How do stereotypical portrayals of gender in films affect how audiences learn to see gender?

INTRODUCTION

As far back as the 1930's when cinema finally was becoming of age, the silver screen was dominated by macho male heroes like Johnny Weissmuller's Tarzan rescuing squealing damsels in distress like Maureen O'Sullivan's Jane. Generations of little girls have grown up watching such stories play out in movies as they wait for their own knight in shining armor to rescue them. As more recent movies portray more and more female heroes, we begin to question why the damsel ever existed? Their need for "rescue" aside, Hollywood's portrayal of so many female characters as frail, vain and catty often leaves little room for redeeming qualities. In the same way, boys are sent the message that they need to be tough and insensitive to achieve male status and respect as they complete daring acts of achievement and strength to maintain that status. Sadly, it seems that children's movies portray genders in such a narrow way that it is not surprising that so many young people today struggle with gender identity given that they, and the generations before them, have been shown only one definition of maleness or femininity with which they are expected to identify. When they do not seem to fit that mold, they often begin to question their own gender.

It is clear that movies use genderlect styles of communication to guide character interactions, but how does this affect the audience? More specifically, how do these stereotypical portrayals of gender in films affect how audiences learn to view gender? In analyzing the gender roles in Disney "Princess" movies, specifically *The Little Mermaid*, the way in which young children perceive genders can be analyzed. Furthermore, the way in which those perceptions impact their mind and lifestyle is also important to consider.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As the topic of gender has become more and more prevalent in today's society, there continues to be a growing number of studies that could be considered useful for looking into this question. Studies surrounding gender have branched out to looking at the cause as well as the power of perception, to the underlying messages communicated in things of everyday life.

A major area of study has been the role of gender in film, and the distinction between male and female characteristics. For the sake of our topic of study, we will focus on the role Disney has played in this distinction. Numerous studies examine the supposed Princess movies of Disney, but after observing their findings, it seems that they should really be referred to as Prince movies. This is because the importance placed upon the male characters in the films, even when built around a woman, staggeringly outweighs the significance of female characters, even the princess, herself. This is shown through the finding that the male characters are more prevalent and speak more than female characters. A study by Carmen Fought and Karen Eisenhauer discovered that female characters are given as little as one-third of the dialogue in Disney's Princess movies (Fought and Eisenhauer) than male characters. In fact, the infamous *Frozen*, a story of two princesses only has given female characters 41% of the dialogue.

Furthermore, the characteristics of the male and female characters create strict expectations for young viewers to place on their own gender and the gender of others. This is investigated in a study by England, Decartes, and Collier-Meek where they enumerated the characteristics of each gender that are present in every Disney Princess movie. The male characters are shown to be strong explorers and assertive, unemotional, athletic, independent, brave leaders who inspire fear in others. While, in contrast, the constant female characters are

shown as weak victims who are emotional, tentative and fearful. They are often ashamed nurturers who collapse in tears and continually ask for advice and help (England et al.). These characteristics paint a clear picture of what it means to be a man and woman in society according to Disney. To young impressionable minds, these repetitive characteristics are dangerous to their perception and consequently stifling to their own character development. Another area of study explores the impact of such defined gender roles on young and impressionable minds. It was argued by Giles, that once an audience assigns characteristics to fictional characters, those characters then are incorporated into the audiences' social reality and perceptions, (Giles). This applies to children as well, as they observe female characters such as Disney princesses exhibiting docile roles, who are shown to have a lower expectation regarding the ability of women to be effective leaders, (Kilbourne). Numerous studies have concluded that children internalize the messages provided to them through movies and television about masculinity and femininity. Other studies arguing that such gender stereotyping has a direct impact on the perception of behaviors such as the variety of social, educational, and vocational goals for young boys and girls. Additionally, these same stereotypes have a negative impact on the relationships and interactions between peers, as well as other general psychological health, (Bigler). The power of movies to imprint these stereotypes on young minds is great.

In the same study by England, it was observed that the child viewers of such movies are given consistent social script. Social scripts are the expected behaviors of society on an individual's actions, and behaviors. The love stories told to these children give them the social script that falling in love happens in a matter of days, if not at first sight, such as in the Disney's *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*. Additionally, falling in love happens against all odds such as in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, *Mulan*, as well as *The Princess and the Frog*. Or in some cases both scenarios, as couples fall in love quickly and against all odds, such as in Disney's *Cinderella*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin*, and *Pocahontas*, (England, et al.). These unhealthy and impractical love stories set up children for not only misunderstanding how people fall in love, but it also creates an unrealistic expectation of how they will fall in love, as well as simply carry themselves in life.

COMMUNICATION THEORY

The way in which genders are presented to children through movies and television is directly related to the way in which men and women supposedly communicate, before it becomes stereotypical. The way men and women communicate can best be analyzed by viewing them as two different cultural dialects, otherwise known as genderlects. The theory of genderlects builds around the idea that men and women have different preferred styles of communication, as well as goals of conversation.

