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# The Evolution of Disney Princesses and their Effect on Body Image, Gender Roles, and the Portrayal of Love

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The Evolution of Disney Princesses and their Effect on Body Image,  
Gender Roles, and the Portrayal of Love  
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A research project submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

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## ABSTRACT

The media plays an essential role in determining people's schemas of the real world, assumptions about cultural ideals, and perceptions surrounding body image, gender roles, and the idealization of love (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008; Herbozo, Tantleff-Dunn, Gokee-Larose, & Thompson, 2004). Children in particular are vulnerable to these messages due to their high consumption of media and their cognitive development (Agarwal & Dhanasekaran, 2012; Herbozo et al., 2004). Disney is one the most powerful aspects in children's media and their princess phenomenon plays an essential role in perpetuating stereotypes by having their heroines embody submissiveness, being young and thin, and attracting love interests (Do Rozario, 2004; England, Descartes, Collier-Meek, 2011).

There are three different eras of princesses: the first one includes *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*; the second one includes *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, *Pocahontas*, and *Mulan*; the most recent era includes *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled*, *Brave*, and *Frozen*. Research has shown how the Disney princess has evolved over time and is breaking certain stereotypes; however the most recent era lacks scholarly research (England et al., 2011). Given the power these films have on children's psychological and physical health, this is an area that must be examined.

This project researches body image, gender roles, and the portrayal of love in the most recent era of princesses. Research was done by exploring newspaper articles, magazine articles, websites, blogs, and scholarly articles to discover how this era is portrayed. It was found that these five princesses represent progress in the Disney

franchise by encompassing both masculine and feminine traits (Rome, 2010). The portrayal of love is also revolutionized in this era by going beyond the romantic type and incorporating familial love and self-love (Law, 2014; Rome, 2013; Saladino, 2014). Body image, however, is the one frontier that seems to lack progress. The Disney princess still seems to encompass unrealistic body features and is often sexualized in her movements. In order for Disney to continue their progressive movement forward, it is recommended that they create more realistic and well-rounded female characters.

## INTRODUCTION

Sociocultural factors greatly influence the way people think and create perceptions of the real world (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008; Herbozo, Tantleff-Dunn, Gokee-Larose, & Thompson, 2004). One of the most dominating factors contributing to this issue is the media. Media consumption in general has a measurable impact on people's beliefs surrounding reality and helps guide their values, decisions, and outlooks; regardless of how true the perceptions are (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008). Media messages are also one of the main sources for the development of body image and the expectations of gender roles (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008; Pryor & Knupfer, 1997).

Research shows that watching "gender portrayals has an effect on individuals' real-world gender based attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors," (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008, p.131). The discussion of how women are portrayed is of particular importance because these portrayals are often detrimental (Haas, Pawlow, Pettibone, & Segrist, 2012). Women are portrayed as highly sexualized, more passive, and take on less active roles than their male counterparts (Conley & Ramsey, 2011). Women are often discouraged from power and encompass stereotypical feminine traits emphasizing their beauty and roles in the home (Pryor & Knupfer, 1997). Repeated exposure to this content leads to women accepting it as representations of reality, normative, and as crucial to their attractiveness (Grabe et al., 2008).

Children, in particular, are the most vulnerable to accepting these beliefs, especially given the immense amount of media in their lives (Herbozo et al., 2004). A national survey in the US found that children aged 8-18 are exposed to the media an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes a day (Agarwal & Dhanasekaran, 2012). Media usage

has a negative impact on all aspects of child development including their ability to distinguish between fact and fiction (Agarwal & Dhanasekaran, 2012). Media use is inversely related to self-esteem, especially for young girls (Racine, DeBate, Rita, Gabriel, & High, 2011; Grabe & Hyde, 2009). Girls not only internalize messages from the media, but then begin to objectify their own bodies as well. Self-objectification is related to a host of psychological outcomes, including low self-esteem and depression (Grabe & Hyde, 2009).

One of the most influential aspects in children's media began in 1937 with the imagination of Walt Disney and his princess phenomenon (England, Descartes, Collier-Meek, 2011). The classic Disney princesses perpetuate stereotypical gender norms by being thin, graceful, young, submissive, and attractive to romantic suitors of the opposite sex (Do Roazario, 2004). Disney focuses on targeting young girls in particular to personally identify with the princesses and encourages internalizing their messages about femininity (England et al., 2011). The desirable traits associated with being a princess can create psychological issues for girls and mixed messages around what truly encompasses the female gender (Grabe & Hyde, 2009; Lee, 2009).

There have been three major eras of Disney princesses: The first era includes *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959); the second era includes *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), and *Mulan* (1998); and the most current era includes *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Tangled* (2010), *Brave* (2012), and *Frozen* (2013) (England et al., 2011). The princesses from the first era encapsulate submissiveness, traditional female gender roles, and stereotypical beauty. Over the years Disney



princesses have become more egalitarian, heroic, and athletic, showing progress that they transform with the corresponding societal shifts. Though they have become more autonomous, they still possess timeless beauty and have become more sexualized. The princesses from the second era dress more provocatively and still find true love in the end with a prince (England et al., 2011).

On the other hand, there is very little research on what messages are being relayed about gender, body image, and love from the third era of princesses. What do these new princesses represent? Are they becoming more egalitarian since the second era and straying away from stereotypical femininity? This type of research is extremely important and necessary due to the extreme impact these media messages create for young children in American culture today. Given the profound effect that viewing these images has on young girls' psychological and physical health, it is necessary to explore how the themes of gender roles, body image, and love are presented in these new movies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Media Consumption

The power of the media exists everywhere, especially in the homes of Americans. Media use and exposure includes television, motion pictures, cable or satellite access, radio, computer, internet access, video games, handheld audio games, and instant messaging programs (Roberts & Foehr, 2008). Most adults participate in media multitasking and spend an average of 6 hours a day exposed to and/or using some type of media outlet (Levin, 2010). Ninety-nine percent of US households with children have at least one television (Roberts & Foehr, 2008). The typical American aged 8-18 years old lives in a household containing “three television sets, three video players, three radios, three personal digital media players (for example, an iPod or other MP3 device), two video game consoles, and a personal computer,” (Roberts & Foehr, 2008, p.15). These statistics clearly show how Americans, especially children, are media saturated.

Media exposure and consumption play an important role in teaching individuals their society’s basic beliefs and value systems. People experience most of their socialization from the media and view the messages as accurate and based on reality (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008). Media has also proven to be extremely useful in the fields of education, sports, arts, science, and culture in general (Argawal & Dhanasekaran, 2012). Children in particular are sensitive to these types of messages due to their still emerging cognitive and social development. Children have a more difficult time discriminating between fact and fiction because of their underdeveloped personal cues and reasoning abilities (Argawal & Dhanasekaran, 2012; Kirkorian, Wartella, & Anderson, 2008). The attention of children is also mostly driven by movement and

sounds effects, making them more likely to take in all of the messages supplied by the media (Kirkorian, Wartella, & Anderson, 2008).

Children also yield higher media exposure use and averaged about seven hours per day in 2009 (Racine, DeBate, & Gabriel, 2011). In 2004, children aged 8-18 years averaged 7.5 hours of media exposure, with twenty-five percent of that time using two or more media outlets at once (Roberts & Foehr, 2008). The average American child spends one third of his or her day on some form of electronic media (Argawal & Dhanasekaran, 2012). Roberts and Foehr (2008) examined the total media exposure and use by children in the United States and found that out of all the media outlets mentioned previously, television viewing consumes almost triple the amount of time as any other form. The next closest categories consist of videos and movies, which can be argued simply another form of television (Roberts & Foehr, 2008). Given the amount of time children spend viewing media messages and children's vulnerability; the media's influence on youth must be examined.

