

An Argument on Disney and Psychological Development

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Abstract

Through the voices of literature and research, this argument discusses the ethical implications Disney imposes on the psychological development of children across the whole of society. As children are consistently exposed to media, advertisements and film, the simplicity of what once was entertainment, has now taken on a drastic profile of that of an educator. Sources, including those of Bell, Haas, and Sells, (1995), Giroux (2010), and Strasburger, Wilson, and Jordan, (2014), stand behind the firm disposition that Disney educates children when it comes to identity administration, gender performance, and racial stereotypes, thus shaping society as a whole. Beginning with an intense review of term definition, event causation, and source evaluation, this analysis will lead into a thought provoking argument that will provide an insight into the powerful pedagogy of Disney, and how it affects a child's psychological development when it comes to growth, play and even self-identity.

The essence of Disney magic has taken flight on the wings of magic carpets and broom sticks, and has been able to spread their influence upon the whole of society and its youth. With something as simple as faith, trust, and pixie dust, innocence has been exploited, as the definition of childhood entertainment has evolved into one of childhood education (Giroux, 2010). Thus, the pedagogy of Disney has formulated on the boundaries of ethicality, as children are consistently exposed to the mass manipulation of the massive media conglomerate and the power it holds (Bell, Haas, & Sells, 1995). The literature is frustrated about this topic, as sources including those of Ajayi (2011), Lugo, (2009), and Wohlwend (2012), claim that digital entertainment gives a child insight on how to behave sexually, how to perform gender roles, what class distribution is, and teaches so many more cultural values that are essential to a child's life and growth. The psychological effects are insurmountable when it comes to how Disney affects childhood development on the bases of growth, play and identity administration, and should be critically evaluated by viewers, parents, and teachers alike (Bell et al., 1995; Giroux, 2011; Tonn, 2008). By exploring these topics through the voices of literature, an argument will be reached and debated when it comes to the powerful pedagogy Disney implements within development, and how specifically it is executed in the classroom, among the most relevant of places.

Literature Review: Definition Section

The definition of childhood entertainment has adapted and reformed throughout the years of civilization, as technology rises, society standards shift, and entertainment changes (Strasburger, Wilson, & Jordan, 2014). While previous generations have been raised without common terms like television or Google, a newer age has been directed to the aura of consumerism and entertainment, as children are constantly learning from mass media sources (Collier, 2014; Giroux, 2010; Strasburger et al., 2014). An issue has thus begun, where innocence and happenstance collide on the terms of ethicality, as instances of gender roles, race stereotypes, and sexuality have subliminally made themselves a part of the definition of Disney (Ajayi, 2011; Giroux 2010; Lugo, 2009;

Wohlwend 2012). Through definition, the psychological effects Disney has on children in regards to growth, play and self will be explored.

Growth

According to Schaefer & DiGeronimo (2000), there are five areas of growth across age groups, which include 1) emotional health, 2) cognitive development, 3) family and peer relationships, 4) personal growth, and 5) character formation. Popular culture is one of the most prevalent sources of pedagogical information a child can receive, giving an insight into what is the standard social norm at the time, creating “a sociocultural framing of identity construction” (Collier, 2014, p.4). One of the aspects of identity, or sense of self, is that of gender. As cited in Hunnington (2013), children develop a sense of gender identity and the characteristics that distinguish male and female between ages 3 and 5. Femininity and masculinity are demonstrated based on the capability to distinguish gender profiles by practices, materials and speech and is something that is never fixed, but is a consistent political, cultural struggle (Wohlwend, 2012; Ajayi, 2011).

Play

Another aspect that is fundamental to psychological development is imagination. Play is found on the basis of creativity itself, defined as “a psychological process that involves the generation of new ideas and derives functionality from ideas that are potentially practical,” and is an aspect that is highly critical to a growing human being (Hill 2012). A child’s ability to play is one of the most vital resources for psychological growth and even deemed as a “profound biological process” (Brown & Vaughan, 2009, p.5). An issue arises again, when children formulate ideas on how they should play, imitating the characters and stories they’ve seen on a screen, becoming the person and not building upon themselves (Tonn, 2008). According to Wohlwend (2012), Disney teaches children how to play like a princess, how to rescue like a prince, and how to intimidate like a villain, taking on the gender construction of either extreme masculinity or emphasized femininity. While these representations aren’t necessarily a negative premise, they often inhibit the creativity of the imagination, as children practice the gender agents they have adopted (Wohlwend, 2012). It structures play in a way that strips away the ability to think independently and, instead, rely on a preexisting source that is circulating through popular culture and media (Wohlwend 2012).