Genderlect theory of communication has been studied in many direct and indirect ways. One study by Tannen (1990) synthesized the key differences of male and female language, in being that men communicate in a language of status and interdependence, while women communicate in a language of connection and intimacy, (Tannen 42). It is clear that these styles and goals of conversation are doomed to clash with one another, and therefore their communication can actually be considered different 'languages' which the communicators must work to translate.

Along with genderlect theory, there exist different approaches to the relationship between the two cross-cultural methods of communication. The first being the dominance approach, which interprets the differences in male and female language in terms of male dominance and female subordination, where men have the power and women are oppressed (Coates). A newer

approach is the difference approach, which sees a similar situation but sets it in different subcultures of which men and women are raised. These different realities they grow into tend to steer women in the direction of submissive roles, and men in the direction of dominant ones, (Saki).

In line with this idea of subcultural environments, Coates argues that women are socialized into believing that strongly asserting themselves is unladylike, and even masculine (Coates 116). In fact, Holmes' study suggests that polite means of communication is associated with female values and femininity, (Holmes). Girls are taught from a young age that they must comply with the expectation that women are cooperative and maintain good social standings. While men are taught that they should meet the expectation to be domineering in their means of communication, swearing, commanding, etc. (Saki). These non-standard communication characteristics are actually interpreted as manly. While the standard and polite communication characteristics, including compliments, hedges, questions, and overall emptiness is considered to be the way that a true lady speaks.

It is interesting that these true social cues seem so warped when you look at them for what they really are. While these stereotypes and norms of genderlect communication did not originate from movies, they certainly have an impact on the continuation of such norms. In fact, it is likely that movies serve as a medium for these stereotypes to be passed down through generations, keeping them from growing outside of these crushing constrains.

APPLICATION

For this topic of inquiry, looking into any of the Disney Princess movies would lend itself to valuable research, but for the sake of answering how gender roles in film impact people's way of thinking, *The Little Mermaid* will be analyzed. *The Little Mermaid* is a Disney Princess film that was released in 1989 and is considered to be a part of Disney's "Renaissance" era. The period of time between 1989 and 1998 saw the "rebirth" of Disney's success, following their box office slump. Films of this era included other movies such as *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, and *The Lion King* (Sanza). This Disney era was notably one of the biggest Hollywood turn arounds and owed it success to musical fairy-tale storytelling. *The Little Mermaid* was the start of this era and set the stage for the success to follow, as it earned over $84 million in the domestic box office during its initial release, and $211 million in worldwide since. Therefore, it is currently one of the most popular Disney princess movies ever and it is significant in the way it set the stage for the movies that followed.

The story of Ariel is often praised by critics who observe her as a modern heroine who speaks her mind, acts independently, and even rebels against the norms. However, to view Ariel as a Princess that speaks freely is ironic, this is because *The Little Mermaid* was the first of many Disney Princess movies that gave female characters less than half of the dialogue of the movie. Quite symbolically in the film, Ariel gives up her voice in order to be with the man she loves; the movie saw the grossly imbalanced gender dialogue where women had 29% of the dialogue whereas men had 71% (Fought and Eisenhauer). Moreover, this is sadly the highest female dialogue percentage of all the princess movies in Disney's "Renaissance" era. This example of outspoken women was not only widely popular among young children, but it was intended for their impressionable minds.

In addition to female characters being shown as less central to the story than men, the message these characters get across in their short time must be observed. In a study regarding the portrayal of gender in Disney Princess films, it was discovered that more than half of the

compliments female characters receive in these films are based on their appearances. In fact, only 11% of the compliments toward females are about their skills or accomplishments (Media Report to Women). It's a sad reality to recognize that the we have been communicating to children that women are only good for their looks. This message invokes body-image problems in girls starting at a very young age. Furthermore, it tells boys that women are only desirable to the 'prince' based on their looks. In the data from Fought and Eisenhauer's research, during the period of Disney's "Renaissance" era 38% of the compliments given to females were in regard to their looks, this shows improvement from the earlier 55%. However, the compliments regarding skill were still significantly lower, at 22% (Fought and Eisenhauer). While this data shows improvement, the importance placed on a woman's exterior is still prevalent as children continue to watch the classic princess films.

In *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel is shown to have the uncommon characteristics of rebelling against the norm, and even making decisions for herself. While these are great traits that Princesses should possess, the outcome of this decision becomes almost worse than if Ariel had done what was expected of her. This is because the driving desire behind her choices was to get to Eric and to obtain him as a husband. To do this, Ariel was not only willing to sacrifice her family, her home, and her identity, but her voice. In the film, Ariel makes a deal with Ursula to give up her voice in order to become a human, so she could meet Eric. The catch to this deal was that Ariel had only a certain number of days to obtain Eric's love, otherwise she would become a mermaid again, and belong to Ursula. This plotline quite literally shows young children that sacrificing yourself for the person you love is worth it, no matter the cost to your life. This unhealthy way of thinking is prevalent in some young girls today as they change who they are to please a boy to earn love and acceptance.