### **Media and its Impact**

Mass media has played a large part in socializing children over the past 25 years, mostly due to the influence of television (Pryor & Knupfer, 1997). The media teach children what is socially desirable and perpetuate sociocultural norms (Argawal & Dhanasekaran, 2012; Roberts & Foehr, 2008). Research has found that the media can have a negative impact on children psychologically, socially, and physically (Racine, DeBate, Gabriel, & High, 2011). Internalizing the sociocultural ideals contributes to the development of body image issues and unhealthy eating patterns (Hayes & Tantleff-Dunn, 2010). The main areas the media have negatively affected are body image,

nutrition and eating habits, early sexual experiences, and gender role expectations (Argawal & Dhanasekaran, 2012; Racine, DeBate, Gabriel, & High, 2011). Several studies have also found a negative correlation between television viewing and personal contentment in children. Children who are less secure or less satisfied with their lives actually consume a higher amount of television than their more secure counterparts (Roberts & Foehr, 2008). A high proportion of the research supporting this focuses specifically on young girls because of their vulnerability due to lower self-esteem, lower body dissatisfaction, and the higher objectification of women in the media in general (Clay, Vignoles, & Dittmar, 2005; Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006; Grabe et al., 2008).

The media presents a powerful ideal of what is considered beautiful for women. The ideal body includes a small frame, small waist, bigger bust, a curvature shape, and looking youthful (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006). Magazines, television, movies, music, and video games often present an unachievable thinness ideal and mold the sociocultural model of what defines beauty for women (Dohnt & Tiggeman, 2006). The images of women shown in the media today are also thinner than in the past, leading to an even more unattainable body ideal (Grabe et al., 2008). Female adolescents are expected to navigate these false images and determine what is real; however, this rarely happens (Lapayese, 2012). Repeated exposure to this content leads to women accepting it as representations of reality (Grabe et al., 2008). Girls feel more pressure to conform to these ideals, especially since the media teaches them that their bodies are their main source of self-worth (Gordon, 2008).

Body dissatisfaction is related to many mental health issues including depression, low self-esteem, eating disorders, and obesity. It has emerged as one of the core aspects

affecting women's overall health due to its demonstrated impact on both mental and physical well-being (Grabe & Hyde, 2009; Grabe et al., 2008; Racine, DeBate, Gabriel, & High, 2011). In terms of the media affecting girls' body image concerns, researchers have found that viewing music videos, television shows, and reading magazines predicts a higher awareness of dieting. Girls who specifically read magazines aimed for older women also have higher body dissatisfaction (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006).

Media consumption is also linked to earlier sexual initiation in adolescents as they are exposed to highly sexually explicit content. There has been an increase of sexual content in the past 10 years as well as sexual objectification of women in the media (Argawal & Dhanasekaran, 2012; Grabe & Hyde, 2009). The sexual objectification of an individual is defined as "an instance in which a person is made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than being seen as a person with a capacity for independent action and decision making" (Grabe & Hyde, 2009, p.2840). Grabe and Hyde explored the role of the media in the sexualization of females. They found that media use is directly related to body dissatisfaction and internalizing disordered beliefs surrounding body image (Grabe & Hyde, 2009). The researchers discovered that viewing these images on a regular basis leads to the internalization that women are objects and the belief that a woman should only be valued based on her appearance. This study also showed how young girls begin to objectify their own bodies, leading to lower self-esteem (Grabe & Hyde, 2009).

Gender role stereotypes are also consistently perpetuated through the media. Society is shaped by the way advertisers and television influence people's ideas of how people should look and act (Pryor & Knupfer, 1997). Gender is a socially constructed

paradigm that is influenced not by biology, but by the culture in which one lives. In the American culture, female gender roles are more associated with femininity and sexuality (Lee, 2008). Images in film have been found to shape people's perception of gender-typed body image and acceptable behavior. Children are conscious of these gender portrayals and expect similar expectations in the real world (England, Descartes, Collier-Meek, 2011). Through the portrayals of women on the big screen, children learn that women should be more submissive and subordinate to their male counterparts (Hammer, 2010). Women are often portrayed as having to sacrifice their career aspirations in order to have a family and/or to allow their husband to thrive in his career (Hammer, 2010). Nancy Signorielli (1997) found how images in television, commercials, films, magazines, and music videos teach women to be more concerned with finding a suitable partner, while men are more concerned with their careers. Higher consumption of television and films correlates with more traditional gender roles (England, Descartes, Collier-Meek, 2011).

Women are also less represented in certain career fields in television. Women are more often shown as being teachers or secretaries as opposed to men, who are more often depicted as scientists or doctors (Hammer, 2010). Hammer (2010) looked at 117 lead female characters in films to examine the importance of their relationships and their careers. She discovered that out of the 81 films viewed, most of them depicted women in traditional gender roles. These include a housewife or homemaker, a teacher or college professor, a waitress, and/or a nanny. Through these careers, women are shown as the predominant caretaker or caregiver. Women are also represented in oppressive traditional gender roles such as being a prostitute or a drug addict (Hammer, 2010).

Films have portrayed high-achieving women; however, their work is often not directly referenced. They are deemed educated and successful, but most of their screen time revolves around their love interest (Hammer, 2010). Sixty-five percent of the women portrayed in those movies focused solely on their romantic relationships. Their lives outside their love interests were never fully established. This perpetuates the myth that a woman having a successful career and being independent is not enough; she has to have a romantic suitor in order to be fully fulfilled (Hammer, 2010). Even if a woman has a career, her life is shown to be centered on the relationships she has, further teaching viewers that women are innate caregivers. In most films, happiness is not achieved through education or a successful job, but through love and marriage. This myth that love conquers all teaches both young girls and boys that women need a man in order to live happily ever after (Hammer, 2010).

## **Disney**

Disney Incorporated is one of the six leading companies in the media industry worldwide (von Feilitzen & Bucht, 2001). Disney movies are produced in the United States and also have a strong effect internationally, creating important implications for children everywhere (England, Descartes, Collier-Meek, 2011). Disney's full length feature films are part of most children's lives and are one of the most prominent factors to be examined when looking at children's media (Tanner, Hadduck, Zimmerman, & Lund, 2003). The Disney princesses are particularly influential because of the immensely powerful marketing franchise behind them. The Disney princess franchise contains over 26,000 products and rose from 300 million in annual sales in 2001 to 4 billion in 2008 (England, Descartes, Collier-Meek, 2011; Whelan, 2012). Products that are "associated

with children's culture now garner at least as much cultural authority and legitimacy for teaching specific roles, values, and ideals as more traditional sites of learning, such as public schools, religious institutions, and the family," (Giroux & Pollock, 2010, p.91). Most children are also familiar with the stories of Disney princesses and internalize their values and messages (Whelan 2012). Disney targets children to identify with their characters and internalize the messages about body image, gender roles, and love from these iconic role-models (England, Descartes, Collier-Meek, 2011).

As mentioned previously, there are three major eras of Disney princesses: The first era includes *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959); the second era includes *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), and *Mulan* (1998); and the most current era includes *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Tangled* (2010), *Brave* (2012), and *Frozen* (2013) (England et al., 2011; Wohlwend, 2012). Over the years the princess has evolved and redefined her message incorporating the three waves of feminism. Her narrative will continue to grow as women gain a stronger voice in society; however, they "will also always be tied down in some way to their predecessors," (Whelan, 2012, p.10). As princesses become more empowered, they will still maintain an identity to less empowered ideals perpetuated by the first two eras (Whelan, 2012).

### **Disney and Body Image**

The way the female form is presented by Disney in the first two eras reflects the current socio-cultural assumptions of what the female body should portray (Herbozo, et al., 2004). The classic Disney princesses depict the societal Western standards of beauty such as thin, graceful, young, and attractive to romantic suitors of the opposite sex (Do



Roazario, 2004). The idealistic concept of beauty is perpetuated through princesses having “extremely pale skin tones, small waists, delicate limbs, and full breasts,” (England et al., 2011, p.556). For example, Cinderella’s delicate features are emphasized by having the smallest feet in the kingdom, proving her identity by fitting the glass slipper (Do Rozario, 2004). Exposure to these media images significantly influences body dissatisfaction in young girls (Herbozo et al., 2004).

The first era of princesses were directly under Walt Disney’s supervision and encapsulated beauty through their hair, lips, and the ability to harmoniously sing and dance. For example, Aurora from *Sleeping Beauty* was given three gifts by the fairies. Two of her gifts were beauty and song, which later attracts her prince. Older age also became synonymous with ugliness and death through the use of the evil stepmothers/queens, perpetuating the myth that beauty can only be attained by the young (Do Rozario, 2004). For example, in *Snow White*, as the princess runs through the dark forest she sees the branches as old wrinkled hands reaching to attack her and doesn’t feel safe until she wakes up in a meadow surrounded by young animals. Both *Snow White* and *Aurora* are put into a deep sleep by older women because they are considered the most beautiful and therefore the most threatening (Do Rozario, 2004). Disney filmmakers have created an incessant time loop in which the princess is a constant entity through re-releasing of films and marketing on multiple products. Its products are “forever young and forever available,” (Do Rozario, 2004, p.36) just like all of its princesses.

