

# The Independence of Princess Images in Frozen and Princess Animated Films Series of Disney

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**Abstract.** Social gender theory is proposed to distinguish biological sex, which holds that gender is not just born but acquired through psychological, cultural, and social norms and more. Nowadays, scholars generally study the issues of communication and gender from the perspective of social gender. The Disney Frozen and Princess series of animated films has created 14 princesses with different images and styles in 80 years, from 1937 to 2017. The inner characters of the women in the films are influenced by the environment and ideology of The Times to a certain extent. Based on gender theory, nine princesses were randomly selected from 14 princesses in 13 Disney officially recognized princess films and Frozen as research objects, and the independent characteristics of princess characters were coded and analyzed by using the content analysis method to explore the main reasons for the change. The research finds that, with the development of the times, the princesses in the Disney princess animation series gradually show more independent characteristics in personalities. Moreover, the main reasons for the differences and changes in these princesses are the changes in social culture.

**Keywords:** social gender; Disney princess animation; Frozen; independence; personality.

## 1. Introduction

Affected by the global epidemic, movies and TV series have almost become the main ways of relaxation and entertainment for people. Film studies also became the main object of study and discussion by scholars of various disciplines during this period. Disney animation has played an important role in promoting the development of American animation and even the world's animation culture [1]. The values and culture behind Disney animation have profoundly influenced the world. After the release of the earliest Disney princess animation Snow White and Seven Dwarves, Disney has created a number of popular classics based on traditional fairy tales, and the main feature of these films is that the storyline revolves around women to develop. Every Disney princess is the embodiment of romance and beauty. In the twists and turns of the princess's extraordinary experience, people enjoy the wonderful picture and bizarre stories, and the princesses experience challenges and trials, eventually achieving the awakening of self-awareness and growth [2]. The Disney princess image has a profound influence on image communication and the construction of the plot. A study of the changes in the image of Disney princesses can not only reflect the artistic style of animation creation but more importantly, can explore the values and ideology behind the creation. To better understand the trend of the character image, the research on the change of the independence of Disney princesses is carried out and is expected to provide more ideas and methods for the research on the changes in characters' personalities.

Most of the existing research on the Disney princess series and the Frozen series tends to look at feminism in terms of love or film contexts. This study mainly presents the female image from the aspects of the princess's personality and cuts the perspective back to the women themselves. The main content of this paper revolves around the evolution of the independence of Disney princesses, and the content analysis method and the social gender theory were adopted as basic methods and theories of analysis. In the 80 years from 1937 to 2016, the Disney Princess series of animated films and Frozen created 14 princesses with different styles. The female images in the films were influenced by the environment and ideology of the times to a certain extent.

This study randomly selected 3 princesses from each of the three stages---the early films, middle films, and the current films---of Disney princess movies generally recognized by society and took

these 9 princesses as the research objects of this study: Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora, Belle, Pocahontas, Mulan, Merida, Elsa, and Moana. The early films were released between 1937 and 1959. These are Snow White and the Seven Dwarves (1937), Cinderella (1950), and Sleeping Beauty (1959). Thirty years later, a group of five middle movies began to release, and this study will analyze: Beauty and the Beast (1991), Pocahontas (1995), and Mulan (1998). As for the most current Disney Princess film, this research chose Brave (2012), Frozen (2013), and Moana (2016).

## 2. Keywords Description

### 2.1 Social Gender

The concept of social gender was formed in the 1960s, which was the second wave of feminism[3]. The distinction between biological and social sex was made by psychologist Robert Stoller. In his research on bisexual people, he pointed out that the gender of these subjects is inconsistent with their biological sex. It can be concluded that it is necessary to distinguish between biological sex, that is, biological sex and social sex[4]. In analyzing the status inequality between men and women, feminist scholars introduce social gender, which is different from the biological “sex” of men and women. Feminist scholar Oakley proposed, based on Storer’s research, that gender connotation is not only the anatomical and psychological characteristics of men and women in the biological sense but also social gender, that is, socially constructed masculinity and femininity[5]. Gender is mainly formed under the influence of social culture and social psychology; it is not a direct product of biological sex.

### 2.2 The Definition of the Independent

Based on previous literature, it is concluded that princesses became more independent in personality over time. To test it, some detailed definitions of the word “independent” are collected and integrated from existing documents. For example, “independent” can mean “confident and free to do things without needing help from other people [6]”, Merida, for instance, freed her mother on her own; “independent” also means “not looking to or obey others for one’s opinions or for guidance in conduct, especially from male character [7]” like Moana defying her father’s ban on going to sea and embarked on an ocean adventure), and “not requiring or relying on others’ parenting to living (as for care or livelihood) [8]”, while Aurora is not; “independent” is also equivalent to “showing a desire for freedom [8]” when Elsa is longing for a life free of inhibitions, and “not depending on the authority of another, autonomous, self-governing, such as performing an independent action against many, being alone when it was not the norm, or not participating in the expected culture [9]” as Elsa alone lifted the curse and became head of the kingdom; At the same time, independent refers to “a tendency of disapproval or attitude towards common ideas, sometimes even in opposition [10]”, such as Mulan believes that girls can fight on the battlefield, too; “be able to make rational judgments and not be tempted [11]” is also a vital definition”, for example, Pocahontas made a rational choice between love and duty. It could refer to “having or earning enough wealth so that they do not have to rely on sb else for help [6]” and “active thinking [7]” as well.