Moreover, the amount of male characters greatly outnumbers the female. Beyond just the main characters, the smaller roles, as well as all the nameless extra characters, are almost always of the male gender. This twisted version of reality where women do not exist, or have an impact on anyone or anything, is a sad story to be sharing with young children. For instance, it was reported in the study from Fought and Eisenhauer, that while *The Little Mermaid* pioneered a storyline with more characters, while the number of characters increased, so did the gender inequality. In fact, the number of male speaking roles in the film are nearly double that of women's (Fought and Eisenhauer). This imbalance is also prevalent in the 'sidekicks' of the princess. Just as in *Cinderella* where all of the mice were males, so as in *The Little Mermaid* all of her friends, Flounder, Sebastien, and Skuttle are all males. Furthermore, the portrayal of Sebastien makes a clear statement about gender roles. This is because in a scene where he is explaining to Ariel how to make Eric fall for her, he puts on a role of a "woman". In doing so, he is animated to have long eyelashes, which he batts dramatically, as well as big puckered lips. This performance of how a mute Ariel should make herself attractive in order to gain love shows not only an unhealthy body-image, but also spits in the eye of women. It would have been simple for the role of Sebastien to be written as a female. But in doing so, they would lose the tasteless joke, that belittles being a woman down to mere blinking.

Overall, it is interesting that there are no women in the film shown doing anything, other than trying to obtain a husband, except for the villain Ursula. Many studies have focused on the gender role of villains in Disney Princess movies, and a clear formula for the villain's gender role has been identified. In a study by Eisenhauer, it was observed that women are shown to be domestic and "lady-like", unless they are the villain. This communicated that being anything other than what is perceived as expectable is bad, and even evil. The character of the villain is

very controversial in having a queer-like characterization. Manly women, capable of leading and fighting for themselves, must then be evil; as that is how the villain Ursula is portrayed. Ursula's appearance of having short white hair, bright red lipstick, an overweight body, and a tight busty corset, creates a sharp contrast from Ariel's long red hair, and petite figure. In fact, Ursula's character was based on the popular Hollywood drag queen Divine, further adding to her deceptively female "illusion". When young children see Ursula and other villains, being portrayed in gender transgression, they are more likely to develop a lasting negative connotations with non-stereotypical gender behavior.

CONCLUSION

These gender roles being presented to young children in the intensity created by Disney Princess films must have an impact on their perceptions of gender. Young and developing brains are like sponges that soak up the world around them and all the information presented to them. Moreover, children inherently trusting of others, do not question what they see. So, when they see genders presented as in *The Little Mermaid*, it will inevitably impact their opinion of what it means to be a male or female.

The power of gender identities goes beyond a sex, but incorporates behavior, as well as the way we see ourselves, and the way we interact and relate to others. In this way, it was discovered in a study by Thompson and Zerbinos, that children who recognize gender stereotypes in animated films had similar expectations of gender as relating to themselves and others (Thompson and Zerbinos). Furthermore, gender roles and treatment of females constantly portrayed are likely to become seen as normal by children. These norms connect with their concepts of social behavior and morality in what is seen as expectable or expected.

When children watch a film like *The Little Mermaid*, a film still popular today, and they identify Ariel as a role model, especially for young girls, they fall into the trap of stereotypes. For example, when they observe Ariel quite literally giving up her voice for love, they are all the more likely to end up in a relationship, romantic or otherwise, that squash who they are. After emulating Ariel, they are in danger of following in her footsteps in the ways her character was created to revolve around men, no matter the cost to her or even her safety. In a study by Bresnahan, it was identified that children internalize messages of masculinity and femininity as they see models in the media around them (Bresnahan). Subconscious messages hold a large amount of power over children, in the way they will carry themselves, and what they expect from others based on gender. It is concerning how the gender stereotypes don't have to be taught to people, it is integrated in everyone's mind that men are strong leaders, and women are beautiful, helpless damsels in need of love and rescuing. These perceptions are presented to everyone in the same way, through films and media, such as in Disney Princess films that have continued to be widely popular amongst both girls and boys since they were created back in 1950.

This is why this matter of the gender stereotypes portrayed in children's films is so vital to be aware of in order to guard young minds from such damning perceptions. While throwing out movies, especially one as widely popular and merchandised as *The Little Mermaid*, is perhaps not a realistic goal, there are ways to protect young minds before they form their own way of thinking. I think that perhaps the way to go forward, in a society so run by gender roles, it would be perhaps very beneficial to present more gender equal films to children, to at least combat the reality seen in other films. Moreover, taking the time to talk to children about what they have seen and perhaps subconsciously identified as truths is an effective way to challenge the stereotypical ideas directly.

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