

The Embodiment and Effects of Feminism in Disney Films in the 20th and 21st

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Abstract. With the rise of feminism, the female characters in Disney's animated films break away from the original female stereotypes. The feminist content in Disney has evolved with the wave of the feminist movement. More and more brave, astute and independent female characters appear in movies. Compared with the simple princess movies, which tell the story of the elegant but weak princess who is rescued by the prince, these new female characters reflect the change of people's thoughts. These feminist contents promote the concept of gender equality, show the diversity of women's beauty, and deepen people's self-affirmation. However, some evidence shows that Disney characters have deformed aesthetics and tend to cause unhealthy body control. But people can improve this problem by being tolerant of beauty's distance and paying attention to the beauty within. Parents can also guide their children to learn about women's rights in movies so that the improved Disney movies can play a more positive role.

Keywords: Disney Movies; Feminism; Effects; Self-affirmation; Gender Equality.

1. Introduction

Disney films have long been known for their excellent characters, beautiful pictures, and rich themes. Many people are attracted by Disney movies, both adults and children. Disney's films have also done well in the film market, with 5,300 movies owned by Disney in 2021, 37% of the US film market in 2019, and seven of the top15 films in 2016 [1]. Although many Disney movies are widely distributed, when discussing Disney, we always think of the word "princess." Disney's Princess series is famous worldwide and has become a gender enlightenment film for many girls. While some people have criticized princess movies, saying they impose more constraints on female images, making girls think that girls should be gentle and sweet and that the prince redeeming-princess routine will amplify male power or lead to premature puberty in children.

But with the rise of feminist elements in Disney films, the characterization has changed. The female characters in Disney movies are no longer gentle princesses but some women with personality and courage, such as Merida in brave legend, Elsa in Frozen, and Moana in *Moana*. The presence of these female characters brings a feminist element to the theme of Disney films, as well as a more positive influence on children. Children's exposure to feminism lays the foundation for gender equality in society and contributes to children's gender recognition and self-identity.

While many people are dissatisfied with the images of princesses and princes portrayed in Disney films. The quiet princess might deepen the constraints on women, and the brave prince might aggravate gender inequality. But Disney's representation of women is evolving, and there are more feminist elements in Disney films. These elements of feminism make children more equal in their attitudes towards gender, feel more satisfied with themselves, and show society the infinite possibilities of women.

In this article, I will introduce the evolution process of feminism in Disney movies and show the development of feminist elements by analyzing and comparing the characters in Disney movies of different ages. Next, the influence of feminist factors in Disney films and finally, the discussion of counterclaims will be conducted and suggestions will be given.

2. Background information

The increased feminist elements in Disney films are linked to the evolutionary and social contemporaneous feminist movements. When the first wave of feminism ended in the United States in 1920, Disney released *Snow-White*, an adaptation of The Brothers Grimm, in 1937, when America was going through a depression. As a result, women in the United States bear much economic pressure, and more women go out to look for work. In the *Snow-White* movie, the characters of Snow White are like women of this period. Before the economic crisis, women were widely expected to stay home, do housework and look after children. When the Great Depression hit, these women were under pressure to leave their homes and enter society. It's like Snow White running into a dangerous forest to escape her stepmother. Disney released *Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella* films before the wave of the second wave of feminism. The beautiful and kind female characters in the movie represent the improvement of the acceptance and tolerance of women in society [2]. But in the film, these women are portrayed as a unified kind, beautiful and straightforward image without distinctive personalities. They are often the ones who lack action and need a prince to save them [3]. It also represents the social stereotypes and constraints on women. There were fixed expectations for women at that time and restrictions on them to behave like those princesses. In the movie, male characters are often in the position of heroes, and they usually save the princess at the critical moment, which is also a reflection of the patriarchal society at that time and reflects the fantasy of men at that time for their high status and high ability.

