

Disney's Influence on Females

Perception of Gender

and Love

by

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**ABSTRACT**

Female college students were questioned on their perceptions of love and gender, and the effect that romantic Disney films had on these perceptions. Ten female college students at a Midwestern university were first screened regarding their Disney knowledge using a trivia test, and then questioned using a written interview. Participant responses corresponded with past research that Disney films create unrealistic perceptions of love and gender. Findings suggest it is important for future research to examine the formation of these perceptions more closely.

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A special thanks to my mother for encouraging me to be a princess and a tomboy in my youth, and allowing me to pursue whatever dreams I had. Also thanks to all my friends who helped me through my thesis.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Many people have a romanticized view of love: the Hollywood-fed view in which people fall in love at first sight, experience unwavering passion, and live happily ever after.

[T]he sound of mothers' voice as she read to me from...*The Little Mermaid* and *The Snow Queen*. These emotionally wrenching tales, to which I raptly listened and to which I was powerfully drawn, instilled in me a longing to be overwhelmed by romantic passion and led me in my teens and early twenties to attempt to emulate these self-sacrificing heroines (Golden, 1998, p. 185).

This passage was taken from the book *Slaying the Mermaid*, a series of interviews with women woven together with psychological theory concerning the self-sacrificing nature of women and how something as seemingly harmless as a fairy tale aided in producing this behavior. Fowler and McCormick (cited in O'Brien, 1996, p. 177) argue that the introduction of fairy tales at an age when the distinction between "fantasy and reality is blurry leads readers to accept the stereotypical conventions of fairy tales": princesses are mistreated, women in power are evil, and everyone lives happily ever after.

The purpose of this study is to investigate whether the messages and themes from Disney's most popular animated films influenced females' perceptions of gender and love. Gender and love will be examined together since research has shown that gender-role expectations and the perception of what love entails are intertwined. To get the clearest picture of this influential theory it will be necessary not only to investigate Disney films in depth but also to examine the influential nature of the medium of television and its effects on the socialization of children.

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The topic at hand was chosen for two main reasons. First, the ability to have high quality intimate relationships is a keystone of adult mental health and well-being (Montgomery, 2005). Since it has been suggested that media influences children's perceptions and that these perceptions can be carried into adulthood, romantic Disney films may shed some insight into adults' romantic perceptions. Second, Disney characters have become extremely well known to millions of children and, as one analyst of the Disney empire remarked, "these films inspire at least as much cultural authority and legitimacy for teaching specific roles, values, and ideals than more traditional sites of learning such as public schools, religious institutions and the family" (Giroux, 1995, p. 25). Fathergoose (1954) estimated as early as 1954 that a third of the world's population has seen at least one Disney film. Hence, it seems only logical to evaluate the themes and messages romantic Disney films are sending to youth about love and relationships; since these films are likely to play a role in the development of children's cultures and may influence children's and adults' information about families.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

### *Impact of Television Viewing*

To begin it is important not only to look at the impact of Disney films but also the influence of television viewing as a whole. In the space of only a few decades, watching television seems to have become one of life's essential activities. Today 99 percent of all American households possess at least one television (Gomery, 1993). Collectively, the American nation tunes in to 250 billion hours per year, and by the time an average American child enters the first grade, they have seen at least 5,000 hours of television. Liebert, Neale, and Davidson (1973) estimated that a child born in the early 70's will, by the age of 18, have spent more time watching television than in any other single activity but sleep.

McGhee and Fruch (1980) suggest that heavy television viewing may contribute significantly to children's acquisitions of stereotypic perceptions of behavior and psychological characteristics associated with males and females. Liebert et al. (1973) stressed when examining the content of television it is important to keep in mind that entertainment does more than merely entertain our children and us, "it communicates information about the social structure and it shapes attitudes about ourselves, others, and the world at large" (p. 18).

Most adults realize television entertainment does not provide an accurate picture of the real world. On the other hand many children and adolescents believe that it does. In a study conducted by Lyle and Hoffman (cited in Liebert et al., 1973) first-, sixth-, and tenth grade students were asked about the reality of television. About half the first graders felt that the people on TV were like the people they know, and large percentages of the older children believed TV characters were like real people most of the time. What is the reasoning for this?



Young children's experiences of the world are inherently more limited than those of older children or adults. Their frames of references are more narrowly focused on specific instances; incoming information is processed on the basis of previous experiences and not, as with adults, though more abstract knowledge that allows for inferential leaps across contexts (Manley-Casimir & Luke, 1987). Salomon (cited in Manley-Casimir & Luke) insists the quality of learning from TV has much to do with peoples' pre-existing schemas. Hence, if children do not have a realistic schema about relationships or gender they will use TV representations to form their schema, which is adaptable, but may not assimilate new information that does not correspond to their existing schema.

### *Learning Models*

How do children gain information about gender, couples, and relationships? First, they learn by observing and participating in their own families. However, parents typically do not discuss the topic of romantic love, marriage, or sexuality with young children; hence, for many young children their earliest exposure to these themes likely come from media sources.

Corsaro (1997) refers to the term *childhood symbolic culture* to explain the various representations or expressive symbols of children's beliefs, concerns, and values. Three primary sources of childhood symbolic culture are children's media (e.g., cartoons and films), children's literature (e.g., fairy tales), and mythical figures (e.g., Santa Clause). Simply put, children often make use of popular stories, myths, and fairy tales to make sense of themselves and their surroundings. Yet, the role that Disney images, characters, and stories play in children's lives, in the family, and in peer groups remains relatively unexplored.

