

# Analysis of Gender Stereotypes in Disney Female Characters

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## ABSTRACT

Disney company has already released many female-led animated films, but its films have gender stereotypes towards females. Since 1937 Disney released its first princess film Snow White, Disney has always created beautiful princesses who are attached to men. Although Disney and fans of Disney asserted that Disney deviated from this trend since 2013 by releasing Frozen(2013), Zootopia(2016), and Moana(2016), these movies still have aspects of gender stereotype in veiled ways. This thesis aims to utilize literature review and case study to analyze the reasons the female characters in Disney films, which are the result of gender stereotypes and predictions to the trend of Disney portraying its following female characters. According to my analysis, gender stereotypes still exist both in Disney movies released before 2013 and that after 2013. Female characters have not escaped the shackles of male control, not only in appearance but also in action.

**Keywords:** *Disney, Disney princess, Gender stereotype, feminism, Female empowerment*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the Disney company released its first animated film in 1937, no matter how feminism developed, its female characters are always passive, ideal, and cater to male characters. The aesthetic standards of its female characters are obliged to be white-skinned, slim, and be decently dressed. Although Frozen, Zootopia, or Moana, which are conferred a title of female independence released in recent years, aren't an active revision but to ingratiate the audience due to public opinions. Disney just utilizes an obscure way to continue portraying female characters who are inferior to male characters. Although the audience can see that the image of Moana is not a traditional aesthetic standard; Frozen conveys sisterhood rather than a love story. But these female characters cannot pursue their own wishes or escape pain freely. Although the audience can see Moana's body image escape from the traditional aesthetic standards and Frozen sends a message of sisterhood instead of a love story, these female characters cannot freely use their independence to pursuing what they want or escaping what they suffered. They always have to rely on male characters to help them reach the goal. This could have potentially negative consequences to the young female audience

who is immersed in these gender stereotypes films in their childhood.

This thesis aims to use literature review and case study to analyze reasons the female characters in Disney films are the result of gender stereotypes and suggestions to the trend of Disney portraying its following female characters. The thesis will analyze the appearances and behaviors of Disney female characters before 1937 and utilize films released after 2013, like Zootopia to reveal how gender stereotypes embody in Disney's films. The author will reveal the nature of the gender stereotypes of Disney female characters and propose a vision for the future development of Disney movies.

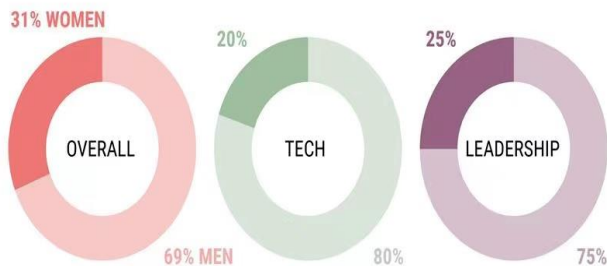
## 2. THE DEFINITION OF TRADITIONAL GENDER STEREOTYPE

Gender bias is the stereotypical attitude or prejudice that people have about a particular gender. The concept of gender stereotype also refers to the "feminization" and "masculine" social construction, which is based on the power and social cultural standards of women and men. The social construction considered to be "feminized" and "masculine" is based on the power and

social cultural standards of women and men[1].

## Women in Google's Global Workforce

Google released 2017 diversity data for their workforce. It shows that while the percentage of women employees at the company is increasing, men are still overrepresented, especially in tech and leadership roles.



Source: GOOGLE'S EEO-1 DATA  
GRACE DONNELLY/FORTUNE

Figure 1. Women in Google's Global Workforce

As we can see from above graph, it shows that less female workforce is in need compared to male workforce. To a certain degree, it indicates that male is stronger than female.

Male has been always defined as traits of strength and achievement. For instance, in the workplace, Gender stereotypes can work against or disadvantage women's ability in the hiring process, and women are more likely to be treated unfairly. Management and similar leader positions are often defined to be "masculine", which means they are regarded to be aggressive, competitive, powerful, and independent. These personalities do not conform to the perceived traditional female characters according to gender role stereotypes. Thus, women will face more challenges and obstacles in the workplace[2]. Since females are more associated with weakness and inferior to men, gender stereotypes in films can be defined as women characters are affiliated with male characters. Women character's appearance and behaviors are under the control of male characters, obviously or imperceptibly.



Figure 2. Disney's princess film, Beauty and the Beast

In Disney's princess films, such as Beauty and the Beast, they construct characters that combine gender stereotype[3]. Disney does not overturn such a male-centrist and female dependent on male's way of creating characters, even though it is a princess film, and its audiences are mostly female. In Disney films, male interests, expectations, power, and leadership are consistently out competed for those of female characters, who must defer to the male direction and wait for male characters to save them[4]. Therefore, Female characters must do things that men would not traditionally do. Researchers found that in the 16 most popular Disney animated feature films from 1937 to 1995, Disney women were more likely to do housework than male characters, and men were more likely to have more authority than women[5]. Pointed out that Disney's female characters are sensual, feminine, and white or whitewashed. Disney princesses not only need to cater to the male characters in the movie but also need to meet the standards of men in the real world for their ideal partners. Women in real life will imitate these princesses and use princesses as their aesthetic standard. Also, the inevitable plot in almost every Disney film would show that the female characters were in trouble and male characters would show up and solve all the problems. It can be found that Disney still couldn't escape from the traditional love story. Disney through depriving or weakening of women characters' abilities to show male's ability, which to form an unbalanced relationship.

