t enjoy watching movies? So yes, I do and why not because I mean like, it’s entertainment, right? So, passing time for, that’s why.”

As evident from the above responses, the participants’ responses echoed each other’s thoughts in terms of their interest in movie watching.

When asked about their favorite genre, the most popular was noted to be a tie between comedy and action with thriller holding the second position and lastly mystery and romance. According to this finding, the genre of romance did not hold a strong position when it came to the number one choice of genre preferred to be watched by the participants.

There was no notable pattern in terms of the frequency of the movie watching habits of the participants. The answers ranged from almost every day to once in six months with twice a week, once a month, twice a month, once in two-three months in between. Other answers were “pretty often,” “depends on my mood,” “when I have free time,” and “when I have friends over”. When asked about the preferred location, a majority responded with ‘alone at home’, followed by ‘alone or family’ and ‘in theaters with friends’.

From the above findings, it was concluded that most of the participants preferred to watch movies by themselves and the frequency varied based on their work schedules and mood.

The responses from the next set of questions were as follows:

Cinderella, a Disney production of 1950 was the most popular movie in terms of the first Disney movie ever watched by the research subjects, followed by Sleeping Beauty and Snow White. The Disney franchise started its inception with Snow White, the first Disney production released in 1937. Snow White has been portrayed as a fair maiden with soft, rosy cheeks, bright red lips, and a head full of shiny, black hair. But the representation of her persona has not maintained the same fair precision as her looks were presented to be. She lacked grit and an independent spirit throughout the movie and is seen to await her prince to come and play the role of her savior. Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella strongly followed suit and are observed to have a similar pattern in terms of their passive nature.

From the findings, it is clear that in the earlier days of their lives, a majority of the respondents began the journey into the realms of Disney with Cinderella and princesses with a similar submissive nature like Snow White and Aurora.

Sleeping Beauty may have ignited a sense of new hope and entertainment in the time of The Great Depression of the 1930s but it is not a sound representation of independent and strong women of modern times.

The following production from Disney was Cinderella which was released in 1950, in quite a proximity after World War 2 had ended and even though the audience was given the experience of 'happily ever after', it was accomplished with the rescue of Cinderella, quite similar to the pattern which was observed in Snow White. Another noticeable aspect in both of these movies was the homemaking skills each of these princesses possessed. They knew how to cook and clean which fell under the necessary skill-sets of a nurturing housewife that fit perfectly into the mould of the patriarchal structure of society.

On the contrary, the more recent films have displayed the lead roles as more adventurous and independent with active voices that have not been reduced to a missing one of mere damsels. But due to the popularity of the initial movies, Cinderella remains a popular choice as the first viewed Disney movie in the earlier phases of the respondents' lives, according to the findings.

Out of the 10 questions set for the interview, all the participants were asked to answer each one of them except for question number 6 which had sub-questions directed to both female and male participants separately.

They were asked to state their opinion regarding Disney movies. The female participants were asked if they thought Disney's portrayal of women was healthy and if Disney influenced their ideas of romance growing up. The male participants were asked if Disney princess characters influenced the way they viewed women in real life.

4.2 Opinion regarding Disney movies

The issues stated here consisted of three aspects: Disney's portrayal of women, Disney's influence of romance, and Disney princess characters' influence on the way men viewed women in real life.

Disney's portrayal of women

The key respondents stated that they are opposed to the idea of how romance has been portrayed in older movies. In the initial movies of Disney, princesses didn't need much to fall in love. The idea of compatibility was not introduced in the storylines which may have given a false sense of reality when it came to the concept of romance. The findings from this segment do indicate that the transition of characters that Disney has recently introduced has left a positive impact on the audience but the older movies do tend to have left a negative impression in terms of their portrayal of women.