Hence, Zimmerman-Umble and Smith (1996) argue that main media articulates cultural values about gender by portraying men, women, and their relationships in particular ways.

Disney stories have become part of a “cultural repertoire of ongoing performances and reproductions of gender roles by children and adults; moreover, these stories present powerful and sustained messages about gender and social relations” (p. 230).

Two different models of socialization have been proposed. First, is the *deterministic model*, in which, the child plays a basically passive role. In the second, a *constructivist model*, children are seen as active agents, eager learners, who actively construct the social world around them and their place in it. Many developmental psychologists have come to view the child as active rather than passive, involved in appropriating information from his/her environment to use in organizing and constructing his/her own interpretations of the world (Corsaro, 1997). This model leads us into the concept of social modeling.

Liebert et al. (1973) and other social scientists regard television programs as instructions. They consider the child viewer as a pupil, learning from the content of television, and emulating the behavior he/she sees modeled by the people on TV. This approach to acquiring new skills is coined *observational learning*. Children actively advance their own social learning by choosing models to imitate—say a parent or cartoon character (*observational learning* can occur even if the child does not imitate the observed behavior). According to *social learning theory*, imitation of models is the most important element in how children learn gender appropriate behavior (Papalia, Gross, & Feldman, 2003). In light of the extensive literature revealing social modeling as a powerful influencer of children’s concepts and behavior it would seem important to closely examine media produced for the use of children, especially Disney films.

To better understand how gender and romance are linked it is useful to cover Erikson’s conceptualization of *identity* and *intimacy*. A sense of *identity* is a “self-constructed dynamic organization of drives, abilities, beliefs, and personal history into a coherent and autonomous self

that guides the unfolding of one's adult life course" (Montgomery, 2005, p. 347). Erikson defines a sense of *intimacy* as the willingness to participate in a tender supportive relationship "without losing oneself in the relationship" (p. 347). Thus, the development of the self is a key aspect of the development of healthy interpersonal intimacy. With this and the other concepts discussed earlier in mind the material presented in the rest of the literature review will tie together the hypothesis that the messages and themes presented in romantic Disney films influence female perceptions of love and gender in a negative way.

### *Gender-Role Development*

Coltrane and Adams (1997) argue images of others and ourselves are largely developed by gender stereotypes, which provide a baseline for cultural distinctions between men and women. It has also been argued that early cognition about gender is influenced more by the overall representation of gender in society rather than the gender representations occurring within individual families (O'Brien, 2000). Researchers remain interested in the topic of gender largely because of its pervasive influence on social attitudes and behavior, as well as evidence that children's perceptions of gender limit options open to them.

Several studies have demonstrated that highly stereotypic sex-role behavior characterizes programming for both children and adults (McGhee & Fruch, 1980). Television imagery has adopted the tendency to portray men and women in conventionally stereotypical ways as demonstrated by nearly two decades of television content analysis (Coltrane & Adams, 1997). Sex-typing on television has been found in the following areas: (1) females are most likely to be cast in a leading role when some family or romantic interest is central to the plot; (2) the marital and parental status of female characters is more well-defined than that of male characters; (3) females tend to be depicted as more attractive, happier, more sociable, more peaceful, and more

useful while males tend to be represented as smarter, more rationale, more powerful, more stable, and more tolerant; and (4) in children's programs women tend to be depicted as being affectionate, submissive, forgiving and fragile, but as having low amounts of self-confidence, ambition, dominance, and individualism.

Maccoby, Wilson and Burton (cited in McGhee & Furch, 1980) found that children pay closer attention to, and show better retention of, the actions of same-sex characters. If so, this suggests that children learn from television and film gender roles that have been shown to be stereotypic in these mediums. Are these stereotypic behaviors shown in Disney films as well?

#### *Why Disney?*

Bell, Haas, and Sells (1995) note, "If Disney corpus can be seen as peddling a pedagogy of innocence, perhaps one of the most telling lessons it sells us is that of gender—of bodies, sexuality, and desire" (p. 155-156). Representations of women in Disney films are due partly to the fact that Walt Disney's personal feelings about family life shaped the Disney Company, and partly to the fact that his attitudes mirrored the patriarchal cultural beliefs of the 1940's about what roles women should play in society (O'Brien, 1996). The formula he developed for his animated films, which is still being used by his successors today, incorporates patriarchy into classic fairy tales by eliminating or downplaying female characters' self-empowerment while foregrounding male power. Disney's simplified representations of gender roles also made patriarchal values more accessible to younger audiences. Tanner, Haddock, and Zimmerman (2003) found that gender stereotyped images are portrayed in Disney films, but that men's control over and abuse of women is romanticized.

A strong potential exists that Disney animated films are part of most children's lives in the United States, therefore Disney films are an important starting place when considering the

content of children's media (Tanner, 2003). The top ten highest grossing animated Disney films has brought in more than 5 billion dollars to the company ("Top Ten Highest Grossing Animated Disney Movies" n. d.), and Disney films (including Buena Vista affiliate) account for 26 of the top 150 highest box office films ("Box Office Charts" n. d.). The potential for Disney films to influence children's attitudes becomes stronger due not only to the almost ever-present popularity of Disney advertising and merchandising, but also to the easy and inexpensive availability of these films on VHS and DVD. Disney films are no longer limited to theatre showings, but are available through video rental and purchase; hence, the effect that Disney films have on children's conceptual growth may be more pronounced today than in the past (Junn, 1997).

