

Disney for the social construction of romantic love media essay



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The romanticized view of love today has its roots in the cumulative powers of various factors and social actors. Socialization starts from birth and children in particular are at the stage of growth in which they absorb and develop most of their cultural and social values. So while the media has become the villain in modernity, the social actors who shape the collective body of how society accepts romance and love are more worthy of examination.

We are analyzing Disney princess movies targeting young girls in particular because it promotes an individual identity conveyed through the products these girls eat from, dress in, play with and carry around. According to Fowler and McCormick, (1986) children who were “introduced to fairy tales at an age when the distinction between fantasy and reality is blurred” consequently accepted the unrealistic ‘once upon a time’ and the “happily ever after” construction of the fairy tale even after they grew up well into their adolescent years. This seed, which was planted when they were young, will bloom later in life when they are most romantically fertile.

Since it has been established that media influences children’s perceptions and that these perceptions can be carried into adulthood, analyzing the Disney princess films may shed some insight into adults’ romantic perceptions.

Our purpose is to investigate how the messages and themes from Disney’s most popular animated princess films have portrayed social actors like family, figures of authority and peers to viewers which will in turn craft the young viewer’s attitude as well as the development of their personal ideas of gender and love. These will be examined together since research has shown

that one's social conditioning and the perception of what love entails to the female gender are intertwined. (Chrisler and Smith, 2004)

The ability to have high quality intimate relationships is a keystone of adult mental health and wellbeing (Montgomery, 2005). Analyzing the themes and messages Disney princess films are sending to youth about the people who play a large portion of their socialization is important since these films will therefore take an indirect but significant role in the development of a child's acculturation and may influence children's and adults' approach to interacting within and starting a relationship or a family. On the sender side, the messages sent may be distorted by these hues placed before the child and on the receiver side the child trying to reciprocate may also tweak their behavior according to what they have perceived is right.

Literature review

1. Impact of media

Beyond merely Disney film media, there is merit in expanding our search for impact to television as well. In 2008 the Nelson Media Index found that the amount of television children from the age of 2 to 11 are watching hit an eight-year high. This mirrors similar findings in media consumption over the last two years across TV, Internet, Games and Mobile phones. (McDonough, 2009)

Studies have shown that heavy television and movie viewing is “ associated with an especially strong increase in stereotypic perceptions of males by girls” (McGhee & Furch, 1980) in particular. Also, “ children pay closer

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attention to, and show better retention of, the actions of same-sex characters.” (Maccoby, Wilson and Burton, 1958)

What this helps us realize is that children who are exposed to the media, especially film and more so television, learn gender roles and behavioral traits that are stereotypical in these mediums. The more they are exposed the more these perceived norms are reinforced, acted upon, and thus perpetuated through the creation of a set of shared values.

2. Social actors

Social actors are people or groups of people who are conscious, thinking, individuals who have the capacity to shape their world in a variety of ways by reflecting on their situation and the choices available to them at any given time. Depending on whether one believes in a functional structure of society or not, social actors may either the act according to structural pressure or actively construct their world through the day-to-day choices they make.

Social actors who socialize, define and shape the way children and consequently the youth and adults view and adopt the idea of romantic love include parents, peers, educators, and the mass media. Children learn by watching and imitating these role models.

However, parents do not normally discuss or exhibit behaviors or signs that depict or explain romantic love with their children at a young age. More often than not, the child’s first exposure to the concept of romantic love is through the mass media. Adults are fully capable of differentiating fiction from reality

but children are unable to do so fully. Lyle and Hoffman (cited in Liebert, Neale & Davidson, 1973) conducted an experiment in 1972 with first-, sixth-, and tenth grade students asking about the reality of television. About half the first graders felt that the people on TV were like the people they know, and large percentages of the older children believed TV characters were like real people.

If children actually believe that the characters they see in mass media behave the way real people behave, this is a source of concern. If the first basic set of values a child absorbs and replicates about such social behavior are not regulated or provided by parents or guardians, the initial platform from which other socialization agents build upon is not as unadulterated as once thought.

3. Attitude development

Media, which often depicts the family unit, is a source of dominant family values for society. The normative nuclear family in Singapore is defined as a family comprising “ a married couple, with or without unmarried children, and a parent or grandparent” according to the National Family Council and the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sport (2009). This family structure is also often portrayed in media like television for families.

However in the USA, only 45. 19% of the families have children and of these families, 29. 79% are single parent families. From 2000 to 2009 the amount of single parent families with only a father and children have risen by 30% while the amount of single parent families with only a mother have risen by

14%. These statistics by the U. S. Census Bureau (2011) do not begin to
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include the number of such families with children who are not married.

Interestingly enough, the Disney princess films also mirror the current state of affairs, making it more relevant to viewers. These similarities may influence children watching to adopt the same reactions characters have towards their families, which we will explore later.

