The Feminine Mystique According to Disney: A Defense for Better Media

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Abstract

The following stasis map explores the presentation of female gender roles through the famous Disney story-telling magic and the effect that these social constructions have on children's perception of gender and sex. Upon reading this paper, the intention will result in the examination of references in order to assess whether or not Disney's presentation of gender roles is beneficial or detrimental for children. In order to accurately evaluate and understand the scope of Disney's influence on and creation of the female construct, this paper will pull information and evidence from a wide-range of academic and popular sources. From these resources, a discussion regarding Disney's emotional and innocent appeal to young girls will create an outlook of understanding pedagogy and what youth culture sells to children.

Through Disney's control over children's media and public pedagogy, the limiting and restrictive portrayals of women ultimately have a detrimental influence on child-development and the interpretation of gender roles to which children are subjected. References, such as Mouse to Mermaid and personal communication with C. Bell, create a well-rounded definition of pedagogy and various constructions of what it means to be a woman according to the Disney Corporation. In addition, "Gender role portrayal and the Disney princesses" by England et al. as well as "Gender roles in Disney films: Analyzing behaviors from Snow White to Simba" by Hoerrner, examine the ultimate, harmful effects of Disney, as the company represents a teacher of gender roles and social norms to children.

Literature Review

Most define Disney as a happy childhood memory that continues to live with them in favorite fairytales, characters, and songs, but fail to question the immense power this media has over the public's memories (Sun & Picker, 2002). The Walt Disney Company has an international influence and is famous for their films depicting childhood stories and innocence (Sandoval, 2014). From this influence, the company has an acute talent for manipulating its consumers into buying on its sociopolitical ideologies (E. Bell, Haas, & Sells, 1995; Sun & Picker, 2002). In order to understand the treatment of female characters in particular, a critical look at the gendered stereotypes in animated films must be taken into account (Moldagulova, 2013). In 2001, the Disney Corporation made a marketing campaign, the Disney Princess line, with the goal to advertise to girls and encourage them to identify and create bonds with their princess role models (England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011). When identifying these role models, a gendered worldview set up by Disney represents a reiteration of social norms that are fed to children in the pursuit of attaining money (Hoerrner, 1996). The pedagogy and distribution of the Disney ideologies, through children's movies, television, and merchandise, in assets such as Pixar Animation, Marvel Entertainment, ESPN, and theABC Television Network, centered on gender, create a widespread and well-developed influence over the media and those who absorb the images the corporation deems popular (C. Bell, personal communication, March 6, 2015).

With the Disney Corporation's incredible influence over youth culture, the company controls the depictions of gender roles, which, when internalized, affects child development and the lessons of social norms. Gender stereotypes and roles are designated by Disney as limited rules of traditional femininity that is reiterated through and mirrored after popular culture (Baker-Sperry, 2007). Accordingly, Disney's portrayal of gender stereotypes not only affects a child's perception of social norms through consumer culture and peer interaction but also play key roles in this

developmental process of creating an identity (England et al., 2011). This power that the Disney Corporation holds over a child's understanding and development of gender norms, is ultimately limiting and injurious (Wasko, 2001), as Disney teaches girls to act as the damsel in distress.

Definitions: Disney and its Women

From a consistent media culture centered on gendering, Disney contributes to reinforcing gender roles through differentiation in manner, body-types, and stereotypes that define what it means to be a girl or a boy. Media, in this sense, is the means of transportation, by which social norms are conveyed and reinforced to its target audience (Baker-Sperry, 2007; Sandoval, 2014). Through media consumerism and public pedagogy (E. Bell et al., 1995), the definition of girlhood is borne through the princess manner and body type (England et al., 2011). The stories and characters created by the Disney Corporation serve as prototypes not only for selling merchandise, but also for creating role models for children (Sandoval, 2014). Defined by Roof (2007), gender roles represent sets of socially or culturally delineated manners that are generally expressed by the gender binary code set up by biological sex (England et al., 2011). In turn, gender is defined by a multitude of societal factors such as the media (Sandoval, 2014).