Disney is involved in more than children's films. They are also a major contributor to most avenues of children's media. The Disney Corporation owns a major television network, cable television networks, and radio stations. They also develop children's books, cartoons, movies, videos, computer software and games, as well as many other products designed for children's use including toys and clothing. Another reason Disney is examined in relation to the conceptual growth of children is that family relationships are often central to the plot and story line.

One feminist writer wrote that fairy tales might serve as:

[T]raining manuals in passive behavior and that millions of women must surely have formed their ideas of what they could or could not accomplish, what sort of behavior would be rewarded...in part from their favorite fairy stories. These stories have been made the repositories of the dreams, hopes, and fantasies of generations of girls (cited in Stone, 1975, p. 48).

Eric Burne, a popular psychiatrist, felt that fairy tales offer not only dreams and hopes but also actual programs for behavior (Stone, 1975). Stone interviewed 40 women and many admitted they were influenced by fairy tales. They had admired the lovely princesses and hoped to imitate them—especially their ability to obtain a man and a castle without much effort. Peggy Orenstein (2006) of the *New York Times*, asked an important question, “Aren’t the Princesses, who are interested only in clothes, jewelry, and caging the handsome prince, somewhat retrograde role models?” (p. 3).

Until recently few have questioned Disney’s continued depiction of women in traditional gender roles because Disney is hailed as a supplier of society’s dominant family values. Researchers like O’Brien (1996) claim the female characters in *Cinderella* and *The Little Mermaid* represent a continuation of the practice of creating characters that enact female oppression and embrace patriarchal values. The Disney tales are so strong that the story in each of the company’s instantly classic feature films tends to be perceived as the original version of the fairy tale.

There are three main ways Disney films generally differ from the original tale. First, the plot is changed. In Hans Christian Anderson’s tale of *The Little Mermaid*, the plot revolves around religious notions of the poor gaining entry to heaven through love and suffering which a woman sacrificing her voice and home to live happily ever after with her prince replaced. Second, female characters are left out. Again in Anderson’s tale it is the mermaid’s sisters that come to her rescue not the prince, and the mermaid’s grandmother is not even included in the Disney version. Third, the story is oversimplified. Tanner et al. (2003) argues that the tendency to over simplify the original myth, on which the movie was based, is exaggerating the idea of romantic love.

### *Themes and Messages*

Several researchers have analyzed Disney films for common themes and messages, and what these themes and messages are saying to children. Downey (1996) notes the importance of analyzing themes indicating that cultural-specific themes contribute to the process of civilizing society's young because fairy tales encourage conformity to culturally sanctioned roles. Also, the "truths" presented in fairy tales often reinforce disparaging images of females.

The first common theme suggests that marriage/love is the goal of Disney heroines. Snow White is "wishing for the one she loves to find her", Ariel gives up her voice and risks her freedom to win over Prince Eric, and Cinderella is granted only a few hours to charm the prince before returning back to rags (Disney, W., & Hands, D., 1938). The second theme is beauty equals femaleness. In Disney's Cinderella the differences between Cinderella and her stepsisters are highlighted in terms of grace, beauty, charm, cooking, and cleaning to demonstrate to audiences the qualities that a woman needs if she wants to get married, and therefore have a happy and fulfilled life (O'Brien, 1996). In Disney fairy tales women who do not possess these traits never find happiness. Leiberman (cited in Downey, 1996) criticizes Disney's "beauty contest" motif as harmful to viewers. Brown (1950) remarked on these two themes, "Plainly she (Cinderella)...is delighted with her looks and from the onset is bound to win the prince. She is, in short, a smug little number with a mind as empty as a diary on Christmas morning" (p. 30).

The third theme is a restriction of females at puberty. Snow White is sent out to be murdered and Sleeping Beauty is put to sleep. Such heroines have their freedom restricted at a time in life when heroes are discovering independence. Restrictions on girls at puberty could reflect anxiety about competition with other women that increased sexuality offers, as protection to herself so she will remain pure for the one man who will eventually claim her, or as a reaction

of men to the threat of female sexuality (Stone, 1975). A fourth theme is the silencing of women. In *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel's voice is silenced and she sacrifices her curiosity to gain the love of a man. In *Beauty in the Beast*, Belle's promise to remain forever at the castle requires her to give up her books and her father. This sacrifice silences Belle, and such muting is a standard device for punishing women in traditional fairy tales (Downey, 1996). Brown and Gilligan (1992) comment that women "silencing" themselves is common, and conclude that on the way to womanhood a girl experiences a loss of voice and a loss of a sense of self as she silences herself.

The fifth theme is females are saved or succeed only through the help of men. The majority of Disney princes save the princess from the villains (i.e. *Sleeping Beauty*, *Snow White*, etc.), and in the case of *Cinderella* and *The Little Mermaid* their cast of male friends do most of the work; they rescue Cinderella from the tower or beat the evil sea witch and gain the prince for Ariel. Hence, the Disney heroine survives to find happiness thanks solely to the heroism and sacrifice of male characters and without experiencing personal growth or self-empowerment (O'Brien, 1996).

The last major theme in a Disney film is patriarchy. Downey (1996) argues Disney fairy tales ideologically saturate their audiences with "archetypal myths...symbols...[and] values derived from a distinctly American cultural context" (p. 187). Because the context historically is rooted in patriarchy, Disney tales can be interpreted as reaffirming the status quo, and depict the feminine as a "paradigm of powerlessness" (p. 185).