The Discourse of Self

Memories of magic carpets and glass slippers create something magical within the essence of childhood and often define the very life period itself. However, “These cartoon visions ... make crucial contributions to our most important discourses of the self” (Bell et al., p.86), and can even go so far as create an identity for a person. A sense of identity can be categorized as a “self-constructed dynamic organization of drives, abilities, beliefs, and personal history into a coherent and autonomous self that guides the unfolding of one's adult life course” (Montgomery, 2005, p. 347). A cultural identity can be defined as an individual’s background and behaviors, a combination of values, morals, and history (Ajayi, 2011). Disney films interject “stereotypical ‘messages’ about race, class, and gender,” and teach our children “how to ‘be’” (Bell et al., 1995, p.103). As the media has invited itself into the very development of childhood as it stands today, the question must become, ultimately, who is to become the prominent educator in children’s lives if not the parent or the school? (Sun & Picker, 2002).

Literature Review: Causal Section

The mysticism of Disney magic has swept itself into the everyday lives of society throughout its existence, consistently formulating a monolithic discourse of individualized, pop culture (Lugo, 2009). Today, children are constantly immersed in this idea of Disney Culture, and have become subject to the pedagogy of social standards that Disney exploits (Giroux, 2010; Sun & Picker 2002). The causation behind this cultural profile that Disney employs, is discovered once the layers of magic have been exposed, revealing the corporate character who has manifested the idea of innocence and is motivated solely by profit (Sun & Picker, 2002). What once was Walt, a man who created films to celebrate the talents of storytelling through technology, is now a powerhouse, fueled by the perfect, idealistic audience: children (Bell et al., 1995). The Disney Corporation has made its mark on society through the tools of advertising, marketing, and media, targeting children and ultimately shaping them on the basis of psychological growth, play, and thought (Bazzini, Curtin, Joslin, Regan, & Martz, 2010; Giroux, 2011; Marketing to Children Overview. n.d.).

Marketing: Pursuing the Perfect Audience

Disney has transformed the industry of childhood entertainment into a force of education implementing values and social structures that shape the very basis of childhood imagination (Giroux, 2010). Through strategic commercialization, Disney has formulated the ideal execution to turn children into the perfect consumers, a process which stands as a major reason for the mass influence Disney holds today through merchandise, videos, and advertising (McLean, 1998; Tonn 2008). Through vulnerability and malleability, children become the idealistic consumer, as their hearts are open, and their sense of loyalty is unflinching (McLean, 1998). In effort to reach these minds, Disney has employed researchers, marketers and advertisers to work with experts in the field of child psychology to understand how to effectively target their culture, develop marketing material that is both appealing and successful, and ultimately define the needs and desires of the youth market (Giroux, 2010). With this power behind them, Disney has become one of the most prevalent educators of its time, educating children how to express cultural notions of race, gender, sexuality, and ultimately, a discourse of the self (Ajayi, 2011).

Growth: How Disney Affects the Stages of Development

Psychological development is crucial to thriving intellectually in our world, and children grow based on how they perceive the world around them. Modern day, mass media is an element where children gain knowledge and expertise, and ultimately form an identity for themselves (Collier 2014). The area of growth is such a malleable experience, as young children possess a very small frame of reference, learning from specific instances and experiences, unlike the abstract knowledge of adults (Tonn, 2008). Disney gives causation for how to feel, think, belong, aspire, and be (Bell et al., 1995; Giroux, 2010). Media goes even further to impact a child, as it has been linked to issues like obesity, eating disorders, advanced sexual displays, violence, family stress, and an incapacitated ability to create (Marketing to Children Overview, n.d.).

