



# Evolution of Disney Princesses and Its Impact on Young Girls

Zihan Jin

University of Toronto Mississauga: 3359 Mississauga Road, Mississauga, ON, L5L 1C6,  
Canada

Email: sandara.jin@mail.utoronto.ca

**Abstract.** *Background:* The media has a significant influence on children's gender perception. Disney film is one of the most popular children's media, and the content about gender roles conveyed in the film will become an essential factor affecting children's gender cognition. In addition, the princess series in Disney movies covers many depictions of gender stereotypes, which have a more profound impact on children, especially girls. *Methods:* A secondary research study was conducted to investigate the changes in gender roles in Disney princess films and the subsequent effects on the formation of young girls' gender perceptions. *Results:* The study found a positive correlation between the evolution of women in Disney films and the impact of stereotypes on young girls. Moreover, young girls' perception and pursuit of the "traditional" princess image can have a negative impact on them.

**Keywords:** Disney Princesses, girls, self-objectification and self-sexualization.

## 1 Introduction

According to Coyne et al., the media can develop and reinforce stereotypes about gender impressions of children, especially girls <sup>[1]</sup>. Although gender attitudes may change with age, preschool is a critical developmental period for children as they begin to understand their relationships with others and exhibit gender differences <sup>[2]</sup>. The children's media that preschool girls are most exposed to is Disney princess movies, one of the most popular media and merchandise for young girls <sup>[1]</sup>. Because parents generally prefer "safe" Disney princesses to other highly sexualized media models <sup>[2]</sup>. In addition, with 13 official princesses, Disney sends a powerful message about gender norms and roles as young girls see the princess not only as a movie character but also as a loving friend, a cultural symbol of childhood, and an idealized symbol of girlhood. Thus, they worship and tend to imitate the image and behavior of the princess <sup>[2]</sup>. In other words, Disney princess images greatly influenced young girls' stereotypical attitudes toward gender impressions. The lives of young girls are inspired by the ubiquitous influence of princesses <sup>[2]</sup>. Their view of the princess will also become the standard by which they hold themselves to a strict standard.

The plots and characters in Disney films have changed with the changes in

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surrounding culture and times. The transformation of female roles in Disney films has been divided into three stages. First, the original image of Disney princesses was the typical damsel in distress and very family-oriented, such as Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty. The second phase transformed female characters into rebellious and ambitious characters, such as Ariel, Mulan, and Rapunzel. The third transformation portrays female characters as independent and free, such as Merida, Anna, and Elsa [3]. Nevertheless, because roles are derived from the socio-cultural context in which people live, even if roles have been slightly upgraded in recent years, it does not represent a paradigm shift in ideology or how women are perceived [4]. So, the changing characters of Disney princess films cannot represent the success of the transformation of gender stereotypes. In addition, the Disney Princess films also involve a range of merchandise and accessories. However, the current research mainly focuses on constructing and transforming the princess image. More analysis is needed on the film's supporting characters, the story plot's transformation, and the surrounding products' state.

Therefore, this paper will fill the academic gap and comprehensively discuss whether the transformation of the princess image, supporting characters' image, and plot in movies can reduce the influence of traditional princess images on young girls' stereotyped gender cognition. Moreover, how do these gender stereotypes affect young girls' appearance, behavior, dreams, and stereotype recognition? This paper will use the method of secondary studies and focus on two research questions: What is the relationship between the evolution of Disney films and the impact of stereotypes on young girls? How will the perception and pursuit of the princess image affect young girls? To explore whether Disney movies, as popular children's media, are beneficial media information for children's gender cognitive development.

## **2 The relationship between the evolution of Disney films and the impact of stereotypes on young girls**

### **2.1 The transformation of the princess**

First, the image of the princess has changed. As mentioned above, the princess is divided into three stages of evolution. The traditional princesses, such as Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty, has the appearance characteristics of being beautiful, thin, young, with fair skin and big eyes, and is accompanied by the character traits of being weak, helpless, fragile, romantic, controlled, sometimes troublesome, waiting for the prince's protection and rescue. However, with the rise of feminism, Disney's portrayal of heroines in its princess movies has also been affected [5]. Compared with the traditional princess images, later princess films featured more gender-neutral and broke stereotypical female characters, such as Elsa, Merida, and Mulan, to cater to the market and the public [6]. For example, Merida is a representative late princess who conforms to the characteristics advocated by feminism and is different from traditional ones, showing the audience another perspective of female characters. The first is her appearance characteristics. She has the most noticeable "large mass of messy curly orange hair" [5], different from the traditional princess's smooth, neat, beautiful, meticulously

