The cultural construction of the feminine through Disney films

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Abstract

The question of gender roles in Disney's films has been one of the relevant issues in film industry. Disney has for a long time been at battle with the public for being accused of depicting their characters, specifically females, in stereotypical ways. Gender roles can affect viewers in the manner they see themselves with the others around them. The roles of men and women pictured in Disney's films have mirrored the cultural perspective and beliefs of social norms and expectations on gender roles and identity. This study tries to figure out the roles of the princesses and the female villains in Disney's films with regard to the cultural construction of the feminine. This study applied a qualitative descriptive method with several steps taken during the data analysis. Finally, the— analysis wasinformally presented through a descriptive representation in words. The findings demonstrate that despite displaying the characteristics of strength and power, female villains are frequently portrayed as ugly, overweight, or nonsymmetrical. On the other hand, the princesses are shown to be very beautiful, which helps them succeed in life. The portrayal of the female villains also promotes the notion that powerful women are the most dangerous people in the world. In general, Disney has not yet achieved gender equation between villains and princesses. There is little room for girls to choose between being a wicked villain and a pretty princess.

Keywords: *beauty standards; Disney's films; femininity; gender roles*

INTRODUCTION

A research conducted by Cassiakos, et al (2016) revealed that children began consuming media at the age of four. Cassiakos states that allowing children and teenagers of all ages to get an instant access to a variety of media platforms for entertainment, education, and marketing creates a continuous immersion of this generation in the digital environment. According to the Pew Research Center, 26% of adults say that they are online almost constantly, and 77% of adults say that they do so on a daily basis (Perrin & Jiang, 2018). An individual who spends more time online brings a significant impact on the way he interacts with others. Many parents report that their children watch more than two hours

of television per day, allowing businesses to put the influence of the fictional world to the real world (Cassiakos et al., 2016).

Interestingly, researchers Coyne, et al (2016) discovered that, despite the fact that children are strongly influenced by the media, specifically regarding gender differences; girls were more influenced than boys. Moreover, Coyne and others concluded whether movies that depicted stereotypical behaviors, both boys and girls were more likely to engage in gender-stereotypical female behaviors.

One of the largest entertainment companies in the world is The Walt Disney Company: "Its size and scope are significant," and it has a significant impact on consumer culture (Birkbine et al., 2016, p. 24). Because it has the power to influence children and adults, the company is actively shaping what we value in society (Birkbine et al., 2016). The extent of Disney's influence is demonstrated by the rate at which our society consumes media. Disney has been able to continue influencing the world in the number of films Disney has produced.

Understanding gender is essential for comprehending the impact of media. Disney's animated films employ stereotypes to reflect how women are portrayed in media. A book entitled *Diversity in Disney Films*, published in 2013, states that numerous Disney films contribute to the use of stereotypical female behaviors (Putnam, 2013, p. 150). Additionally, the first Disney princess films were released at a time when media and society were dominated by gender stereotypes and norms. Similar to the majority of other forms of media, Disney films contain images that merely reflect social norms. In the first wave of Disney classics, the princesses represented the gender values and goals that women idealized throughout history. Characters in earlier Disney films, like *Snow White*, strongly reinforced gender-based stereotypes. At the time the films were released, women and girls were still viewed as homemakers. "The classic Disney princesses perpetuate stereotypical gender norms by being thin, graceful, young, submissive, and attractive to romantic suitors of the opposite sex," Rozario (2004). These young, pretty, and kind princesses represent society's expectations for females and gender roles. They are all given tasks like cooking, cleaning, and acting like a mother figure. Even when Snow White finds the dwarfs in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, her first reaction is to clean and care for them. Snow White has required the heroism of the prince rather than the prospective heroine—and, sadly, contributed to the historical period's gender stereotypes rather than the women's equality. There are many gendered images depicted in the early Disney films that clearly indicate the time period in which they were created. Even though they have power, women are still required to get it in a way that is in accordance with their feminine nature.

Despite the depiction of the princesses, the portrayal of the female villains in Disney's films presents a problematic pattern through their behavior and appearance. Sharmin and Sattar (2018) discovered that while male villains were depicted in a variety of ways, female villains were depicted similarly in terms of appearance, with three out of four female villains depicted as old, ugly, and unattractive. The most common motivations for female villains are envy/vanity

(28%). In contrast, 35% of male villains are motivated by acquiring power and wealth (38%). According to the study, these depictions of the differences between male and female villains point to Disney's persistence of negative messages.

