

TALE AS OLD AS TIME:

A Textual Analysis of Race and Gender in Disney Princess Films

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Introduction

Media effects have been debated for decades. There has been ongoing consideration regarding the possible influence the mass media can have on its viewers. This debate has ranged from the media's effect acting as a hypodermic needle, where the values and messages within the media cause a direct change in the values of its viewers, to the media having minimal power to influence the viewing public. Generally, due to their pervasiveness, media are considered to play an active role in our lives. Many people agree that mass media is incredibly influential as a teacher of social norms, specifically to young people (Wynns & Rosenfeld 91). The media has been described by Wynns and Rosenfeld (91) as holding a powerful role in forming the attitudes, values and behaviours of its viewers. Due to the power that the media holds in regards to influencing individuals' understanding of society, there has been a lot of research conducted to examine the specific messages being delivered through television programs, films, advertisements, and music genres. Since it is generally agreed that children are most vulnerable to being influenced, extensive research has been done to analyze the messages being delivered through children's programming.

The Walt Disney Company has undergone increasing scrutiny for some of the themes found within their films; however no study has been done to specifically address the Disney Princess franchise. Therefore I will be focusing my paper on the incredibly popular Disney Princess franchise, and the representations of race and gender within its films. In order to thoroughly examine the race and gender roles being promoted through this franchise, this study will use a textual analysis. The purpose of this is to achieve an in-depth look at the racial and gender stereotypes embedded within each film. This study will consider the racial and gender stereotyping tendencies of these films by examining the gender roles being fulfilled in the film,

specifically by the heroines, by examining the dynamics of the heterosexual relationship in the films, and finally by considering how each film constructs racial differences. Therefore, through the use of a textual analysis on each of the nine Disney Princess films, I hope to add to past examinations on the Walt Disney Company, considering how these widely viewed and circulated films may influence young audience's attitudes, values and beliefs regarding race and gender.

Literature Review:

Media, Gender and Race

Mass media is easily accessible by the general public and is able to reach wide audiences. It is because of the mass media's extensive reach that it is able to affect people's perceptions and understanding of many different issues (Hazell & Clarke 5). As new forms of mass media continue to emerge, the scope of the mass media is continuing to extend and becoming nearly impossible for the general public to avoid. This is adding to the effect that the mass media can have on the public's perception and understanding of various issues (Hazell & Clarke 5). Therefore, the mass media can be seen to provide and direct the political and social understandings of the general public, where the media suggests what the collective's societal beliefs should be (Hazell & Clarke 5).

Alternatively, there remain people who believe that the effect of the media on its viewers is very insignificant. This counter argument suggests that any problematic messages that may exist within the media, should not be a cause for concern because they will not affect the attitudes of the individuals watching. Although this argument is often dismissed, it cannot be overlooked that our social relationships, educational institutes and beliefs are a major factor in directing us towards our social roles (Wynns & Rosenfeld 91). Even though this argument is

prevalent, this paper will focus on the belief that the increasing pervasiveness of the media in our lives has caused it to shape our attitudes and values, perhaps even more so than institutions that previously defined our understanding of our roles in society (Wynns & Rosenfeld 91).

Research has proven that the media is very influential in fostering gender and racial stereotypes (Gunter 9). The representations of race and gender within the media affect the viewers. This is because the media is seen to play a significant role in offering a socializing influence on the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of its audience (Gunter 21). It affects the ideas that viewers have in regard to what may be considered acceptable gender roles and gender traits. Media also serves as a source for the acquisition of gender and race-linked knowledge and characteristics, as well as the development of gender and racial roles, conduct, self-evaluative standards, and self-efficacy beliefs (Morawitz & Mastro 132). Individuals are adopting gender and racial characteristics by monitoring the rewards and consequences associated with certain behaviours as portrayed within the media (Morawitz & Mastro 132). This also creates the mistaken belief that it is not acceptable to fall outside of these gender representations and that if you belong to a certain racial category you are supposed to fall inside of the specific racial representations (Gunter 12). Therefore, through the mass media's creation of stereotypes, and its portrayal of impossible images, the viewers become negatively affected when they do not meet the mass media's standards of what is normal and natural (Walsh-Childers 146).

This is evident in advertisements, which have found their way into most forms of mass media. They are able to "subtly perpetuate and reinforce societal beliefs and expectations concerning gender and race through both their images and texts" (Hazell & Clarke 6). The images and texts that are seen within advertisements and all mass media in general "become a part of the culture of a society and become the basis on which new images and words are

created” (Hazell & Clarke 6). So, the mass media’s stereotypical portrayal of race and gender ends up creating a cycle where stereotypical representations are then the norm. In a society where white heterosexual men tend to dominate high powered positions at media corporations, this cycle ends up favouring white masculinity as the dominant ideology. Thus, females and other races are seen in an unfavourable light (Hazell & Clarke 6). These representations tend to be internalized by the general public. Evidently, the mass media is a powerful resource through which viewers develop their identity and come to understand the role that gender and race plays in the real world (Morawitz & Mastro 132).

Gender in Film

The way that the mass media is able to foster gender and racial stereotypes is by portraying the ideal. For example, although there has been a lot of change over the years in terms of what is considered appropriate societal roles for men and women, this change is not reflected in contemporary television (Gunter 13). Women are seen as domestic, focused mainly on family and personal relationships; they are considered highly emotional individuals, less competent and dependent on their male counterparts for emotional and financial support (Gunter 15-16). Meanwhile men are being portrayed as having interests outside of the home, while still being the head of the household. When fatherhood is being focused on, it is seen as not constant and a non-biological matter (Matthews 106,117). The men struggle with parenthood and are burdened by its difficulty, stressing that a man’s contributions in child-rearing are problematic and so their success remains outside of the domestic world (Matthews 107). Clearly, these ideals create appropriate gender roles that are demonstrating “first- world patriarchy” (Vint 161).

This tendency to present masculinity and femininity in stereotypical ways is also commonly used in films. Similar to the ideal representations of males and females created in television and in advertisements, films often create traditional representation of what it is to be male or female. Since “past research additionally indicates that watching televised gender portrayals has an effect on individuals’ real-world gender-based attitudes, beliefs and behaviours”, it is no surprise that the consumption of films also influences the audience members’ gender-based attitudes and beliefs (Morawitz & Mastro 131).

These gender representations found within the media, specifically film, create patriarchal gender discrimination. Femininity is depicted, for example, where happiness and personal satisfaction are found through marriage and motherhood. The storylines revolving around the female characters typically create a morality tale where the good mother is the victor and the independent woman is punished or transformed (Vint 162). The films are creating the idea that if a woman is free and independent, she will be unhappy. A woman’s liberation will deny her marriage and motherhood, which are the two true sources of happiness for a woman. Therefore, if a woman focuses on her career and power she will be condemned to a loveless life as a spinster, where she will miss her chance to have children and spend the rest of her life longing for a child and for the opportunity to become fulfilled through ‘Mr Right’ (Vint 162). This belief, that happy women find their satisfaction in nurturing, returns to a pre feminist idea where life as a spinster becomes the worst thing that could happen to a woman. This theme became a pattern in melodramas, suggesting that if you are alone and a woman, you are incomplete (Byars 67).

Unfortunately, it is these kinds of story lines within popular films that are having a negative effect on the attitudes, beliefs and actions of the public in regards to gender roles. Films that present motherhood as happiness and independence and the absence of a man as a failure,

frighten women into “accepting traditional gender roles and identifying with such roles as their only authentic source of personal happiness” (Vint 162). More and more, films are avoiding the theme that females should be domesticated as it is losing resonance with the public. However, they are heavily focused on the idea that a woman’s life should be centered around the heterosexual family. They are motivating women to fall into gender roles centered on love, where the film tells a personal story and thus does not acknowledge any structuring problems surrounding gender roles. Instead the films make finding the right man the solution to gender discrimination, because they imply that love transcends any gender stereotypes as it is “real, natural, and unchanging, preventing us from ever imagining a world in which most men treated women badly” (Vint 163).