groomed, and dressed hair. Secondly, she has the character traits of self-confidence, strong, firmness, brave, and daring to challenge and take risks. So different from the traditional princess who loves housework, she likes challenging and adventurous sports such as horse riding, archery, and rock climbing <sup>[5]</sup>. Unlike classic princess movies, which promote appearance and weaken personal characteristics, Merida has a rough appearance, strong personality traits, and "masculine" hobbies, representing a breakthrough in the image of Disney princesses to shift gender stereotypes.

## 2.2 The transformation of the plot

Simultaneously, the storyline transition matches the princess's image transformation from a princess with no thoughts or goals following love to a fearless pursuit of freedom, family, and friendship. The traditional storylines begin with the female protagonist living in a miserable and even persecuted environment. Then they all hope a man will appear and rescue them from their original lousy life. At the end of the story, the princess met such a man as she wished, often a high-status prince, and they married and lived happily ever after. Such storylines tell young girls that clinging to a man and getting married can be a meaning of a woman's life and a path to happiness. However, in the later princess movies, the storyline no longer takes the search for love as the main line. For example, princess Merida of *Brave* wants to be a respected woman and have the freedom to choose her future. She opposes the need for women to marry under traditional social concepts and actively strives for control over their lives. The storyline also focuses more on family relationships than a love story <sup>[5]</sup>, which means that Disney princess movies reduce the portrayal of the binding relationship between love or marriage and women through the transformation of the later princess image and encourage young women to pursue themselves bravely.

## 2.3 The transformation of the supporting characters

In addition to the change in the image of the princess, the image of the supporting characters in the film also has changed. Villains in early princess movies were primarily female, such as Snow White's evil stepmother. The image of a female villain tends to be old, ugly, jealous, unattractive, and powerful, who compete with and takes advantage of the princess <sup>[5]</sup>. In contrast, the positive characters are primarily males, such as the huntsman who frees Snow White and the seven dwarves who care for her. Furthermore, the image of the male character is to use his masculinity to save the princess, brave and handsome <sup>[5]</sup>. The portrayal of villains and decent images intensifies the spread of gender stereotypes --- women are negative and easily jealous devil images, while men are positive and brave angel images. At the same time, depicting the appearance of the female villain as old and ugly also conveys the view that only young and beautiful women are correct and worthy of liking. However, in later films, such as *Mulan*, *Pocahontas*, and *Frozen*, The villains have all become male, reducing the deterioration of the female image. Therefore, the evolution of Disney movie supporting characters, princess characters, and story plots reduce the portrayal and promotion of gender stereotypes in films.

## 2.4 Whether Evolution Works on Young Girls' Gender Perceptions

This section is to further explore whether the reduction of stereotypes in films could reduce the influence of stereotypes on young girls. According to Stover, the transformation of Disney's princess image was designed to transform the desire for a prince into a desire for a father's approval [7]. For example, Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog* is the only princess with a formal job--- a restaurant waitress. Compared with other princess image settings: the descendant of the royal family (princess or queen) or the unmarried housewife figure [5], the job represents the progress of the Disney princess image. Because this means that women are no longer dependent on men, and the value of their lives is no longer on marriage but on proving themselves through their efforts and abilities. However, Tiana's job and dream are to inherit and stick to her father's ideals [7]. Thus, although the meaning of her life is no longer the marriage, it becomes pursuing her father's liking or approval. Other mid-to-late princess movies also emphasize a happy ending that the princesses gain their father's approval, such as *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin*, and *Mulan*. It still represents the need for women to be validated by a patriarchal culture. It only substitutes one set of stereotypes for another, masquerading as real progress [7]. Thus, changes in the traditional image of the princess and the storyline will not reduce the influence of stereotypes on young girls.