The social roles presented by Disney media embody the gendered stereotypes, which negatively affect how children learn and eventually perform gender (C. Bell, personal communication, March 6, 2015; England et al., 2011). Ultimately, with such a construction, female characters gain their worth in life and function through: their male counterparts, idealized feminine beauty, and a youth-culture fixation (Ma, 2008). Therefore, with overlapping sexuo-political messages and gendered identities presented by Disney, women are pigeon-holed into three limiting character-types, which translates into a female's worth based on age, beauty, and womanhood (E. Bell et al., 1995).

Becoming a woman requires a certain finesse, a set plan that keeps up with natural gender norms, and eventually defines identity (C. Bell, personal communication, March 6, 2015; E. Bell et al., 1995). Through Disney's characters then, if and only if, the gender is properly performed, then, the woman is allowed humanization (E. Bell, et al., 1995; England et al., 2011). The requirements for female Disney characters are as follows: the graceful, youthful and peaked in pubescence princess, the sexually-peaked, enticing and powerful villainess, and the sacrificial, comical and loving godmother (E. Bell, et al., 1995). Examples of the characters whom fit so neatly within these feminine categories can be acquired from *Sleeping Beauty* alone, as Aroura, Maleficent, and the three fairies, Flora, Fauna and Merriweather, exemplify the roles and characteristics listed above. Within these three categories, little room exists to create divergent and empowered female characters for a young audience to identify with (Wohlwend, 2009; Stover, 2012). Squandered beneath these roles, women and girls alike internalize these images of femininity and translate them into the proper ways to think and imagine sexuality, female subsistence, and womanhood (Limback, 2013).

In many cases, princess films appear to celebrate the female characters, which sets up gender as a culturally contrived production based on essentialist codes of biological sex (Limback, 2013; Quynn, 2007). The princesses, presented at the peak of their development and beauty, fulfills a social vitality that must be learned (Limback 2013). As Quynn (2007) disputes, people are taught *appropriate* gender roles through enculturation, which is emphasized and bolstered by the media (C. Bell, personal communication, March 6, 2015). This process of interpretive socialization is affirmed by peer culture and social interactions sanction children to learn the so-called rules of the social groups they inhabit (Baker-Sperry, 2007). The worth of these princesses then, lies specifically within her youthful beauty and behavior (E. Bell, et al., 1995), and as Disney sells it, passivity is inherently femininity (Cochrane, 2006; Stover, 2012). When presenting the villainesses however, these middle-aged evil-doers are at the peak of their sexual maturity and overall power (E. Bell, et al., 1995). In

terms of female gender roles, power is ultimately seen as the woman's downfall, (Limback, 2013) demonstrated in the character of Lady Tremaine in *Cinderella*, Mother Gothel in *Tangled*, or Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty*. From the presentation of the gracious godmothers then, the appeal and value of the godmothers lies within their sacrifice as motherly figures for the princess (E. Bell et al., 1995), therefore fulfilling the appropriate gender role while creating the necessity of motherhood in femininity (Stover, 2012). The traits that construct women in Disney films ultimately work against them (England et al., 2011) to objectify and limit them as characters (Cochrane, 2006). In addition, this timeline that Disney creates is a three-stage set up for overall female development and implies worth of them as women (E. Bell, et al., 1995). Girls and women are therefore provided with these stereotypes and internalize the importance of the youthful body, the danger of having too much power, and the motherly duty they must contribute (E. Bell et al., 1995; Wohlwend, 2009).