In the second era of princesses, sexuality has become integrated with their identity through the way they are drawn and how they attract possible suitors (Do Rozario, 2004).

They move with a burlesque attitude and are more sexually provocative. Ariel in particular both moves and sings in a suggestive way, especially as she wears only a seashell bra for clothing (Do Rozario, 2004). She does not even possess a voice when she meets Prince Eric and only has her looks to draw him in. Her body is the only way in which she can win him over (Lee, 2008; Whelan, 2012). Pocahontas “has a Barbie doll body, tall, with long muscular legs and arms, huge breasts, and a tiny waist” (Aidman, 1999, p.4). Feminists describe her physical features as unattainable and unrealistic (Aidman, 1999). Belle’s physical attributes are also emphasized, especially through the title of the movie *Beauty and the Beast*. She is also the desire of Gaston simply because she is considered the most beautiful girl in the village (Whelan, 2012).

Although there is emphasis placed on traditional beauty, the second era of princesses do incorporate other traits to redefine its structure. For example, Ariel, Pocahontas, and Jasmine move with stereotypical grace as well as possess the grace of sportswomen. Ariel acts more as a lifeguard by saving Prince Eric’s life. Jasmine can pole-vault over buildings in a single leap and Pocahontas displays athleticism by running cross country and jumping through water falls. Mulan fights alongside men during war and ends up saving the country of China (Do Rozario, 2004). Although these princesses possess the traditional beauty ideals, they also incorporate some nontraditional standards of beauty to help alter the norm.

### **Disney and Gender Roles**

Gender role portrayals in Disney princess films have been shown to adhere to the stereotypical views of men and women. Princesshood is bound with being weak, passive, subservient to males, dutiful, and incapable of living an independent life (Lee, 2008;

Whelan, 2012). All of the Disney princesses from the first two eras encompass typical feminine traits such as being helpful, emotional, needing help or being a victim, fearful, tentative, sensitive, nurturing, affectionate, physically weak, and physically attractive (England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011).

The first era of princesses in particular are more submissive and adhere to more traditional gender stereotypes than the second era. They all encompass the house matron persona and exhibit feminine behaviors through their physical appearance (England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011). Snow White is seen as subordinate to the prince, even though he is a minor character (Do Rozario, 2004). She is also rescued by the dwarfs by taking on domestic duties such as cleaning and cooking for them (England, Descartes, Collier-Meek, 2011). In *Sleeping Beauty*, the three magic fairies give up their magical powers to do common housework in order to protect the princess Aurora (Do Rozario, 2004). In *Cinderella*, her housework duties are an act of submission and a way to gain love from her stepmother and stepsisters by being their servant (England, Descartes, Collier-Meek, 2011).

The princesses are also extremely kind and helpful as they try to overcome difficulties preventing them from achieving a family, which defines their happy ending (Wohlwend, 2012). The princesses from this era do demonstrate some ability to be assertive, however, it is strictly with animals and children. This represents a very limited range of assertiveness because Disney does not demonstrate this with other adults. They are also seen attending to their physical appearance more often as well as expressing emotion, particularly crying (England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011).

The second era of princesses still possess traditional feminine attributes, but incorporate masculine traits as well, such as being athletic, heroic, and independent (Do Rozario, 2004). Ariel, for example, wants to explore and make independent decisions for her life. She displays rebelliousness and freedom and makes decisions that are often against her father's wishes (Whelan, 2012). Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* is extremely brave, assertive, and independent. She engages in reading and is not afraid to speak her mind regardless of other people's judgments. In *Aladdin*, Jasmine is both assertive and confident (England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011). Mulan and Pocahontas are argued to be the most masculine princesses of the second era. They display acts of diplomacy and are involved in war. They also save their male counterparts by using their intellect and wit versus their bodies (Whelan, 2012).

Alternatively, these princesses still possess stereotypical gender roles. Belle ends up alienating herself and is viewed as "different". She also voluntarily gives up her freedom to be a prisoner in order to save her father, therefore only pushing the gender roles so far (Whelan, 2012). Belle still possesses typical gendered traits such as being nurturing and sensitive to emotions. Ariel also displays typical feminine characteristics such as attending to her physical appearance and being fearful. Jasmine's physical features are also greatly highlighted and she is one of the most sexualized princesses in the Disney franchise. She uses her body to help save Aladdin multiple times. She is also shown as physically weak and very nurturing towards animals and humans (England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011).

Even though Mulan represents strength and power, her true gender is revealed and eventually she ends up with her romantic interest. Pocahontas does not end up with her

love interest, but she does choose to put her family's needs above her own (Whelan, 2012). This proves how they still succumb to traditional feminine roles because they choose to return home to family and are paired with a romantic suitor (England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011). The princess has evolved to become less stereotypical in gender roles, but mixed gender messages are apparent because they still possess classic feminine traits through their looks and choose love over independence (England et al., 2011).

### **Disney and its Portrayal of Love**

The first era of princesses adhere to the idea of love at first sight. All of the princesses end up with a dashing prince, whom they barely know and have only met once or twice. No information is given on how their romantic relationships are formed and/or maintained. All of them fall in love, get married, and somehow live happily ever after (Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman, & Lund, 2003). This also sends the message that when a man and woman meet, they instantaneously fall in love. No time is needed to elapse and no other common factors need to be in place in order for love to form (Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman, & Lund, 2003). These three princesses fear ending up alone and even fantasize about the day they'll meet their prince. They all sing about the possibility of falling in love and finding immediate happiness. Their entire narrative as a character is to find a happy ending through romance (Whelan, 2012).

All three of the princesses are also saved by their male counterparts. Snow White and Aurora are both placed in a deathly coma. Their very lives depend on their prince finding and rescuing them with true love's kiss. Cinderella's life didn't depend on her falling in love, but her livelihood was dependent on being saved by the prince from

enslavement (Junn, 1997; Whelan, 2012). The first era of princesses also engaged in more love-related behaviors than their male counterparts, such as making their desire for romance known. References to marriage and weddings were also highly common throughout the three movies (Junn, 1997).

The emphasis for the second era of princesses is placed on ending up with a suitor whom the princess loves. They want to choose the right partner and still be able to fulfill their dreams (Whelan, 2012). The films from the second era actually refer to love 2.5 times more than the first era. Jasmine, for example, rebels against her arranged marriage and focuses on pursuing Aladdin because she falls in love with him (Junn, 1997). The ideas of marriage and weddings decreased as compared to the first era, which shows improvement because marriage is not their only end game. Mulan, for example, does not marry her love interest and instead decides to pursue a dating relationship (Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman, & Lund, 2003). Pocahontas breaks this stereotype even more because her romantic relationship completely dissolves. She instead chooses the love of her family and stays behind with them (Aidman, 1999). Love also gets represented as something that forms over time, especially in *Mulan* and *Beauty and the Beast* which shows progress in how love is portrayed (Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman, & Lund, 2003).

Although the second era of princesses do break some of the traditional stereotypes concerning romance, their ultimate goal still remains to find a suitable partner for marriage (Do Rozario, 2004). This is present in *Aladdin*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *The Little Mermaid*. Mulan does not marry her suitor in the end, but she does give up her tomboyish identity to enter a relationship with Shang. The film also alludes to the fact that they will enter a romantic relationship that will most likely lead to marriage. Love

and marriage serve as a way to tame and domesticate these rebellious women by having them settle down (Whelan, 2012). Their happily ever after still seems to be dependent on finding a man (Junn, 1997). Pocahontas, as briefly mentioned earlier, does not adhere to this stereotype. However, the interpretation of her story is completely distorted and historically inaccurate. Pocahontas never had a romantic relationship with John Smith and eventually does leave her family to marry and move to England. Therefore, one could argue that the historical facts reflect stereotypical portrayals of love (Superhuman4, 2015).