The perpetuation of the gender roles that are currently ingrained in American society is impacted in a number of ways by these stereotypes. In the end, Disney depicts the princesses in a way that is stereotypical of gender roles and has the potential to bolster existing social structures. According to this study, female princesses and the female villains in Disney films pinpoint a child's understanding of social structures, especially dealing with gender roles. As media has become a defining feature of modern society, it is essential to comprehend this issue. While Disney media is extensively consumed; as a result, it's critical to examine how the media, especially Disney films portray women, in terms of the roles of their princesses and female villains. The proposed research question is "How the cultural construction of the feminine is portrayed through the princesses and the female villains of Disney films?"

Gender Roles
The behaviors that men and women are expected to exhibit based on their gender are referred to as gender roles. Brannon (2008) stated that the male and female gender roles are similar to rules that both genders must follow in order to fulfill their respective roles in acting masculine and feminine. In many Western societies, women have traditionally been regarded as more nurturing than men. Consequently, the traditional conception of the feminine gender role stipulates that women ought to act in a nurturing manner. Taking care of her family full-time rather than working outside the home is one way a woman can fulfill the traditional feminine gender role. On the other hand, established gender roles assume that men are leaders. As a result, the conventional conception of the masculine gender role holds that men ought to be in charge of their homes, handling important family matters and providing financial support. Pilcher and Whelehan (2004) mentioned that "A "traditional" domestic division of labor, which has grown especially since industrialization, is one in which men are in charge of the necessary financial provision of their family's household (by laboring or working outside the home for a wage) and women are in charge of the management and performance of housework and caring work (like cleaning, laundry, shopping, cooking, and caring for children)". The quotation suggests women as the ones who are expected to do such roles as serving their husbands, cleaning the house, and taking care of their children. Meanwhile, men who are expected to lead the household and earn money to support the family are also affected. Each of them has a role or responsibility as a man and a woman. A standard known as the traditional gender role forces a man to be masculine and a woman to be feminine because of how society constructs gender.

Masculinity and Femininity
Gender differences highlight the concerns of male and female; the male is associated with masculinity, while the female is associated with femininity. In social life, femininity and masculinity are represented by predetermined

patterns, ideal conceptions of what women and men ought to be, rules of behavior, and, ultimately, notions of their social roles and cooperation. "Masculinity and femininity refer to the way society's perspective in how a man be a man and how a woman be a woman," (Burke and Stats, 1988). The way someone is referred to as a man or woman will be determined by society. Females tend to view themselves as feminine, while males typically view themselves as masculine.

Society plays a critical role in assigning gender roles according to an individual's sex. Both masculinity and femininity are social constructs. People form opinions about what constitutes femininity and masculinity. They produce generalizations of gentility and manliness which are comprised of thoughts regarding appearance, as well as actual engaging quality in all kinds of people. They decide things like how men and women should act, how they should speak, how they should walk and dress, and so on. Physical characteristics, social roles, and occupations are all included. As a result, we can say that masculinity and femininity are strongly associated with their roles. For instance, men's ideal role acts as a family breadwinner, while women's ideal role acts as a mother or housekeeper. "Men are defined as creatures that are aggressive, competitive, and instrumentally oriented," based on Terman and Miles (1936), "while women are defined as creatures that are passive, cooperative, and dependent". Furthermore, Terman and Miles added that a strong individual figure, firmness, and bravery are examples of masculine characteristics. Meanwhile, femininity is characterized by nurturing and loving behavior, compassion, and submission.

Beauty Standards

Mass media as the component of a culture, has a significant impact on society's conception of beauty. The media play a crucial role in shaping society's perception of beauty. A person's ideal beauty as a form of their body image can be formed through media perceptions from both men and women. The mass media present an image or figure of a person who is thought to possess beauty.

The ideal body type and size for both men and women are frequently depicted in the media. As a result, society will establish a standard and ideal body size (Grogan, 1999). Whiteness is frequently the focus of media representations of beauty ideals, which emphasize certain body types and characteristics that indicate youth, such as a slim body, large eyes, full lips, flawless skin, and high cheekbones.