Response by participant C: *"I think the thing about Disney movies is that, it has the main component of most of the Disney princess movies is insta(referring to instantly falling in love) love whereas when the two main protagonists meet each other, they instantly fall in love and the problem with it is, is that it seems very fake and not exactly genuine and the characters seem kinda fickle at times so it also focuses a lot on the damsel in distress and knight in shining armor which kind of portrays the role of women in a negative way because it shows that, these movies show that the women are weak and they need a man to protect them rather than it something being women empowering."*

To add to the previous response, participant F said: *"So I think it's changing a bit now, I think it's getting better but the portrayal of women is almost disturbing, that the fact that it's shown to kids and more often than not it's the damsel in distress, you know, I think it*

does affect the psyche of how a child ends up or especially as a girl myself, how I would end up thinking what the world is supposed to be. That being said, I think it is getting better because recently, the recent movies like Frozen, and Brave and Moana, I think are slightly better but at the same time I still feel like the systemic sexism and the patriarchal things are still there in some instances.”

This answer echoes the previous one and highlights the changes Disney has incorporated in its recent ventures. Respondent F mentioned that the portrayal of women may affect the psyche of the audience, especially a young girl growing up.

Influence of romance

The key respondents referred to parental guidance as an influencing factor that played a role in the behavioral pattern. This insight is particularly useful as the exposure to certain allegedly harmful content may not always be banned from the eyes of young children but they can be educated regarding crucial matters like gender role portrayal so children understand these concepts better. When asked about the portrayal of women in Disney movies, the answers rang a similar tune and shed light on how the recent princesses are stronger and how the portrayal is changing across the franchise.

Participant A mentioned parental guidance to be an influencing factor in the behavioral pattern as such: *“Well, uh, my opinion is different from like this influencing my personal romance because I didn’t let it influence my personal romance because I was pretty clear that these are just fantasies and my mom also kind of made it clear to me that helped me to watch it without affecting my own life but my opinion would be that even though Disney tried to portray the princesses as a really strong character who’s able to overcome the enemies I do believe they did mostly portray that the love between the prince and the princess is really important and it’s the center of their lives so that is kind of unhealthy but in Frozen*

when they showed the love of the family, it was really good. It wasn't entirely about romantic love."

Disney princess characters' influence on the way men viewed women in real life

The key participants (male) mentioned how the portrayal of certain characters may have impacted the viewers who grew up watching them. Participant E elaborates on that note by mentioning a certain aspect from the movie Cinderella where the prince is seen to pick a bride for himself from a grand ball organized for the very purpose. This is a clear indication of how women have been portrayed to be disposable in the hands of their male counterparts which in turn may pose to give young girls a certain predetermined idea about romance and gender roles.

Participant E on this note stated: *"Since I did not watch a lot of Disney movies, so I wouldn't say that they affected my perspective of women in general but growing up, I, when I watched Disney movies when I was little, I did not exactly find anything wrong in them because I was still developing, you know, and everyone was watching it, I didn't really look into it much, but now that I think of it, if I talk about Cinderella, and about how the prince finds this princess with her shoe and how they were all, how all the girls in the kingdom were there for the prince, to please him. I think that is, that is wrong in the sense that, the women in the movie were brought up with one and only life goal, which was to please the prince and be the princess, and the prince, on the other hand, had it all for him. He was picking up women from a bowl, a ballroom full of them and it was, now that I think of it, was pretty wrong and as and it, I can see how it can affect a lot of other people who are more into the Disney scene because they might think that, oh since they are man, you know, they are respected that they will have a line of women waiting for them doing whatever they wanted them to so now that I think of it, it could affect a lot of people in that sense."*

4.3 Basic knowledge of Disney movies

The key respondents answered a few Disney related questions focusing on the three chosen movies. The choices were: *Sleeping Beauty (1959)*, *Beauty and the Beast (1991)* and *Moana (2016)*. Half of the respondents mentioned having watched all 3 movies, followed by the majority of the rest who admitted to having watched 2 out of the 3 movies. Their responses to trivia about the three given movies helped shed light on the issues of consent and education of women. Insights from the trivia are as follows:

The importance of consent

The importance of consent before engaging in any form of contact, especially with a stranger is brought to light here. The depiction of Disney characters in earlier times can be noted from this example. Disney focused more on ‘happily ever afters’ but the methods for that state to have been accomplished were often on shaky moral grounds.