Children develop their attitude towards their socialization agents from other socialization agents. A child's understanding of a family relationship or a peer relationship stems from them seeing other families, and how others interact. These relationships when portrayed by the media, in particular Disney, are deeply steeped in gender play, racial and cultural stereotypes.

Liebert et al. (1973) and other social scientists have regarded television programs as a set of instructions for children to learn and imitate the behavior he/she sees portrayed by the people on TV. According to the social learning theory, imitation of models is the most important element in how children learn gender appropriate behavior (Papalia, Gross, & Feldman, 2003).

4. Why Disney?

Disney is not about promoting an idealized worldview through entertainment or being a source of entertainment and joy to children around the world. Disney is a powerful socialization tool as we have elaborated on above. There is a need for us to sit up and take notice of the messages told, especially since these films are often popular as adult feature films, yet not held to such strict criticism.

Disney movies have great pervasiveness and influence, almost on an equal standing as other sources of socialization. Disney characters are familiar to millions of children and, like one analyst of the Disney observed, Fathergoose (1954) estimated as early as 1954 that a third of the world's population has seen at least one Disney film. Beyond popularity, Disney's tangible presence in other aspects of life warrants a deeper investigation. In fact, " these films inspire at least as much cultural authority and legitimacy for teaching specific roles, values, and ideals than more traditional sites of learning such as public schools, religious institutions and the family" (Giroux, 1995, p. 25).

Disney provides more than movies; the spin offs include educational materials, books, cassette tapes, videos, cartoons, and computer software along with clothes and toys for use. The Disney Channel is a major television network and was ranked first for the 63rd consecutive month in the Kids 6 to 11 demographic and for the 62nd straight month amongst teens aged 9 to 14 by the May 2010 Nielsen ratings. (Disney Channel May 2010 Ratings Highlights, 2010) Disney Channel was also ranked the second most watched cable channel among total viewers during primetime, behind USA Network in first place with an average of 2 million people. (Cable Ratings: May 31 – June 6, 2010)

According to Giroux (2004) Disney's pervasive power is so great that " Disneyland is more ' real' than fantasy because it now provides the image on which America constructs itself". In addition to all of the above, Disney is now also taking a more direct and active role in education by sponsoring

teacher of the year awards, provides scholarships, internships, and financial aid in exchange for allow their content to permeate the education system.

Disney plays an enormous role “ in shaping individual identities and controlling the fields of social meaning through which children negotiate the world”. Yet, people are more willing to suspend critical judgment about Disney films, as they are meant for children.

Themes and messages

We analyzed seven Disney Princess movies grouped three time eras. Snow White, Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty compromised the old movies from 1937 to 1959. The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast and Aladdin constitute the transitioning movies from 1989 to 1992. Lastly, Tangled and Princess and the Frog were the two movies grouped as the current or new movies from 2009 and 2010.

With regards to social actors there were two main actors we will be focusing on, the family and the peers. Narrowing down our focus to these two will help extract the relevant themes and derive its tacit messages from there on. The portrayals of how the protagonist (and at times the antagonist) learn and react to/from various social actors lend legitimacy to certain ideas about how people should approach romantic love.

The portrayal of family as an obstacle to the protagonist’s desires

In general, there has been a great shift in the portrayal of the family in Disney Princess movies over time. The In the old movies, there was a distinct lack of paternal figures of authority. Sleeping beauty, Snow White and <https://assignbuster.com/disney-for-the-social-construction-of-romantic-love-media-essay/>

Cinderella all lacked a paternal figure but had many interactions with their mothers or female guardians. In this era, it is interesting to note that all the antagonists were female, be it Maleficent from Sleeping Beauty, the Queen from Snow White or the wicked stepmother and stepsisters from Cinderella. Also note that of the three, two were actually the protagonist's maternal figures.

In the transition era, only the paternal figures were present for the female protagonist and the maternal figure has been replaced completely. However in this era, the fathers who care for their children are portrayed as unable to understand the wants of their child and end up losing control over them despite having their best interests at heart. The sultan wants Jasmine to be married to a prince so she can be taken care of and thus locks her up in the palace, king Triton wants Ariel to stay away from the dangers out of the sea and Maurice encourages Belle to mingle more with the townsfolk, like Gaston, when she complains about there being no one to talk to. The antagonist is now removed from the family but over the course of the films hold the father hostage at some point, forcing the protagonist to choose between her family and her desires.

In the new movies, there is again a return to the lack of fatherly figures that are either completely not present (in the case of Rapunzel) or dead (in the case of Tiana). Those who are present (Charlotte's father) are portrayed as existing only to fulfill the desires of their children.

While it would be far-fetched to say Disney was ahead of its time by consistently portraying incomplete families for viewers to identify with,

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promoting the idea that a family structure in which the primary caretaker is an obstacle to one's pursuit of happiness regardless of parental intention is not.

Parents or guardians are unable make decisions for their charges

Most prevalent in the transitioning movies but it is important to note that the children who grew up with those movies are now the adolescents or young adults who are reaping the fruits of their socialization process.