There are some commonalities in Disney romantic films, compared to nonromantic films that should be mentioned. First, the lead females start the film as single and arc shown at the end of the film to be married or attached to one male, which is not true of male leads. Second, both



love and sexually related depictions have increased in more recent romantic films of the 1990's compared to films of the 1950's. And third, females in love engaged in fewer and more passive love-related behaviors versus men who engaged in active love-related behaviors (Junn, 1997).

There are also differences in the way male and female characters are portrayed. One, male power, is portrayed as positive while female power is viewed as negative. O'Brien (1996) argues that the stepmother replacing the father entirely in *Cinderella* fosters the patriarchal view that strong women are evil and are detrimental to the proper upbringing of children. Two, females were the lead only in romantic films and were most likely to be married or attached to a male figure by the end of the film. According to Junn (1997) this is consistent with research showing that, in general, females are underrepresented in the media and more likely to be cast in a leading role when the central plot includes themes of romance, family, or sexuality. Lastly, females are more often depicted in a sexual manner than males.

Given the fundamental importance and developmental significance that love, marriage, and sex plays in the lives of most people it is important to be aware of the messages the popular media source of Disney is promoting to young viewers. One prevalent message is love comes at a cost, self-sacrifice. While early heroines fell in love at first sight and lived happily ever after, love relationships for later heroines come at a cost. Ariel gives up her voice and cultural identity, and Belle discovers love only through trials, sacrifice, and learning to look beneath the surface.

Even though more recent Disney heroines acquire a greater sense of selfhood *Cinderella*, *Aurora*, *Ariel*, and *Belle* still end up reinforcing images of the "perfect girl." Forgotten are their dreams and explorations; they settle for marriage and a castle. In a world where women struggle to expand their horizons Disney reifies the image of the "perfect girl," while punishing

questioning girls by labeling them disobedient and peculiar (i.e. Ariel and Belle). Golden (1998) notes women absorb these messages early. Journalist Peggy Orenstein (2006) spent a year talking to eighth grade girls and found that they were already completely indoctrinated by these lessons that emphasize niceness, valuing silence, and compliance. These girls responded by developing an ideal of a relentlessly selfless “perfect girl” and the results were: anorexia, panic attacks, and thoughts of suicide at the age of thirteen.

A third common message is that satisfaction is gained through marriage/love. Downey (1996) finds this message limiting because it embraces the view that a woman’s identity derives from her relationship with a man, and once she catches him her goals are realized. In *The Little Mermaid* and *Pocahontas* women who begin the film as strongly independent and self empowered are brought back to the patriarchal fold when they fall in love. At first Ariel wanted to become human to explore her intellectual curiosity; she later wants to become human to be with her love. Henke et al. (1996) stresses the disquieting nature of this message that satisfaction is defined not by self-knowledge or accomplishments but by a role prescribed through marriage.

The final message found in Disney films is women use good looks to get a man. This is most evident in *The Little Mermaid*, where Ariel tries to convince the prince to marry her using her feminine charm since she is not able to speak. As Ursula told Ariel she does not need her voice to get a man, “you got your looks, your pretty face, and do not underestimate the importance of body language!”(Howard, A., Musker, J., & Donley, M., 1989). So, how do these themes and messages affect females?

#### *Effects on Gender*

Fairy tales are among the predominant forms in which ideas about femininity are mass produced (Craven, 2002). One form of femininity is the important value placed on relationships

with others, and identity formation through relationships. Brown and Gilligan (1992) argue that women learn to value connections with others and, at least in part, define themselves through their relationships with others. Henke et al. (1996) add that females learn to see themselves through the gaze of others, hear things that suggest they can be perfect, and believe relationships can be free of conflict. The problem is a struggle between what they know from experience and what others want them to know, feel and think. As a result, girls learn that speaking can be disruptive because it might put the relationship at risk. This internalization has negative consequences for women in the areas of mate selection and occupation (Diekmann & Murnen, 2004).

Gilligan (1993) uses the term *ethic of care* to describe when decisions and morality center on relationships, evolving from selfish to selfless during adolescence. In Disney's *Pocahontas*, some have applauded the ending as a departure from the fairy tale ending where women achieve fulfillment from marriage, but Gilligan criticized it as consistent with the societal expectation that women are socialized to think that decisions based on relationships are appropriate only to be told as they get older it is egocentric. The new pressure to selflessly set aside bonds in relationships results in a *profound psychological loss* (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 180). As a result women are expected to set aside their own desires to accommodate the needs of others, like Pocahontas did when she stayed behind to help her people instead of sailing away with John Smith.

Promoting nurturance as a woman's primary goal can lead to dependence on others for approval and self-esteem. When Pocahontas attempts to secure the safety of both Smith and her family, only her own needs are not met. By conforming with what is expected of her, Pocahontas shows that ultimately she will now rely on others' approval for self-validation while

her sense of individuality will become subsumed within the bonds of her community (Dundes, 2001).

The harmful effects of self-sacrifice are so widespread among woman that Christiane Northup, M.D, an expert on women's health has given them a diagnosis *burnt toast syndrome* (Golden, 1998). Northup notes that it can cause many serious female health problems and occurs when women always put others first and settle for what is left. Common physical symptoms include: lumps in the breast, uterine fibroids, cancer, and heart disease.