In the late 1960s, the second wave of American feminism began. Unlike the first wave of feminism, the second wave of feminism no longer only focused on equal political voting rights but paid more attention to the equal rights obtained by each woman. Women are no longer instruments of childbearing or low-class figures in patriarchal societies. "Second-wave feminists realized that women's cultural and political inequalities were inextricably linked [4]." Subsequent Disney films have featured a lot of female identity awakening. Like *Beauty and the Beast*, released in 1991, Belle is brave and optimistic and finally saves the prince with love. It is the first Disney movie to feature a princess who is unconventional and intelligent. Then, into the 21st century, many female characters with distinct characteristics, such as Princess Rapunzel from *Tangled* and Merida from *Brave*. They are all women with a strong sense of autonomy and a spirit of exploration. The emergence of these roles is related to the rise of women's status in society and the emphasis on gender equality. These roles represent that women no longer need to be attached to men and that they can aspire to make a difference themselves.

As society has become more vocal about the rise of feminism, media messages related to feminism are often able to gain attention. People want to support and recognition from some media. Compare that to DreamWorks Animation (DreamWorks Animation is an animation film and television production company based in Glendale, Los Angeles, USA. Its representative films include *Kung Fu Panda*, *How to Train the Dragon* and *The Boss Baby*, etc., and its worldwide box office revenue exceeds 15 billion dollars [5]), which has only four of its 35 animated feature films featuring female leads, and SONY Pictures, which has none, and it's clear that Disney has gone way beyond that. Disney has filled a need for female audiences. Even though only 17 of the 50 Disney and Pixar films between 1989 and 2018 featured female protagonists, Disney was able to make more money from them [6]. The global box office ranking shows that the top grossing cartoon movies are *Frozen* and *Frozen II*, which proves how popular an excellent cartoon movie with a female character as the main character is. *Frozen II* even ranks among the top 10 grossing films of all time by the Disney Company [7]. Films that highlight female characters can well arouse the emotional resonance of female audiences and bring more significant benefits simultaneously. As a result, Disney's films upgrade and highlight female characters, far surpassing their competitors.

3. The effects of feminist content in Disney movies

3.1 Educate children about gender equality

Princess characters in Disney's animated films before the rise of the feminist movement fit social stereotypes. People think that women should be as clever and sensible as those princesses and marry good men. These princesses convey the most traditional image of women. *Snow White* is so innocent that she almost puts herself in danger several times. *Sleeping Beauty* had to be kissed by the prince to wake up, and Cinderella was afraid to show the prince what she looked like. This is all because of the constraints and stereotypes of women in traditional societies. Women live in a patriarchal society and have no chance to show their abilities.

The emergence of Disney princesses in the 20th and 21st centuries has changed all these constraints. The new generation of Disney princesses encourages girls to do what they want and establish gender identity. Such girls will have a good understanding of gender equality. Professor of BYU Coyne said that "Princess culture gives women key storylines where they're the protagonist. They're following their dreams, helping those around them, and becoming individuals who haven't been prescribed a role because of their gender [8]." Elsa in *Frozen* is a girl, but she has superhuman abilities. Even though she was confused when looking for herself, she didn't need a man to save her. She can grow and succeed on her own. This inspires children not to be limited by their gender. They are always free individuals who can do whatever they want.

The feminist element of Disney not only enables girls to gain strength and gender identity and lets boys know how to get along with women and communicate better instead of blindly suppressing women with identity and gender. Research has shown that boys exposed to Disney princesses tend to be better able to talk about their emotional needs in a relationship. Disney's films do not amplify the power of male characters as traditional films do. In *Frozen*, *Moana*, and other movies, male characters are more likely to accompany girls and the princesses find that these men are not so powerful, like Maui in *Moana* [3]. Such male characters are less aggressive but not less attractive and convey the right way for men and women to get along.

This is despite some studies arguing that Disney princess movies can disrupt children's early gender development. A study by Professor Coyne and her colleagues found that children who participated in princess culture had better perceptions of gender equality. They organized a two-wave longitudinal princess culture study to research the influence of gender cognition on preschool children. They measured the penetration of princess culture in 307 children with an average age of less than five. Five years later, 155 of the children were interviewed and asked about their views on gender. It turns out that these children generally think that work, relationships, and education are equally important to men and women [9].

