

2016

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Recommended Citation

Lopez, Gressi (2016) "Disney's Gender Messaging," *JCCC Honors Journal*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: http://scholarspace.jccc.edu/honors_journal/vol8/iss1/1

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Disney's Gender Messaging

Abstract

Gender in Disney is defined differently through various forms of characterization. The study focuses around the messages Disney portrays about gender. Through gender messaging, Disney has left three common recurring themes (*Notions of Romance, The Real Housewives of Disney, Is what's on the outside what's on the inside?*). Disney also has undergone transitions within these themes throughout different time periods (labeled as *Classical, Transitional, Contemporary*). The changes that have occurred throughout these time periods have been recorded and are valuable in looking at the gender-related cultural scripts of the past. For Disney has changed its interpretation of gender only as much as society let it.

Cover Page Footnote

Brian Zirkle, Sociology, was the faculty mentor for this Honors contract.

Introduction

This study focused around finding the messages that Disney was sending about gender through the years. Disney centered around three themes (*Notions of Romance, The Real Housewives of Disney, Is what's on the outside what's on the inside?*). These themes discussed what gender messages Disney preserved throughout the years and what it changed to adapt for the time. Several things attributed to the changes and adaptations of the themes. Disney could only use the cultural scripts available. This adaptive measure created room for change and growth when it received criticism from both sides. Furthermore, with a feminist movement arising and gaining influence with support from the people, well, Disney had to change its approach to center topics, like gender.

Gender in Disney has changed from its first notions of gender, represented in the Classical period, from women being domestic servants, second to men, and only having one acceptable version of masculine/feminine, to a mix of gender characteristics/typing with the same heterosexual marriage, in the Transitional period. Disney finally ended by breaking down the norms of masculinity/femininity and introducing androgyny, as well as a non-marriage ending. All these changes have been put into three recurring themes (*Notions of Romance, The Real Housewives of Disney, Is what's on the outside what's on the inside?*).

Theoretical Framework

Gender is a widely debated topic, but not so debated, is the fact that, society dictates what traits individuals should take in order to participate in society. Through this process of socialization children learn to accept either a female or male gender. (Eitzen, Zinn, Smith, 2013). Within the early process of socialization, males are expected to acquire traits of masculinity and females traits of femininity. They are described as polar opposites, however a combination of

both masculinity and femininity, or androgyny, is deemed favorable (Michaelson, Aaland, 1976). There are differences among gender roles in different cultures and how each sex should participate in society. Each society's culture has helped socialize and construct gender roles. In modern day, individuals have the advantage of viewing and reviewing these messages through the use media.

Media and entertainment (movies, television, games, etc.), are now the main source of constructionism (Kellner, 1995). This is concerning considering, gender messaging^[1] through the media and other popular forms of entertainment has received little to no attention. Even more considering there are so many available outlets for Americans to view these messages. According to Nielsen Company, 96.7 percent of households have televisions; Pew Research Center has found 68 percent of Americans have smartphones and 45 percent have tablet computers. The Pew Research Center has also started to see that in recent years these percentages are only increasing, creating more opportunities for users to receive gender messaging.

The availability and viewing of media and other outlets of entertainment, have an effect on viewers through the use of subliminal messaging. Viewers, especially young viewers, are more likely to start forming gender identities through these outlets. Such outlets, like Seventeen magazine, teach young girls what occupational aspirations they should have and what their gender identity should be. Young girls who are exposed to Seventeen magazine are found to place a high occupation aspiration for an entertainment career (especially modeling), and place an emphasize on their qualities in obtaining a romantic relationship with a male (Massoni, 2004). This form of media has created girls who picture themselves as “Cinderella’s, Barbie’s, and Girl Friday’.” For example, a Cinderella girl will work hard, in their respective career, in hopes of

finding a Prince to take care of them. However Seventeen magazine is marketed towards just girls, and to those in adolescence, but what if there is another source of entertainment that reaches both genders even earlier than adolescence?