Moreover, newer, less gender-stereotypical princesses often have a feminine appearance in Disney merchandise [1], which proves the distinction between Disney merchandise and movie characters, so the image of the princess has not entirely changed in the Disney Princess line. For example, *Mulan*, who abandons the demure media attributes of traditional Disney princesses, bravely and intelligently saves the country [7], takes off her armor and dresses up in a pink, feminine Chinese costume. First, pink and dresses are considered feminine elements, which boys often reject [6]. So *Mulan* was replaced by a pink Chinese dress, representing the transmission and deepening of gender stereotypes. Secondly, *Mulan* and other new princesses' strong, independent, and brave spirit also lost their "thoughts" and "combat power" because they were sold on the counter as dress-up dolls with traditional princesses and gained these gentle and passive qualities of traditional princesses. Therefore, the content of Disney films acknowledges feminist progress, while the marketing strategy paradoxically conveys post-feminist ideals in reverse. These actions present a problematic concept akin to "post-feminist strength-in-beauty ideology", referring to encouraging girls to associate confidence or competence with their appearance [7]. So girls would think that changing their appearance to something attractive will give them confidence and autonomy. Furthermore, such thoughts lead to self-objectification, which will be discussed in detail below.

Finally, a study found that although gender portrayals have become more complex, traditional gender role stereotypes for girls and women are still strong. Because earlier Disney films, such as *Snow White* or *Cinderella*, are still very popular with children, their messages are still relevant to children's learning and development [1], and there is a correlation between the number of mentions of beauty and the popularity of stories [8], such as the number and usage of adjectives to describe a woman's appearance, the degree of emphasis placed on the importance of appearance. For example, among the

Disney princess movies, Cinderella has the most references to female appearance, so the Cinderella character has the highest number of books and movies about it [8]. Therefore, the transformation of the Disney princess image does not reduce its influence on young girls' gender cognition because the traditional princess image still greatly influences young girls.

### **3 The influence of young girls' pursuit of the traditional princess image**

This paper will analyze the influence of young girls' pursuit of the traditional princess image on them from four aspects: the promotion of the importance of appearance, the pursuit of beauty and thinness, Insensitivity to the male gaze, and the identification of stereotyped gender concepts.

#### **3.1 Self-objectification**

According to Trekels & Eggermont, boys evaluate and objectify girls simply because of their appearance 2.5 times per hour on popular TV shows on the Disney Channel [9]. For example, in *Snow White*, the hunter lets her go because of her beauty; the prince falls in love with her after seeing her face; and the Dwarfs do not want to bury the dead Snow White because she is so beautiful. These important plots full of turning points prove that a man loses his mind in front of a beautiful woman, and women can get men's sympathy, help, and love through their appearance. Through the depiction of the importance of women's appearance in these plots, Disney princess movies not only objectify women but also affect young girls' perceptions of princess images, further affecting the understanding of women's images. The traditional image of a princess that young girls perceive is that all of her features are based on her physical beauty, and the image of a princess is what young girls aspire to be [2]. Therefore, young girls will think that appearance is a prerequisite for all the qualities through Disney movies; thus, leading them to self-objectification, a process in which girls internalize observers' perceptions of their bodies and learn to see themselves as objects whose value is measured primarily by their appearance. Many studies have shown that self-objectification is associated with a range of negative outcomes for young girls, including eating disorders, sexual dysfunction, attitudes toward cosmetic surgery, and depression [10]. Therefore, the plots that emphasize the importance of appearance in Disney princess movies objectify women and further affect young girls' perception of female images, thereby unconsciously self-objectifying, which will harm their lives and health.

#### **3.2 Low body self-esteem**

At the same time, the early involvement of princesses may predict lower body self-esteem in childhood or adolescence [1], usually defined as a low self-assessment of a person's body image and appearance. Lower body self-esteem of young women means they are more likely to be influenced by the media and thus become interested in

cosmetic surgery<sup>[11]</sup>. According to the research<sup>[1]</sup>, children desire a slim body shape as early as preschool, with girls as young as five showing concerns about becoming fat, a sign of young girls' self-objectification and low body self-esteem that can lead them to diet, weight loss, and plastic surgery.