Play: How Disney Creates Imagination

The life that Disney breathes into the minds of our youth often serves as a fabricated sense of creativity. Disney play teaches children how to construct an identity, and build an understanding of what it means to be either feminine or masculine (Wohlwend, 2012). According to Cochrane (2006), in the 1970s, parents often tried to avoid gendered toys, like Barbie and Superman, in effort to allow their children to develop naturally. However, throughout the years, play has been constructed by media. Girls are taught to play princesses and dolls while boys are taught how to play

heroes, interested in weaponry and battles, as portrayed by their animated role models on the screen (Wohlwend, 2012; Cochrane, 2006). In fact, observational learning is one of the most prominent skills in a child's frame of reference, and they employ what they see and hear throughout not only their play, but their social learning as a whole (Tonn, 2008).

Self: How Disney Administers Identity

Individuals are defined by their identities, which "are like narratives and are constantly constructed and re-constructed," through what individuals are exposed to within their culture (Collier, 2014. p.4). Children are taught through popular culture how to maneuver amongst race and sexuality, how to *do gender*, and what it means to create a sense of self (Bell et al., 1995; Lugo, 2009; Wohlwend, 2012). Society demands an identity of children, and Disney serves as an important tool for learning how to "operate within the socio-cultural and historical framework in America," (Ajayi, 2011, p.401). When children try to understand what it means to formulate their identity, they look at the most dramatic images they can see as a reference, which most often comes from the childhood entertainment producers prevalent in today's society (Hunnington, 2013; Sun & Picker, 2002).

Literature Review: Evaluation Section

Disney has become a hazard in today's society, according to Sun & Picker (2002), as it has become an underlying source of education that administers identity construction, gender performance, cultural functioning, and so many more essential values a child needs to thrive (Ajayi, 2011; Giroux, 2010; Wohlwend, 2012). Literature has continually expressed their criticism with this matter, as sources across their expertise claim that Disney, in its iconic light of fame, has commercialized and transformed the learning space for young minds, and serves as one of the most significant contributors for a child's discourse of self (Ajayi, 2011; Bazzini et al., 2010; Bell et al., 1995; Giroux 2010).

Evaluating the Effects & Motivation

The force of Disney has been made known to affect the psychological development of children throughout many areas of growth, and as Bell, Haas, and Sells (1995) make the observation that, "If Disney corpus can be seen as peddling a pedagogy of innocence, perhaps one of the most telling lessons it sells us is that of gender, bodies, sexuality, and desire" (p. 155-156). Sources, as cited within the works of Ajayi (2011) Lugo (2009) and Wohlwend (2012) agree with this note, claiming that Disney implements various social teachings that provide a child with tools on how to operate within current society, ranging from race to sexual promiscuity, from language to stereotypes. The case is also made that Disney instills an important social stereotype that *what is beautiful is good* and that children passionately adopt this perspective, according to Bazzini (et al, 2010). Causation for the specific stereotypes seen in Disney movies can be connected directly to their creator, as source Tonn (2008) makes the association that Walt's personal life affected his films greatly, especially when it came to what roles women should play in society and how essential it is to have a male dominant society.

Opinions concerning Disney's purpose are punitively centered about superficial, monetary values. Giroux (2011) states that it is painfully obvious that Disney's only purpose is to capture the attention of the youth and imprison them as loyal consumers. He also titles Disney as a symbol of capitalist consumerism (Giroux 2011). 2001 Disney CEO Michael Eisner states, as cited in Sun & Picker (2002), that the company has no moral obligation to create history, art, or educational statements. Their only goal is to make a profit. This has become an issue across literature, as there is a large amount of evidence identifying children's exposure and reliance on media and advertising

sources, serving as an outlet for social learning (Bazzini et al., 2010). Children start to learn to imitate the social behavior of those they see and admire, which can be detrimental when the company producing these fantastical role models does not have an interest in educating behavior.