As Disney, and its princess's reputation and popularity became apparent in society, critics- most notably gender scholars- started to question the messages presented in Disney. Mainstream feminists, through the use of blogs and articles, like Bustle, have said Disney portrayed women as being passive and submissive to their male counterparts. Princess were making girls accept a passive gender role. Other progressives worried that "its messages promote a hegemonic, uncritical acceptance of traditional values, so that children exposed to Disney learn to accept capitalism, racism, sexism, and so on (Best & Lowney 2009)." The argument from right, conservative moralists, worried that Disney had begun to produce morally questionable content and teach children "witchcraft and necromancy" (Garcia 2007, Best & Lowney 2009). Disney's Princess line had become a major source of gender messaging, and with access easily available thanks to the rising trend in technology, it's audience was now able to watch these messages repeatedly and instantly. In a case study done by Alexander M. Bruce (2007), Bruce found that female college students had mixed feelings about whether Disney had a positive or negative influence on their lives. Those stating it has positive influences reinforced ideas that it gave young girls role models and a sense of hope in looking at the future. Pessimistic views on the influence stated that Disney gave girls false expectations about life and failed in allowing them to place value on their self.

Research has shown that messages given to youths is impactful on how they socialize gender. Media has become a source of socialization and Disney's spot as the top entertainment source for children, has given it a strong role in that process. Whether Disney intends to or not,

they have early access to socialization and are becoming a major source for socialization. We need to understand the messages Disney is sending in order to evaluate their effects on the developing mind.

My research is focusing on the messages about gender being taught to viewers. Disney clearly has an impact on children. In order to understand this impact we must figure out what messages are being delivered to children. With enough time future studies would further Bruce's 2007 study on the reactions of students through interviews. This would be done to see the accuracy of messaging or/and affects it has long-term. However, for now the evaluation of the messages being delivered must be analyzed to comprehend Disney's preservation and introduction of new gender roles.

Methods Section

In order to accurately select themes that pertained to notion, it was crucial to qualitatively analyze the selected movies. The films that were selected were examined individually. It was crucial to select the themes that were pertinent to gender. Qualitative analysis allows one to select the themes and examine them thoroughly. In addition to this, qualitative analysis also allows one to understand how, in this case, Disney presents their messages.

To accurately analyze and understand the gender messaging of Disney, eight movies, all selected from Disney's princess line, were selected. These eight movies consisted of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*(1937), *Cinderella*(1950), *Sleeping Beauty*(1959), *The Little Mermaid*(1989), *Beauty and the Beast*(1991), *Aladdin*(1992), *Tangled*(2010) and *Frozen*(2013). These movies were chosen to accurately analyze how Disney has changed or preserved its gender messaging through the years. Two important factors were taken into consideration when determining these films. The first factor was popularity, which movies, or princesses, had been

marketed the most and become the most popular among buyers. The second factor was historical context. In order to understand how Disney had changed or preserved its gender messaging, I had to gather movies that were most impactful (popularity) and view the reliability of their messages.

Disney has changed its messaging through the years, due to its criticism from multiple sides (Best & Lowney 2009). Therefore when analyzing the selected princess films it was important to understand how they changed and adapted their depictions on gender, what stereotypes about gender they preserved, and whether these adaptations/preservations were an accommodation, assimilation, or rejection to the available cultural scripts of the film's release date.

When starting my research, it made only sense to start off with Disney's first princess film, *Snow White*, and end with its most recently available princess film, *Frozen*. It made sense, because by watching them in chronological order, I was able to view what Disney preserved and what it changed to meet the needs of their viewers at that time. It should be noted however, that *Snow White* is the black canvas that Disney first painted on. Disney uses *Snow White* as a jumping off point and a basic model which it changes, adapts, and preserves in various forms, therefore it will be the starting point of each theme, but this does not mean that *Frozen*, Disney's latest available film, is the ending point, but the most recently revised version of its initial model.

Each movie contained different characters and stories but different names didn't mean different themes. Though there was progression from beginning to ending, it wasn't a smooth transition into the modern day gender roles portrayed in *Tangled*, and *Frozen*, so in an attempt to show the transition it was important to divide the movies among groups. These groups consisted

of classical movies (*Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty*), transitional movies (*Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin*), and contemporary movies (*Tangled, Frozen*).

When analyzing these films, and their respective groupings, I paid special attention to who Disney deemed a protagonist (usually the princess, with the exception of Aladdin) and who they antagonized (the villain). Though protagonists and antagonists were more closely examined, supporting characters were analyzed as well, for their interactions with main characters is what builds a protagonist/antagonist. In addition to this, I had to understand that certain characters, who exemplified feminine/masculine characteristics, were able to further their significance through interactions with less feminine/masculine characters. Interaction among men and among, whether within a group of their sex or not, was also critically analyzed. This examination was beneficial when understanding the status that gender carried in these films. When looking for the theme of gender in Disney it was imperative to understand the status, interaction, sexuality, and power of characters who were defined by their gender.