Self-sacrifice also has sexual side effects. Many women consciously and deliberately sacrifice their own feelings and satisfaction, as when they fake orgasms, because they are more concerned with their lover's pleasure than experiencing pleasure for themselves. Women who focus more on their partner's satisfaction than their own tend to have exceptionally strong dependency needs (Dundes, 2001). Lerner (cited in Golden, 1998, p. 14) remarked, "Many women still have no concept that their bodies and sexuality exist for themselves—no concepts that their lives can be for themselves".

#### *Effects on Love*

Social scientists have had as much trouble defining love as philosophers and poets. There are books on love, theories on love, and research on love. Yet no one has a single, simple definition that is widely accepted. A study conducted by Fehr and Russell (1991) on the concept of love found that people significantly agreed that in our culture we learn about love from childhood on.

So, if people learn about love from childhood on, for many people messages about love presented in Disney films provide a foundation those beliefs about love are grounded on. Tanner et al. (2003) analyzed 26 Disney films to identify themes about couples and families. They

found that love at first sight was a theme in 18 of the movies, and for the most part it took a couple of minutes for the couple to fall in love. Montgomery's (2005) study found that the romantic belief of idealization (love will be nearly perfect) was higher among adolescents than adults, suggesting the belief that idealization is replaced by more realistic beliefs in love through the experience of relationships and their conception of intimacy mature.

There are those who do not believe in love at first sight and others who are shocked when it does not happen. Sally Dear, a professor, remarked "I have students say, 'I had no idea. I thought you grew up, fell in love and got married and that was it'" (Johnson, 2004, p. 12b). What are the chances for love at first sight in real life? Fisher (cited in Peterson, 2003) states there are several criteria for love at first sight: (1) timing, the moment must be virtually perfect for both; (2) mystery, there must be a sense there is much more to know; (3) barriers, the love cannot be too easy to get; and (4) the beloved must fit a childhood conception of the ideal mate.

Markman (cited in Peterson, 2003) says such an early attraction can provide only two of the four parts of the equation that produces love, but the most important ingredients are missing. "You cannot determine if you will be happy together over time or if you will develop a sense of intimacy and friendship that predicts the future of a relationship" (p. 12d). You can fall in lust with somebody, but it takes time to develop a truly loving bond says the author of *The Ten Laws of Lasting Love* (cited in Peterson, 2003).

Given the evidence people learn about love from a young age, and that much of the information is derived from the medium of television, what message does Disney give on the maintenance of relationships? Tanner et al. (2003) found very little information was given to the viewer about how love and relationships are maintained in most movies. In the majority of the

movies the couples fell in love, got married, and lived happily ever after. Disney clearly illustrates the idea that, love is easy and requires no work.

So, what is the problem with these messages that Disney films present? These images encourage an expectation for relationships that is unrealistic, as couples do not live happily ever after without effort from both partners. Images of love at first sight in the film encourage the “belief that physical appearance is the most important thing when entering an intimate relationship. These representations of couples also tend to present the image that marriage... [is] the ultimate goal in life for all people” (Tanner, 2003, p. 368).

### Chapter III: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to evaluate if the messages and themes from Disney's most popular animated films influenced females perception of love and gender in a negative way.

Sections addressed in this section include: sample, field site, instrumentation, data collection procedures, and data analysis.

#### *Sample*

The sample was taken from thirteen students at a Midwestern University. Sign up sheets were posted in the Home Economics building on campus and announcements were made in undergraduate classes three weeks prior to screening. Sign up sheets also included an incentive of a chance to win fifty dollars for full participation in the study. Each student was screened on their knowledge of Disney movies to be sure they were well knowledgeable in Disney genre. Students who scored less than a 75 percent on the Disney movie questionnaire were not eligible for the study. Based on this criterion three participants were not accepted into the study. Also, any student that moved to the United States after the age of two years old or spent more than three years out of the United States during their childhood was not eligible for the study due to the availability and popularity on research of Disney movies in the United States. One participant met this criterion.

The sample was limited to females due to past and current research indicating that fairy tales influence young girls' perceptions of love and gender. A college sample was chosen due to availability. In addition, female college students were the target age group for this study since they may still hold onto childhood perceptions of love and/or may be changing their views due to increased experience in romantic relationships. Participants ranged from 19 to 30 years of age. Informed consent was obtained from all participants who were treated in accordance with the

“Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct” (American Psychological Association, 1992).

#### *Field Site*

The research was conducted on the campus of a small size (about 8,500 students) university in a Midwestern city of 15,000 people. Screening and data collection took place at the campus library on the first floor in a group study room.

#### *Instrumentation*

Before screening the interviewer conducted an ad hoc test of the screening test. The test was given to 16 students in a Human Development and Family Studies class to see if the questions were too hard or too easy.

The questions were derived from popular romantic Disney movies. The questions were based on six Disney films: *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Pocahontas*. There were five questions per film with a total of 36 answers (some questions were worth more than one point). Types of questions ranged from: character names, plot lines, songs, personal characteristics of characters, popular phrases used, and endings. The questions were in the form of multiple choice and short answer. A key was constructed to correct the Disney questionnaire prior to screening. The key to the Disney questionnaire can be viewed in Appendix A. Results of the ad hoc screening are in the next chapter.

Before data collection began the interviewer assessed the validity of the data measurement (written group interview) by having experts review the items for relevancy to the content. The experts consisted of two professors at the university, who were given the questions via e-mail. Suggestions and opinions from the experts allowed the researcher to revise the



interview and were returned to the experts for another opinion. After the experts and the interviewer agreed on the validity of the content the interview was ready for administration. A sample of the written interview, with its instructions, can be viewed in Appendix B.