When asked what awakens Princess Aurora from her sleep in *Sleeping Beauty*, all the respondents stated it was due to ‘a true love’s kiss’. To add to that participant L said: *“what awakens Aurora and that’s a kiss from the prince and I think that is really, really problematic because it is done without consent and she was sleeping.”*

Education of women and individuality

Belle is introduced in 1991 in the movie *Beauty and the Beast*. Belle is seen to find joy in the world of books and her thirst for knowledge is looked at with an odd eye by the villagers she is surrounded with. With her characterization, Disney steps into a new era where women are seen to pursue much more than dreams of a prince, even though it may still not be an acceptable form of behavior by the society that is also portrayed in the movie. Belle is seen to have an independent nature and the defining trait of her personality is much more than

her beauty. She is smart, brave, and resilient as she pays no heed to the villagers and manages to lose herself into the world of books regardless of what they may think of her.

In *Beauty and the Beast*, Belle, the lead character was called strange. The key respondents to this issue stated it was due to her interest in reading. Participant J said: *“It’s because she used to read books and teach young children how to read. That’s why it was not common at that time or in that particular village, that’s why they used to call her strange.”*

A similar answer by participant C stated: *“That was because she did not fit into the others’ expectations and standards because she used to enjoy reading a lot and she was unlike the other females in the village so that’s why she was deemed strange by the others.”*

The recent years of Disney have witnessed a very noticeable change in the characterization of the princesses with the introduction of a few mentionable characters like Merida from *Brave* (2012), Elsa from *Frozen* (2013) and, Moana in 2016. These princesses are seen to choose adventure over the dream of a prince charming and a castle. These movies are the modern-day representation of women independently functioning without the need of a man and are the flag bearers of their destiny.

The final two opened-ended questions explored areas of their opinions regarding the transitional characters of the three Disney princesses from the three chosen movies and if TV/movies have impacted their perceptions of romantic relationships. The researcher found a few interesting answers from the question which asked the participants to state any stark differences they have noticed in the three Disney princesses from the three enlisted movies.

4.4 The transition of Disney princess characters

The key respondents stated their opinions regarding the transition Disney princess characters went through over the decades focusing on Aurora, Belle, and Moana from three

different decades. The respondents mentioned that Disney did come a long way in terms of their female representation from Aurora who mostly waited for her prince to Moana who took it upon herself to be the savior of not only herself but her entire community.

They also discussed how Aurora was destined to be married off right after birth and she succumbed to the fate that was decided for her. On the contrary, Moana is seen to break the shackles of her boundaries to find her path irrespective of her dad's opinion. These two movies have both shown women to have looked into the face of adversity but one was seen to have given in and the other to have put up a fight. They also mentioned how Disney has incorporated less sexist elements when their movies transitioned into modern times.

Participant A stated: *“Personally I don’t like Sleeping Beauty because to be very honest that movie, she was portrayed as a vic..more like a victim because her stepmom cursed her and then she was saved by the prince and she couldn’t do anything by herself so she seemed to be more dependant but in Beauty and the Beast, at the end, Belle was the one to save the prince from the curse. So, she was the one who actually helped, like who actually also contributed in the final solution and in Moana, her character was more like a reliable, more reliable because she was not only fighting for her personal love life but she was also carrying the weight of the, of helping the whole village. That’s the difference I guess.”*

On the same note, participant F stated: *“So I think there’s a clear difference between the pop-culture idea of princesses at this point. I think it is getting better in the sense that you know Sleeping Beauty was, like Aurora was married off the very moment she was born, in fact, it’s not as blatant in Moana, but at the same time her father still pretty much in Moana, from what I like to remember, pretty much-deciding everything that is going to happen in her life, all because of a certain superstition that he might have. So if you like, difference would*

probably be that it's a bit more modern or you know it's more in terms with the pop-culture right now but it is still problematic."