In deciding to choose Disney as the subject of my study, I had to understand what made it a viable and reliable subject. Disney has become a dominant source of children's entertainment since its first animated feature film- *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). Since they reach family audiences which contain members of both sexes, gender, and different ages, Disney has an umbrella of people, and in the last decade, cultures to reach. Disney's animated feature films hold a strong popularity among audiences but none more than Disney's princess line. The Princess line, which is the most heavily marketed department of Disney, has been able to retain its prowess into modern day households with movies like *Tangled* (2010) and *Frozen* (2013). According to Disney, their Princess line brought in \$300 million in 2000 and then \$3 billion by 2005, only confirming its number one status in children's entertainment.

Discussion

Is what's on the outside what's on the inside?

In Disney films, physical appearance plays a major role in describing characters motives, emotions, and whether they will prosper in their respective film. Happiness in the Classical and Transitional periods are only given to those who possess beauty, youth, a gentle nature, and aesthetically pleasing image (whether feminine or masculine). It is important to understand that Disney had created versions of masculinity or femininity which define characters and dictates their role in the film just as much as their physical appearance. They have created a correlation between sexuality and physicality. In the Transitional period followed the guidelines of the previous period, its final film, *Aladdin*, did offer some change in direction from the precedent it had perpetuated. The theme of physicality was challenged and completely rejected in its last period (the Contemporary period).

The Classical period was crucial in establishing this theme of aesthetics or physicality determining happiness. Characters, mostly princesses, who were youthful and beautiful were envied and hated for it, and became targets of vengeance. This most notably happened with *Snow White and the Evil Queen*. The film immediately states, *“Her vain and wicked Stepmother the Queen feared that someday Snow White’s beauty would surpass her own. So she dressed the little Princess in rags and forced her to work as a Scullery Maid.”* Furthermore Snow White’s beauty was so great that it forced a strong and powerful women, like the Evil Queen, to deteriorate with envy and jealousy. The beauty that she held at the beginning of the film was taken away when she befell to her jealous, as she transforms herself into an old witch that is depicted as being hideous in appearance. This is sending a very alarming message, as women get older they start to lose their beauty drastically and, unless seen inside the world of magic, have

no worth. Furthermore, if they fail to fall in the lines of a gentle/aesthetic femininity they are deemed undesirable. There begins to be a shift from aesthetically pleasing and youthful female being just, a desirable characteristic wanted by both sexes of all ages, to now being a symbol and epitome of femininity.

This notion of femininity only coming in a physically beautiful and young female package, is further sharpened when introducing Cinderella and Aurora. Cinderella was depicted as being a hard worker, however after a few minutes into the movie, she is seen carrying the same level of softness like Snow White. She is shown as so gentle that she can even understand the mice in her home. This was continued in Aurora as she also posed a softness that allowed her to interact with woodland creatures. Both Princesses also had features deemed to be attractive for the respective times of their movies release. Due to their movies being centered on them it only helped perpetuate the epitome of femininity being a softness. The only glimmer of change was in Maleficent. Unlike her companions, the Evil Queen and the Wicked Stepmother, Maleficent didn't envy Aurora's beauty. She decided to poison Aurora because she felt like ruining her life out of pure pleasure. However the young viewer will only see the pretty princess being attacked, because she's a princess, but by already having attached the main reason for older female protagonists demeanor being about jealousy towards the youth, it won't matter what Maleficent's reasons are because they'll eventually boil down to her being jealous of a younger, prettier girl, who just so happens to embody feminism.

When analyzing *Snow White* again, it is important to note that it was centered on the women and their appearances, and what it implied about their femininity and temperament. *Snow White* not only created misconstrued message by depicting a beautiful, youthful, femininity, but it completely ignored anything dealing with masculinity and their physicality, like it did with

Snow White. This was the case, until they released *Cinderella*. In *Cinderella*, and later *Sleeping Beauty*, Disney presents the first distinguishable male characters, like Prince Charming/Phillip and their respective fathers (who are the Kings). These princes are shown as being mature, charming, muscular, handsome, and young, they are the prize that every princess wants. By making them the male protagonist's in the Classical period they become the model for, not only what a prince should be, but what a boy should aspire to be. This makes them a prototype for masculinity. However, when males are presented as being older, their concern isn't with being handsomer than their young versions. Older male characters are seen as wealthy, loving, and endearing characters. They even offer comedic relief to contrast the seriousness that older female antagonists bring. *Cinderella*, was a great introduction for masculinity and a male protagonist, but it continued to perpetuate placing aesthetically pleasing young women as the epitome of femininity.