Similarly, gender stereotypes are not only found in films in relation to femininity and the female characters. Masculinity is often depicted in terms of power. Strength and financial control determine the value of the male character, and maleness is constituted by conventional ideas of masculinity. Drinking, fighting and fornicating are considered central to the characterization of masculinity, where physicality and authority are essential attributes (Hill 410). Commonly in films, the male character is able to assert his masculinity over the female character by establishing himself as the protector over the weaker gender. By doing so, the male is able to dominate the heterosexual relationship, where he fulfills the primary role as the active patriarch in relation to the passive female that the male will save and/or dominate (Boyd 78). Generally, it seems that male gender roles seem to focus on the political dominance over women, where they are more physical, assertive and self-determining (Boyd 74). Masculinity is created through aggression and the objectification of women, which is incredibly problematic, as films tend to construct gender ideologies and confirm them as part of the natural order of things (Hill 414).

Even when masculinity is discussed in the context of fatherhood, it tends to work to highlight a paternalistic understanding of the concept (Matthews 101). When fathers are depicted as the caregivers they are seen to struggle through it, suggesting that men are not naturally equipped to raise children. Paternal responsibility is seen as being a mere presence in the child's life, but not much else, because being a "constant and obsessive presence...is constituted as an overly feminine way of relating to children" (Matthews 117).

Clearly, the depiction of masculinity and femininity within film follows antiquated representations of what gender roles should be associated with men and women. These definitions of what it means to be male or female reinforce stereotypes, and suggest to viewers that there are proper and/or appropriate ways to act as a male or female. Women are constantly seen as the subordinate, while men are given power and assertiveness as characteristics to live up to. In the end, both gender roles for men and women are seen as one dimensional. However, the images of women are far more narrow, suggesting that "women are much less powerful and important than men" (Gow 153). These messages that affect our gender based attitudes and beliefs need to be expanded in order for stereotypes to be lessened in the real world, and for our ideas of what is gender appropriate to be more realistic.

Race in Film

The use of stereotypes within the mass media is also affecting our beliefs and attitudes regarding race. The presence of an ideal is extended to racial differences, as a hierarchy of skin color has been created within the media. This hierarchy was made to reflect former values in American history, where lighter skin tones were seen as more socially and culturally acceptable than having a darker skin colour (Hazell & Clarke 7). This is obvious in "white-oriented

magazines”, where the black women featured have lighter skin tones, straightened hair, and a generally less curvy figure, in comparison to “black-oriented magazines” where the women have medium complexions and curvy figures (Hazell & Clarke 9-10). Clearly, the physical characteristics of African-American women are being filtered to coincide with dominant standards of beauty. Therefore, features that do not coincide with this hierarchy, or match the white ideal of beauty are underrepresented in the mass media, and when they are utilized, they commonly perpetuate racial stereotypes (Hazell & Clarke 7).

Often, popular films are reaffirming dominant race relations. For example, in regards to the performing arts within film, race (along with gender and class) becomes a factor in who will be recognized as a valuable member in a specific field (Boyd 67). It is typically the white dancers who get hired because within the arts “people of color have been de-valued and hierarchically labelled as exotic, primitive...or low art” (Boyd 71). These types of labels within the media promote the derogatory, condescending, restrictive and oppressive categorization of racial minorities. In addition, the arts performed by these groups are often re-appropriated into white culture. This tendency demonstrates that minority groups can only make their way into the mass media once white culture has dissected and identified that cultural group. Whether this includes white culture stripping away crucial components of their culture or presenting race as a dichotomy where the bodies of the other are depicted through stereotypes, this presentation of race falls within the dominant discourse of white supremacy (Boyd 72).

This discriminatory belief, that one race is superior to the others, is not just a reference in films about the arts. Rather, the exclusion of people of colour in primary positions is a general trend within films (Boyd 71). Even when racial minorities are included, their characters seldom facilitate racial tolerance. Often, films that use minorities in the lead roles still utilize a racial

hierarchy as a crucial part of the film's narrative. Furthermore, the minority characters do not avoid negative stereotypes, but rather fulfill racist portrayals, which become incredibly problematic when these films become a commercial success (Park, Gabbadon & Chernin 158). The popular use of stereotypes within the media industry "results from the need to quickly convey information about characters and to instil in audiences expectations about characters' actions", therefore stereotypes help create instantly recognizable characters (Park et al. 158). This practice, however convenient, simply works to reproduce racial stereotypes and even makes them culturally acceptable, which legitimizes the racial hierarchy. Thus, when films create minority characters that fulfil racial stereotypes, even in a comedic setting, they end up reinforcing the stereotypes that the humour is attempting to ridicule (Park et al. 158).

Evidently, "in the world of film, minority characters rarely resist or reject the stereotypes that are forced upon them" (Park et al. 158). Frequently, we are presented with representations of minority groups that initially appear positive and thus we quickly believe this film is perpetuating racial tolerance. Often, however, this is not the case (Boyd 73). There needs to be more attention given to the negative effects of minority actors embodying racial stereotypes. By embodying these stereotypical characterizations, the minority groups are taking part in their own racial ridicule (Park et al. 159). Comedies allow controversial content to exist in the mainstream while appearing acceptable. However, the nature of the content "affirms the dominant ideological position because it diffuses viewers' critical interpretation" (Park et al. 160). It is film material such as these comedies that instruct "colour blind" viewers how to make sense of their social world using these racial categories. Even though blatant racism and bigotry have become unacceptable in this day and age, racial stereotyping within films reduces and naturalizes racial differences. The consequence of this is that racial differences become objectively existent, where

the stereotypes preclude alternate ways of considering race, and since these stereotypes are used against persons of minority groups, whiteness maintains its privileged position (Park et al. 160).

Gender in Disney

The portrayal of these negative and demeaning images has been proven to strengthen the societal stereotyping surrounding race and gender. With all of this research proving that the mass media is rife with gender and racial stereotypes, it is important to consider how this works within specific groups. The influence of these types of media messages affects people of all ages. However, “it is particularly disturbing for young viewers who become students of the positive and negative life lessons taught by their pervasive television teachers” (Hoerrner 213). Regardless of any societal developments made for women, they continue to be mediated in the same fashion. Women are depicted as meek, submissive, overly emotional, and reliant on men, while men are independent, intelligent and aggressive towards the achievement of their goals (Hoerrner 213). The message surrounding gender roles that is being taught to viewers, specifically children, is that appropriate gender roles are one-dimensional.

The problem with children being so impressionable to the messages delivered through the media is that, unfortunately, animated cartoons are a major source of gender stereotyping. They are a staple in most children’s television and film viewing experience and their sexist depiction of gender roles is a cause for concern. Over the years there has been tremendous focus on animated television series, while animated films have received select scholarly attention (Hoerrner 214). One might expect more focus on films since children often have their own video library in the home, spending hours each week watching these films. Films, which parents and

researchers tend to encourage above television programs, are arguably easier to control (Hoerrner 214).

The 'G' rating and wholesome image of the Walt Disney Company have generated a great deal of trust from families, so people overlook the gender roles being propagated through their films. The Disney heroines, for example, have been created as, and continue to be, one-dimensional and stereotypical. These heroines, even though they are supposed to be the lead characters in the films "are pale and pathetic compared to the more active and demonic characters in the film" (Henke, Umble & Smith 233). The female characters created by Disney fall victim to the predominately male production staff found within the corporation. They are images of women created by men, designed to emphasize biological features that will define the heroine as female (Bean 55). The Walt Disney Company creates their heroines as helpless and in need of protection, where the male heroes enter the action and rescue the heroines (Henke et al. 234). After all, a persistent pattern within the Disney franchise is that a woman's true happiness exists only through the love of her prince (Craven 127). For example, a message that is continually reaffirmed throughout Disney films is that marrying young is advantageous, or even recommended. If you consider the father-daughter relationship, which is frequently the only relationship the female heroine has with a parent, the fathers "support or overtly advocate their young daughters' marriages" (Wynns & Rosenfeld 104). This recurring storyline encourages viewers to consider 'true love' as the ultimate measure of happiness. Females should transition from their reliance on their fathers straight to marriage, meaning independence is unsuitable for women. Clearly, Disney portrays femininity as being an object, where the female characters are to be displayed and desired, instead of being autonomous individuals (Craven 129).