A third response on the matter from participant K was: *"Aurora was, she wasn't like as educated I guess, there wasn't much feminism shown in it, but then again in Beauty and the Beast, Belle, I really liked her, she was my favorite princesses during my childhood, I liked the fact that she was so strong about education, like how she strongly pursued it and about Moana, her curiosity, she was very different from the other two I guess, she's headstrong, she would go out and venture out alone like I think these are differences. I don't see...I really liked the change that they made in Beauty and the Beast, like Aurora was, she wasn't, she was never really my favorite, I never kinda liked her. I found her kinda stupid at one point."*

Participant K is seen to be quite opinionated in her choices of like and dislike and she blatantly mentions that she preferred Belle over Aurora due to her zeal for education. She also goes forward to mention how the concept of feminism wasn't portrayed in the earlier movies.

A fourth participant L brings forward the element of sexism in her answer and stated: *"Okay, I think Disney has had the princess notion in the older movies more than the new ones as Disney tried to rebrand itself in the new ones with Elsa and Brave and Merida and her bravery and her disobeying her mother. So I think the differences are quite a bit and the later movies have less sexist elements than the ones in the older movies."*

Participant B stated how Disney should have come forward sooner with the changes they have implemented in their characters and here's what his opinion was: *"I would say, in the older movies, the princesses, the female characters played, a lot of, you know they were very passive, they weren't actively involved I think. They were always waiting for the prince*

to come up and do something, they weren't given that much attention or power to do anything and I think that kinda affected the girls who grew up watching them. Like they were shown that girls are not meant to play an active role in anyone's life, they are just the passive, non-powerful character. That's something I see but Moana, what I heard from people is and from the questions, I infer that she's a heroic character, an active character who plays a very important role in the entire movie. So that's the difference I see and I would say Disney is a bit too late with this change, they should have come up with it a long time ago. But hey, it's better late than never."

A timeline of the Disney animated films marks the transition Disney has made into creating characters that support gender equality, individualism, and independence. Children of the progressive society can relate better to the newer movies as they focus on individual journeys rather than one that is based on dependency.

From the findings above it seems that the younger generation does not hold the older Disney movies as a standard to behave a certain way but are more influenced by the recent princesses who portray more independent characters devoid of traditional gender roles. In the same spectrum, they are also aware of how the older movies may affect the cognitive pattern of the younger generation if proper guidance along with the exposure to these movies is not provided.

4.5 Perceptions regarding Disney movies playing a role in how romance is viewed

When asked about their perceptions regarding Disney playing a role in how they viewed romance, the key respondents mentioned how the recent Disney movies show a better depiction of romance as opposed to the older ones. They stated that the way romance has been portrayed in movies has left a deeply rooted notion in the minds of the audience which affects the way they view romance. The emphasis on the most important day of a woman's

life being her wedding day is an age-old concept that has been recycled through different movies over time. The respondents mentioned how the contribution of a prince charming in the fantasies woven by young girls is a common phenomenon when they think about their ideal romantic endeavor.

Participant C said: *“Yes, as I have said, previously in older movies and TV shows, the female characters were shown to be fragile and they seemed to need men to protect them but the good thing about current and newer movies is that this perception has changed over the time and now women can be more confident about themselves and yeah. Before I used to think, I didn’t used to think of romance in the most positive way because most of the old princess movies were so much into insta (referring to the notion of instantly falling in love) love that I actually just thought of romance as something very fragile and temporary, however, now, my view of romance has changed a lot because they are portrayed in a much, much more positive way, so yeah.”*

A second participant F stated: *“Yeah I think definitely, for me romance for me has always been a monogamous relationship, yeah with, basically monogamous relationship, but the concept that you know, true love exists, that the most important day of a woman’s life, it’s always said that the most important day of a woman’s life is her wedding day and things like that all comes from movies, more often than not they all come from movies and I think that is really the realization that it doesn’t have to be that way, doesn’t always affect, doesn’t always come to everyone. Thanks to these movies I feel like it has been rooted in us in ways that it’s pretty difficult to unlearn from.”*

A third response by participant G stated: *“Like when I was growing up, mystery wasn’t a thing then, but romance was like my first, if we say, growing up. So, I would say like romance was something, oh, that I would like to have this, when I have my own love story. I*

would wanna have like a guy like that who take care of me, who cares for me, and who will love me like that. Like no problems, no fights, nothing. So I would believe that like romance did impacted me a lot because I was, I would think like that. For my future. If I was a kid, yes. It did impacted me.”