The Transitional period offered little to no change in this theme. Villains were still predominantly older females, protagonists consisted of youth and aesthetically pleasing males/females, and older males were still seen as masculine and comedic. Disney also continued to have their protagonists be the epitomes of their respective sexes (female/male) sexuality (femininity/masculinity). The only major difference between the Classical period princesses and the Transitional period princesses is Transitional princesses were given a dominant trait in addition to their feminine traits, in order to give them some substance. Ariel is presented as having the physically aesthetic features and the safe temperament as her previous predecessors. While she does contain some new characteristics like a head-strong confidence and active creativity, she ultimately remains the same soft and feminine version of a princess. In her film, when she gives up her voice she also gives up the creative side of her. Belle is also given the

same features of the older princesses only she has one dominant trait: intelligence. She is admired by all for her beauty but the village is confused by why she is so invested in reading. Jasmine is the one princess that sheds light into a new version of femininity. She is strong and outspoken and completely rejects her role as a princess. However, after Jafar traps her, she is still portrayed as being defenseless and too soft to actually challenge the villain, Jafar, directly without resorting to being rescued by a prince. Transitional princesses are given the same versions of femininity as Classical princesses, the only change is they now have some small attributions to distinguish them among other princesses.

The Transitional period also continues the same theme of villains being older females, with the exception of Jafar, being physically unattractive. Their evil personal is contrasted with their protagonists appealing versions, attributing beauty with a good morality. Disney also created the same male protagonist that was identical in physicality and masculinity to their predecessors. The transitional period offered no change for what it meant to be a villain, or what it meant to be a male character in the film. They showed small glimmers of change only to have it revert back to the old prototypes. That was the case until the Contemporary Period.

Within the Contemporary period, Disney challenged several proponents of their old films. Villains no longer were limited to being physically unappealing, and they were not limited to older women who had become wicked because of their jealousy. They also introduced new versions of masculinity and displayed their version of femininity in a new light.

Each film in the Contemporary period focused on one of the two sexualities. *Tangled* focused on presenting various new forms of masculinity and *Frozen* presented Disney's old version of femininity in a new light. When looking at *Tangled*, the film was narrated by Flynn Ryder who is the first example of changing the masculinity in male protagonists. Flynn Ryder

was shown as being conceited, and only concerned about himself, which was a stark contrast with Classical Princes who never worried about their looks, and were quick to help their kingdom, but more importantly their princesses. Flynn completely rejects this old form of princes and is an antithesis of the old mode in every way. He doesn't go out of his way to help his princesses but instead manages to fall in love with her, at the end of the quest, completely rejecting what every male protagonist before him has ever done. This is also repeated in one of the musical numbers: I've Got a Dream. When Flynn and Rapunzel stumble into a tavern they are greeted with vicious male thieves and bandits. These thieves and bandits who are portrayed to be almost caveman like, turn out to be real people who dream of being more than just what they are limited to by their demeanor/appearance. They prove that they aren't what's on the outside. *Tangled* also ushers in the new age of feminism where a Disney princess, who is still aesthetically pleasing, can save the day, as Rapunzel saved Flynn from death. However it was *Frozen* that truly brought the subject of feminism into a new light.

Frozen introduced feminism in a new light through its female characters: Anna and Elsa. Elsa was youthful and beautiful, but mature and powerful. She was the first princess to be more than just a pretty face. Her power and strength came from within her, but her control and confidence came from the love she had for her sister (and not of some male). Anna also, while initially displayed as a Classical princess, became more than just a pretty face, by going on a quest to bring her sister back. She realizes that love at first sight isn't a safe approach, and that the world isn't just black and white, there are dangers she must be alert for. Anna also performs a different act of true love in sacrificing her life for her sister.

Feminism and masculinity weren't the only things being changed in the Contemporary period. Villains were depicted in a new light. In *Frozen*, we also see for the first time a villain

being portrayed in a new light. Prince Hans, in every sense is a Classical prince, except in his final moments he betrays his princess for what he wants, power. This shows that villains can be anyone, they aren't limited to physically unappealing demeanors, and they can be deceitful and handsome, or beautiful.