## 3. Discussion

### 3.1 Early Films—Few Independent Characteristics

As Disney’s first three princesses, they show few characteristics of independence.

Gender theory assumes that individuals are defined by social culture and are the site of “disciplinary power”. In the patriarchal gender order, women become objects under “the male gaze. Men took over the public sphere of society, while women’s main job was to take care of their families.

Influenced by this idea during that period, although the three princesses are all of noble origin, the film still highlights the image of them as girls with the potential of being “good wives and mothers” with excellent household skills rather than as independent individuals.

Snow White makes the room spotless for the seven dwarfs and cooks delicious meals for them; Cinderella does all the chores by herself, and Aurora can live a simple and comfortable life in the forest with the three fairies. In the film, taking care of the family is the most important job for the three princesses.

In the movie, their resistance is futile, and the three princesses can only wait for male characters to rescue them. They have no ability to resist oppression and threat by themselves. Although they yearn for love and marriage, they can only wait passively. Their happiness is gained by their feminine qualities under the male gaze, such as beauty and good housekeeping skills.

In the traditional patriarchal society, men hold the right to discourse and play an important role, while women can only be happy by being attached to men[12]. The princesses are unable to achieve happiness on their own. Cinderella indulged in her fantasies, telling herself, “As long as you believe, your dreams will come true”, but did not take any action to realize them. Being abused by his stepmother and sisters, she was always submissive and defenceless. She did not show any sign of attempt to fight back until in preparation for the royal ball, but did not succeed ultimately; Snow White lived happily in childhood with her father’s shelter but was threatened and oppressed when her father passed away, and she waited until the role of the prince appeared and her living conditions was finally improved. In addition, there were all male characters who show Snow White a way out of the hunter and protect the homeless princess.

### **3.2 Middle Films—Gradually Show Independent Features**

Through the analysis, it can be seen that at this stage, the princess gradually showed independent characteristics, especially in aspects like “A tendency of a disapproval or rebellious attitude towards common ideas, sometimes even in the opposition”; “Be able to make rational judgments and not be tempted”, and “Active thinking”. Belle, Pocahontas, and Mulan break the image of females in traditional cognition; the princesses begin to have the independent personality, they are no longer disciplined by a traditionally patriarchal society, and their desire and pursuit are no longer just centered on love and marriage, they yearn for the unknown and the new world, and dare to break the traditional rules, to explore the world and start their self-discovery.

In traditional society, an important source of power is education, but women have been excluded from the education system. Belle, who loves books, becomes a “strange” girl in the eyes of the villagers and bears “a rebellious attitude against common ideas”. However, it is because of the acquisition of knowledge Belle has her own independently “active thinking” and capability of making “rational judgment”, which allows her to reveal Gaston’s hypocritical and evil mind hidden under the handsome appearance and abandon the stereotypes of the ugly appearance of the beast.

Mulan is confident and unrestrained, dares to express her feelings frankly, not caring about the different ideas of other people, and ignoring the requirements of traditional feudal rituals for women. She is “a rebel of the traditional rituals” and believes that women should also pursue their own unique values. From the beginning, Mulan disguises herself as a man to adapt to the male-dominated public sphere but finally shows her self-worth as a woman. This process implies the awakening of women’s self-consciousness and the infinite potential of being a woman.

### **3.3 Current Films—Have Distinctly Independent Characteristics**

The three princesses in current films can best highlight the human nature and independent characteristics of princesses, mostly in; “confident and free to do things without needing help from other people”; “not depending on the authority of another, autonomous, self-governing, such as performing an independent action against many, being alone when it was not the norm, or not participating in the expected culture”. They no longer rely on the help of men to save themselves but are shown as having important roles to take on social responsibilities.