Groesz et al. (2002) stated that Western media portray a woman as being excessively thin and lean, having long legs, a flat stomach, and narrow hips. In addition, the body type that emphasizes curves has resulted in the establishment of a society-wide beauty standard. According to other writings, while attempting to fulfill the beauty ideal, there are numerous other factors to consider, such as flawless skin and beautiful facial characteristics, in addition to thinness, which is crucial to achieving the beauty ideal. According to Brooks (2015), beauty is an expression that typically refers to women's facial beauty. When describing beauty, facial beauty is regarded as a significant factor. "Women's bodies are categorized as beautiful not only based on facial beauty, but also synonymous with white, smooth, and firm skin," writes Kasiyan in the

book *Manipulation and Dehumanization of Women in Advertisements*, as cited in Valencia and Junaidi (2021). It implies that the Western excellence ideal is basically spinning around an appealing face, slimness, and firm and white skin that connote energetic behaviours. It demonstrates how society, philosophy, and culture have extensively defined beauty as an aesthetic term.

On the other hand, aspects of beauty are ingrained in a culture and passed down through family, peers, teachers, and the media over time. based on the presumption that many women are attempting to meet society's evolving standards of beauty. A view of beauty that is used as a standard for determining whether a woman is beautiful emerges as a result of the phenomenon of beauty trends that are prevalent in society. When someone is attractive, they are usually treated kindlier or better (Horlstrom, 2004). As the opposite of this phenomenon, people don't care as much about someone who is average or even worse. Because of this, many women make an effort to conform their physical appearance to the standards that were in place at the time in order to be considered beautiful.

Female Villain
Disney's female villains are an interesting part of the films to study. Female villains in Disney are frequently depicted as exhibiting non-traditional beauty standards. In every Disney films studied, the villains are larger than the princesses. Furthermore, in six of the eight Disney films, female villains exhibit characteristics that distinguish them from the usual realm of beauty (Wellman, 2020). Furthermore, Wellman (2020) added that harsh features such as pointed chins or more defined cheekbones are some of the features many of the female villains have. Sharmin and Sattar (2018) also stated that the female villain are often portrayed as unattractive, overweight, or out of shape, compared to the good shapes of the female heroines have

METHOD
The focus of this study was Disney films. The qualitative descriptive method was used to provide a comprehensive description of the cultural construction of the feminine. The data for this study were taken from two different sources: primary data and secondary data. The primary data sources were taken not only from Disney's films *Sleeping Beauty, Little Mermaid, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,* and *Cinderella,* but also from the film scripts. To enrich the discussion, the secondary data source collected from internet sources were concerned with the issue of the discussion.

Several steps were taken during the data analysis, ranging from identifying the evidence in the films to support the analysis and to make the description clear. First, the collected data were selected carefully in accordance with the cultural construction of the feminine through Disney's films. Second, the analysis was conducted by highlighting the selected data in the form of dialogue, monologue, descriptive, or narrative. Finally, the analysis informally was presented through a descriptive representation in words.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There were a few similarities among the films. Here, they are broken down into two categories: princesses and female villains. More specific similarities among films are discussed, such as how princesses and female villains are physically portrayed.

The Physical Appearances of Disney's Princesses and the Female Villains

The princesses in Disney's films are depicted as having European beauty standards. Snow White, for instance, is extremely fair, has black hair, red lips, and is dressed in a blue, red, and yellow dress. Cinderella has fair skin, a small waist, bright blonde hair, and a light blue dress. In *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel has vivid red hair and is dressed in a green bikini with a purple top. In *Sleeping Beauty*, Aurora wears a light pink dress that complements her light skin and blonde hair. In addition to being extremely thin, Aurora fits the stereotype of being ideal.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Ariel are four of Disney films in which the princesses are portrayed based on the stand out characteristics such as their voice or beauty. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the queen is extremely jealous of Snow White because she is referred to as the fairest girl of the land. She is also a great singer. Aurora receives both the gift of beauty and the gift of song from the good fairies in *Sleeping Beauty*. The stepmother was envious because Cinderella is depicted as beautiful and charming girl of all. Cinderella is also portrayed singing very well while working. In *Little Mermaid*, Ursula takes Ariel's wonderful voice because she is described as having one.