Argument

As Disney distributes its messages to thousands of children, the psychological effects are overwhelming when it comes to how this powerful conglomerate affects children's social values and should be something that is taken into ethical consideration by viewers and producers alike. Sources of Bell et al., (1995), Giroux (2010), and Strasburger et al., (2014), stand behind the firm disposition that Disney socially educates children through identity construction, gender performance, and racial stereotypes, thus affecting society as a whole. As children learn through these practices, these themes are instilled within them as they grow, to be later implemented within their own children. Through a scrutinized examination within the modern literature, an argument is thus constructed within the evaluation of how impressively pervasive the magic of Disney truly is, how their impact is felt within a child's environment itself, and what to do about this prevalent issue in society today.

The Issue: Innocence Colliding with Ethicality

The fantastical essence of Disney has been transformed, transmogrified by child and adult alike, into a glorious representation of an enchanted carriage, parading away with its passenger into another realm where the problems of their prior world vanish without a second thought. The masterpiece of this Disney magic takes on the appearance of such an allusion, hiding what is truly underneath: a picked pumpkin, ripening in an ignorant state. Disney has become a sanitizer: full of innuendos and social screenings that are hidden beneath ball gowns and glass slippers, only to reveal themselves when the clock strikes midnight. Unfortunately, today's society has found itself caught in a vortex of timelessness, where midnight is never reached. It is in this cycle, where the society of our youth finds itself in an endless circulation of social teachings.

This issue has captivated the whole of the literature, as researchers, journalists, and authors overwhelmingly state that Disney has cast a spell, exposing children to a way of life that is polluted with strict gender constructs, identity formation, racial questions, and so much more. This is a problem that touches the lives of the entire population, as children evolve into a future generation that will, one day, be responsible for the structure of society. If our children are administering themselves through themes of Disney film, they will lead society with the same. Presently, young girls are being taught to not only cater to men through *Snow White* and *Beauty and the Beast* but to win their affection through their bodies through *The Little Mermaid*. Young boys are taught to play the part of a determined hero through *Hercules*. Children are being taught to affiliate African American voices with voices of the crows in *Dumbo*, the monkeys in the *Jungle Book*, the gorillas in *Tarzan*, and the hyenas in *The Lion King*, associating them with lower animals and not individuals. They are also being taught historical inaccuracies through the misrepresentations of *Pocahontas* and cultural stereotypes through *Aladdin* and *Mulan*. All of these instances, children mindlessly adopt these cultural values and relay them into their relationships, their learning, and their identity as a whole.

These effects of Disney's development administration have been felt across volumes within the scholarly world. However, when this issue is presented into a place where children thrive, grow and learn through their environment, the problematic weight of Disney media is refuted and irrelevant. Thus, we are left with an ultimate question; who is educating our children? Is it their schools, their teachers, their parents? Or is it, like the literature avidly claims, Disney that is the educator through childhood entertainment?

Disney in the Classroom

When I presented a variety of questions via interview, educators ranging from preschool to elementary school, to middle school, responded surprisingly to the claim that Disney negatively educates our children by means of growth, play, and individuality. The overall consensus stood firmly in the mindset that media is a major educator in a child's world. However, many teachers claim that Disney plays a minor role in socially educating their students, and that, if anything, Disney provided children with an important sense of creativity, imagination and fantasy. Teachers had thoughtful insight to offer me when given questions in regards to media-linked behavior, gender roles, cultural and self-view, and how strongly they feel about media being a primary educator.

When discussing how often students display media related behavior, the noted occurrences were much higher when dealing with a younger age group, with children aging from two to five years of age. An interviewed preschool teacher was passionate about how often young girls were consistently seen imitating, acting, and even disputing over the roles of Anna and Elsa, from the 2013, explosive film, *Frozen*, stating that this psychological occurrence has become something nearly obsessive on a daily basis in the classroom. While literature fervently attacks this method of play, as source Wohlwend (2012) claims that this sort of acting strips a child's ability to create, many teachers argue that this sort of dramatic play gives a child the imagination that they wouldn't have otherwise. An elementary school teacher that I interviewed claims that Disney is one of the few sources of entertainment that allows kids to be kids, and gives children not only an escape, but courage to write their own stories and pave their own path of self-discovery. However, when discussing kids at the middle school level, the involvement of the media was much more influential. A teacher described how often children behave in accordance to what they see in popular, non-Disney music videos and movies, romanticizing violence, drugs, and misogynistic behavior.