Additionally, as the Walt Disney Company continues to create Disney Princess films where the princesses uphold generally the same characteristics, it has, over the past two decades, begun creating male leads with depth to their character, who evolve as the story progresses (Gillam & Wooden 3). Including these more recent characters who have received increasing attention to their development, Disney has a reputation of designing male characters to fulfill the role as the “alpha-male”, where “alpha male” stands “for all things stereotypically patriarchal: unquestioned authority, physical power and social dominance, competitiveness for positions of status and leadership, lack of visible or shared emotion, social isolation” (Gillam & Wooden 3). Whether it is *The Little Mermaid’s* Prince Eric’s ability to ride up on his boat and save the princess or *Toy Story’s* Buzz Lightyear’s need to save the galaxy, the Walt Disney Company loves to highlight its male protagonists’ alpha male attributes. In the end, even though The Walt Disney Company has begun creating male characters who have more substantial attributes than a one-dimensional idea of masculinity, there is still an obvious return to the alpha-male they originally focused on within their films.

Evidently, the Walt Disney Company is perpetuating gender stereotypes throughout its franchise. Masculinity is continuously defined by “its violence, its isolation, its lack of emotion and its presence” (Jeffords 165). Accordingly, the male characters within the Disney films, whether the Princes of the Princess franchise or the lost boys in *Peter Pan*, are seen to be aggressive and active in contrast to the females as victims and passive subjects (Hoerrner 221). And even when women are lucky enough to be portrayed to uphold a take charge attitude, this is after taking care of the men around them, or in keeping house. Although it has been argued that these right minded women, like Snow White or Wendy (from *Peter Pan*), enter a messy world and take charge to clean it up (Brode 175), it is only through the use of domestic traits that they

are 'taking charge'. In many of the Walt Disney Company's films, specifically those centered mainly around animal characters (i.e. *The Jungle Book*), the few females used in the plot of the film act as the civilizing figures (Murphey 130). This validates the impression that females are nurturers, refined, and important in relation to the male characters. This further reinforces an image of females as one-dimensional, as true happiness for a female is achieved through maternal characteristics that coincide with the antiquated message that a female's fulfillment comes through marriage and motherhood (Vint 162).

Race in Disney

The Walt Disney Company has operated under the guise of producing wholesome children's tales "in which children's fantasies come true, happiness reigns, and innocence is kept safe through the magic of pixie dust" (Giroux 17). However, through a closer examination of Disney films, it is clear that the company's idea of innocence coincides with a particular Westernized idea of values and beliefs. Similar to the role of gender within Disney films, the role of race is also restricted. Up until recently, Disney refrained from portraying non-European races within its films, specifically in the roles of the protagonists (Bryne & McQuillan 94). It is apparent through examining the large volume of Disney films that there is a pattern in which whiteness is privileged. Although this tendency reflected society back when *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and some of the earliest films were created it should no longer be the standard in their franchise, and yet it prevails.

This privileging of whiteness became a theme in Disney's *Fantasia*, where the film relied on the symbolism equating black with evil and white with goodness. This was pervasive throughout the film. For example the characters were paired only with characters of the same

colouring, and the plot is resolved in the final episode of *Fantasia* where the evil black devil's terrorization is only halted through the intervention of Christianity (which is generally considered as Europe's main religion) (Bryne & McQuillan 95). Also in *Fantasia*, in the episode that includes the centaurs, Disney uses the black coloured centaur (Sunflower) as the 'hoof-polishing handmaidens' to the Aryan centaurs. The controversial nature of utilizing this servant stereotype has not escaped the Walt Disney Company's attention, because when the film was re-released in the 1960's, the company eliminated Sunflower from the film. Problematically, Disney moved from suggesting a racist stereotype within its film, to denying the existence of an African servant (Cracked.com). Dealing with race symbolically, without introducing any minority human character into the film, became a popular tactic for Disney (Bryne & McQuillan 96).

The first Disney film to be acknowledged for its use of characters that are racially marked black are the crows in *Dumbo* (Bryne & McQuillan 96). This film is a stepping stone to the direction that Disney was headed in. The crows are voiced by a white man doing his best "black voice" to assign the animals stereotypical African-American traits and mannerism. The crows are seen to be intellectually inferior in the film, as they speak in slang and Ebonics, referring to each other as "brotha". They even name the main crow Jim Crow (Cracked.com). The introduction of race into all-animal films became a popular way for Disney to deal with race representations (Bryne & McQuillan 96). The most disturbing thing about the use of this imagery is that it persists from the 1940's in *Fantasia* and *Dumbo*, through to 1994's *The Lion King*. The racial imagery in *The Lion King* is just as obvious, as Scar, the villain of the film, is notably darker than all the other lions of the pride. Scar has also aligned himself with the Hyenas, who are

considered to be savage animals of Africa, whose behaviour and environment reinforce stereotypes surrounding Africans (Bryne & McQuillan 102).

The Walt Disney Company's use of racial stereotype in their animal centered films extends past coloured imagery and into the voices of the characters and even the dialogue. *The Jungle Book*, for example, contains many negative stereotypes: "the film invariably endows regal mannerisms and posh British accents to characters with power...The Black-coded characters speak a jazz lingo that reflects the most stereotypic African American dialect" (Miller & Rode 93). The film furthers this crude portrayal by characterizing the Black-coded characters as monkeys. King Louie, the main monkey, then serenades Mowgli (the human character) in his black-coded voice "I wanna be like you", because they want to be human too (Miller & Rode 92). Even *The Little Mermaid*, although not a strictly animal centered film, does not avoid playing into these racial stereotypes with their animal characters as they voice Sebastian, the sea crab, with a Caribbean accent. This decision would not be so problematic if they did not have Sebastian try to persuade Ariel to avoid the human world with his catchy number 'Under the Sea'. During this scene "Sebastian makes it quite explicit that this Caribbean-equivalent, underdeveloped aquatic state does not engage in significant labor. Merpeople just sing and dance, while humans work" (Murphy 132). This segment in the film introduces a racist perspective as the merpeople, who are equated with the Caribbean, live a supposedly inferior lifestyle compared to the industrial lifestyle of the humans (Murphy 132).

Furthermore, within the Walt Disney Company's films there is an observable pattern in how they depict their white female heroines versus the heroines of colour. The white characters, such as Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* or Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*, are designed to look very youthful and innocent. They are given porcelain skin and delicate features with a slender

and capable figure, despite rarely engaging in physical activity (LaCroix 219). The heroines who are racial minorities, such as Pocahontas or Esmeralda from *The Hunch Back of Notre Dame*, are depicted as being much more athletic than the white heroines. In addition to the emphasis on these characters' athleticism, they are also illustrated to emphasize that they have reached sexual maturing (LaCroix 220). This difference in the construction of the characters, along with their costuming in the film, emphasizes the characters of a racial minority to be exotic and sexual. Clearly, Disney has created a division in its presentation of White women versus women of colour, where

early characters (read White), Ariel and Belle, are weaker, more pristine, and largely incapable of action, whereas the later heroines, ail women of color, are depicted in such a way as to emphasize their bodies and physicality. The reader is encouraged, through this privileging of the body and the physical in the rendering of the physique and costuming, to look at Jasmine, Pocahontas, and Esmeralda in different and more voyeuristic manner than the White heroines. They embody the exoticized Other woman—one whose sexualized presence is privileged above all else. (LaCroix 222)

Evidently the Walt Disney Company has been creating films for the past several decades that utilize highly offensive representations of race. The films are based on stereotypical assumptions regarding minority groups, where whiteness is privileged. Whether it is the implication that whiteness is the natural/normal colour of skin in *Peter Pan* when they seek to uncover "What made the Red man Red" (Bryne & McQuillan 107), or the use of the exoticized Other for Esmeralda's character in *The Hunch Back of Notre Dame* (LaCroix 222), or the racial imagery used for Scar and the hyenas in *The Lion King* (Bryne & McQuillan 102), Disney continuously creates films that reinforce dominant ideologies and negative stereotypes, teaching the viewing children that ideas of race are restricted.

Gender and Race in Disney Princess

The Walt Disney Company has created a line of films where heroines are central to the story line. Since the year 2000, these films became categorized as part of the Disney Princess franchise. Currently, the Disney Princess franchise contains nine films, and thus nine heroines: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Snow White), *Cinderella* (Cinderella), *Sleeping Beauty* (Aurora), *The Little Mermaid* (Ariel), *Beauty and the Beast* (Belle), *Aladdin* (Jasmine), *Pocahontas* (Pocahontas), *Mulan* (Mulan), and *The Princess and the Frog* (Tiana) (Disney.go.com). The first of these films, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, was created in 1937 and the most recent, *The Princess and the Frog*, was created in 2009. Although decades apart, the Princess films all have similar themes, with “Disney’s portrayal of women as superficial images of helpless princesses, subserviently trusting males to carry them off and live happily ever after in a retro world of post marital bliss” (Brode 171).