The interview consisted of 14 open-ended questions based on gender and love. For the gender questions students were asked where their perceptions of gender came from and their thoughts on female Disney characters behaviors. They were also asked about their perceptions of these behaviors and if they view them positively or negatively.

For the love portion the students were asked questions based on their perceptions of love where these perceptions may have come from, whether these perceptions changed over time, and, if so, why might these perceptions have changed? During the interview students were asked questions concerning Disney movies: did they idolize the female heroines when they were younger, did they perceive the romantic stories as realistic, have they ever come to the conclusion that romance is not what is portrayed in Disney films? There were also two Likert scale questions on their perception of the influence of TV/movies concerning romantic relationships.

#### *Data Collection Procedures*

The students had one and one half hours to complete the questionnaire and the interview. The Disney questionnaire was administered in paper and pencil form. If the student had more than nine wrong answers they did not take the written interview.

Each eligible student wrote their answers for the written interview on a computer so the researcher would be able to interpret their answers in full. Data was collected individually from participants to create a relaxed environment and to ensure confidentiality. Each student participating was given the same instructions in the same manner. Instructions were given prior

to the beginning of the trivia test and interview. Any questions a student had were answered prior to or during the testing/interview.

Students were given a disk to save their responses of the written interview. This helped ensure confidentiality since there was no way for the interviewer to determine which disk belonged to whom. When the students were finished taking the interview they saved their work and quietly exited the room.

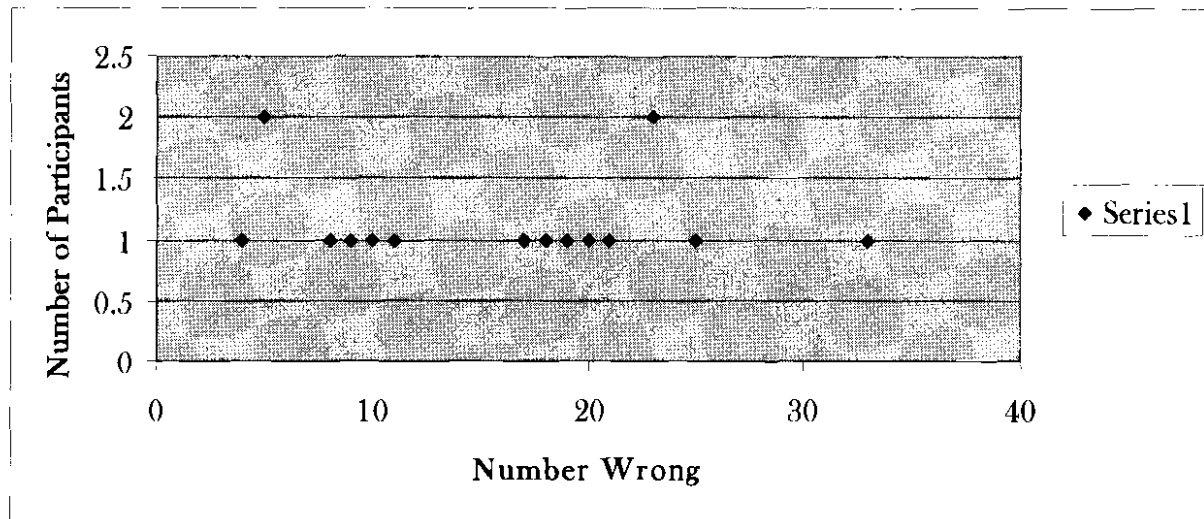
#### *Data Analysis*

The qualitative data was analyzed by categorizing similar responses of the students. Similar responses were then matched to past research on love and gender perceptions. The researcher looked for similarities between student responses and previous research that argued the medium of television (or in this case Disney movies) negatively affected female's perceptions of gender and love. The researcher also analyzed if older perceptions of love had changed through the experiences of dating.

## Chapter IV: Results

A graph of the test results can be seen in Figure 1. After reviewing the ad hoc test results the researcher concluded the screening test was neither too hard nor too easy, and was ready to be used in testing. This conclusion was based on the test scores, with almost half scoring 69.5 percent or higher, and most of the other half scoring between 63 and 46 percent.

Figure 1

*Disney Trivia Ad Hoc Test Results*

The first four questions of the written interview inquired if the participant still watched older Disney films (those released prior to 1990), if the participant watched newer Disney films (those released after 1990), what emotions these films produce in the participant, and why the participant enjoys Disney films today as well as when they were younger. Eighty percent of participants responded yes to continuing to watch older Disney films and 100% responded yes to watching newer Disney films. The most common response to what emotions these films produced was “happy memories, being young”, and “childhood and a simpler time...romance and dreams coming true”.

When asked why they enjoy Disney films today there were three common responses: “easy to watch and never get old”, “easy to escape, not much thinking involved in watching a Disney movie”, and “am still a kid at heart and enjoy the innocence that Disney films portray”. When asked why they enjoyed Disney films when they were younger there were two common responses “they sent out the message that everything will work out happy in the end...” and “...the dreams coming true really made me feel like I could dream too”.

Questions six asked participants to examine where they thought their ideas of romance came from. Fifty percent responded both their parents and TV/movies, 30% responded with just movies/TV, and 20% responded with just their parents. These responses correspond with past research that young children learn about romantic behaviors by observing their own families, but because the topic of romantic love is typically not discussed until adolescence many of their ideas are likely to come from media sources.