Is what's on the outside what's on the inside? Well Disney sure had a confusing way of answering. In order to understand, one has to know that Disney used masculinity and femininity to determine, just what was on the inside. They at first displayed a soft feminism and a tough masculine which was attributed to the protagonists their films. Older female characters, who were predominately villains, were evil because of their unappealing physicality and differing version of femininity, when compared to their princess counterparts. While masculinity retained its definition throughout the Classical and Transitional period, it completely was rejected in the Contemporary period. The same can be said for feminism. It was presented in only one version and attributed to only a certain type of female (youth and beautiful), until it was presented in a new light through *Frozen*. Disney changed its answer towards the beginning of their new period, the Contemporary period.

Notions of Romance

Romance can come in various forms and be processed in a multitude of times. Disney decided to follow, until (primary) the Contemporary period, one form of romance. The general theme being a heterosexual relationship resulting in marriage (or some symbolic union). Disney only varied its approach to love-at-first-sight among their protagonists (who were the only ones capable of love). Like most other themes, this trend began in the Classical period. The Classical period is important in understanding *Notions of Romance* because each of its films presented one

new adaptation to their theme, this adaptation form was then repeated in the Transitional period as well, and then rejected all completely in the Contemporary period.

The first film in the Classical period, *Snow White*, established the heterosexual couple ending. After the Prince breaks the sleeping curse on Snow White, they run away into the sunset, with a castle in the background. This insinuates that their relationship is destined for happiness. Furthermore, when the Prince and Snow White first interact there is a brief period of what seems to be courting, however this is false. After Snow White gets over the initial shock of having a stranger break into her castle, she watches him from her balcony and immediately realizes he is the one she has been waiting for (because at this point she has finished singing about waiting around for a prince). *Cinderella* also focuses on love at first sight and a heterosexual relationship, however the film introduces the true goal for all princesses: marriage.

Marriage is what ultimately saved Cinderella in her film. Her marriage to the prince was able to allow her to escape her Stepmother's grasp and the demeaning circumstances under which she was forced to live. The ultimate goal of marriage was directly brought to attention within the first minutes of the film, as we see the King upset with his son not choosing a bride. The whole reason there was a ball, was to find someone for the prince to marry. *Snow White* helped bring love at first sight into being the biggest part of love (or romance); marriage was the ultimate goal in *Cinderella*, which helped advance the heterosexual relationship into becoming about marriage. However, *Sleeping Beauty* combined both of these into one model. Aurora was promised to Prince Phillip, and this was stated within the first few minutes of the film, right after Aurora's birth. Marriage immediately the initial point and end point of the movie, and it becomes the focal point as it creates confusion among the protagonists. *Sleeping Beauty* also affirmed the love-at-first-sight trend. Prince Philip finds Aurora in the woods, and as she dances blindly, Prince

Phillip slips into her grasp to become her partner. After Aurora gets over her initial shock (*I wonder where this has happened before*), she immediately falls in love, and after just three phrases of dialogue, Aurora and Prince Phillip become soulmates.

The Transitional period did not help in eliminating this trend. Instead it only presented it with new characters and different scenarios. *The Little Mermaid* and *Aladdin* put several emphasize on a direct love-at-first sight, while *Beauty and the Beast* introduced an extended courting process, which would be good, if Belle wouldn't have been forced to endure it. For example, Ariel arises from the sea and spots Prince Eric. Instantly she falls in love and is willing to go to extreme measures to be with him, even if it means giving up what makes her so special: her voice. Since *Aladdin*, is centered around Aladdin, it is his point of view that the viewer sees from, however it doesn't matter if it's from a male's perspective because Aladdin falls in love with Jasmine the instant he sees her. The three films might have differentiations of their love-at-first-sight theme, and all three films continued their predecessors happily ever after ending. Each movie in the Transitional period ends with a heterosexual couple ending in their happy ending, which either directly ending in marriage or an implied marriage, like in *Snow White*. The Transitional period different completely try and turn the tide when it came to love-at-first-sight, and it only presented an implied matrimony instead of a direct marriage. However the Contemporary period completely stopped the preservation of love-at-first-sight and the notion of a happy ending in marriage, but not the notion of heterosexuality.