Although Disney uses these films to try to construct what it means to be young and female, the values imparted by these Disney films reflect instead the values of the typically white male authors (Henke et al. 230), meaning that the majority of themes within these films resemble a dominant ideology where white masculinity is privileged (Henke et al. 234). Therefore, the pattern within these films to privilege white masculinity is important to study, as it will allow us to understand what messages regarding race and gender are being delivered to young impressionable children. We cannot falsely believe that just because heroines are being used in the films that Disney is offering their viewers strong and active female princesses to look up to. And the fact that it only occurred to Disney in the last four Princess films to include a princess who is not white/European speaks to the company’s disillusionment surrounding race. The issues within this franchise are especially obvious if you compare *Pocahontas* with the reality of

the United States' history. Disney asks us to forget the racial cleansing that took place and instead focus on the “unfolding magic of romantic adventure tale” (Parekh 172). Here it becomes obvious that they plan to ignore a racial struggle, choosing instead to tell a story about a girl's quest for love.

Since the Walt Disney Company continues to reinforce gender and racial stereotypes within its films, it is important to study and understand the messages they are delivering to viewers. Specifically, we need to consider what role the Disney Princess franchise is playing perpetuating these stereotypes. Since this franchise is targeting children, specifically girls, we need to analyze the extent to which it portrays sex role stereotypes and racial imagery. This is because the material can be very influential on the ideologies of the viewing audience, where the combined ideology of enchantment and innocence within these films helps children to understand who they are and what society is about (LaCroix 90). This is important especially since the Walt Disney Company is considered to have wholesome values and is therefore widely trusted. It is crucial that we dissect the messages that they are delivering and promoting. My research is therefore seeking to answer the following questions:

RQ1: How do the dynamics of the heterosexual relationships within the Disney Princess films promote gender roles?

RQ2: How do the physical and personality attributes of the heroines in the Disney Princess films perform feminine gender ideologies?

RQ3: How do the Disney Princess films use their heroines to depict ideas of “whiteness” and the “exotic other”?

Methodology

In order to ensure this analysis was a unique contribution to studies of gender and race in the media, it focused specifically on Disney Princess films. The Disney Princess films were chosen as the text for the analysis for a few reasons. For starters, film is a very popular medium, and research has proven that watching gender and race portrayals on the screen may affect the public's real-world attitudes, beliefs and behaviours regarding gender and race (Morawitz & Mastro 131). This would not be significant if the films did not reach large audiences, but the Disney Princess films have an enormous following, especially with young and impressionable children. Major Disney pictures are cross-marketed with advertising and merchandising to ensure that the children are excited to see the films and develop a relationship with each film and its characters (LaCroix 214). Therefore, it is this combination of a dominant media source mixed with its impact on impressionable child audiences that makes an understanding of Disney films very important.

Many researchers have considered several areas of focus within the Walt Disney Company and select films. LaCroix has discussed race in *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, *Pocahontas* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Similarly, Bean has looked at the connection of race and sexuality while focusing on *Aladdin*'s Jasmine and Esmeralda from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. The construction of the female self has been analyzed by Henke, Umble and Smith in *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast* and *Pocahontas*. Giroux has considered the Walt Disney Company more as a whole, discussing how individual films fit into the company's patriarchal values. Evidently, a great deal has already been considered by previous academics concerning race and gender in Disney films. My study

uses these past analyses as a foundation for my own. I believe looking at the Disney Princess franchise in its entirety will create a well rounded study, where comparing and considering each film within the franchise will show patterns and by including each film it ensures that there is no bias in my chosen sample. Also, certain films such as *The Little Mermaid* and *Aladdin* have undergone several analyses, while other films have been neglected. Looking at the entire Disney Princess franchise will allow me to consider any progress that may have been made through the past seven decades, while also examining certain films that have been neglected even though they have attained widespread distribution and viewership.

After establishing which text would be studied, it was important to determine the sample. To gather the sample for this study, I decided to focus on the films within the Walt Disney Company that are considered a part of the Disney Princess line. The Disney Princess films, which include *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, *Pocahontas*, *Mulan*, and *The Princess and the Frog*, are all popular films within the company which received wide releases and were mass marketed. This attention ensured that the Disney Princess films each achieved broad exposure, meaning it is also important to know what messages they are delivering to their audiences. Also, with nine films now considered to be a part of the Disney Princess line (excluding sequels) it made for a reasonable size sample to study in order to understand the messages being targeted at the child viewers by the Walt Disney Company, specifically the young girls. Therefore, with the popularity of these films combined with their target audience, the Disney Princess films seemed to be an ideal sample.

Finally, to address the research questions developed and to examine the established sample, this study used a textual analysis. A textual analysis is a type of qualitative analysis. It helps us to understand the meanings and representations within a specific text in relation to our society and culture (Clink & Kramer 246). The use of a textual analysis therefore allows my study to gain an in-depth analysis on the role of gender and race in the Disney Princess films. In order to conduct my analysis, I closely viewed each of the nine films. Here I observed similarities and differences of the films, specifically relating to my three research questions. Generally the films were studied in their entirety, where I critiqued what was observed. I also used the works of others, such as Bean (2003), Craven (2002), Giroux(1999), Henke et al. (1996), Inge (2004), LaCroix (2004), O'Brien (1996), and Sells (1995) to help guide my analysis. I used their work and technique as a guide on how to be successful in my analysis. This specific methodology was crucial to my research, as it allowed me to gather clear and precise results for my study by being able to thoroughly analyze, compare and contrast each of the films in question. Any other methodology might have missed the subtle ways that gender and race are presented in the films, and instead gathered only broad results with few details. With an ideal sample and methodology at hand, all that was left was to begin the textual analysis of the nine films.

Analysis

After performing a textual analysis on the nine Disney Princess films, the findings regarding the race and gender roles used within each of the films proved to be very stereotypical. To demonstrate this, I will begin by addressing my first research question: “How do the dynamics of the heterosexual relationships within the Disney Princess films promote gender

roles?” Each of the Disney Princess films centers on a relationship between the heroine and a male love interest. It is this storyline that sometimes creates a princess out of the female lead, as not all of the heroines are princesses before they fall in love with a prince. The problem with this plot line’s centrality to each of the films is best stated by Eudora, Tiana’s mother, in *The Princess and the Frog*: “Your Daddy may not have gotten the place you always wanted but he had something better. He had love. And that's all I want for you, sweetheart. To meet your prince charming and dance off into your happily ever after” (*Princess and the Frog*). Evidently, a central theme within each of these films proves to be that once a female finds her prince charming and falls in love, they will live happily ever after.

Two of the earliest Disney Princess films, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Sleeping Beauty*, really highlight this message. Both films have the princesses residing in a cabin in the woods (Aurora with three fairies and Snow White with seven dwarfs). Other than the few inhabitants of the cabin, the princess is secluded from the outside world. Here, the lives of Aurora and Snow White are restricted; they do not get to enjoy their lives as princesses and so they long for more. Each princess then has a brief encounter with a prince, where they see what their lives are missing and succumb to love at first sight. Then, in each film, there is a twist of events that renders the princesses unconscious, where only true love’s kiss can change their fate. Luckily for each of them, Prince Charming and Prince Phillip come to the rescue. The message that seems to be present in both of these films is that your life will be unfulfilling until a man comes along and saves your life by offering you his love. It seems love does not simply provide women happiness, but it makes life worth living indeed, it provides life itself in this case. Apparently this message is so important for the Walt Disney Company to deliver in their films that they altered the original Grimm Brothers version of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* just

to include it. In the Grimm Brothers version, moving the resting place of Snow White allows the apple to dislodge from her throat and thus she comes back to life, but Disney felt it necessary to create a woman whose survival was dependent on a man, and have only the kiss from her beloved save her (Inge 137).