3.2 Self-affirmation

With the development and opening of social thought, people no longer have a unified standard for the beautiful character image. Previous Disney princesses have mostly been portrayed as demure ladies, but those princesses were designed to fit traditional female stereotypes. Now influenced by feminism and inspired by the open society, Disney's princesses are becoming more and more personalized and free from the constraints of tradition. The difference of each princess allows the audience to find the shining point from their own body so that children can recognize their expertise and yearn for those princess images with personality. In *Brave*, Merida always wears her hair down. She is as lively and adventurous as the girls who play in the park with their hair down. Merida's hobby is not typical of a girl. She likes archery. A princess with such characteristics and distinctive personality will encourage girls with so-called male hobbies to be motivated and affirm their characteristics.

Similarly, girls in Disney movies no longer have to live by other people's expectations. They can have something to stand for and do it on their own. This image helps children understand the diversity of life and that they are living for themselves. Magic Anna secretly sailed to the sea; although she

encountered many difficulties, their courage survived and saved everyone. Such a disobedient and impulsive figure would never have appeared in a Disney movie before. However, the film's happy ending tells the audience that when they are determined to do something, they should follow the guidance of their heart. It also teaches children that they should listen to their hearts.

Disney has broken the color barrier for princesses, introducing many exotic princesses with different skin colors. These princess images are in line with the public demand for diversity and the desire for racial equality. At the same time, these princesses convey to children that beauty is diverse and not based on appearance. This gives girls worldwide the confidence to accept their looks and appreciate their unique beauty. Mulan, a Chinese princess, introduced by Disney in 1998, is also an honorary princess. She broke all the stereotypes about the role of women. Her honor was chiefly due to her fighting in place of her aged father and her manly strength of character. She not only broke the traditional color of the princess but also broke the social expectations of women's character [10]. Mulan's character doesn't teach children that they should be desperate to do what they want. She encourages them while also talking about the responsibility she takes on. Mulan as a woman, to marry a good husband is to honor the family. She also tried to be a virtuous woman for her family's honor. But she eventually found out that she wasn't whom everyone expected her to be. When she came home full of glory, there was no pride or pride. He knelt before his father and confessed. These actions tell the audience that it is essential to find and stand up for yourself, but it is not necessary to be arrogant or think you are unique because of your personality and pursuit. People can be satisfied with their different skin colors and characters, but they should not be used as a reason for their arrogance. Other colored princesses were also taught such a truth. They often have the heart of the country and do not feel inferior. But they are not arrogant because they are different.

Disney's inclusion of feminist elements also affirms those children with unique ideas. They let them know they are not weird and encourage them to stand up for themselves. In previous Disney animated films, the definition of a good ending mainly was a princess who married a handsome prince and ended up living a good life, labeled an excellent female life. Of the Disney animated films released in the 21st century, five female protagonists have either failed to find love or didn't need it. The five characters are Merida from *Brave*, Dory from *Finding Nemo* (the animal characters are anthropomorphized in the movie, so they are female), Elsa from *Frozen*, Lt. Judy Hopps from *Zootopia*, and Moana from *Moana* [11]. All five characters more or less get along with the male characters and walk side by side in the movie, but they are not after love. They want to be able to prove themselves through their efforts and make themselves feel worthy. These differences from the traditional romantic Disney animated films convey another possibility of beautiful women to the audience. At the same time, it also affirms the rights and power of women and does not bind women with men. This makes more children understand that traditional labels and opinions are not necessary and that they can have different pursuits and goals. They can choose how they like to live.

Furthermore, the research by Professor Coyne and her colleagues adds to this idea. Their Two-Wave Longitudinal study showed that children who were more exposed to princess culture had higher body Esteem. As mentioned above, this group of children participating in the study was surveyed about body esteem. Like whether they are happy with their bodies, even if they are not as perfect as the stars. The results showed that children who participated in the princess culture had higher physical self-esteem, especially children of low socioeconomic status. Because some characters, like Cinderella, also have a lower socioeconomic status, they resonate more with these children. These stories of princesses overcoming difficulties and achieving a sense of accomplishment can be a great influence and inspiration to these children [9].