Being “not looking to or obey others for one’s opinions or for guidance in conduct, especially from male character” and showing “a tendency of a disapproval or rebellious attitude towards common ideas, sometimes even in the opposition”, Merida represents a major shift in Disney’s approach to the

personality of princesses. Merida's mother told her to follow the rules of being a typical princess: "a princess should not laugh loudly, a princess should not wolf down her food, a princess must get up early, be compassionate and patient, a princess must be careful and tidy, and a princess must be perfect at all times." Her mother, as a female, strictly follows the rules of the patriarchal system to tame women, while Merida is a rebel. In order to resist her mother's discipline, Merida misuses magic to turn her mother into a bear and makes her mother hunted by her family. However, in this situation, Merida does not get help from men but relies on her own strength to find the solution and defeat the powerful villain on her own, which is consistent with the definition "confident and free to do things without needing help from other people".

Dissatisfied with the control and restrictions from her father, Moana bravely set out for the journey to the sea; she faced many difficulties alone. She used her wisdom to discover the heart of Tefiti and bravely saved the whole family, using "active thinking" to figure out solutions to problems rather than waiting for men to come to rescue passively.

In the middle and current stage of the Disney princess series as well as *Frozen*, the princesses may be bound by family ties, social traditions, enemies, and even by themselves, but they gradually grow up through the resistance and struggle and realize the transformation of self-salvation from being passive rescued. The films highlight the independent character of these girls.

## **4. Deeper Thoughts from the Perspective of Sound, Image and Text Language**

### **4.1 Sound**

The sound effects in the film can reflect the character traits of the princess. The voice of Pocahontas is low and magnetic, with a low pitch and a sense of power. She used her calm voice to persuade both sides in the face of interracial war, highlighting her calm and independent thinking qualities. Compared to the sweetness and gentleness of a woman's voice under the traditional male gaze, Pocahontas' voice highlights the strength of a woman's voice from the inside out; In the song "let it go", Elsa's voice is full of power, it is in this song that she determines not to pay attention to the judgment from outside. At the end of the song, the song suddenly closes with "The cold never bother me anyway", with determination in her voice. It is in this song that Elsa decides to become an independent individual instead of being trapped by the words of her father and others.

### **4.2 Image**

In the beginning, the physical movements of the princesses in the three early princess movies are gentle and graceful, with little change in facial expressions, which is in line with the image of a lady. Later on, the princess is no longer shown in the traditional concept of the image of a lady, but with their own character traits, and incorporates more independent characteristics (not looking to or obey others for one's opinions or for guidance in conduct; showing a desire for freedom, a tendency of rebellious, and more).

For example, when Princess Merida quarrels with her mother over the marriage, her eyes sometimes open wide, reflecting her anger, and in the process of quarreling with her mother, she strides back and forth and keeps waving the sword in her hand.

The change in the appearance of the princesses also reflects the emancipation of their personalities. Prior to the 1980s, the three princesses have a highly similar appearance: as noble ladies or princesses from Europe, they all have white skin and delicate features. In terms of clothing, they are represented by brightly colored European royal dresses [13]. In the middle stage films, the princesses' dresses, hairstyles, and accessories are strongly individual and ethnic; for example, Mulan's image incorporates more Chinese elements: her face is more angular, and she wears traditional ancient Chinese armor, all of which help highlight her rebellious spirit. In the twenty-first century, the appearance of princesses has become more individualistic, and their independent personalities are more apparent. Merida's overly exaggerated red voluminous curls, the shell necklace worn by Moana, and the Polynesian-inspired costumes all echo their rebellious and independent personalities.

### 4.3 Textual Language

In the early stage, the word “dream” appeared very frequently. In these animations, the “dream” that the princesses talked about is all about the desire for love and the pursuit of a happy marriage. For example, Snow White sings, “I wish, I wish, prince charming will find me tonight” by the well, while Cinderella sings, “perhaps someday, the dream that I wish will come true... so, this is a miracle I’ve been waiting for” [14].

In contrast to the previous, Pocahontas’ words show her responsibility as the successor to the chief of the future tribe. When she has to separate from her lover, she says, “I must stay, I am needed here, and you should go back to where you came from.” She cannot abandon her tribe and her people to follow her love; even though she is not willing to give up her love from the bottom of her heart, she still makes the most beneficial choice for both sides. This simple dialogue shows the shift that women begin to take on social responsibility as well as making rational judgments.

## 5. Conclusion

In the nine films covered in the study, the princesses’ characters become increasingly independent over time, from which the awakening of female self-awareness and self-redemption can be seen. The journey of the female protagonists in the movies is essentially a process of self-awareness and a return to their true nature. In the selection of movies, audiences look for content that is in line with the trend of the times and their own values. They are not just looking for the cultural products themselves but for the deeper cultural connotation and value identity. As the times change and women move from submissiveness and dependence to independence, the princess movies of different periods cater to this change in mentality and perception. The Disney princess series conveys the value of valuing the power of women themselves. Under the influence of a long-standing male-dominated society, the gender roles of men and women remain in focus. With the transformation of female roles in 21st-century cinema, feminism continues to influence society’s perception of different genders while conveying the mainstream values of independence and freedom.

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