Disney's Effect on Children

   A child's perception and internalization of gender norms stems from a pedagogy focused on teaching social roles, peer interaction and play, as well as marketing the famous Disney innocence. From the creation of gender roles through media consumerism and public pedagogy (E. Bell et al., 1995), the definition of girlhood is conveyed through the princess manner and body type (England et al., 2011). Peer culture, for example, can affect how the media divulges knowledge about gender, by influencing social participation and preservation of the social norms in daily life (Baker-Sperry, 2007). These gender role portrayals by Disney provide implications to an international audience; therefore, children all over the world absorb these messages (England et al., 2011). In fact, norms created from these images are exceedingly gendered (E. Bell et al., 1995), which means young and impressionable kids are molded by the movies and merchandise that only expose children to a limited scope of gender roles (Cochrane, 2006). Traditional gender roles exhibited by Disney princesses, including the fulfillment of the homemaker role, seeking a prince, and holding their appearance above all else, are entrenched within these films (C. Bell, personal communication, March 6, 2015). In effect, a child's response to the presentation of these social behaviors, leads to interpretive duplication by participating in and getting rewarded for performing the appropriate gender roles from Disney fairy-tales (Baker-Sperry, 2007; Sun & Picker, 2002). The strict gender roles, which children reenact, are rewarded through social acceptance; however, once children deviate from proper expressions of gender, for example a girl getting her dress dirty, they are scolded for breaking from these roles. Through the powerful ideology and social popularity that is Disney (E. Bell et al., 1995), young girls, for example, are encouraged to look up to and imitate their dear heroines (Cochrane, 2006).

   Through a mix of peer culture and Disney pedagogy (E. Bell et al., 1995), children conceptualize appropriate social behavior surrounding gender roles by assuming the images and meanings of popular media (Baker-Sperry, 2007). For example, since Disney heroines, in most of their classic films, are presented as utterly incapable of solving their own problems, these characters are portrayed as the inferior gender (Hoerrner, 1996); therefore, Disney creates a dialectic cycle by manipulating character portrayal, marketing their products, and finally the translating character portrayal into everyday life (England et al., 2011). In addition, *Disneyfication*, affects the images which children are exposed to by censoring or devoicing the corruption of innocence in Disney films (C. Bell, personal communication, 2015; Moldagulova, 2013). Therefore, as Disney hides behind its innocence, children and families believe Disney is free from corruption, harmful stereotypes, and lack a negative impact on children (E. Bell et al., 1995). Generally, the traditional gender roles Disney constructs consist of: the courageous, unemotional, intelligent, and independent masculine behaviors exemplified in Hercules' character, in contrast to the nurturing, emotional, fearful, wearisome, and submissive feminine behaviors demonstrated by Belle's character in *Beauty and the*

Beast (England et al., 2011; Hoerrner, 1996). According the Wholwend (2009), the list goes on and on, creating a highly stereotypical representation that is limited to two categories in which children try to fit themselves. In turn, Disney female characters are generously victimized through the *natural* feminine characteristics (England et al., 2011), that young girls associate with true womanhood (Hoerrner, 2006).

Equally important, the way gender is branded (England et al., 2011), and sold to girls, is marketed to them at such a young age that it is nearly impossible to keep children away from that influence (Cochrane, 2006). This negative influence appears to be imperceptible, so parents and children are ignorant to the ever-present exposure of media (C. Bell, personal communication, March 6, 2015). Therefore, Disney represents an omnipotent, yet seemingly harmless cultural symbol, practically a rightful part of childhood (Moldagulova, 2013). In addition, the Disney construct (C. Bell, personal communication, March 6, 2015), suggests that the gender role portrayals influence child perceptions and comprehension surrounding gender norms and correct social conduct (England et al., 2011). The construct then allows Disney to create the social norms to which children react and reenact into social life (Sun & Picker, 2002). This leads to coding the behavior of character portrayals as a source for gendered messages within a child's socialization process (England et al., 2011). Since Disney fully represents innocence (C. Bell, personal communication, March 6, 2015; E. Bell et al., 1995), this money-making machine develops its beloved characters as a part of the child's entire world, in turn allowing girls to relate and emulate the stereotyped manners (Hoerrner, 1996), displayed by their meek, helpless, and beautiful heroines (England et al., 2011). As a result, the lesson that girls learn from the many popular Disney films is simply that women must be dependent on men to survive (Moldagulova, 2013). Regardless of who the target consumer is, Disney takes advantage of these stereotypes in order to sell their products to children and their parents under the guise of innocent fairytales (Cochrane, 2006). The rigid expectations and roles presented by Disney films become a reality through the processes of internalization and primacy concerning gender; therefore, children do not have the luxury of social freedom (Baker-Sperry, 2007), especially when they are attempting to imitate their role models (Hoerrner, 1996). The cause of internalization and interpretation is that the process of gendering is completely a social one (Baker-Sperry, 2007). In effect, Disney limits what it means to be girl and boy (Baker-Sperry, 2007), in order to exploit consumer reaction and cash-in on the construction of social norms (Sandoval, 2014).