Women's attractiveness to men is also more apparent in this era when it comes to finding a suitable mate. Compared to the first era, these films show 7.5 times more sexually related depictions of women. The princesses engaged in more sexually provocative stances to try and attract a partner, such as striking certain poses and priming themselves before seeing their prince (Junn, 1997). These princesses are depicted as highly attractive and more voluptuous with bigger busts (Junn, 1997).

In the first and second era, the princesses are shown as having to abandon their own desires in order to pursue marriage (Lee, 2008). They often have to overcome parental demands or leave their families and homes in order to marry and get their happily ever after. The princes, however, did not have external factors preventing them from marrying the woman of their choosing. They could choose their partners as they pleased and their happiness was not dependent on finding love, but simply a benefit (Lee, 2008). This shows how romance and the princesses happily ever afters are still dependent on finding a romantic suitor, even if they choose not to pursue marriage (Whelan, 2012).

### THE THIRD ERA AND ITS EFFECTS

The power of Disney and its princesses is proven to be tremendous. The most recent installment of *Frozen* into the Disney princess genre has grossed more than one billion dollars worldwide and is the most popular Disney animated film of all time (Law, 2014). The *Frozen* phenomenon as well as all Disney princess movies is a movement that is here to stay and has a gigantic effect on children worldwide. Young girls worldwide aspire to be like their Disney counterparts and take their messages to heart (Whelan, 2012). Disney princesses have an impact that goes beyond what can be measured and is evident in the hundreds of blogs, articles, websites, and conversations that I have found in my own personal search.

The messages of *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled*, *Brave*, and *Frozen* are all being discussed on multiple forums showing how every viewer has a strong opinion. Articles have been published in many esteemed newspapers and magazines such as the Washington Post, the New York Times, Parade Magazine, LA Times, and Time Magazine examining what each princess is teaching the newest generation of children. People are discussing the messages about body image, gender roles, and the portrayal of love, understanding the effect that Disney princesses have on people's perceptions of these concepts. Given that these movies are recent, scholarly research on their effects is lacking. These are the messages that must be further researched in the scholarly world due to the extent of their impact.



## Body Image

Many individuals hold that body image is one category that has made few strides in the new era. Some researchers have begun examining the messages being sent about body image. Lester (2010) looks at how the first African American princess, Tiana, might not genuinely alter the body image ideal in *The Princess and the Frog*. Tiana, like all the other princesses is young, slender, and has flowing straightened hair showing how she fits the white idealization of beauty (Lester, 2010). She does not break the stereotype or try to represent a different ideal of beauty by fitting the typical Disney princess physique. She does break the mold in terms of race, but that is outside the realm of this paper (Lester, 2010).

Rapunzel from *Tangled* exemplifies many traits conforming with the ideal standards of beauty as well. One can see she is extremely thin and her most cherished possession is the physical attribute of her hair. Rapunzel's hair actually possesses real magic which is used in the movie to prevent Gothel, the antagonist, from aging (Saladino, 2014). This shows the viewer how a physical attribute is her greatest gift and must not be damaged. It also relates to the first era ideals in which beauty is a girl's greatest gift. Rapunzel takes immense pride in her hair as she sings about spending hours brushing and maintaining it (Saladino, 2014). As a viewer one can see she is also very thin, has delicate features, and large green eyes with flowing blonde hair. I also personally noticed how she becomes a brunette when Flynn Ryder cuts her hair and she no longer possesses magical powers. Although this represents a significant loss and alteration of self, she is still viewed as beautiful.

Merida from *Brave* seems to be the first princess to break some traditional concepts of western beauty. First, she has red frizzy hair and appears to not wear any makeup. She also does not seem to care about her physical appearance and views feminine primping as a waste of time (Saladino, 2014). She is thin, but not to the extent as the other princesses and her bust is not as voluptuous. Her lack of “beauty” and feminine maintenance is called into question many times by her mother, but Merida holds strong and rebels against the stereotypical standards of beauty (Saladino, 2014). Merida seems to be the first princess to truly challenge stereotypical ideas of beauty.

Despite this push forward, there was a lot of controversy surrounding the release of Princess Merida and her different look on some of Disney’s products. The LA Times wrote an article discussing how Disney altered the princess to make her appear thinner, have sleeker hair, wear a more revealing dress with a larger bust, and applied makeup to her face (Sperling, 2013). Her alterations align with the typical princess beauty standards and western idealization of beauty (Sperling, 2013; Valenti, 2013). So many people were outraged by this that an online petition was created with over 200,000 signatures protesting against the image (Riodan, 2013). Disney decided to remove the altered image from their website, however, the image of the “sexier” Merida still exists and is put on many different Disney Princess products such as toys, dolls, clothing, and school supplies (Riodan, 2013; Sperling, 2013). This shows how even though Disney tried to alter the standards of beauty, they ended up recanting the message.

The same message is put forth in the most recent Disney princess film *Frozen*. This is the first movie in which two strong princess female leads are represented. Elsa and Anna are sisters with a strong bond. In terms of their physical appearance, both fit

the typical princess standards of being extremely thin, having small waists, long lustrous hair, and large blue eyes (Lewis, 2013). It should also be noted that Elsa's appearance changes dramatically when she leaves the kingdom and comes into her own. As a viewer, one can see how her dress is much more revealing, she has on heavier makeup, and her hair is worn down (Law, 2014). Even the way her body moves as she walks appears more sensuous and exaggerated compared to how she was before. One scholar regards this as confident and finding her womanhood (Law, 2014), but I would argue it also sends the message that in order for a woman to find herself, she must become more sexualized and alter her physical appearance. The emphasis placed on her external alterations sends conflicting messages to audiences that empowerment doesn't strictly come from within.

Through the physical representations of these new princesses, Disney has yet to alter typical beauty standards. They briefly tried to change them with Merida, but blurred the final message due to the alteration of her appearance in ads afterward. Many newspaper articles and bloggers discuss the concept of how all Disney princesses lack realistic bodily features. For example, an article in the Huffington Post scrutinizes how Disney princesses have extremely small waists (Sieczkowski, 2014). The journalist points out how many princesses have waists that are the same size as their necks. The article then examines princesses from all three eras and alters their waistlines to appear more realistic and send a healthier message (Sieczkowski, 2014). One online blogger gives her critique on what princesses from the first two eras would look like if they had realistic hair that is frizzy after waking up, wind-blown when standing outside, and/or wet after emerging from water. She shows stills from the films and then puts a more

realistic image next to them representing what they should really look like (Brantz, 2015).

Another blog discusses the extreme exaggeration of princesses' eyes and juxtaposes them with more realistic and proportionate eye features. Only the first and second areas are examined, but the concept of them having unrealistic body features is a message present throughout all eras (Lewis, 2013). Clearly these issues are being discussed and journalists, bloggers, and viewers alike all are vying for a change in the way princesses are represented to fit a more realistic ideal.

### **Gender Roles**

This third era of princesses seems to be a progressive movement that focuses on independence and empowerment (Rome, 2010). Messages on gender roles are still being examined, but many researchers, bloggers, and journalists argue that these princesses reject stereotypical feminine behaviors from the past and are assertive (Whelan, 2012). For example, Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog* goes beyond the notion of simply working and desires a career in which she owns her own restaurant. She does not simply want to be a waitress, which breaks the traditional female gender role (Lester, 2010). Many bloggers discuss this notion and how Tiana is the first princess to have a dream that does not include strictly finding her prince charming (Belinkie, 2009).

When Tiana does happen upon a romantic suitor, her dreams and desires do not alter to accommodate his needs. She actually ends up achieving her goal of owning a restaurant and the prince becomes a part of that dream (Belinkie, 2009). Her restaurant is even named solely after her, "Tiana's Palace." Tiana also did not need to be saved by a prince in order to escape some turmoil. She ends up trying to save him, which is the

reason she turns into a frog initially. Tiana is often displayed as being more competent than the prince, especially when he turns to her for rescue (Lester, 2010). Tiana exemplifies independence, resourcefulness, confidence, and ingenuity in her journey throughout the movie (Barnes, 2009).