For the same participant when a follow-up question was asked regarding when they thought the way romance was portrayed on screen has stopped impacting them, she said: *“Probably when I was like, 12-13.”*

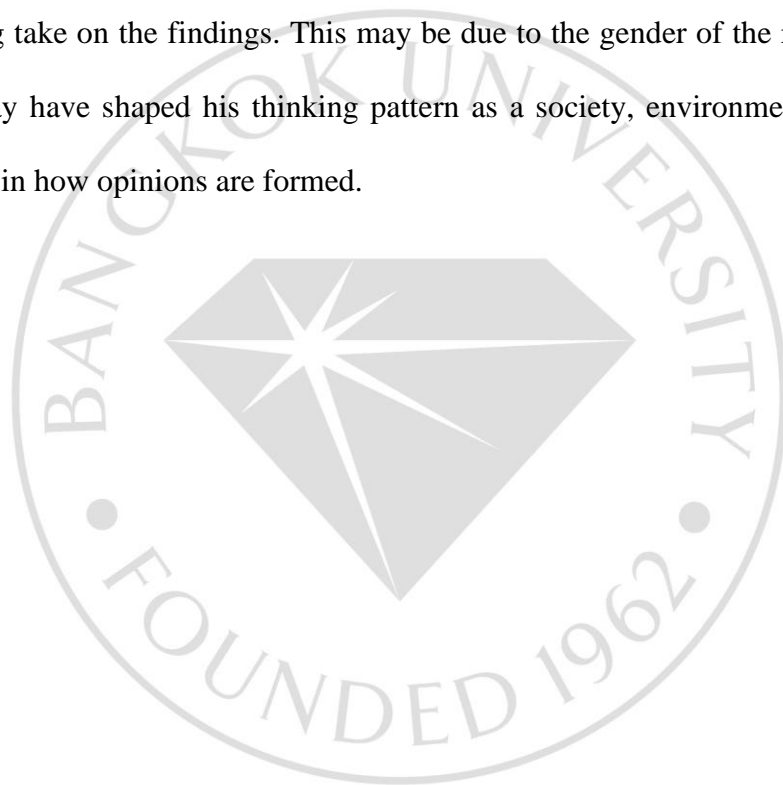
Participant G adds to the opinion stated by participant F and says romantic movies did play a role in how she viewed romance as a child but it changed around the time when she reached the age of 12 or 13.

A fourth response stated by participant I: *“So do I think that TV/movies impacted, you know, my perceptions of romantic relationships, if that’s what you are asking then, obviously it does have an impact because it’s not like we believe what we see but somewhere in our minds we do expect or we have you know like, a thought process, a fantasy, somewhere we would like to lose ourselves in. Maybe have a prince charming or something else, something, a different sort of relationship or somewhat. We see something in a movie and maybe we imagine that maybe I wish I was the girl, I wish I was the girl there or maybe I had something like this with someone else so obviously it does have an impact. How and why uum because movies or TV movies, these film, it’s just a way for us to lose ourselves, to just imagine or fantasize what we can’t have in real life or what we don’t usually have. But so uum, yes, it does have an impact on our lives. That’s all I guess.”*

Participant B for the same question stated: *“I mean, the media or the entertainment industry, they set up an unreal, uh unreal type of romance, like the relationship, it just, they don’t work out like that. There are always mistakes, setbacks everything happens so they*

have set up an unreal standard for romance and I don't really, they didn't affect my view on romantic relationships at all because I have had first-time experience and I have always been the person who learns from my own experience. I don't let any, any source let my point of view of something. I don't let my point of view be affected by anyone or anything so they didn't really affect me because that's the kind of person I am."

Participant B mentions how he has relied more on his own experiences instead of having the entertainment industry set a benchmark of how romance ought to be. This opinion is an interesting take on the findings. This may be due to the gender of the respondent being male which may have shaped his thinking pattern as a society, environment and education also play a role in how opinions are formed.



CHAPTER 5

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.