The Little Mermaid, Aladdin, Sleeping Beauty and to a smaller extent Beauty and the Beast have their respective parental figures trying to direct the path of their children's romantic pursuit which runs contrary to their child's desires. The theme of parental control leading into the protagonists rebelling is replicated time and again in each movie; some of the protagonists react with passive resistance like Aurora who did not leave the castle but refused to leave her room to meet her prospective husband whilst others like Rapunzel, Ariel and Jasmine took active steps to free themselves from their parent's control by going so far as to run away.

The idea that rebellion is the way in which one ought to react to parental control is perpetuated with each movie and weaves itself into shoring up the victimization of the protagonist without adequately addressing the legitimate concerns parents have for their children. A child watching this from a single perspective with no depth of thought can easily be swayed to adopting a flawed scheme of reasoning with regards to how one ought to respond to a specific situation.

Peer influence on decision making is negligible

For each of the movies since the transition era the protagonist has been accompanied and aided by at least one friend. This friend is the closest thing to a peer the viewers can identify with beyond the protagonist. These peers are supposed to aid and support the protagonist through all their schemes regardless of risk or feasibility. The danger of such an observation is compounded when paired with the fact that most of these scheme run contrary to the wishes of the protagonist's parents or guardians. Sugar coating this as friendship and delivering it to children who may not be able to differentiate showmanship from reality is dangerous on a few levels.

First, it creates an unrealistic expectation of one's peers and how much one can expect a friend to support you. When these expectation are not met social relationships may suffer as the self-centric princess admirer cannot reconcile the idea that one's friends might not support or even discourage you with the expectation of blind loyalty.

Secondly, it creates a scenario in which one is left without a voice of reason. The protagonists are headstrong and "follow their heart" regardless of circumstance or consequence. In the movies, peers of the protagonist often only pitch in to help when the protagonist has found themselves in an irrecoverable situation. In the Little Mermaid for example, Sebastian and Flounder do their best to discourage Ariel from visiting Ursula but switch to helping her once she has already made the transition from mermaid to human because there is nothing else they can do but try and help Ariel

succeed or be lost to Ursula forever. Likewise in the older films, the fairy godmother only appears when all other options are exhausted.

Possible effects

Building on what was explored in the sections above, if children are left to watch and absorb the tacit messages the Disney princess movies express, the risk of them imitating what they watch is very high. This can lead to a few problems.

Firstly, children may develop a rebellious attitude towards parental control under the guise of personal freedom. Once they begin to conceive of one's parents as an obstacle instead of a guardian or a source of guidance the next response to parental control is to find ways around them. Left unchecked, parents will lose their ability to speak into the lives of their children as a figure of authority and wisdom because children are more inclined to discount their parent's input.

Secondly, children may be influenced to think that their decision to be rebellious is justified so long as they achieve their personal desires. In Disney princess movies, these acts of rebellion do pay off in the end and the protagonist's parental figures are made to step down and recognize the protagonist's choice as legit. This might promote the idea that rebellion is alright because in the end when one succeeds one's parents and guardians will recognize the merit of your choice.

Lastly, children may become more self-centric and cripple their ability to interact with others socially. Self-centric behavior is divisive and will cause

social isolation if they hold on to the unrealistic expectations of friendship which media displays.

Above all, the indoctrination of this identity in children will help Disney to sell their products. Parents who spend on clothes, toys and services while motivated by their children's desires help fund and bring the princess dream to life. Later in life when these children grow older and become financially independent they can either contribute likewise on their own or pass on what they deem appropriate to their children.

Cumulative effects on romantic love construction

When these children grow up their understanding of romantic love will come from two main sources: their observations of other couples, starting with their parents and the observations of the media they have consumed.

Gender roles notwithstanding, Disney movies set unrealistic standards as to what love is supposed to be like and what qualities the ideal partner should possess. Having already been disenchanted by their parents, they start out without a realistic example as to what a healthy relationship would look like beyond the confines of a screen.

Without an accurate source for reference even if one manages to find a partner, the discrepancy between what one would expect from a real relationship and one which ends once the curtain falls will become painfully clear. Many how cannot accept or tolerate this end up breaking up with their partners.

With a limited social circle to begin with, looking for a partner is hindered. Add the influence of ingrained stereotypes and the young adults pool of viable options continue to dwindle. The situation is exacerbated when one takes into account the high standards and expectations of one's partner one are looking for and there is a propensity for one to be unable to find a partner.

Conclusion

The Disney princess movie portrayals of family and peers is fundamentally flawed and isolated from reality. This creates an unbridgeable gap when viewers try to apply and emulate the attitudes, identities and characters they see on screen in real life. Projecting the forced implementation of these ideals on reality forecasts a bleak future for those children.

One response is to inculcate a culture of monitoring within parents to recognize and teach their children to differentiate between fantasy and reality. It is feasible but difficult to restrict children from being exposed to these influences at a young age until they are at a stage of their cognitive development in which they can differentiate fantasy and reality for themselves.