Rapunzel from *Tangled* breaks gender norms as well. She craves to go on a journey for self-discovery and desires freedom and independence. She sings of being passionate and wondrous, with the yearning to go on adventures. She displays masculine traits such as being strong by climbing within the tower she is held captive. Rapunzel is also able to overpower Flynn Rider when he breaks into her home and ties him up. She displays strength and confidence by eventually standing up to her captor, Gothel, and finally able to get her freedom. There are many moments throughout the movie where she tries to outsmart Gothel in order to reach her end goal of escape (Saladino, 2014). Rapunzel also ends up saving her romantic interest in the end by using her magical powers. She does not rely on the male lead to grant her freedom and instead tries to earn it back by herself (Saladino, 2014).

Merida from *Brave* breaks through the glass ceiling when it comes to displaying non-traditional gender roles. She is extremely self-aware and insistent on choosing her own destiny. Merida wants to “change her fate” and fight back against societal standards. She does this by refusing to get married and through her daily actions (Saladino, 2014). She possesses many non-traditional feminine traits such as being free-spirited, adventurous, athletic, self-sufficient, and defiant (Law, 2014; Saladino, 2104). Her father gives her a bow and arrow as a gift, and although her mother disapproves, Merida is absolutely thrilled. Merida is seen riding horses, climbing mountains, hunting, and using

weapons (Saladino, 2014). Her voice and opinions are expressed without hesitation and she rarely questions herself (Chaney, 2012; Saladino, 2014). As a viewer, I would argue that she is the most strong-willed Disney princess so far given her physical abilities and rebelling against traditional standards. Many bloggers share this same belief and see her as very anti-princess. She seems to create a new princess standard of what it means to be strong and feminine (Chaney, 2012; Chen, 2012).

*Frozen* begins breaking gender norms by having the first ever Disney female co-director, Jennifer Lee, for a full-length animation film. She is also a screenwriter for the film and has a large influence on the portrayal of the two princesses (Law, 2014). Elsa is portrayed as a strong and powerful woman. She goes from being a princess to becoming Queen and ruling over the entire kingdom. This is the first time we see a Disney princess become the highest authority figure and reign throughout the film. Elsa incorporates masculine traits into her femininity as she displays strength and takes an active role in her duties as queen. She becomes a successful ruler and is adored by the citizens of Arendelle. Elsa also possesses an extreme power which leads to her being hidden away. This alludes to the stereotypical belief that women of power are threatening (Law, 2014). She is seen as a frigid ice queen who is totally devoid of emotions (O'Rourke, 2013). Elsa, however, fights this perception by later embracing her magical gifts as a part of her identity. She learns to accept herself and move past other people's judgments, which is immortalized in the ballad "Let it Go." The townspeople gradually shift from seeing her as something to be feared into a woman they respect and admire (Law, 2014). Elsa exemplifies a woman who balances co-existing masculine and feminine traits that allows her to be both authoritative and loving.

Anna is another princess who pushes gender role boundaries. Anna is someone who is extremely fearless and ventures out to save her sister. She does not wait for a man to rescue Elsa and chooses to go after her alone (Law, 2014). Anna stands up for what she believes in and voices her opinion to men in power. She constantly defends her sister against Kristoff and Hans, the two leading male characters, despite their efforts to sway her opinion. She stands up to Hans at the end of the film and shows extreme physical strength by punching him (Law, 2014). Anna also displays true heroism when she sacrifices herself to save her sister Elsa. She risks her own life and does not wait for a man to rescue the heroine or herself (Law, 2014).

All of the princesses, however, still possess some aspects of traditional gender expectations. Tiana still fits the traditional female role by being a cook/waitress (Lester, 2010). She also possesses many common feminine traits such as the need to be rescued and being affectionate. Tiana does not escape an eternity of being an amphibian until she is saved by the prince when they get married (Barnes, 2009). Tiana encompasses the helpless victim persona by ultimately needing to become a princess in order to reach her other goals (England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011).

Rapunzel adheres to traditional gender expectations as well in many situations. First, she is only able to escape the tower after Flynn Rider helps her do so. Although he does not technically rescue her, it is his appearance that finally convinces Rapunzel to set out on her journey (Antonia, 2010). Second, she initially believes that she is too weak to set out on her own and not capable enough to grapple the world she longs to be in (Antonia, 2010; Weiss, 2010). Many bloggers also argue that the story does not even truly belong to her because it is narrated by a male character, Flynn Rider (Antonia,

2010). This represents the notion that although she may be strong and determined, Rapunzel still ultimately lives in a man's world. The film is dominated by female characters, but yet Disney still chooses to have a man be the main storyteller (O'Connor, 2011).

Rapunzel also lacks important dreams and aspirations. Her only wish is to see the floating lights, but nothing further beyond that (Saladino, 2014). There are many times throughout the film where Rapunzel is seen as gullible or incompetent. For example, her captor convinces her that the lights are simply stars and that the world is a dangerous place. Gothel even refers to her as a dummy in the film, perpetuating the belief that Rapunzel is incapable of surviving on her own. Her voice is lacking in the earlier part of the movie and often squashed by Gothel or herself (Saladino, 2014). Last, Rapunzel perpetuates the feminine traits of kindness and nurturance through having animals as her sidekicks (Corliss, 2010).

Elsa from *Frozen* originally adheres to typical gender traits as briefly mentioned earlier. She displays lacking control of her emotions which is symbolized through the loss of control in her powers. She is taught to fear her emotions so she must choose to "conceal, don't feel." This sends the message that women are extremely emotional and lack control of how to deal with them. It also depicts how women cannot be powerful and still have emotions (Law, 2014). As a viewer, I believe this also sends the message that women have to put on a show to adhere to the gender expectations and according to Elsa "be the good girl you always have to be." This is reinforced by her parents and making her believe she has no other choice than to hide her true self (Law, 2014).



Anna is portrayed as goofy and sometimes incompetent in decisions she makes. As mentioned earlier, she decides to venture out on her own to find Elsa. However, the start of her journey fails miserably until she begins traveling with Kristoff (Law, 2014). The relationship with him then turns into one of dependence and eventually romance. She also appears helpless and needs to be rescued after Elsa accidentally strikes her heart with ice. Kristoff takes it upon himself to seek out the wisdom of his family to find a solution for her (Law, 2014).

These characters represent a combination of masculine and feminine traits that displays progress within the Disney Princess franchise. The third era battles gender expectations by making the female strong, powerful, and ambitious (Rome, 2010). However, there are juxtaposing ideas apparent throughout the films that reinforce typical gender roles. Many of the princesses perform acts of rescue, but also need to be rescued in the end such as in *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled*. These mixed messages can confuse children and simply be seen as the exception instead of the rule; therefore not causing permanent change in gender roles (England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011).

### **Portrayal of Love**

The aspirations for love differ for the third generation of princesses and challenge the notion that a happy ending is only achieved through romance. The movie plots do not revolve around the princesses finding a romantic suitor, but focus on pursuing their own interests. For example, Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog* wishes to return to her human form in order to achieve her dream of owning her own restaurant. The movie also continues on after she marries Prince Naveen and shows her ultimate dream of becoming an independent business owner (Whelan, 2012). Tiana does not strictly aim for romance

in order to find happiness. She wants to have a career as well in order to feel fully satisfied (Tucker, 2009). Tiana marries the prince in the end, but it is portrayed as a choice based on love and respect. She seems to have an equal partnership with someone who simply happens to be a prince as well (Belinkie, 2009).

These princesses are also not solely dependent on men to be saved, and in fact most of them save their romantic interests at some point. In *Tangled*, Rapunzel saves Flynn Rider's life and acknowledges her love for him. The movie also reflects how they seem to "date" for a while before they end up getting married (Saladino, 2014). As a viewer, one can see how initially Rapunzel is skeptical and afraid of Flynn Rider. The process of romance and love seems to evolve throughout the movie and breaks the myth of love at first sight. Both characters need one another in order to survive their journey. Rapunzel needs Flynn Rider in order to escape her captor and venture out on her own. Flynn Rider, on the other hand, needs Rapunzel to get out of many sticky situations. Their love is based off mutual respect and they end up both putting each other's need ahead of their own. Rapunzel is willing to sacrifice her freedom to save Flynn Rider, but instead he chooses to put her independence first by ridding her of her magical curse (Saladino, 2014).