4. Counterclaims of the positive effects of Disney movies

Although the female image of Disney has improved, its princess image still has a bad influence. Disney princesses have slim figures and good looks, regardless of age or race. These are the standards that shape the image of the princess. But this image is difficult to achieve in real life when the girl

who loves the princess image finds the difference between the princess image and the princess image. They may feel inferior and even choose to diet to achieve the exact figure as the princess. This unhealthy low self-esteem and weight loss can lead to mental illness or malnutrition at a critical time for their bodies and brains to develop.

Michele Ruiz says that while Disney's princesses are starting to save themselves rather than relying on princes, princesses have almost morbidly trim waistlines despite their energy. This makes him feel uneasy about his daughter, whom he cannot protect from these unrealistic and pathological ideals [12]. Disney has intentionally begun to convey elements of feminist culture, but it is still getting this unhealthy beauty. Toe Anug and Lean Williams said that Disney characters "might heighten or reinforce our preference for lower waist-to-hip ratios, and the perception that physically attractive individuals with lower waist-to-hip ratios possess morally favorable qualities [13]." They also found that the median hip/waist ratio of Disney's 11 official princesses is just 0.535. This means their waist is about half the size of their hips, which is a terrifying figure that shows off the beauty of princesses. Therefore, the unhealthy figure of the princess will aggravate the deformed aesthetic and the blind pursuit of harmful beauty.

The overzealous pursuit of princess figures is harmful to the developing children and the women who are pursuing their dreams. Sarah Daniels, 29, is a standout musical theatre actress who has dreamed of becoming a Disney actress since she was a child. When she auditioned for the role of the *Little Mermaid*, her fantastic voice got her the chance. She had to wear Ariel's shell tights to sing on the rocks during the show. But the producer tells her that her body doesn't match Ariel's and that Daniels has to lose weight. So she changed her eating habits and developed an eating disorder and severe ulcerative colitis. She was too anxious and concerned about her body fat while trying to lose weight and wondering why she couldn't be taller so she wouldn't be too fat at the same weight [14]. You can imagine how terrible it is for people with talent and dreams to almost miss out on their goals just because of their size. Therefore, Daniels has lost so much weight. Such an excessive focus on appearance can lead to long-term depression and physical damage. And for girls fascinated by Disney girls, the idea of never being as thin as the movie characters can cause severe anxiety.

The princess in the movie is generous, intelligent, and brave and can touch the audience with kindness and sincerity. Girls who love princesses want to be the ideal image of princesses, so they may become more premature and lose their original innocence.

5. Conclusion

Disney films are no longer downplaying female characters and have been criticized by feminists. The female characters in movies are often courageous and intelligent. This conveys to the audience the individual rights of women and their power to be no less powerful than men. These feminist elements tend to have a positive impact on children.

This article mainly tells the evolution process of feminist elements in Disney movies and the cultivation of children's gender equality awareness and self-identity through feminist content. When children are exposed to independent and beautiful women in film, their perception of women will not be constrained by stereotypes. Instead, they will be more used to facing difficulties. In the face of gender issues, they will also think that women should get the same rights as men and that they can have the same character and hobbies as boys.

When Disney's female characters are no longer fixed on the beautiful princess but become changeable and interesting. Those images convey the many possibilities of a better life for women. Women no longer need a marriage; women no longer need quiet and submissive. All of these show feminist ideas and affect the audience.

Although the portrayal of princesses and women in Disney films has had some negative effects, we can assume that those are the standards Disney has adopted to maintain harmony and good looks. Instead of dismissing the anxiety caused by images of delicate princesses, we should focus on the inner qualities they possess. Parents should tell their children about the inner qualities similar to those

of the princesses to encourage them to develop their strengths, rather than focusing on the princesses' figures and expensive clothes.

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