While cosmetic surgery has traditionally been associated with middle-aged patients, many of these days are younger. The survey report shows that the percentage of college students interested in future cosmetic surgery is 21% to 43%, and young women are more interested in cosmetic surgery than men<sup>[12]</sup>. Moreover, the change in young girls' attitudes towards cosmetic surgery relates to the Disney princess movie. Cinderella has the most profound influence, who gets a magical transformation with the fairy god-mother's help, and then the prince falls in love with her and save her from a miserable life. Since the 1980s, Cinderella stories have increasingly been told through popular cultures, such as advertising, media images, and television shows<sup>[8]</sup>. The onscreen transformation is framed as a Cinderella-like fairy tale, in which unhappy people are transformed into happy ones by cosmetic surgery, a quick, easy, and painless way to alter their appearance and match their true inner selves to their unreal outer selves<sup>[13]</sup>. More specifically, people think they can gain confidence, fulfill their childhood dream and the meaning of life, and find self-reflection through cosmetic surgery to change their appearance. For example, TV shows, *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover* use this fairy tale metaphor to show women a Cinderella-like transformation and position themselves as a woman's (girlhood) dream come true after plastic surgery<sup>[8]</sup>. So young girls would think cosmetic surgery is the best way to change their life status or find meaning. At the same time, such physical transfiguration has been taking place in various cultures through oral histories, legends, fairy tales, folk tales, and later in movies, television series, computer games, and hypertexts<sup>[14]</sup>. They are prompting young people, even teenagers, who are easily influenced by the media trend, to accept plastic surgery<sup>[15]</sup>. Overall, Disney princess movies influenced young girls' attitudes toward plastic surgery, and their pursuit of beauty and thinness in princess images leads to low body esteem, leading to an increased desire for dieting and cosmetic surgery that have a negative impact.

### 3.3 Self-sexualization

An analysis of 168 fairy tales, such as Cinderella, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty, found that most emphasized female beauty<sup>[8]</sup>. However, girls grow up in a culture that overemphasizes the importance of looking good and "sexy," which can be detrimental to girls' self-image and healthy development<sup>[10]</sup>. Because not only will this trigger the self-objectification mentioned above, but it will also lead young girls to value their appearance over other attributes and to engage in appearing-centered behavior to appear sexually attractive to others, which is called self-sexualization<sup>[9]</sup>. The appearance characteristics of most of the princesses in the Disney princess movie series conform to the image of a "perfect" female in the eyes of men: big breasts, thin waist, fair skin, small face, big eyes, high nose bridge, and smallmouth. Therefore, Disney princesses are female images from the perspective of the male gaze; that is, they objectify female sexuality and portray female images from the perspective of heterosexual men as sexual

objects to satisfy and please them <sup>[16]</sup>. However, the average age of princesses is 16 years old. In addition to the appearance characteristics mentioned above, their dresses all have feminine elements, such as clothes that show body curves and expose shoulders, necks, or midriffs, exquisite hairstyles, shiny accessories, high heels, and perfect and beautiful makeup. The princess's "perfect" image and strong influence desensitize young girls to the male gaze and inspire them to emulate the princess's image. At the same time, princess-related peripheral products, such as princess clothing and princess-dressing toys, have further encouraged young girls to pursue female images from the perspective of the male gaze. Among the costume products related to Disney princesses, high-heeled shoes/glass slippers are very representative. However, high heels represent femininity and are considered sexy when young girls wear them <sup>[9]</sup>. In addition, in the experiment, girls wearing princess dresses were asked to dress up their hair, wear accessories, and use cosmetics such as lipstick to make themselves look beautiful <sup>[2]</sup>. However, advertisements often link cosmetics to adults' desire for sexual attractiveness <sup>[9]</sup>. So when young girls imitate the image of Disney princesses, they will inevitably fall into the aesthetic requirements of men and come into contact with adult clothing and accessories early, which make themselves sexually attractive. In this way, they are disciplined by society and self-sexualization without realizing it. However, engaging in self-sexualizing behaviors, such as makeup and wearing sexualized clothing, has been associated with negative outcomes, including lower academic performance, body shame, and negative self-concepts <sup>[9]</sup>. Therefore, Disney princess movies and their peripheral products guide young girls to self-sexualization, negatively impacting their lives and studies.