On the other hand, Disney's female villains are frequently depicted as exhibiting unconventional beauty standards. The female villains are depicted as greater than the princesses. Furthermore, the female villains present the attributes that separate them from the beauty norm. They are frequently depicted as nonsymmetrical, overweight, or unattractive. Ursula is shown to be overweight, with large breasts and a large body, in *The Little Mermaid*. In Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, the evil queen disguises herself as an elderly woman to deceive Snow White into eating the poisoned apple. Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty* is a female villain with a tall, thin body, yellow eyes, and pale green skin. She also has pointed chins, and defined cheekbones. Because of these nonsymmetrical appearances, she does not meet women's ideal beauty standards like the Princesses.

Gender Roles of Disney's Princesses and the Female Villains

According to Brannon (2008), the stereotypical characteristics of women are pious, submissive, domestic, and pure. Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora, the first three princesses—also known as the classic princesses—exemplify how these characteristics, as well as the traditional archetypes of women's gender roles and gender stereotypes, apply to them. Their quietness, grace, and calm reflect the submissive qualities they possess. They depict the ideal women as they fulfill each characteristic that society expects them to have. In addition, they are portrayed as the ones who expect others, especially the male characters, to save them. The three princesses reinforce the notion that women

are dependent to men and that the only way for them to feel safe is through the protection from men. They passively rely on the men's assistance to feel free from their misery.

In addition, the princesses are very domesticated due to their cleanliness, affection, and willingness to do the house chores. They fulfill the expected gender role if they can be mothers and establish their own identities and roles in society. "... the housewife-mother—the model for all women, portraying women's ideal reality as long as they close to domesticity such as cooking, cleaning, washing, and childbearing. ...Women had to accept sexual passivity, male dominance, and nurturing motherhood in order to achieve identity and find fulfillment under this regime" (Leitch, as cited in Chrismana, 2016). The princesses now perform house chores in order to maintain their identity, and finally marry the princes. Their idea of "happily ever after" is only obtained by marrying the princes and always has other people to help them out when they need it. In Disney's films, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella,* and *Beauty and the Beast* are just a few of the Disney films in which the princesses are depicted joyfully performing stereotypical femininity like doing the house chores and cleaning. Finding a home and cleaning it are the ways Disney presents Snow White. Meanwhile, Aurora is shown for the first time in *Sleeping Beauty* when she is cleaning the house as well. Moreover, while performing house chores like washing dishes and cleaning the house, Cinderella is shown singing and conversing with her animal companions.

In terms of the need for others, the princesses in Disney's films are portrayed as being physically weaker. None of the princesses can defeat the villain on their own. For instance, Cinderella is unable to escape from her stepmother until the prince appears and proposes marriage to her. Prince Philip defeats maleficent, who has transformed into a gigantic dragon, in order to save Aurora. After putting Snow White to sleep, the evil queen is chased by the seven dwarves off a cliff. Furthermore, Disney films articulate whether the princesses either need a man to rescue them or view falling in love as their main goal. After the Prince saves Snow White, the two of them finally fall in love. In addition, in the original *Sleeping Beauty*, Prince Philip is the one who awakens Aurora from her sleep and saves her; As a result, the film portrays Prince Philip as the savior. Later on, they also fall in love, and live happily ever after.

Meanwhile, Disney puts the villain in dominating position above the princesses. The evil queen, the stepmother, maleficent, and Ursula all possess powers that enhance their power of dominance over princesses. Maleficent has the strongest magic in the land and the power to shapeshift. The Stepmother in both movies humiliates and belittles Cinderella and forces her to become a servant in her own home. These dominating position and abilities differentiate their feminine roles from the princesses like Aurora, Snow White, Cinderella, and Ariel, who rely on external factors to succeed.

Cultural Construction of the Feminine through Disney's Films
Despite the fact that some of the Disney films showed a change or progression in relation to social norms, there are still numerous similarities existed in the

films. Through Disney's use of female stereotypes that are associated with beauty, female characteristics and power, indicated that there are some negative impacts Disney films bring to society because the portrayal of the princesses and the female villains does not give young girls choices of personality traits they can imitate.