Gender roles are some of the most distinct character traits a child adopts as they grow through the life process. Given this, teachers definitely see the affect Disney has on young minds in this area, as they take on the characters of princesses and princes, and believe that true love's kiss is the solution to fix all problems. A middle school teacher attests to this, as young girls fantasize about falling in immediate love, and dream of looking like a princess on their wedding day. Beauty became of particular interest, when the teacher gave this account:

Surprisingly, I let kids vote on Disney movies to watch as a reward in class one day and the majority of the boys voted for *The Little Mermaid*. When I expressed my surprise at this and asked why, they said it was because she only wore shells and one boy even said he thought she was "hot". It was interesting to me that the males in the class were most fond of this movie from their childhood because of the female role.

Instances such as these, serve as critical insight to how beauty and gender roles are portrayed and received by females and males alike.

Another critical aspect to a child's psychological development is how a child forms friendships, racial-views, and conducts self-evaluations. Throughout the age groups, teachers were unsure if Disney was a major factor in how a child formed friendships. However, it can be said that girls spend their time with girls, and boys with boys, especially at young ages. When discussing Lugo's (2009) argument, stating that Disney implements racial views in a child's perspective, the hypothesis was overwhelmingly refuted working with young children. However, when working with middle school kids, racism becomes a part of their discourse. This became evident when discussing the *Princess and the Frog*, as students claimed that the movie was only made to feature a black princess. Teachers also claim that Disney makes an impact upon individuals' self-views. The point was noted that the main characters are never unattractive, poor, or overweight, which gives the children an unrealistic mindset for who they are supposed to be, regardless of gender. It also was said that

Disney tells girls that, in order to be worthy of anything they have to endure a struggle, as in *Tangled*, where Rapunzel has to physically and emotionally separate herself from her mother before realizing her true value. Finally, at the end of that road, the reward of true love, getting married as a teenager, and happily ever after awaits them.

Finally, a consensus was made among the preschool and elementary teachers, claiming that a child's environment is the primary educator. Children learn the most from their parents, their teachers, and their classmates, and not as much from the media. However, there is still an underlying issue with childhood entertainment, as teachers argued that parents often use the television as a babysitter, and don't take the time to filter what their child absorbs. Another issue is that Disney has upped the rating on their movies, changing their films from G, to PG, and even PG-13. Teachers are often frustrated with this, as they can't even show the films in class, due to adult humor and innuendoes that cause the film to no longer be age appropriate. As children grow older, however, the more influential the media becomes. A middle school teacher reports that children are much more responsive and interested when a lesson is related to something in the media. When using contemporary elements to back up her lessons, her students have proven to consistently score higher on exams. The agreement was made by each teacher, however, that children constantly and subliminally, absorb media. They claim that it is the job of the parent and the teachers to encourage kids to be careful of what they see and hear.

Proposal

While this issue of childhood entertainment education is problematized on different levels, by scholars to educators to individuals, the matter still stands that Disney induces a stage, featuring emphasized gender personas, explicit sexual messages, and questionable relationship administration. All of these elements contribute to a sense of self within a young, growing mind. Regardless of the variation of opinion, Disney is a subliminal educator and displays cultural messages that teach children how to function in society, how they should look, how they should act, and ultimately, how they develop. Thus, an issue is present, and a solution lay just beyond the horizon. Childhood entertainment educators should be held to a higher standard of accountability for the social teachers that they are.

The issue of education is presented whenever there are children involved, as they have such malleable minds. Giroux, as cited in Sun & Picker (2002) implicates that Disney has the capability to distribute their messages to millions of children, and it is with this power, Giroux demands, that the company be accountable for such influence. Our educators need to be held to a standard of education combined with entertainment. When proposed with this solution, the teachers who I surveyed responded with complete enthusiasm, agreeing with the note that Disney has the power to be educational. However, as Giroux sadly stated, in (2010), we shouldn't wait on the edge of our seats for Disney to act, for profit through entertainment will always weigh in heavier than ethicality through education. Now, throughout all the research, literature, and argumentation about the issue at hand, it is time for a resolution to be initiated.

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