### 3.4 The identification of stereotyped gender concepts

According to Slater et al., children's media depict ideal bodies and embed gender roles and stereotypes <sup>[10]</sup>. So young girls' pursuit of the princess image also affects their perception of gender roles. The experiment proved that girls have unique emotions toward princess dresses <sup>[2]</sup>. When young girls wear princess dresses, they will pay more attention to their behavior and appearance. For example, young girls think the princess is a passive observer, so they will maintain a limited and static image after wearing the princess dress. It represents that the traditional princess image would control young girls' actions and thoughts. According to the findings, Disney female characters, including princesses, are likelier to do housework than men. In contrast, men are six times more likely to hold positions of authority in roles <sup>[2]</sup>. As children use gender as a classification framework <sup>[10]</sup>, gender stereotypes transmitted by children's media will lead them to suppress their behaviors and thoughts to adapt themselves to traditional gender roles. Therefore, after young girls are exposed to the female image of doing housework and the male image of authority and competence from an early age, they will show a more modest style of self-expression and a lower level of confidence in their ability and ambition than men <sup>[10]</sup>. For example, the female who call themselves "princesses" have less desire to work, more expectation of the traditional division of housework, and more emphasis on superficial qualities such as appearance <sup>[1]</sup>. A study found that girls who accepted gender traits and believed women should avoid leadership roles and always

be gentle and affectionate were more likely to be depressed<sup>[2]</sup>. Therefore, the traditional image of Disney princesses can lead young girls to suppress their dreams and interests and thus become depressed.

## 4 Conclusion

In this article, the impact of the development of Disney princess movies on young girls' gender cognition is first examined. Through the multi-angle analysis of the development of the princesses' image, supporting characters' image, and the plot, it is concluded that the development of Disney princess movies has not positively impacted the gender perception of young girls. There are three main reasons. First, the new plot still leads young female audiences to accept that it is important to gain the approval of a patriarchal society. Secondly, the contradiction between the images in the movie and the peripheral products images has caused confusion about the beauty ideology of post-feminism. Thirdly, the traditional princess image is still popular among young girls. Therefore, even though the princess images in Disney princess movies have changed, the influence of traditional princess images on girls' gender-stereotyped cognition cannot be reduced. It next examined the impact of gender stereotypes in traditional Disney princess characters on young girls' appearance, behavior, dreams, and gender identity. First, promoting the importance of appearance in Disney princess movies makes young girls unconsciously self-objectify, which will have negative effects such as eating disorders or depression. Second, young girls pursuing traditional Disney princess beauty and thin appearance can lead to low self-esteem, increased dieting, and plastic surgery. Third, the Disney princess image that conforms to the aesthetics of the male gaze will lead young girls to unconsciously self-sexualization when watching or imitating, which will have negative effects such as low academic performance and body shame. Finally, the gender stereotypes that young girls receive through the images of Disney princesses lead them to repress their behaviors and thoughts, which can negatively impact low self-confidence and depression. Therefore, as popular children's media, Disney movies are not beneficial media information for developing children's gender cognition.

There are some suggestions that Disney can make to improve its princess movies so that they can have a positive impact on young girls' gender perceptions. First, the portrayal of princesses should be in line with the appearance of teenagers rather than catering to the male gaze to prevent self-objectification and self-sexualization. Second, the importance of female appearance and stereotypes should be less emphasized in movies and more about personal abilities and personality traits that are not related to gender. For example, brave and handsome should not be only masculine words, and beautiful and gentle should not be only feminine words. Thus reducing the constraints and negative effects of stereotypes on young girls' abilities and future development. Third, the movie should reduce any descriptions about the importance of gaining approval from the patriarchal society and pay more attention to the pursuit and dreams of the protagonist to promote that women should not be anyone's appendages and should also have the right to live for themselves.

This article analyzes the protagonists, supporting roles, plots, and peripheral



products of Disney princess movies and concludes that traditional princess movies still have a significant influence. It helps to untangle the correlation between the development of Disney princess movies and their impact on young girls. Then the article analyzes self-objectification, low body self-esteem, self-sexualization, and repressed thoughts and behaviors of young girls to conclude that Disney princess movies have a negative impact on young girls, thus helping parents to identify whether it is suitable media for teenagers. However, consider the plenty of children's media and teenagers' early exposure to the Internet and social media. Although Disney is one of the popular children's media, it cannot be regarded as the only or the most significant influence. A new discussion step should be carried out with other popular children's media and research.

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