Evaluation: Good or Evil, the Question of Disney

The effects of pedagogy and peer culture, which stem from an ever-changing cultural bias, are overwhelmingly damaging and prejudicial when it comes to the recurring, negative stereotypes of female Disney characters that young girls and boys alike interpret into their everyday lives. Starting in the 1980s and lasting through 2000, the princess campaign rewrote a formula for the Disney brand as a commercial and creative goldmine (Pickett, 2013). Gendered images, measured across Disney princess films beginning in 1937 with *Snow White*, rarely evolve with the changing social standards of women in society (Wasko, 2001). From the early Disney princess films based entirely from Grimm Brother's Fairytales, the Disney Corporation continued on to produce the voiceless heroines who show the gendered behaviors of domesticity (E. Bell, et al., 1995; Stover, 2012; Wasko 2001). By tracing female representation through changing social standards and cultural media, the feminist outlook presents a perspective of challenged gendered images by the 60s and 70s (Stover, 2012). From a feminist point of view, and as explained by Stover (2012), in order to revert back to traditional femininity in American culture, Disney used the encouragement of domestic traits to move women from the labor force and back into the home. As Pickett (2013), concludes, women, as

Disney teaches, are meant to give everything up for men, meant to control male violence in order to turn him into a prince, and are meant to stay within the confines of the male patriarchy.

The Disney Corporation draws on the rehashed gender ideals of femininity while presenting a *new woman,* although social standards for girls and women may be ever changing (C. Bell, personal communication, March 6, 2015; Stover, 2012). Themes include, valuing a woman's appearance over her intelligence, women are incapable of saving themselves and are in need of protection from male counterparts, women must marry and be domestic to be successful, and finally, power is a woman's downfall (Wasko, 2001). Even though roles of women may have been altered slightly over the course of the princess genre, objectification and *sexualization* of female characters (C. Bell, personal communication, March 6, 2015), is glossed over with seemingly heroic characteristics, such as in *Mulan*, while resorting back to the traditionally female characteristics in the end (Limback, 2013; Stover, 2012). Some argue, through post-feminism, that there was a shift from female objectification to female *subjectification*, where marketing strategies of the powerful women manipulate the ideal female beauty and manner (Stover, 2012).

Frequently, in Disney films, gender stereotypes are developed to portray women as victimized sex objects, teaching young girls that their worth is in their bodies or what they look like (Wasko, 2001). For example, as C. Bell (personal communication, March 6, 2015) discusses, Snow White and Aurora, in their respective roles, spend most of their films as objects rather than subjects. These princesses do not have the chance to enact their own stories or even grant consent to their princes, who save them with a kiss. According to Giroux (as cited in E. Bell et al., 1995), these gender roles are presented to children in a disguise of innocence, allowing female characters to become unequivocally visual objects of desire for a male gaze and for female role models (Pickett, 2013). Although Disney continues to twist and manipulate themes and plots, these animated films continue to spin out traditionally restricting portrayals of gender (Wasko, 2001). As Giroux (as cited in E. Bell et al., 1995) analyzes, both identity and status depends upon how children write and perform accepted gender roles in play and in memory (C. Bell, personal communication, March 6, 2015; Wohlwend, 2009). Since children combine play, media, and writing in order to reenact favorite Disney stories, the need to live up to gendered expectations affects social interactions and learning (Baker-Sperry, 2007; Wohlwend, 2009).