Question eight explored how participants perceived the portrayal of romance in Disney films. Ninety percent reported that Disney movies are “very unreal, people fall in love with a kiss and live happily ever after,” constituting a virtual consensus. These responses correspond with past research that most adults realize television entertainment does not provide an accurate picture of the real world.

Question 13 asked participants if they believe in living ‘happily ever after’. The researcher wanted to see if participants still hold onto the romanticized belief portrayed in many Disney films. All participants responded that they do believe in ‘happily ever after’ and all added some obstacle to achieving this goal: “Yes, I do...my definition of happily does not equal perfectly. How sad would it be if I thought I would never live happily ever after,” and “ Yes and no. There will be some tough times, but if it is true love then it will be happy”. This response

matches with past research that through maturity and experience a person's perception of romantic relationships becomes more realistic.

Question 14 examined whether participants' relationship expectations had become more realistic. It asked whether the participants believed in love at first sight and the responses were 60% no, 20% yes, and 20% not sure. This also fits in with past research that relationship expectations become more realistic over time, and the perception that it takes time to develop a truly loving bond.

When participants were asked which major experiences changed their expectations of romantic relationships 30% responded no major experience and 70% responded their own dating experiences (especially break ups and cohabitating with someone romantically). One participant responded

I would have to say that my own dating experiences have changed my expectations of romantic relationships. After dating three different guys (at three different times) for a long period of time I realized what type of romantic things were important to me and what I need in my relationship.

In questions 11 and 12 the researcher asked participants how they would describe a healthy relationship and where or from whom did they learn what is needed for a healthy relationship? The five most common answers were: communication (70%), trust (40%), honesty (30%), love/care (30%), and supportiveness (20%). Since how to maintain a healthy relationship is not portrayed in Disney fairy tales where did the participants learn what is needed to maintain one? Only 20% cited TV/movies; the other 80% responded parents and their own experiences.

When participants were asked which type of pretend play they engaged in as children most responded with stereotypical female behavior, with playing house as the most common

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answer (70%). It cannot be concluded if these behaviors were affected by viewing Disney films, but when asked where most of their ideas about gender came from 90% responded from their family and only 50% included TV/movies in their response.

Participants were asked to describe common characteristics of lead female Disney characters, and the most common descriptors were: beautiful, nice, skinny, great hair, perfect, and good bodies. This matches with past research that Disney female characters are sex-typed, in that, they are depicted as happy, attractive, affectionate, and fragile.

Lastly, participants were asked to rate the influence of TV/movies on children and themselves concerning romantic relationships. The participants felt that TV/movies have more of an effect on children (60% agree and 40% somewhat agree) than it does themselves (20% agree, 70% somewhat agree, and 10% somewhat disagree). These responses correspond to the notion that children's perceptions are more easily influenced by messages on TV/movies than adults who believe TV/movies does not provide an accurate picture of the real world.

## Chapter V: Discussion

These results suggest that the participants felt that Disney films have influenced their perceptions of love and gender. It cannot be speculated from the data that the participants believe this influence to be positive or negative. So, in turn, the research hypothesis was supported by the data, but it does not reveal whether Disney films' influence was positive or negative.

The data shows a greater influence of Disney films on participants' perceptions of romance than on gender. This may be due to more realistic and available gender models provided to young children, including those seen through their families in day-to-day contexts. Participants may have felt more influenced by romance due to media portrayals.

The way the participants described female characters in Disney films was in accordance with past research. The characters were almost completely described in the context of physical attributes. Since past research suggests that individuals identify more with characters of the same sex, future research might explore how males would describe female characters and vice versa.

Lastly, past research was supported by participant's perceptions that their romantic relationship expectations have changed through their own dating experiences. It cannot be concluded whether participants who believe in love at first sight whether they gained this idea from Disney films or other sources. The data also indicated that the framework of the 'happily ever after' belief still remains a strong belief within all the participants, but that framework has been altered. Even though all participants still have this belief they all concluded that it comes with work towards the relationship.

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### *Limitations*

The first limitation of this study was the Hawthorne effect. The researcher felt that some of the participants' responses may have been the result of them knowing what the researcher was looking for. Before testing began the researcher considered the effect on the data, but concluded even though some participants' answers might be biased, other participants would seriously consider the effects of Disney films on their perceptions of love and gender.

The second limitation of this study was the narrow sample. The sample was considered narrow because the participants were educated college students who had or were taking human development and family studies classes. Their responses may have been influenced by their education level and understanding of outside influences on their perceptions.

The last major limitation of this study was that the interview was in written form. The researcher speculated that allowing participants to write their responses they would result in participants being more willing to reveal more intimate information than they would in a spoken interview, especially since the researcher would not know whose answers belonged to whom. After data collection was conducted the researcher felt some of the responses were not really answering the question, which could have been avoided in a one-on-one interview. Also, the researcher speculated that in a one-on-one interview more in-depth answers could have been obtained through additional questions.

### *Future Research*

Since there is limited research on the effects of Disney films on the perception of love and gender there are several possibilities for future research. The first is a longitudinal study to see how these perceptions change over an individual's life. The study could start testing children at the age of five years old and continue re-testing until the age of 40 at five-year intervals. The



results would reveal changes of these perceptions at childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, and middle adulthood. With a longitudinal study researchers would have more accurate information on what experiences changed these perceptions, where the perceptions were formed and what they were formed by, and the affects of maturation on these perceptions.