### 3. THE DEFINITION OF NEW GENDER STEREOTYPE

The definition of a new gender stereotype is that Disney avoids directly objectifying or making female characters dependent on male characters, but Disney still discriminates against men in terms of their attitudes toward women. Disney limits the female characters' abilities to pursue their own dreams or overly exaggerates women's abilities to deliberately prove to the audience that it was a feminist film, instead of it is a good story but the main character happens to be female. For instance, Disney released Frozen in 2013, they claim that they had already escaped from the traditional bias because it is a story about sisterhood, instead of the traditional love story that the prince saved the princess. However, scholars have pointed out that Frozen is not a radical revision of Disney's stereotype of female characters but using a less radical way to portraying dependent and delicate characters[6]. Although Elsa and Anna are more independent and stronger than the previous female characters, they still can't utilize their independence to escape or challenge her position as an object [6]. Frozen formulaic its female characters and its female characters were created for the purpose of a female-themed movie. Disney intentionally emphasizes the strength of women in films

after 2013. Females should be complex and multifaceted, each with their own personal vulnerabilities and traumas and flashpoint, rather than being locked into a stereotype that women are all like this. For instance, Captain Marvel's heroine is completely mythologized, lacking a human arc of light. The deliberate emphasis on female empowerment, or the fear of male empowerment, is not a successful film with a female protagonist.

**4. CASE STUDY OF ZOOTOPIA**

Disney released Zootopia in 2016. Disney has moved away from the traditional female role of princess, instead, Disney portrayed a brave, adventurous, and insightful bunny officer, Judy. The breakthrough is Disney made a change in the appearance of female characters. Disney stops portraying a charming princess image but creating a bunny act as a policewoman. Judy is the first noncarnivore who is qualified to become an officer and she is a professional woman, which means she has her own career and unlike the previous princess who was born into or married into the royal family or aristocratic family. Also, Judy and Nick, the male character of Zootopia, their relationship is not bound by love. It seems that Zootopia is a film about women pursues their dreams independently while cooperating with men equally. But Zootopia is still a film gender stereotype because following of reasons.

First, Disney set Judy's upbringing in Bunnyburrow has made her too naive and overly trusting to solve a major missing animal case that has bedeviled the Department of Animal Protection. Thus, a more capable male character is bound to emerge. However, Nick exhibits bossy, egotistical behavior which lets him become a questionable partner. Their relationship established significant gender power differences[7]. In the whole film, Nick always belittles Judy's family background, optimism, and ways of solving problems with crude and superior attitudes, although Nick himself is a tax dodger. When Judy invited Nick to join her and unmasked the conspiracy of Zootopia, Nick denied her to the community and utilized a condescending attitude to accept. The acceptance of cooperation with Judy is only to drive the story forward instead of appreciating the ability of Judy.

Second, Zootopia just got rid of the bond of marriage and continues to make the female role dependent on the male by the bond of friendship. The nature of female characters relying on men to succeed has not changed. Also, although Disney didn't point out clearly Nick and Judy were in the couple relationship, but their dubious relationship in the film and Disney's publicity after the event, cannot convince the public that they're just friends. Thus, although Zootopia is a female-led animated film, female characters still cannot

get rid of attachment to male characters, just like Judy is always inferior to Nick.



Figure 3. The photograph of Judy and Nick in the film

**5. DISCUSSION**

According to the analysis, Disney has a long way to go when it comes to gender equality in its films, especially for its female characters. There are three suggestions for Disney how to portray a female character without gender stereotypes. Above all, Disney needs to show the audience the range of female characters' ages, not promote age anxiety, and embrace the positive aspects of aging. Disney should admit that although teenage women are attractive in terms of physical attractiveness and so on, women of every age, including the middle-aged and the old, also have their own charms. Thus, Disney won not bring age anxiety to the female characters, which means Disney radically eliminate gender stereotypes. Besides, instead of over hyping women's abilities to appeal to female audiences, Disney should learn to tell a story that the main characters happen to be a woman

**6. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the fact shows no matter how feminism developed from 1937 till now, gender stereotypes in Disney's films still exist. Disney just changed from the traditional gender stereotype to a new gender stereotype which is obscure. According to the previous literature review and case study, it is obvious to see that female characters cannot get enough respect and are always dependent on male characters. They

can't be free to pursue their dreams. Disney can't create a richer and livelier female character without being dependent on males or exaggerating the strength of women. Disney is just to encounter nowadays women's needs to movies in feminine colors commercially and mechanically. The audience wants to see a good and inspiring story whose main characters are exactly female, instead of films created to highlight women's rights intentionally.

In the future, the author eagerly hopes for Disney to create a real feminist film that can show the diversity, especially recognizing the positive aspects of women being aged and molding multiple beauties instead of just creating sweet, innocent, slim young girls, who let young girls think it is a formula for beauty. Also, the author hopes Disney creates male characters that are more respectful of women and never glorify women by belittling men.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

First and foremost, I would like to show my deepest gratitude to my teachers and professors in the whole program, who have provided me with valuable guidance in every stage of the writing of this thesis.

Further, I would like to thank my parents and all my friends for their encouragement and support. Without all their enlightening instruction and impressive kindness, I could not have completed my thesis.

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