Within the Contemporary period, princess and their male counterparts were able to interact and fall in love with each other, versus just loving someone based on one interaction. Rapunzel and Flynn spent the entire film learning to work together and each other's past. Their love was based on what they had endured together throughout the film. Flynn doesn't realize he

has fallen in love with Rapunzel until the later part of the film, as they sail under the gentle currents of a lantern-lit sky. It isn't until they are put into an atmosphere that can foster romance that they realize they are in love with each other. *Tangled*, let go of the past notions of love-at-first-sight in order to show that love takes time to develop; it does not just happen instantaneously. *Frozen* approaches love-at-first-sight in a different way. The film decides to satirize love-at-first-sight through Anna. When viewers are first introduced to Anna, she is a quirky every-girl. There isn't anything about her that is put on a pedestal, so when she meets Prince Hans and falls in love immediately, it's shocking, that a realistic character could so easily fall into the norm of love-at-first-sight. However, after her sister, Queen Elsa, runs away, her love-at-first-sight with Prince Hans becomes a source of comic relief. This is best exemplified when Kristoff, who she eventually does start to develop some feelings for, is baffled by her quick inclination to fall in love, and repeatedly makes fun of her for it. The love-at-first-sight trend is completely destroyed when Anna is betrayed by her Prince. His betrayal demonstrates the problems with love-at-first-sight, impulsive decisions are unpredictable.

The Contemporary period also tackled another common theme, happy endings, leading to marriage. *Tangled* ended in marriage between Flynn and Rapunzel, and *Frozen*'s ending was solely based on Elsa and Anna accepting each other, but also on Anna and Kristoff's continuing romance. This is important to note, because *Tangled* continued the preservation of Disney's marriage goal, but it completely rejected the marriage portion in *Frozen*. For once, in *Frozen*, the ending did not revolve around some notion of romance, but instead on the power of love between two sisters. This became a complete rejection of marriage as the ultimate goal, especially when they never fully explore Kristoff and Anna's relationship to even insinuate a possibility for marriage. Marriage never became an important part of the ending of *Frozen*. However, *Frozen*

and *Tangled* continued the preservation of heterosexuality. No where did they mention explicitly that one of their characters, let alone a protagonist, wasn't heterosexual. This notion that romance is limited to only heterosexuality is devastating when there is now a growing acceptance and number of openly non-heterosexual individuals and couples.

Disney constantly perpetuated a heterosexual couple as its protagonists and their ultimate goal marriage, throughout the Classical and Transitional period. Marriage was either explicitly implied or given some insinuation towards it as an end point. Though the Contemporary period helped reverse the tide of marriage as an endpoint and love-at-first-sight, it continued to present heterosexual couples. This is important to note because this is the only theme that Disney has not fully closed or geared away from, in fact it is the only thing that it has continued to preserve even in its most recently advertised film, *Moana* (2016).

*The Real Housewives of Disney*¹

Disney undergoes a transition from presenting its female characters as being second to their male characters by giving them a definitive role of domesticity, to redefining what it means to be a woman, whether married or not. However, at first princesses, and other female characters, are expected to cook, clean, and, if not disrupting their tasks, sing, while princes save the day. As all the other themes, this perception of princesses only pertaining to the domestic world, has slowly evolved into an acceptance of new roles and rejection of old ones. When looking at this theme, and any other theme, Classical princesses set the model, Transitional princesses changed the composure of it, and Contemporary Princesses broke the mold.

¹ In order to become a housewife, a female must be married or have been married once, however this section is putting emphasis on the roles of a female within a marriage not the notions of romance within her role as a housewife.

Classical princess are depicted as being “traditional housewives.” Their main focus throughout the film is to head the domestic front while their suitors save the day, and them. Snow White is adored by the seven dwarfs, except grumpy, for her ability to command the hearth and domesticate the men. This is also not astonishing as she spends all of her film either cooking, cleaning, and singing about cooking or cleaning. In the one scene she isn’t performing a domestic chore she is poisoned, and then saved once The Prince decides to kiss her. Aurora, for the few minutes that she is awake, is either picking berries or walking to the altar, and when she follows Snow White's fate in sleeping curses, she must be saved by Prince Philip. While Cinderella doesn’t seem to have a lot in common with her fellow Classical princesses, she does spend her days cleaning after her Wicked Stepmother and stepsisters, in the hopes gaining something better. This ends up being her Prince Charming who takes her away from her domestic duties and brings her to the castle. There are several issues with these examples. Most notably princesses, no matter how hard working or resilient, are expected to be saved by her male counterpart. They are unable to save themselves and become dependent on the male's ability to save them. When princesses can’t save themselves, or become help shape the outcome of their lives their value can’t be placed in heroism, but instead something else: domesticity. These issues makes them wives, and perpetuates their roles as housewives. However it is important that Classical princesses aren’t just valued for their domestic aptitude but also their reproductive abilities.