A female's dependence on men for her life's happiness is further illustrated through Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin*, and *Mulan*. In each of these films the heroine is dissatisfied with life and is longing for more. Ariel finds life underwater to be boring and restrictive, and hopes to one day enjoy life on land. Jasmine feels like a prisoner in the palace and even runs away to try and escape the life that she deems repressive and intolerable. Lastly, Mulan feels like an outsider and is very insecure as she does not fit the expectation placed upon her as a young Chinese girl. Rather than each of these heroines embarking on a path of self discovery to determine what makes them happy and learning to embrace their unique personality, they each instead fall in love to solve their problems. Ariel falls in love with Prince Eric, a human for whom she gets to leave life in the water and live on land. Here, the film equates Ariel's desire to be human as a desire to be with Prince Eric and "to be a part of *his* world" (Wynns & Rosenfeld, 100).

Ariel's unhappiness with her life under the sea is correlated to her life being unfulfilled without the companionship of her prince. Similarly, Princess Jasmine's unhappiness with her life in the palace is also solved when she meets Aladdin, they fall in love, and he comes to live with her in the palace. This demonstrates that the source of her dissatisfaction with her life in the palace was the absence of love. Once she falls in love with Aladdin, her life in the palace is no longer intolerable. The final scene of the film shows Aladdin and Jasmine singing "a whole new

world, a whole new life, for you and me” (*Aladdin*) on the magic carpet as they fly in to their future – which is undoubtedly the same as Jasmine’s past, with the exception of it being “for you and me”, proving once again that a romantic heterosexual relationship is where one ultimately finds fulfillment. Finally, Mulan, just like Ariel and Jasmine, finds the culmination of her adventure in a relationship with a man. Mulan leaves her home to join the Chinese army. She did not fit in at home, and similarly, she does not fit in amongst the boys training to join the army. However, once a romance between her and Shang commences she seems to find her place in the world. Although Mulan is not as passive as most of the other Princesses, the film follows the same general plot as the others in the franchise and in the end delivers the same message to the viewers- once you find a man to love, you will be happy with your life.

Even the most recent Disney Princess film, *The Princess and the Frog*, fails to deviate from this theme. Although this film is the first of the franchise to be produced in the twenty-first century, it continues with the same general plot that we first saw in 1937’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Disney’s attempts at creating a more independent princess character, similar to its development of Mulan, is ultimately ignored when Tiana can only see her dreams come true with Prince Naveen at her side. Tiana is also quick to choose her brief romance with Prince Naveen over her lifelong dream to open a restaurant, making the distinction that the restaurant is just something she wants, while Naveen is something she needs. This realization that Tiana has ignored the film’s chance for a more modern plot confirms what her mother (Eudora) said to her at the start of the film- “And that's all I want for you, sweetheart. To meet your Prince Charming and dance off into your happily ever after” (*The Princess and the Frog*). This proves once again, even generations after the first Disney Princess film was created, that once a woman finds her

Prince Charming she will have her happily ever after, because a man is all you need for happiness.

It appears that the only progress made in the story line archetype of the Disney Princess films is the fashion in which love is sparked and the power relations within it. For Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora and Ariel (the first four princesses), love is sparked instantly; each of these heroines witness love at first sight. All four princesses meet a prince and are immediately taken with him; their whole world alters as a result of this relationship. Similarly, in each of these four films “the man (prince) in love rescues [the princess] from the clutches of jealous, malicious, older women who hold ‘power over’ them” (Henke, Umble & Smith 241). Once again this highlights that the relationship is central to the plot, where the heroine’s situation can only be improved through the heroic actions of the male protagonist. It also demonstrates a negative relationship between women, and even though these princesses are being saved from the negative forces in their lives by their respective prince, in the end they are simply moving from one relationship where power is held over them to another. Whether it is Cinderella escaping the enslavement from her wicked stepmother, or Ariel who is moving from the sea into the human world, both females find their power to be dependent on their affiliation with their Prince. After all, without Prince Charming, Cinderella would have no claim to royalty and would have to return to her servant life and without Prince Eric, Ariel would have to return to life under the sea.

The Beauty and the Beast seems to be the turning point in the power dynamic used for the relationships within the films. Here Belle is being pursued and is also in control of the Beast’s destiny. Here we see a shift in how the Walt Disney Company designs the relationship dynamic,

where the males no longer have total power over the women and the power in the relationship becomes (slightly) more mutual. However, like the previous four films, *The Beauty and the Beast* also centers on a woman's quest for freedom, which is only found when the woman successfully finds love. And although Belle seems to have control over the Beast's destiny, viewers cannot ignore Giroux's (101) observation that she becomes more of a prop used to solve the Beast's dilemma. Rather than being free on her quest for self discovery, she is imprisoned by the Beast. However, in the film this is not regarded as an abusive action by Beast, because it presents Belle as being obliged to save everyone in the castle. Therefore the Beast's imprisonment of both Belle and her father, and his angry and aggressive treatment towards them is not considered problematic, but merely part of the process of having Belle see to her duty. Finally, when Belle and the Beast marry, the kingdom is restored. This is once again promoting that marriage should be our ultimate goal and allows everyone to live happily ever after (Henke et al., 242) and it also reinforces that Belle must uphold a domestic and nurturing role.

The final four Disney princess films continue with this shift, where the males do not have complete power over the heroines. Although this can be seen as an improvement in how the roles in heterosexual relationships are portrayed, there are still many causes for concern in these later films. Firstly, it is not until Disney begins to introduce princesses of color that a shift from the previous film's archetype can really be noted. This differentiation between the white and non-white princesses poses critical concern in the representation of a dominant white culture versus a marginalized group. However, this will be further considered later in this paper. What is more important to note here, is that each film centers on this romantic relationship. Although Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan and Tiana appear to be more autonomous than the previous five princesses,

each one finds her happiness, personal fulfillment and satisfaction through her relationship with a man. And even though none finds herself falling in love at first sight, they still quickly fall in love and in the end each heroine finds herself being defined by male standards and goals. Even the most apparently progressive princess finds herself in a male-dominated world and ultimately finds happiness when she finds love with her prince (LaCroix 223).

It is obvious after examining the heterosexual relationship dynamics in the nine Disney princess films that certain gender roles are being promoted throughout the franchise, while progressive roles are ignored. Any evolution in the character of the princesses seems to “function hegemonically to maintain the patriarchal status quo while tacitly acknowledging the changing roles of women in contemporary society” (Henke et al. 246). Disney is therefore delivering anti-feminist messages to its young impressionable viewers as it designs its heroines as what Henke et al. refers to as the “perfect girl”, who forgets any aspirations and exploration once she finds her male prince to live happily ever after. They have repeatedly designed the female construction of self to be controlled through patriarchal constructs. The story line in the *The Little Mermaid* then becomes very telling of the attitude promoted by the Walt Disney Company, where a woman must give up her voice in order to pursue and attain the love of a prince. Worse yet, whenever they create a heroine with a characteristic that counters the “perfect girl” image, she is labelled disobedient and suffers “for challenging conventional expectations, and eventually abandons her dreams for a definition of happiness within marriage” (Henke et al. 246). Ultimately, each princess conforms to stereotypical gender roles through her heterosexual relationship, where we witness over and over again that a woman’s main goal should be marriage, and it is only through marriage that a woman can find happiness. Self knowledge and

self discovery are seen to hinder this goal, and any trait that the heroine has that does not lead her to marriage is ultimately abandoned, to a point where passivity and dependence remain the only notable attribute for each Disney Princess.

Beyond the romantic relationships in each of the Disney Princess films, the Walt Disney Company continues to demonstrate that each heroine performs feminine gender ideologies both through her physical appearance and her personality attributes. This section of my analysis will focus on my second research question (“How do the physical and personality attributes of the heroines in the Disney Princess films perform feminine gender ideologies?”), where each film and princess will be examined to highlight her stereotypical portrayal. The first film in the franchise, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, uses many obvious stereotyped roles for both the men and women. For example, when Snow White arrives at the cottage it is a mess. She immediately fulfills the role of the housewife and becomes the caretaker of the seven dwarfs. Snow White both cooks and cleans for the dwarfs while they go off to work each day. What is most troubling is that the Walt Disney Company clearly went out of its way to develop this role for Snow White. In the Grimm Brothers version from which the film was adapted, Snow White entered a perfectly clean cottage with a deliciously prepared dinner already waiting (Inge 136).