From the Disney princess franchise, merchandise completely immerses children in a consumer culture "as they dress in, sleep on, bathe in, eat from, and play with products" (Wohlwend, 2009, pp. 57). Every movie and product sold from each story is mediated by the Disneyfication of what is allowed to be exposed to children (C. Bell, personal communication, March 6, 2015; E. Bell et al., 1995; Ma, 2008). These products therefore permit children to identify with their favorite characters and communicate specific gendered beliefs "about what children should buy, how they should play, and who they should be" (Wohlwend, 2009, pp. 57). The Disney Corporation creates such a mechanism that "seduce[s] the audience into identifying with their characteristics, thereby internalizing the norms, the ways of thinking and desiring, and the gendered identities presented on screen" (E. Bell et al., 1995, pp.149). Moreover, cultivation theory, defined by England et al. (2011), implies "that children develop beliefs about the world based on their interpretations of observations and experiences" (p. 557), suggesting that the watching, and re-watching, of these programs affects a child's interpretation and imitation of gender and social values (Hoerrner, 1996; Sun & Picker, 2002). Peer culture, mixed with popular media and material capital, allows children to assign social importance to the roles and representations in movies (Baker-Sperry, 2007; Wohlwend, 2009). In development, children are in a process of forming and assigning meaning to societal norms through the media and peer interaction (Baker-Sperry, 2007; C. Bell, personal communication, March 6, 2015). Through play, and therefore internalization, children are assigning meaning to each action as well as the symbolic presence of objects or toys (Wohlwend,

2009), therefore peer culture builds up a shared meaning to social aspects which are agreed upon and reviewed by playmates (Baker-Sperry, 2007; C. Bell, personal communication, March, 6 2015).

With the power to influence societal expectations, stereotypes, and norms, gender is not free from Disney's famous story telling magic (Baker-Sperry, 2007). The gendered archetypes created by the Disney Corporation set classic limitations and social boundaries that reduce the fairytale heroines to victimized, ditzy home-makers (C. Bell, personal communication, March 6, 2015; Wohlwend, 2009). In addition, the motherly type is kept to fairy godmothers, while the liberated, powerful, and libeled women are put into the femme fatale category (E. Bell et al., 1995; Wohlwend, 2009). As a result, young girls and teens quickly learn that a woman's worth is based either on age, beauty, or sexualization (C. Bell, personal communication, March 6, 2015; E. Bell et al., 1995). These fairytale romances, such as *The Little Mermaid* or *Beauty and the Beast*, ultimately have deleterious effects on expectations and lessons centered on relationships, sex, and gender roles (Pickett, 2013). For example, in *Beauty and the Beast*, gender stereotyped images depicting male control and abusive nature over women is romanticized and normalized (Wasko, 2001; Sun & Picker, 2002). Initially, princesses like Belle and Ariel represent independent and intelligent characters, until a relationship transforms them into the classically submissive female heroine that Disney continues to rewrite into their princess films (Pickett, 2013; Sun & Picker, 2002).

With Disney's power over youth popular culture, social norms are mediated to be culturally meaningful, setting limitations for children to be put into narrow categories of gender (E. Bell et al., 1995; Ma, 2008). Through play and an inescapable availability of products, children hold the ability to internalize these tired, and re-used scripts, allowing these films and the Disney princess archetype to become a reality (Wohlwend, 2009). Within the characters' very makeup, children are taught bare-minimum that men are meant to be dominant while women are meant to be subordinate (Pickett, 2013). In addition, these female role models are continuously sexualized in their animation, characterization, and toys (C. Bell, personal communication, March 6, 2015), which represent gender conformity, therefore, teaching young girls and teens that it is inherently natural for women to be sexualized (Pickett, 2013; Wasko, 2001). For example, when Merida, protagonist of *Brave*, was inducted into the Disney Princess line, her animation was ultimately sexualized to fit into this limited princess body type (Pickett, 2013). In order for young girls to *belong* to this ideal feminine beauty, girls reenact the character roles they watch and buy the products marketed around the princess campaign, allowing children to learn what it means to be a girl, to have a purpose or an identity, or to have a subsistence and sense of self, solely from Disney (Stover, 2012; Wohlwend, 2009).

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