Merida from *Brave* is perhaps the most quintessential example of breaking the stereotypes concerning romance. The conflict of the movie revolves around differing values she has with her mother regarding marriage. Merida refuses to marry a suitor and displays pure distaste at the thought of it (Chaney, 2012; Saladino, 2014). The idea of romance as a realistic possibility never even presents itself. The real love story seems to revolve around the love that exists between mother and daughter (Chen, 2012). The story

does not circle around her finding happily ever after through marriage, but instead discovering her own path. Merida learns how to express this to her mother and have her fully respect and understand her wish not to get married (Saladino, 2014).

Elsa is another strong proponent in the new portrayal of love for this era of princesses. There is no mention of a romantic suitor for her at any point in the film. She does not discuss feeling incomplete without a man and is able to find her happy ending through self-love. Elsa also breaks the happily ever after notion through romance by questioning her sister's engagement. Anna becomes engaged to Hans after first meeting each other, a reference to the portrayal of romance in the first era (Law, 2014). Elsa immediately disapproves of the engagement and emphasizes the absurdity of marrying someone after only knowing them for one day. Kristoff also later mocks her engagement and questions how she could make such an important commitment to a stranger. This sends an obvious message and completely breaks the older portrayal of love at first sight in previous Disney princess films (Law, 2014; O'Rourke, 2013).

Elsa and Anna also redefine what true love is through their sisterly love for each other. Anna is instructed that only an act of true love will save her heart from becoming frozen and ultimately killing her. The viewer learns that Anna commits an act of true love when she sacrifices her life to save Elsa instead of kissing Kristoff to save herself. This challenges the message in the first and second eras in which true love is exemplified through true love's kiss. Anna is not only willing to sacrifice her own life, but also chooses her sister over a man. Their happily ever after does come from love, but a familial one that does not imply romance (Law, 2014). These sisters show how other kinds of true love exist, and they are just as powerful.

Alternatively, however, many of the princesses do live up to certain stereotypical views on love. Although Tiana may not have started her journey looking for romance, she still finds it in the end. She actually does not become human again until she marries the prince, showing how her human existence depends on marriage (O'Connor, 2011). The happily ever after plot line still is not achieved until she marries the prince and ultimately becomes a princess. This again perpetuates the myth that happiness lies in ultimately finding love and that one cannot excel in other areas of their life without it.

Rapunzel also ends up with her romantic suitor at the end of the movie. She is even willing to sacrifice her freedom in order to grant Flynn Rider's his. Her happily ever after seems to not be possible unless she can have both her independence and the man (Antonia, 2010). They end up getting married and finding their happily ever after through the typical portrayal represented in the first two eras of princesses (Saladino, 2014).

Merida's story, as mentioned previously, does not end in romance. However, romance and marriage are the essential piece of the story. It all revolves around her having different values than her mother, which creates conflict initially (Saladino, 2014). As a viewer, I also noticed how all three of her suitors are comically unattractive. It seems as though they were simply a joke, which plays into the belief that marriage is never possible for Merida because the men are essentially unviable suitors. It is my personal opinion as well that a distorted message comes through about the portrayal of love. There are two extreme opinions surrounding marriage and the only way for Merida to achieve her goal is to literally take away her mother's human existence. It is as if the differing beliefs cannot exist with each other. This comes across as both harsh and puts a

negative light on a princess who is supposed to represent power and independence. Choosing to not pursue marriage is seen as damaging and displays more complications than if Merida had just picked a suitor in the beginning.

Anna is another princess that partakes in romance as being a necessary part of her story. Although she does not end up getting married, she is engaged to Hans at the beginning of the film. She decides to marry him after a one night encounter and does not put any thought into it. When that ends due to his villainous ways, she finds solace in the other male character Kristoff. The film ends with them sharing a passionate kiss and leading the audience to believe that they will one day find their happily ever after with each other (Law, 2014).

This third era of princesses seem to go beyond the concept of marriage and romantic love (Rome, 2013; Saladino, 2014). Although romance is an option pursued by many of them, love is represented for the first time in many forms. Familial love such as that between a mother and a daughter or the love between sisters is proven to be just as powerful. Self-love is another concept brought forth for the first time further showing how romantic love is not necessarily the most important kind (Law, 2014). Disney, however, does adhere to some traditional aspects of love especially in *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled*. The later two films, *Brave* and *Frozen*, seem to really challenge the messages about love presented in the first two eras and hopefully represent the new norm that will be continued to be represented by princesses that follow.

## CONCLUSION/LIMITATIONS

These five princesses bring forth new messages and push the envelope of traditional stereotypes. Many positive representations of women and love are being incorporated into the Disney princess franchise, showing how Disney is willing to change as women continue to gain ground in the movement for equal rights (Law, 2014; Rome, 2010). On the other hand, they are still incorporating older messages present in the first two eras, particularly when it comes to body image. Although Disney is altering their princesses to become more dynamic, messages from the previous generations are still highly prevalent in the most recent films (Whelan 2012). Therefore, both different and stereotypical representations were presented in this paper to address both sides of the issue.

The purpose of this paper is not to view being thin, possessing feminine traits, or falling in love as negatives. The purpose is to present the idea that Disney female princesses should reflect women in the real world. Women come in all shapes and sizes, possess both masculine and feminine traits, and pursue all kinds of love. Creating female characters who are more diverse could help combat stereotypical views that exist when it comes to body image, gender roles, and the concept of love. It would also allow girls and boys alike to have characters they can relate to and have healthier representations of women in the media. In order to serve as appropriate role models and examples for children, Disney princesses should be complex and realistic to depict real women in society. Protective factors can increase against depression and body dissatisfaction as children have more diverse role models (Racine, DeBate, Gabriel, & High, 2011).

As mentioned earlier, this research was based on my own personal search through magazines, newspaper articles, blogs, and some scholarly journals. Literature in the scholarly world is very limited on the third era, most likely due to the fact that the films are more recent. Consequently, many of the ideas presented lack empirical and statistical evidence supporting them. Many of them were based off viewer's interpretations of the princesses, including my own personal analysis. Although the research presented may not be valid, it does show how millions of people are discussing their effects. People realize the power of Disney and are vying for more research examining the true effects it has on children. They see how the princesses are evolving and are curious to discover how it is altering the views on body image, gender, and love. The argument of whether or not the princesses are changing for the better is still debatable and therefore, more research needs to focus on this era and how Disney princesses in general affect young girls' trajectories (O'Connor, 2011).

## DISCUSSION/RECOMMENDATIONS

### Media Literacy

Many children receive their first experiences of narrative from television and/or film, and learn how people form their identities. Children often draw from the media as they are beginning to create their own narratives and begin to explore their identities (Parry, 2010). The impact of the media no longer just influences our way of life, but has become a way of life (Graber, 2012). One of the most efficient ways to help combat the messages that the new era of princesses are sending is by helping children understand them through media literacy. Media literacy is defined as “the ability to understand, analyze, evaluate and create media messages in a wide variety of forms,” (Arke & Primack, 2009, p.54). Therefore, increasing children’s media literacy becomes imperative given the effect the media has on a person’s formation of self (Parry, 2010).

Pre-adolescents and adolescents are the most vulnerable population affected by these messages due to their susceptibility to peer pressure, at a greater risk for engaging in problem behavior, and their still developing emotion regulation skills (LeCroy & Mann, 2008). Many researchers discuss the differences between protecting our children from the culture of the media and helping them find empowerment through the messages relayed to them (De Abreu, 2010). Given that it is highly improbable that children can be protected from the media, empowerment through media literacy is one of the most efficient ways to help adolescents promote a deeper understanding of the messages (Byrne, 2009; Graber, 2012).



### *Family*

Media literacy begins with incorporating skills that are needed to fully participate and reflect on what is being taught in popular culture. These include social skills, critical thinking skills, and ethical thinking skills (Graber, 2012). These can be incorporated in the classroom by teachers, through parents discussing the implications with their children, and by school counselors who deal with adolescents on a daily basis. Children need to begin discussing what messages the princesses are displaying with peers, in the classroom, with siblings, and with parents to explore what they mean. An open dialogue helps children find empowerment instead of feeling the need to conform without question (De Abreu, 2010). This can begin at a very young age given that Disney targets children in the preadolescent era (England, Descartes, Collier-Meek, 2011). By participating in discussions, children can learn to actively understand messages about body image, gender roles, and love, and learn to criticize or simply explore what they mean (De Abreu, 2010).