Her relationship with the dwarfs also coincides with another gender stereotype where she needs them for her protection. Just as the dwarfs depend on Snow White for her abilities to cook and clean, she depends on them to keep her safe, reinforcing the notion that the males are the protector and the females are fragile and in need of protection (Sommers- Flanagan et al. 746). The film also works to polarize the idea of femininity, where there is “a murderously jealous and forbiddingly cruel woman on the one hand and an innocently sweet and accomplished in the art

of good housekeeping on the other” (Inge 140). This dichotomous notion of femininity reinforces the traits upheld by Snow White as good and desired, while the traits of individualism and independence exhibited by the Queen are discouraged and shown in a negative light. Finally, the film is plotted around the idea that the Queen’s self worth is based on her appearance and her ability to be the “fairest in the land”. Both the Queen and Snow White are then subjected to the male gaze by the mirror, and Snow White is labelled as the fairest in the land. This creates envy from the Queen, as she validates the importance of being physically attractive for a woman. After all, as Inge (141) has observed, it is only due to the combination of Snow White’s innocence, beauty and domesticity that Grumpy, along with the other dwarfs, enjoys her presence in their home (Inge 141).

The next film that became a part of the Disney Princess franchise is *Cinderella*. This film mirrors patriarchal cultural beliefs about the roles women should play in society. Like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella* was adapted from a previous Grimm Brothers story, which led the classic fairy tale to adopt many traditional gender roles and promote a male dominated family (O’Brien 160). The Walt Disney Company simplified the representations of gender in its films to make them more accessible and clear for young children to attain the ‘appropriate’ message (O’Brien 161). Once again Disney uses a dichotomy to highlight the qualities “a woman needs if she wants to get married, and therefore be happy and fulfilled” (O’Brien 161-2). Cinderella and her step sisters are polarized, where Cinderella is shown to be a woman of grace, beauty, charm and domesticity, while her evil step sisters are cruel, unattractive, whiny and do not contribute to housekeeping duties. In the end Cinderella’s possession of the ‘greater’ qualities allows her to get married, and the step sisters are left husbandless because they do not hold the attributes considered to make good housewives. After

all, it was Cinderella's exquisite beauty that initially gained the prince's interest when all three were at the ball.

Once again the Walt Disney Company creates a film that kills off the heroine's father before the start of the film, and has a female antagonist replace his role entirely with the stepmother in *Cinderella*. Pamela O'Brien's (162) textual analysis of *Cinderella* made a strong argument that this decision to eliminate a father reflects the film's affirmation of patriarchy. Since the father is absent due to death it makes it impossible for the father to do anything to better the situation, therefore the father can be regarded in a positive light. With the only parental figure in the film being an evil woman, it fosters a patriarchal idea that strong, independent women are evil and are unable to properly care for children (O'Brien 162). This notion is reaffirmed when the evil stepmother locks Cinderella in a room. Here her cruelty is highlighted, along with her inability to properly deal with her step daughter. Therefore, it is Cinderella's characteristics that are depicted in a more positive way for a woman to present herself. Even though Cinderella relies on male mice to come to her rescue, and for her Prince Charming to bring her happiness, her dependence on men is not considered negatively, but rather as a result of her positive characteristics of good housekeeping and beauty.

Aurora from *Sleeping Beauty* was designed very similarly to Cinderella where they are both "portrayed as helpless, passive victims who need protection" (Henke et al. 234). They are both presented as the 'perfect girl' who is kind, gentle and loving. Aurora's beauty instantly wins the affection of Prince Phillip, despite the fact that he thinks she is a poor peasant girl. Also, like the first two films discussed, *Sleeping Beauty* uses a polarized view of femininity where Aurora

is seen to uphold the characteristics of an ideal female, despite her weakness and her need for protection, while Maleficent, the evil sorcerer, is portrayed negatively despite all of her power.

Furthermore, “Aurora is obedient, beautiful, acquiescent to authority, and essentially powerless in matters regarding her own fate” (Henke et al. 236). Luckily when she expresses her dream, that “some day my prince will come” (*Sleeping Beauty*), it matches how her parents decided to map out her destiny as she was betrothed to a prince at birth. Henke et al., observed that throughout the film, Aurora plays no part in shaping her destiny and can take no action on her own behalf. She is passively guided to the castle where Maleficent places her under a spell. Aurora remains asleep for the remainder of the film, where everyone else battles over her future. When she awakes from the spell, all of her dreams have come true, because her prince has rescued her and they can now live happily ever after. The character of Aurora presents viewers with the idea that if you are a beautiful woman you will find love. She also suggests that if you are a passive woman who is without autonomy your only dream will still come true because someone in power establishes the conditions within which her dreams could be realized.

Continuing with the pattern of creating beautiful and passive heroines, the fourth Disney princess film, *The Little Mermaid*, has Ariel as a subordinate feminine character. However, early in the film, Disney attempts to present Ariel with signs of selfhood as she rebels against her father and dreams of exploring life on land. As the film progresses, Ariel’s independent and rebellious attitude is quickly lost, as her desires get fixed on attaining the love of Prince Eric and entering the world on land, which Sells (177) notes is aligned with being a white male space. In order to enter this white male space and pursue Prince Eric, Ariel forfeits

her voice. She is silencing herself in order to live in a masculine society, and sacrifices her curiosity and any independent qualities previously displayed in order to gain the love of a man. Ariel's yearning to explore the human world based on intellectual curiosity is quickly forgotten and she no longer rebels against the constraints of a patriarchal system, but she learns that she can only find true happiness within it (Henke et al. 237). This idea is further validated by Disney's continuous trend in vilifying the feminine power, Ursula. Ursula is the only strong female character in the film; however she is represented with a grotesque image and is reassigned to being a symbol of repression that keeps the system from functioning. In true Disney tradition, the filmmakers polarize the idea of femininity by demonstrating that "within Disney's patriarchal ideology, any woman with power has to be represented as a castrating bitch" (Sells 181).

Furthermore, just as Snow White and Cinderella require a cast of males to do most of the work, Ariel needs her male animal companions to beat the evil sea witch Ursula and gain her the prince (O'Brien 172). The film is filled with "patriarchal images of a helpless Ariel who must turn to her male animal friends for both intellectual and physical support" (O'Brien 173). Similar to the step-sisters in Cinderella, Ariel's sisters work as agents of patriarchy, mocking her for her desires of independence and for her desire to explore and learn. It is through these comments from Ariel's sisters that we learn the virtues that should be upheld by a desirable female, and these virtues are later confirmed because it is only after she abandons those characteristics that she finds love. "Once again Disney's heroine survives to find happiness thanks solely to the heroism and sacrifices of male characters, and without experiencing personal growth or empowerment" (O'Brien 173). This love however, is completely superficial. Ariel, like the

princesses before her, resembles the Barbie Doll figure. She is given a thin waist and a larger bust, playing into stereotypical images of women, where each princess is given an unrealistic body type, and illustrated to have immense beauty. Ariel is recognized to be the prettiest of her sisters, and although she is the youngest she is the first to find love. Ariel uses her physique, as she lacks a voice, to successfully win over the affection of Prince Eric. Ursula the sea-witch explains to Ariel: “You’ll have your looks, your pretty face, and don’t underestimate the importance of body language. The men up there don’t like a lot of blabber. They think a girl who gossips is a bore. Yes, on land it’s much preferred, for ladies not to say a word” (*The Little Mermaid*). The narrative of the film proves Ursula correct, where Ariel’s pretty face finds her love, and she submits herself willingly to being disempowered in hopes of finding happiness through a man.

Beauty and the Beast is the next Disney film to be a part of the princess franchise, even though Disney reworked the original story to make have Belle the “working class daughter of a village hobby inventor” (Craven 132). This change corresponds with Disney’s attempt to create a new sort of heroine, one that reinforces the goals of the intended audience. However, this goal fails as the intellectual interests of Belle are labelled as weird and the reason that she is marginalized. And although Belle seems to be more autonomous than the previous four princesses and exhibits a sense of self, her role in the narrative is focused on solving the Beast’s dilemma. In the beginning of the film we see the uniqueness of Belle’s character in how she resists the attention of the town’s most eligible bachelor (Gaston) and how she likes to spend her spare time reading. But rather than pursuing her dreams of experiencing “so much more than they’ve got planned” (*Beauty and the Beast*), her dreams and goals all seem to culminate when

she enters the castle, and takes up the domestic role offered to her by the Beast (Byrne & McQuillan 68)

Moreover, the audience is told early on that any attraction and attention given to Belle is based on her appearance, because as Gaston puts it she's "the most beautiful, so that makes her the best" (*Beauty and the Beast*). Like the princesses before her, Belle is acknowledged to be more beautiful than those around her, which proves once again to be the main ingredient in gaining the love and affection of others. Finally, although Belle initially demonstrates characteristics that do not perform feminine gender ideologies, in the end the trait that is continuously upheld by her is her maternal identity. Belle continuously puts others' needs ahead of her own. For instance, as noted by Henke et al. (239) and Jeffords (168), she exchanges herself to be a prisoner instead of her father, she constantly returns to care for the Beast and nurtures him to have more humane qualities, and cares for the objects that have come to life in the castle. In the end, Belle's role in the film is to turn the "childish Beast into a loving man" (Jeffords 169), which is only achieved through her goodness and of course her beauty.