In Disney films, female villains are frequently depicted as ugly, overweight, or nonsymmetrical while simultaneously exposing the characteristics of strength and power. On the other hand, the princesses are shown to be very beautiful, and this beauty helps them succeed in life. Children may associate powerful women with attributes society views as negative after watching Disney films. According to previous research (Bazzini, et al, 2010), a lot of Disney films reinforce the idea that beauty is a sign of good things (being beautiful is good). In addition, princess characters are shown to be morally virtuous, less aggressive, and destined to achieve positive life outcomes (Bazzini et al., 2010).

Since the villains are depicted with nontraditional beauty standards, Disney nonverbally articulates that society naturally assigns villains as negative characters based on how they initially appear. This prejudice teaches society, especially children, that they do not deserve a happily ever after if they are not beautiful. It also teaches the idea that beauty is necessary for success. Disney reinforces what type of woman society favors by depicting powerful women (the villains) with negative beauty standards and the submissive women in need of assistance (the princesses) with traditional beauty standards.

According to Solis (2016), the idea of a man coming to a woman and saving her has extreme appeal in Western cultures. As a result, the portrayal of women as weak and in need of assistance reflects what we believe to be the case in real life. As a result, Disney and society give negative attributes on women who are powerful on their own. As a result, young girls have two main choices: to be pretty princesses who need to be saved or who can't do anything on their own, or to be the ugly, powerful villains who are feared by everyone in the movie until the hero overtakes them.

The idea that powerful women are the world's most dangerous people is also promoted within the portrayal of female villains. It emphasizes the fact that it is normal and important for women to compete with one another every day. The villains are the only female characters in Disney films who can do everything on their own. As a result, girls who look up to princesses are not seeing independent role models. This can lead to a system in which strong, independent girls are seen as less valuable or unimportant than girls who need help from others. In certain circumstances, relying on others is not necessarily bad; however, when a person is unable to live independently, they run the risk of having difficulties in things such as the daily tasks associated with life.

Moreover, in Disney's films, both the female villains and the princesses speak about men, but in different ways. The princesses frequently portray men as their savior or someone they desperately want to have in their lives, whereas the female villains portray men as the worst people on earth. In her 2017 book,

Jaclyn Friedman explains that while the majority of men have good intentions, they have never been held to a standard that required them to behave differently from the norm. In point of fact, when they are thought to be "too" respectful of women, many men experience social shaming (Friedman, 2017). Social shaming faced by the man who are respecting women leads to a dangerous disconnect between what should be expected and what actually is. This cognitive dissonance between what society teaches men and what should be occurring gives a clear image of how men currently act and how they should. On the one hand, the portrayal of the female villains implies that they will not live up to any standard because of wanting a man. The portrayal of the princesses, on the other hand, demonstrates to the audience that men are already above any standard society sets because they are one of the keys to a happy ending life. As a result, it's hard for men and women to figure out how to have healthy relationships.

Overall, Disney has not yet bridged the gender gap that exists between princesses and villains. Girls are forced to choose either being a wicked villain or a pretty princess, with little room for in between. McDonough (2017) in his research explains that the most effective method for developing and comprehending strong, independent female characters is to possess a combination of characteristics such as beauty, bravery, independence, action, intelligence, and kindness. Disney, on the other hand, does not offer this representation to many young girls. Even though newer Disney films, for example Moana, has started to help people understand what it means to be a woman, older Disney films continue to be important. As a result, their lack of a combination of effective traits makes them ineffective role models.

CONCLUSION

This research analyzed Disney films in order to better understand the effects they have on society. Understanding the common themes is essential because Disney films play as media that employ American culture. It is obvious that gender roles are portrayed differently in Disney films. The appearance of the characters, and the beliefs they hold dealing with the characters' roles are all examples of significant themes in this research. The themes indicate Disney's attempts to break out the stereotypes they brought in their films, as well as a number of problematic issues that have continuously increased. These findings potentially increase society's understanding of the portrayal of women in media as well as the long-term effects of an incomplete female representation in television and film.

AUTHOR STATEMENT

Afina Murtiningrum : Conceptualization, data collection and management, data analysis, writing the abstract, introduction, methodology, results and discussion, and conclusion. Destary Praptawati: supporting results writing, editing and refining the overall manuscript. Riana Permatasari: reference management software and proofreading.

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