Princesses are shown as being overly gentle and, their, value is placed on their ability to please and reproduce. In order to better understand how princesses are valued through their ability to reproduce, one has to understand that reproduction is biologically and physiologically easier right at puberty, which begins in adolescence. Princesses have already been labeled or

depicted as being young, which creates envy from older female characters, and more importantly is a factor in what creates value for them, for it means they are at the peak of reproductive age. Just take into consideration Classical princesses ages: Snow White (14), Cinderella (19), Aurora (16). The princesses being of adolescent ages, have high reproductive value and this is what makes them wanted so much. In *Cinderella*, the king wants to find a girl that will settle down and give his son a child to continue his legacy. The king, Prince Charming's fathers, only way of valuing a girl is to see if she can reproduce. Further perpetuating the need to have a wife, because as stated before, in *Notions of Romance*, marriage is the ultimate goal for several all characters. More important is the fact that Prince Charming, and the other princes, are given the option of choosing who they want and what makes them valuable. Females, like the princesses, become second in comparison to males because they can't give themselves value outside of a relationship with a male. For example, Cinderella wouldn't even be a princess of Prince Charming hadn't married her and given her a title. Disney, in the Classical period, has made princess in domestic servants (housewives), and devalued their characteristics and only allowed them to value their ability to please a male, making females only value their ability to support males in their lives.

Classical princess created the model for what it means to be a "traditional" Disney housewife. The next period in Disney, Transitional, helped change the composure of what it means to be a princess, and her role as a housewife. Transitional films, which were more permeable to Disney's critics, had confusing messages. Princesses were allowed to be rebellious, adventurous, and outspoken, as long as they ultimately became married. From this stance, as long as Disney princesses became married they could be or do whatever they wanted to. This stance also leads to the presumption that females can be empowered, but second when compared to males; as long as females can remain within the confines of their marriage, or title as

housewife, they are free to become who they want. Their value was, not so much, placed on their ability to control the domestic front or how well they reproduce, but instead on their ability to support, their respective, princes quest, adventure, or life, as a good housewife does.

The first film from the Transitional period emphasizes the idea of a woman can vision a better life, as long as she is within the confines of her marriage. Ariel, from *The Little Mermaid*, was depicted as having a headstrong confidence and being a fearless risk-taker. She also strives to get her point across and speak up, especially against her father, King Triton. However, Ariel, literally, gives up her voice to have a *chance* at love, and if fortunate a marriage, with Prince Eric. Ariel is willing to give up her voice, the trait that defines her and gives her joy, all for a chance, not a definitive guarantee, but a chance. While Disney, tried to portray this as a self-less act of love, they didn't realize it was making female characters seem irrational when presented with the option of obtaining marriage, and their role as housewife. This became more evident when Belle experienced the same irrationality.

A trend of strong female characters being confined to marriage was further carried with Belle, from *Beauty and the Beast*, was, at first, depicted as being intelligent, having self-awareness, and favoring creativity. However, she decides to fall in love with the beast, because after she has given him enough love and support he has become a Prince. This is a terrible message to send because it tells young girls: if they love someone hard enough, no matter how abusive, they will eventually love them back, if they are able to become the pillar that supports their man they can turn his savage nature into prestige, women can domesticate any beast as long as they work hard enough. Belle becomes the devoted, loving, and supportive housewife that helps prop her husband up through her intellect and creativity, and in doing so abandons her dreams and aspirations.

As the Transitional period came to an end, Jasmine emerged in as the catalyst in breaking the housewife mold Disney created. Jasmine, in *Aladdin*, takes the role of princesses locked up in a castle to new heights. Jasmine, who is outspoken, completely rejects her role as a princess, leaves the castle, and tries to explore Agrabah. While her father tries to constantly find her a suitor to fulfill her, Jasmine rejects everyone and is enraged when she finds her father discussing matters with Aladdin and Jafar, stating, “I am not some prize to be won!” Jasmine, at the beginning of the movie rejects everything doing with her being valued on her role in the domestic front. However, much like her former predecessors, she is eventually takes on the housewife role and is helpless in the face of danger. She can only support Aladdin in his battle with Jafar, and is unable to escape her fate as a domestic servant. However her initial rejection of this fate, allowed a glimpse into the transition from Transitional to Contemporary films.