Aladdin is the first film in the franchise to introduce a non-white princess, Jasmine. However, other than Jasmine's slightly darker skin and her almond shaped eyes, there are no other signifiers of racial difference (LaCroix 221). Jasmine easily fits in among the other existing princesses, and she is illustrated to be equally beautiful. Her beauty and availability drive the plot of the film, where many suitors are traveling to the castle to try to win her hand in marriage. Aladdin joins the league of men vying for her affection by getting the Genie to make him a prince, because "there's this girl—oh, but Genie. She's smart and fun and... Beautiful. She's got

these eyes that just...and this hair, wow...and her smile” (*Aladdin*). Like all the princesses before her, Jasmine’s beauty is what gains her the affection of the male lead. Her beauty, along with her claim to the palace, also has the male antagonist, Jafar, fighting for her affection. The contribution of her appearance to Jafar’s interest in Jasmine is made clear at the end of the film. He imprisons her, dresses her in a scandalous outfit (although it is not that much more revealing than her normal attire), and they share their first kiss.

In addition, Jasmine’s role in the film is secondary to Aladdin, the Genie and even Jafar. As a result, we do not get to witness many of Jasmine’s personality attributes. We do however get to see that Jasmine’s dissatisfaction with palace life dissolves the moment Aladdin enters the picture. And although she does appear to rebel against her father, ultimately she seeks his approval and guidance in her life choice. The audience thus learns that it is Jasmine’s beauty that gains her attention, and her obedience that allows her to fulfill her role as princess. Lastly, as a secondary character her role in the film is to allow Aladdin to “realize his dreams of becoming something other than a street rat” (Do Rozario 56), rather than Aladdin providing the means for Jasmine to realize her dream of escaping the palace.

Pocahontas is the most unique Disney princess in regards to her personality attributes. Like the other princesses, Pocahontas is beautiful. Or as Mel Gibson (the man who lends his voice to John Smith) put it “Pocahontas is a babe, isn’t she, you’ve got to say it” (Do Rozario 52). And of course, her beauty gains her the attention of John Smith because “Disney constructs Pocahontas as a mystical, mist-shrouded object of desire for the heterosexual white colonizer Smith. The film endows her a female body with the largest chest, the smallest feet and waist, the

biggest almond-shaped eyes, and the longest hair” (Buescher & Ono 145). Her aesthetics are what make her fit in among the Disney princesses, but she differs in one crucial way: Pocahontas does not end up with John Smith. The love story in this film takes a back seat to the story of Pocahontas and her personal destiny. Unfortunately, the message that is delivered through this film is that if you are a woman who chooses to pursue your own dreams, you will be left without the love of a man. *Pocahontas* then becomes a film that perpetuates the idea that a woman’s liberation will deny her marriage and motherhood (Vint 162). Furthermore, it would be hard to argue that Pocahontas is truly following her own dreams and is liberated, because “she chooses her loyalty to and the needs of her own people over her own desires” (LaCroix 225). So, where the other heroines find all their life’s fulfillment in a man, Pocahontas must refrain in a stereotypical portrayal of the ‘noble savage’ (LaCroix 225).

Mulan and *The Princess and the Frog* are the final two films in the franchise, both with limited literature written on them (none in the case of *The Princess and the Frog*). Like Pocahontas, both Mulan and Tiana vary from the princess mould only slightly, where “from Cinderella through Belle, Disney’s female protagonists easily could be the same characters with only slight variations in hair color. Pocahontas, too, varies only slightly in skin color” (Henke et al. 240). Gender stereotypes are challenged in *Mulan* where she becomes a female (disguised as a male) warrior. However, Mulan simply embraces the masculine view of a war, which works to cancel out any disturbance to traditional gender roles (Giroux, 102). Gender roles are further re-established as it becomes apparent that the men in Mulan’s life are moulding her action. In addition, we are reminded at the end of the film that Mulan is still just a girl who is looking for a man, and even though Mulan appears to be an independent character, “the ultimate payoff for her

bravery comes in the form of catching the handsome son of a general” (Giroux, 102). And once Mulan has a man, she returns to her rightful place as a woman under a man, she returns to her female clothing, and becomes a submissive girl which ultimately contradicts the idea that she was ever an independent woman.

Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog* is supposed to represent a career driven woman, who is so focused on her goals she will not let anything else get in her way. However, once you dig deeper into the story of the film, you have a girl who learns that she needs love but she only wants her dream. Tiana’s dreams are put on the backburner and are labelled less important in comparison to finding a man to love. What is worse yet is that the dream she is trying to fulfill is not her dream, but her father’s dream. Once again we have a female heroine who is guided by the men in her life. Tiana shifts from acting to serve her father to acting for Prince Naveen. Tiana then proves to follow the princess mould that was first established in 1937 for Snow White - that the heroine must be submissive and reliant on the men around her. Finally Tiana, although a bit of a spunky character, depicts a modern housewife. Tiana’s goals surround her cooking, and she is a caretaker for all those around her. Evidently, in the past seven decades, only minimal progress can be seen in how the personality attributes of the Disney heroines perform gender ideologies.

Finally, since the Disney Princess franchise has expanded the cultural representation of its characters, it is important to examine how this contributes to the messages being circulated in popular culture. Since domination cannot be properly understood through simply examining only one aspect of identity politics, my final research question relates to how representations of race

are used in the franchise, specifically considering how the films use their heroines to depict ideas of ‘whiteness’ and the ‘exotic other’. And just as representations of women have been extremely restricted by the Walt Disney Company, representations of race have also been limited. That is to say that white males have been constructed as civilized, rational and objective by exoticising and orientalisising of minority groups. By this construction of the other, whiteness is then seen as invisible, but also at the “all-too-powerful center in relation to which the margin is positioned” (LaCroix, 218). Media images have centered whiteness as normal and natural, and the problematic construction of race in the Walt Disney Company’s films has contributed to this issue.

A prime example of the Disney Princess franchise contributing to giving exoticized representations of the other is through the first film in the franchise that introduces a non-white heroine and hero: *Aladdin*. The twisted representation of Arab culture in this film proves incredibly problematic just by examining the lyrics to “Arabian Night” (the film’s opening song), which read “Oh I come from a land. From a faraway place. Where the caravan camels roam. Where they cut off your ear. If they don’t like your face. It’s barbaric, but hey it’s home” (*Aladdin*). The film continues with this presentation of popular stereotypes of Arab culture by depicting the villains as stereotypical Arabs: they have heavy accents, wear turbans, and have beards and large noses. Aladdin and Jasmine on the other hand are Anglicized, they have no accent, and their animation lacks ethnic features. After all, Aladdin was modeled after Tom Cruise (Giroux, 105). Evidently, depictions of race in the world of Disney are very confused, as racial stereotypes are used to design the film’s antagonists, and the protagonists are Americanized, which distinguishes them as good.

Moreover, in the film *Mulan* the Walt Disney Company repeats this negative racial portrayal of how it illustrates the protagonists versus the antagonists. The Chinese characters in the film have a nice wheat coloured skin tone (which is very similar to the skin tone of the white characters), while the Huns are depicted with a grey skin tone. The Huns are also given yellow eyes and are depicted as rampaging savages, who are illustrated so similarly that they support the stereotype that Asian groups are all identical. Once again the antagonists in the film are reminiscent of the stereotyped version of the culture represented, while the protagonists are Americanized to become Asian-American rather than creating characters that accurately depict the ethnicity at hand.