Media literacy interventions are aimed at promoting awareness and a more in depth understanding of what media messages are trying to teach individuals (Byrne, 2009). As stated previously, these “interventions” can be done formally through the education system or informally through parents and peers. Discussing information about the media such as production or consumption can begin the conversation, however it has not been shown to yield greater understanding. Incorporating evaluative content such as looking at a characters behavior from a critical or praising perspective has been shown to be the most effective in helping children understand the deeper messages (Byrne, 2009). Parents can discuss Disney princesses with their children and ask questions about certain

behaviors a princess exemplifies. They can explore what that means and how their child may be interpreting it in terms of body image, gender role identification, and other domains. This gives them the opportunity to connect with the characters on a personal level and evaluate their behaviors more critically as they see how it relates to their own values and beliefs (Moore, 2013).

### *Education*

All fifty states have incorporated some type of media literacy program into the curriculum of their public school systems (Arke & Primack, 2009). Media literacy interventions in the education system K-12 begin with inquiring about students' media intake outlets. Students can discuss how they use media in their daily lives and what impact it has on their ability to seek information. This can be a difficult and sensitive task for educators given cultural differences, personal values, and fear surrounding the topic. However, it can bridge the gap between students and teachers and lead to a deeper understanding of popular culture and its affects (Moore, 2013). Teachers should be aware that they do not need to be experts on the subject or have a guided and direct lesson plan. Depending on the grade level, teachers can guide the conversation in a way that benefits the students.

Educators also need to be aware of their own values, connections, and understandings about the media and its effects. As they are asking students to examine how the media has affected them, they must do the same (Moore, 2013). This creates a dynamic interaction between student and teacher and opportunities for an even more open dialogue because both are participating and learning from each other (Moore, 2013). Teachers can lead discussions, assign media projects, navigate technology, or simply ask

students to become more aware of how the media is integrated into their lives. The point of media literacy in the school system is to help children increase their critical thinking skills by learning how to develop their own personal judgments about the content in the media (Arke & Primack, 2009).

Media literacy is something that can be achieved and should be viewed as a continuum. Children and adults are constantly taking in messages displayed by the media. These messages can change on a daily basis and alter over time depending on the environment, social changes, and/or historical events. Discussing and critically examining the messages help people increase their media literacy skills and truly understand how media messages impact their behaviors, beliefs, and values. Individuals can then decide which messages fit their ideals instead of simply conforming to something they do not fully understand (Arke & Primack, 2009).

### **Intervention Programs**

Another way to help bolster body image and create healthy ideas of gender roles and love is by implementing intervention programs. As mentioned previously, adolescent girls are particularly susceptible to the messages that are being portrayed through the media (LeCroy, Mann, 2008). Therefore, many intervention programs have been targeted toward this age group to help prevent against the negative and harmful messages. This is particularly relevant given that Disney wants young girls to personally identify with each princess (England et.al, 2011). Most of these intervention programs are preventive because these types of efforts yield the most positive impact and have lasting effects (LeCroy, 2004).

There has been one intervention program in particular that has seen multiple benefits. The Go Grrls Program was created by Craig LeCroy in 2004. It was geared toward adolescent girls and implemented within a public school. Fifty-five girls who were on average 12.7 years of age volunteered to participate in the program during their lunch period. They were divided into groups consisting of 8-10 individuals. Each group had two female leaders who were in a graduate level program related to psychology or social work. The leaders delivered a scripted curriculum that focused on six developmental tasks to “promote healthy psychosocial development,” (LeCroy, 2004, p.430). The six tasks are learning about gender roles, creating a healthy self-image, beginning independence, interpersonal skills related to maintaining friendships, learning about resources, and planning ahead. The researchers believed that by mastering these six domains, girls could gain the competency to successfully take on the demands that are put on them by social factors such as family, school, and friends (LeCroy, 2004; LeCroy & Mann, 2008).

In the program, two sessions were devoted to each developmental domain, for a total of twelve sessions. The first task involves creating a healthy gender role identity (LeCroy, 2004). Disney highly emphasizes gender role conformity and as discussed earlier, this is shown through many of the princesses. The program focuses on enhancing positive messages about gender roles and self-image (LeCroy, 2008). The second task focuses on self-worth, especially creating a healthy body image (LeCroy, 2004). Disney princesses have been shown to display an unachievable body image by being extremely thin, young, and sexually provocative (Do Rozario, 2004; Lee, 2009). The program emphasizes reducing self-criticism and promoting a positive self-image. Biological,

psychological, and social changes are also discussed to help girls understand what happens to their body during puberty (LeCroy, 2008).

The third task, establishing independence, focuses on being assertive and finding one's own voice (LeCroy, 2004). Young girls can learn how to find their identity in ways not related to their body and learn how to break out of traditional gender norms while still maintaining their femininity (LeCroy, 2008). Interpersonal relationships is the fourth task that focused on keeping and maintaining friendships. The program focuses on building positive peer relationships, increasing understanding and empathy, and strengthening already existing friendships (LeCroy, 2008). The fifth task involves learning how to access resources when the social pressures were too much. Many adolescent girls feel the same when it comes to these issues, but they are rarely discussed (LeCroy, 2004). By learning how to reach out, they can alleviate anxiety and depression (Grabe & Hyde, 2009; Grabe et al., 2008; LeCroy, 2008; Racine, DeBate, Gabriel, & High, 2011). The sixth and final task involves planning for the future. By increasing confidence during a time where self-esteem is at its lowest, girls can feel more optimistic about their chances for success later in life (Clay et al. 2005; LeCroy, 2008). The program also promotes motivation and focuses on education and vocational aspirations (LeCroy, 2008).

After assessments were given to measure each of the developmental tasks, it was found that three of the domains showed significant improvement. Interpersonal relationships related to friendships, utilizing resources, and learning how to establish independence yielded the highest results (LeCroy, 2004). Body image showed the lowest amount of change after the intervention was implemented. LeCroy believe this was due

to a limited amount of time as well as the fact that body dissatisfaction is at its peak during this developmental period (LeCroy, 2004). The Go Grrls program, however, does show how implementing an effective program can yield significant change in a young girl's psychosocial development and beliefs about self. By focusing on these important domains, researchers can help prevent the negative effects that the media has on children's identity, body image, and concept of self (LeCroy, 2008).

Overtime, a seventh domain was added to incorporate one's sexuality (LeCroy, 2008). This relates to all three aspects that have been examined through the Disney princesses. Sexuality plays out through their body image, the concept of gender and what it means to be a woman, and how it plays it into the notion of finding love. The Go Grrls program promotes awareness and understanding sexuality as well as responsible decision making. This empowers adolescents to feel more in control and alleviate the pressure to conform to certain ideals. It also creates protective factors during a time in which negative self-esteem and body dissatisfaction are at an all-time high (LeCroy, 2008).

There are also intervention programs that focus specifically on the media and its effects on body image. Research has suggested that exposing myths about the images being displayed in the media is the key to help increase body satisfaction (Haas, Pawlow, Pettibone, & Segrist, 2012). The research study done by Posavac, Posavac, and Weigel (2001), focused on secondary prevention as the intervention modality with body image, i.e., targeting the at risk population. As mentioned previously, the most at-risk population for negative body image is adolescent girls, however, this study included women aged 18-25 years old. All participants were enrolled in an introductory psychology course at the University of Utah and were separated into groups of 2-5

individuals. Only women who scored high on body dissatisfaction were included and there was a total of 125 participants (Posavac, Posavac, & Weigel 2001).

Three targeted interventions were created for the study, each with the goal of teaching women that the images represented in the media are false and inappropriate comparisons. The first intervention, the Artificial Beauty Intervention, focuses on examining how the images of women in the media are false and enhanced through different techniques such as airbrushing and photo shopping. Women are shown how the images are unrealistic and unachievable in the everyday world (Posavac, Posavac, & Weigel 2001). The second intervention, the Genetic Realities Intervention, teaches women how the media images are incomparable to realistic women. Most women are genetically inclined to be heavier than models (Posavac, Posavac, & Weigel 2001). This helps debunk the belief that a model body type is somehow achievable through the right diet and exercise regimen. The final intervention is a combination of the Artificial Beauty and Genetic Realities messages. Each intervention consists of a videotape with a psychologist speaking about the topic. A control group was incorporated as well for a means of comparison (Posavac, Posavac, & Weigel 2001).