5.1 Discussion

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. Elizabeth England stated, “children’s media influences a child’s socialization process and the gendered information children view may have a direct effect on their cognitive understanding of gender and their behavior” (Morrison, 2014).

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).

From the responses by the research participants, there is a clear indication that the portrayals of gender roles in earlier Disney princesses in most cases have had an impact on the way they have viewed romance. However, other factors may have also played a role in their decision making like parental guidance, the environment they were raised in, educational and social construct, and gender being a few.

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.

5.2 Limitations of the study

One respondent did not watch any of the three enlisted Disney movies chosen for this study which may have not given an overall even and fairground in terms of the responses given by all. The answers may have come from a second-hand source, from what the respondent picked up from his surroundings, not firsthand knowledge from movies.

Due to the limitation in time, the research data were collected over a span of one month and it does not include an adequate ratio of male to female participants. The female respondents outnumbered the male respondents and hence there could be a lack of information received from the male respondents for findings.

Even though all the key respondents belonged to the same ethnic background, two of them were located outside of Bangladesh so their responses may have been influenced by their social and cultural surroundings.

5.3 Recommendation for future research

It would be beneficial to conduct future research that interviews a wider range of participants in terms of varied ethnicities to determine the perceived impact of Disney on a wider scale of audience members.

Another research could include participants of different age frames starting from children as old as four or five years old to adults in their mid-twenties.

Future research could also investigate the effects of Disney films on children of various economic backgrounds to understand the level of awareness between rural and urban masses to draw a comparative analysis of how socio-economic background plays a role in determining how children view Disney characters, portrayal of women and gender roles.

The research findings can be used by educators and guardians as a tool to initiate an open dialogue with young children to introduce the concept of gender roles, consent, and romance in front of them. The study can help them get a better grasp on how children exposed to 'safe' content such as Disney movies as one may think, may pose as a subtle hazard if children are not properly educated regarding the issues these movies have hidden behind their storylines.

This study may perhaps help parents determine if Disney princesses are a positive role model for their children and help them become more aware of how they address the movies and introduce them to their children.

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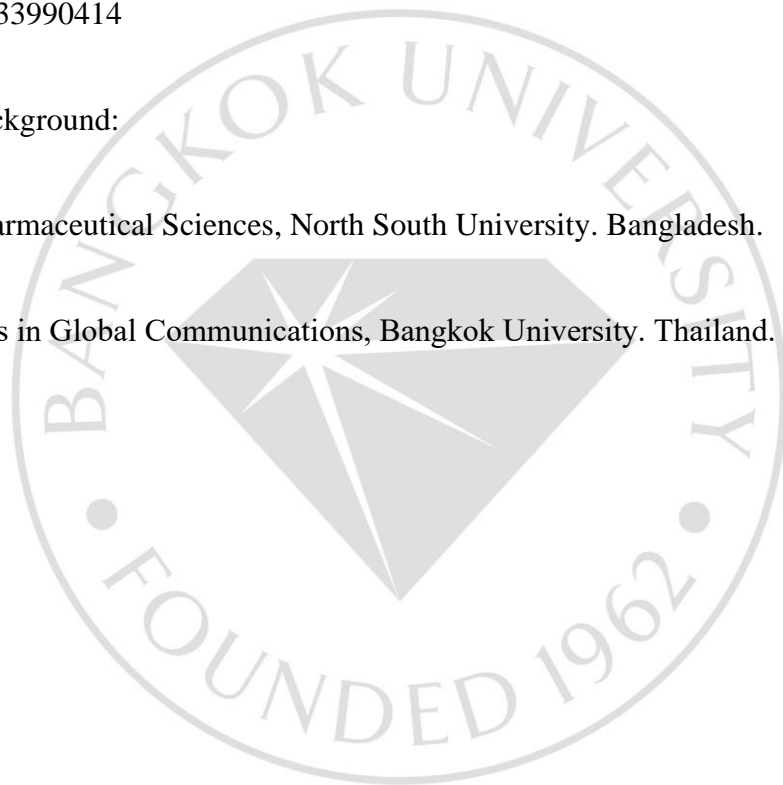
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