The pattern continues in *The Princess and the Frog*, where the villain in the film is a black voodoo magician. The stereotyping here is exaggerated because Prince Naveen is a racially ambiguous character, with an olive complexion and a mild Spanish accent. Although attention to interracial marriages should be considered a good thing within the franchise, their decision to do it in this film and then animate the other character in this way does not deliver a positive message. The main black male character in this film is therefore the evil voodoo magician, using this interracial relationship at the expense of finally having an admirable black male hero. And once again Disney creates the evil character to be more ethnic than their good characters. Lastly, the blackness of Dr. Facilier (the villain) rivals the whiteness of Prince Naveen, which invokes a racist and sexist notion (similar to the colonialist plot in *Pocahontas*), that black women need white men to save them from black men.

This Americanization of the heroines is evident because for the most part “Disney’s female protagonists easily could be the same characters with only slight variations in hair color” (Henke et al., 240). There is however, slight differentiation in the illustration of the coloured princesses versus the white princess. The white characters are all constructed with a porcelain skin tone and delicate features. They are “drawn with tiny waists, small breasts, slender wrists, legs and arms, and still move with the fluidity and grace of the ballet model used” (LaCroix, 220). The animation of Jasmine differs from them, but only in minor ways. Her skin tone is appropriately darker, and she has overly large almond-shaped eyes. However she still retains many white features, such as a small and delicate nose and mouth (LaCroix, 220). The same can be said of Mulan and Tiana, where these two princesses also retain many white features despite a different skin tone.

Another similarity between all the princesses, except Pocahontas, is their body types. Each princess has a small and delicate frame where they are petite to match the 5 foot 2, 95 lb women used as the original model of the characters (LaCroix, 219). Pocahontas, on the other hand, was given a physique reminiscent of a Barbie or a supermodel, which was apparently done in order to emphasize her athleticism. She was also drawn with more exotic features than the other characters; unfortunately she was modeled after an Asian American actress proving further discrepancies in the illustrations of the princesses (LaCroix, 221). This focus on athleticism is quite prominent with Jasmine, Mulan and Pocahontas. It would have probably also been emphasized in *The Princess and the Frog* if Tiana did not spend the majority of the movie in the form of a frog- which has its own racist implication. These three coloured princesses, Mulan and

Pocahontas in particular, are often seen in active sequences so their physical maturity and athletic abilities are highlighted.

The attention given to the physical body of the coloured princesses becomes problematic, as LaCroix (222) observed, when comparing the sexualized wardrobe of Jasmine and Pocahontas with the romanticized and demure dressing of all the white characters. Based on the exotic and sexual stereotyping the Walt Disney Company is playing into when dressing Jasmine and Pocahontas, it would not be unreasonable to assume that if Mulan did not spend the majority of the film in drag and Tiana did not spend the majority of the film as a frog, their costuming would have found a way to draw attention to the physical body. The white heroines are differentiated from the characters of colour, as the films work to sexualize and exoticize the non-white princesses. This means that the overall message delivered by the Walt Disney Company is that white characters are

more demure and conservative, while associating women of color with the exotic and sexual...the early characters (read White), Ariel and Belle, are weaker, more pristine, and largely incapable of action, whereas the later heroines, all women of color are depicted in such a way as to emphasize their bodies and physicality...They embody the exoticized Other woman-one whose sexualized presence is privileged above all else (LaCroix,222).

This corresponds with how racial minorities are typically depicted in the media, through a lens of distorted sexuality (Boyd, 71).

Furthermore, the invisibility of whiteness and the exoticized presentation of minority groups is used in the Disney Princess franchise to drive the actions of the heroines, where the white heroine's race is not connected to her choices in the narrative. Instead, white heroines' choices are credited to their character and personality attributes, while the heroines of colour

have a clear connection between their race and their behaviours (LaCroix, 224). This tendency is particularly obvious in *Pocahontas*, where she chooses her loyalty to her own people over her own desires and is also constructed as what Parekh (174) refers to as a ‘simple, nature-loving native’. Pocahontas’ behaviour in the film is “directly and clearly related to her ethnicity/Otherness and enacted in contrast to John Smith’s Whiteness” (LaCroix, 225). The contrast between the hero and heroine is also noteworthy, as Pocahontas and John Smith are the first interracial couple within the Disney Princess franchise (and due to the racial ambiguity of Prince Naveen, the only certain interracial couple). It is no surprise then that they are the only couple that does not stay together. The Walt Disney Company’s tendency towards racial and gender stereotyping is culminated in this decision, where their message that a female needs a man to live happily ever after, now has the added subtext that it must be within your own culture.

Discussion

Analyzing race and gender roles in the media has been an important consideration of scholars for years. Through this analysis, it seems that our work is far from over. As the media continues to expand, and its reach continues to grow, we cannot neglect the negative messages that are continuing to be delivered. The Walt Disney Company is a powerful corporation whose products are observed by numerous individuals worldwide. Since the films Walt Disney produces are specifically targeted at young impressionable children, it is increasingly important that we continue to deconstruct the messages being produced. Through this study it became clear that race and gender role stereotyping, which has been found pervasively within the media, continues to present itself.

After examining the ideologies promoted in the Disney Princess franchise it is obvious that the Walt Disney Company is continuing to favour racial and gender stereotyping within their films. Although the films within the franchise have developed over the course of more than seventy years, there remains little progress regarding the messages delivered in the films. Disney's wholesome image masks the presence of anti-feminist messages, telling females to rely on a man for their happiness. This antiquated idea is further reinforced by showcasing female and male characters that are created with traits that are considered either feminine or masculine. The 'wonderful world of Disney' also proved to develop an incredibly racist depiction of any non white groups.

Evidently, the Disney Princess franchise is littered with negative stereotypes and problematic ideas. It is incredibly disheartening to see a franchise that is specifically targeted at young girls containing messages which dictate that to be happy you must be beautiful, domestic, and attain the affection of a man. It is even more troublesome that a film such as *The Princess and the Frog*, which is considered to be a groundbreaking addition to the Disney Princess franchise with its addition of an African American princess, contains that same racist depiction of its characters that is present in some of the Walt Disney Company's earliest films.

It is rather shocking that in over seven decades there has been little progress within their films. Whether it is Aurora singing about how one day her prince will come, or Tiana being told that all she can hope for is to find her Prince Charming and dance off into her happily ever after, nothing has changed regarding Disney's depiction of a female's dependence on a heterosexual relationship. Whether it is Snow White being labelled fairest in the land or Pocahontas being described as a babe, the Walt Disney Company continues to reinforce the value of superficial beauty as a trait of fulfillment. Lastly, the first five films in the franchise construct whiteness to

be the norm, where race is invisible in the human characters, while the next four films in the franchise Americanize the protagonist of the film and fulfill racial stereotypes through the antagonists of the film. Clearly, Disney has yet to make any real progress in the concept of equality in their films, and by their continuous reinforcement and creation of both racial and gender stereotypes it does not seem like they are planning to change their overarching themes within the Disney Princess franchise. Kellie Bean sums this up perfectly, as she notes the problematic message remaining at the heart of the Walt Disney Company: “Whiteness and wealth signify authority and goodness; dark skin indicates evil; marriage represents the inevitable reward of the righteous and properly catechized woman” (Bean, 53).

It is obvious there is still a lot to be considered regarding the Walt Disney Company and their Disney Princess franchise. A larger sample for this study, including films outside of the Disney Princess franchise, would have better indicated the prevalence of stereotypes within the Walt Disney Company. Also, we should consider the sequels to the films in the franchise which did not receive as much attention. This will allow us to understand if it is perhaps the consistent use of these dominant ideologies that allows these films to be incredibly popular and successful, or if this is the only message being delivered to Disney’s audience. Furthermore, it would also be interesting to consider other popular animated films that are not created by the Walt Disney Company. This would also allow us to see what types of messages are pervasive to young audiences in general. After all, if most children oriented animated films are perpetuating negative stereotypes, then the Walt Disney Company should not receive full blame. I would hope that there are alternative gender role representations out there. Unfortunately, the messages being delivered independently throughout many media avenues support a cynical idea that the same messages dominate animated films. It seems that these stereotypes are popularly used to describe

the relationship between men and women, their roles, and characteristics, while also teaching viewers that racial stereotypes are acceptable, and the Americanization of racial groups is what makes them tolerable. Let us hope to see a turn in these racial and gender patterns, and let us also hope that this longstanding tradition of white heterosexual male dominance in the media will begin to fade throughout the next decade.

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