Assessments were given both pre and post-test about body dissatisfaction, body image disturbance, and social comparison. The study found that women who were exposed to either type of intervention reported less weight concern and fewer negative self-statements. Participants were also less likely to make discounting statements in comparison to media images as compared to the control group. All groups yielded to be effective, with the likelihood that one was not statistically more effective than the other (Posavac, Posavac, & Weigel, 2001). This study shows how targeted interventions can

be useful in combatting body dissatisfaction. Women are bombarded with false media images every single day from a very early age; therefore it is imperative to implement a program to help them understand that these messages are unachievable and false. Given the number of adolescent girls and women of all ages who suffer from body image disturbance, interventions should be implemented in the school systems as well as other domains (Grabe et al., 2008; LeCroy, 2008; Posavac, Posavac, & Weigel, 2001).

Another study done by Haas, Pawlow, Pettibone, and Segrist (2012), focused on increasing body satisfaction by exposing the false and enhanced images in the media and incorporating facts about the average American female figure. One-hundred and sixty female college students from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville participated in the study as part of their general psychology course. They were randomly assigned to the experimental or control group and their ages ranged from eighteen to forty-five years old. All participants took the Body Esteem Scale (BES) before the experiment. Two to four weeks after the BES assessment, participants returned and the experimental group was shown magazine advertisements featuring thin and attractive women. The control group had no media exposure. After this intervention, both groups took the BES assessment a second time. Two to four weeks after the first intervention, both groups returned for their last session. The experimental group was shown a thirty-three minute media presentation revealing the myths about models such as airbrushing and photo shopping. The video also presented facts and statistics about the size of average American women. The control group had no media exposure. Both groups then took the BES assessment for a third and final time (Haas, Pawlow, Pettibone, & Segrist (2012).



The results from the study showed that viewing magazine images of thin and idealistically attractive women created a negative effect on body esteem. This provides further support that viewing these images decreases women's self-esteem and body image. However, results from the study also showed statistical significance that the media presentation had a positive impact on women's body esteem. Participants' body image increased after viewing the presentation as well as their sense of sexual attractiveness. These results help provide encouragement for programs like these and offer evidence that interventions counteracting the negative images can improve body image (Haas, Pawlow, Pettibone, & Segrist, 2012). Nobody can be shielded from the media and its messages about gender or body image, but increasing awareness and knowledge about the media can yield a positive change in self-esteem and self-worth for all individuals (Bryne, 2009; Haas, Pawlow, Pettibone, & Segrist, 2012; LeCroy, 2008). This type of intervention can be implemented in the classroom, workshops, family life education programs in schools, or even by parents at home. Combatting the negative images portrayed in the media can be achieved and has a more profound effect as media literacy increases on all fronts (Graber, 2012; Haas, Pawlow, Pettibone, & Segrist, 2012; LeCroy, 2008; Moore, 2013).

Interventions such as the Go Grrrls program and those that focus specifically on the media's influence on body self-esteem help promote positive ideals about body image, gender roles, and self-worth as a woman (Haas, Pawlow, Pettibone, & Segrist, 2012; Lecroy, 2008; Posavac, Posavac, & Weigel 2001). The media, especially Disney, are involved in shaping a child's ideas about self, what it means to be a woman, and how love can be achieved (Giroux & Pollock, 2010; Parry, 2010). By implementing these

programs or having conversations about myth vs. fact, children can begin to have alternative messages and discover which ones fit their values and beliefs (Arke & Primack, 2009).

### **Counseling Implications**

Counselors need to be aware of the power of the media and their effects on individuals and their concept of self. This includes being cognizant of sent messages that are negative and/or have detrimental effects on children (American Counseling Association, 2014). As mentioned earlier regarding educators, this type of awareness begins with self-exploration. Counselors need to examine how these messages have personally affected them and how they interpreted them as an adolescent (Choate & Curry, 2009). They need to understand the stereotypes that exist when it comes to gender, body image, and romance and explore how people internalize these messages. Counselors have an ethical duty to remain self-aware in order to fully help clients to the best of their ability (American Counseling Association, 2014). Counselors should immerse themselves in research and literature as well as attend seminars and workshops to enhance their personal growth and development. Part of the profession involves constant personal growth as they ask their clients to engage in the same process (Choate & Curry, 2009; Winston & Piercy, 2010).

Another role counselors have both professionally and ethically is to educate parents, families, children, and communities on realistic ideas about gender and body image (Ballam & Granello, 2011). School counselors and those who counsel children and adolescents have a particular responsibility because they are working with an extremely impressionable population. Certain problems arise for children and

adolescents that shape their experiences, especially as they experience changes related to puberty. Counselors need to be aware of the issues that affect this population and understand the developmental considerations that come into play (Das, 1995).

School counselors have a strong influence in the education system and interact with students on a daily basis. Research shows that school counselors have a positive effect on adolescents and can be another support system to help increase their resiliency (Whiston & Sexton, 1998). Given the powerful effect that they have, it is their ethical responsibility to implement some type of comprehensive program to help increase media literacy (American Counseling Association, 2014; Choate & Curry, 2009). Counselors can teach youth healthy and realistic messages about body image, gender roles, sex, and love. They can explore flexible gender roles, what it means to be feminine or masculine, what a healthy body really looks like, and appropriate information such as when to engage in sex (Ballam & Granello, 2011). Counselors can also educate parents and the surrounding community about these issues and how to increase media literacy. They can incorporate psychoeducational workshops for students, parents, and teachers (Das, 1995).

School counselors also need to be educated on what interventions and curricula are effective in combatting the negative messages from the media. As mentioned previously, interventions are often done with adolescent girls because of their increased risks of body dissatisfaction, low self-worth, and internalization of cultural standards (Choate & Curry, 2009; LeCroy, 2008). Counselors need to understand how gender impacts development and society's expectations for women and their roles (Choate & Curry, 2009). They then need to convey these messages to adolescent girls.

This can be done through the interventions mentioned previously and through “large-group guidance, small group counseling, individual counseling, faculty in-service training, and parent workshops,” (Choate & Curry, 2009, p.217). Large group guidance involves classroom presentations that increase media literacy and promote healthy development. Small group counseling can be done through the Go Grrrls Program, mentoring young girls, and simply facilitating the conversation. Individual counseling is always an option to help individuals increase their personal awareness and explore topics that are often tied to shame. In-service training targets these issues to faculty members and increases their awareness. Finally, parent workshops involves psychoeducation and giving them resources to further explore this topic outside of the classroom. As one can see, there are a multitude of ways to increase media literacy and discuss the issues of body image. It all begins with communication and exploring these domains to help create protective factors against internalizing negative societal messages (Ballam & Granello, 2011).

Family counseling is another place where these issues can be discussed. Parents are the main source of information for their children and have a powerful role in shaping their ideas and beliefs (Ballam & Granello, 2011). Protective factors greatly increase when parents create safe and open environments to discuss issues surrounding gender, body image, and other diverse topics (Ballam & Granello, 2011; Winston & Piercy, 2010). As families learn how to communicate openly and honestly in counseling, their conscious awareness of gender related dynamics increases. They can discuss these issues safely and make each other accountable to continue exploration as their competencies grow. Populations in general are becoming more diverse, therefore incorporating cultural

competency into family counseling is beneficial to both parents and children as a whole (Winston & Piercy, 2010). It also encourages families to discuss messages that are being relayed and understand how they are being interpreted within the family unit.

Counselors also have a responsibility to go beyond the counseling room to advocate for these issues on a societal level (American Counseling Association, 2014). A counselor's skills and repertoire makes them uniquely appropriate to create policy changes (Choate & Curry, 2009). This can be done within the school systems, organizational systems, and questioning existing policies on an institutional level that prevent growth in this matter. Counselors can consult with other professionals and make people aware of the impact the media has on individuals to help continue media literacy on a larger scale (Choate & Curry, 2009; Whiston & Sexton, 1998). Counselors can also individually advocate for these issues by writing a letter to Disney asking for more diverse characters or becoming involved in women's issues. Personal advocacy may be less direct, but helps create the shift that leads to real worldwide change.

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