Contemporary films introduced a new housewife. One who no longer placed her value on her reproductive abilities or had to become a source of support for her husband. She was no longer the inferior in the relationship, she instead became an equal. Her role wasn't to be a dutiful follower but a partner that wasn't tied to her domestic abilities because, if there, they were a small part of who she was as an individual. In hopes of portraying an egalitarian relationship, Disney created *Tangled*. The film is promoted as a coming of age story, centered on Rapunzel, but narrated by Flynn Rider. Rapunzel, much like Jasmine, is the classic “locked in a castle” princess, however after capturing Flynn, when he breaks into her tower, she makes him take her to see where the lanterns in the sky come from. After yearning for what she wants, she takes it upon herself to obtain it and in the process finds love and where she belongs. Rapunzel's value doesn't come from her relationship but instead comes from her ability to know what makes her secure and happy. While she becomes married, she does not become an old version of a

housewife, but instead embraces her role as an equal in her relationship. This is taken one step further in *Frozen*.

Tangled broke the mold of being a housewife, and presented a new independent and egalitarian version, however *Frozen* rejected the old version, accepted the new housewife, and presented a woman who found joy without ever taking the title. In *Frozen*, the female protagonists, which had, in the past periods, been perpetuating the storyline only to obtain their ultimate goal (marriage), instead decide to place their values their self. This theme is satirized through Anna. At the celebration of Queen Elsa's coronation, Princess Anna finds a prince and falls in love within a matter of minutes. When she tries to get permission to marry him from her older sister, she is denied and why she initial doesn't understand why. After being betrayed by the prince she loved at first sight, and finding true love in Kristoff, Anna understands that happiness isn't obtained through just romance; by the end of the film she understands the dangers of love at first sight and that happiness shouldn't solely be based on a relationship, even though it can be a factor in happiness. In addition to this, Disney presented an independent woman who learns to control her power and wield it. Furthermore she doesn't ever get married, making her the first female protagonist to find happiness within herself without any connection to a male. Anna continued the theme in of self-actualization from *Tangled*, and Elsa proved that marriage and romance don't have to always be factors in true happiness and in turn became the first non-housewife of Disney.

During the Classical period, Disney presented their version of a female protagonist that found her value in marriage. This version later shifted during Disney's Transitional period. Their depiction of female protagonists became muddled under the heavy criticism from both

sides. However once Disney was able to stand in resolute they ushered in a new age of female protagonists, in the Contemporary period.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to view the themes and messages Disney presents about gender. In this experiment, each theme undergoes a transformation by adapting to their time period or preserving remnants of the past time periods. Disney has gone through several transformations throughout their years. As they reacted to the cultural scripts available to them at the time of each film's release, they learned to start moving in a more modern direction. Their themes, when looking back, seem to emphasize the social problems, like gender inequality, in society, but it is important to see that they haven't preserved all the same notions of gender. It is easy to blame Disney for the damaging themes they present and preserve. However, Disney isn't solely responsible for preserving negative gender stereotypes. Disney can only release material that it deems uncontroversial; it records the cultural scripts of the time by presenting what is still acceptable in society. This being said, the changes in themes of each of Disney's periods moves only as far as society will let it.

All of themes discussed in this paper demonstrate an arc of change for Disney. However, when looking at *Notions of Romance*, Disney still preserves heterosexuality and has yet to explicitly show a non-heterosexual couple or character. The reasoning behind this is Disney refusing to present a non-heterosexual character because it is afraid of the controversial backlash from this time period. Disney preserves and adapts to the cultural scripts of the time.

It should also be noted that while the study focused on three major gender themes in Disney, there are several other potential themes or at least more aspects of the three major themes to be explored. For example, Disney continues to present two occurrences in the film.

The first one being true love's kiss and the second, an act of true love. Each version has, just like the other themes, changed into different interpretations and preserved some aspects.

Disney has changed and adapted throughout its three major periods, its interpretation on gender. It presents what it deems to be non-controversial and helps record the cultural scripts of the time periods. This study focused only on the three major recurring themes of gender in Disney. It analyzed the changes in messaging and the recurrences of messages. In furthering this research, I would have done interviews of college students, who would have time to internalize the messaging and be able to express their internalization.