Another study that could be performed is testing different cohorts and their perceptions on love and gender. This study would investigate questions such as how did the cohort's childhood culture affect their perceptions, and whether the type of Disney film available when they were younger affected their perceptions (i.e. older films, newer films, culturally diverse films, and films with non-romantic female leads).

Future research could also investigate the effects of Disney films on gender. For example, do males come to believe they need to rescue a female in terms of love? Do they come to believe they have to be brave, daring, and charming to be a man and get the woman? Class differences could also be studied concerning the influence of Disney films on the perceptions of love and gender. Would there be differences in class concerning availability to these films, modeling contradictions to their real life families, or non-approval from their primary caregivers?

Lastly, future research could focus on differences between divorced/never married households versus non-divorced households. Does the child's available gender models and romantic relationship models influence her perceptions of love and gender? Do children's models affect the realisticness of romantic Disney films? With so many variables available to affect a person's perception of love and gender it is important to explore the possible effects.

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## Appendix A

**Disney Questionnaire**

**Fill in the blank or circle yes or no for your answer.**

How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_

Were you born in the United States? Yes No

Have you lived for more than two years out of the United States between the ages of 1 to 18 years of age? Yes No

Do you consider yourself knowledgeable in Disney fairy tale films? Yes No

Do you still watch Disney fairy tales as an adult? Yes No

**Please circle the following Disney films that you have watched:**

*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*

*Cinderella*

*Sleeping Beauty*

*The Little Mermaid*

*Beauty and the Beast*

*Aladdin*

**Print your answer in short answer or multiple choice format to the following questions.**

What is the main female characters name in *The Little Mermaid*? Ariel

What is the name of the prince in *The Little Mermaid*? Eric

Name two of the female characters friends in *The Little Mermaid*? Flounder, Scuttle, Sebastian

What is the villains name in *The Little Mermaid*? Ursula

In *The Little Mermaid*, what does the female lead think a fork is called?

- snorfbat
- dinglehopper
- thingamabob
- wachamacallit
- whatsits

What is the lead female characters name in *Sleeping Beauty*? Aurora

What is the name of the prince in *Sleeping Beauty*? Phillip

Name the villain in *Sleeping Beauty*. Malicifant

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Whom does the lead character in *Sleeping Beauty* live with from birth until her sixteenth birthday?

- a. her parents
- b. her father
- c. her mother
- d. her aunt
- e. none of the above

How does the main character meet the prince in *Sleeping Beauty*?

- a. at a ball
- b. her parents and his parents introduce her to him
- c. once upon a dream
- d. while horseback riding

How does the Beast become cursed in *Beauty and the Beast*? Be specific. Refuses to shelter an old beggar woman, and is considered vain and uncaring when he changes his mind after she transforms into a beautiful maiden.

What is the main female characters name in *Beauty and the Beast*? Belle

Who asked the lead female character to marry her in *Beauty and the Beast*? Gaston

Why is the lead female character in *Beauty in the Beast* called peculiar? She likes to read.

The man that proposed has a plan to force the lead female to marry him in *Beauty and the Beast*. What is it?

- a. put her father in a mental institution
- b. pay her father to force her
- c. threatens to burn down the library
- d. drug her

What song is Snow White singing when she first meets the prince?

- a. One day
- b. Wish you were here
- c. Someday
- d. I'm wishing

Why did Snow White's stepmother fear her? Her beauty.

Name five of the seven dwarfs from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Doc, Dopey, Sleepy, Bashful, Sneezy, Grumpy, and Happy.

Why do the dwarfs build Snow White a glass coffin? Too beautiful to bury.

What is the only cure for 'sleeping death' in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*? A kiss

What is the female characters name in *Aladdin*? Jasmine

What is Aladdin's pet monkey's name?

- a. Abobo
- b. Nabi
- c. Abu
- d. Subi
- e. Nagu

Why is the Sultan upset with his teenage daughter in *Aladdin*?

- a. she keeps running away from the castle
- b. she gives money to the poor
- c. she loves a poor man
- d. she will not pick a suitor

Name two of the wishes the genie is unable to grant in *Aladdin*?

- a. kill someone
- b. make you younger
- c. go back in time
- d. make someone fall in love with you
- e. stop time

While the Sultan is hypnotized, he informs his daughter that she will marry whom in *Aladdin*?  
Jafar

Name one of Cinderella's animal friends. Jack, Gus, and Bruno

What are Cinderella's stepsisters' names?

- a. Amelia and Desiree
- b. Anastasia and Drizella
- c. Anabella and Dedra
- d. Adricne and Danielle

Why is the king upset with his son in Cinderella? Won't marry or he has no grandchildren.

How does Cinderella's stepmother know she was at the ball? Cinderella is singing the song from the ball.

Why might Cinderella not be able to try on the glass slipper?

- a. she is locked in the attic
- b. the glass slipper breaks
- c. her stepsisters are blocking the door from the mice
- d. none of the above
- e. a and b



*Appendix B*

Read each question carefully. Type your answers under each question you are answering. Please be as specific as possible in all your answers. All answers including your identity will be kept strictly confidential. If an answer does not apply to you please write **NA**. When you are finished taking the interview save the interview with the disk provided to you shut of the computer screen, NOT the computer, and you can leave. If you have any questions please feel free to ask. Thank you for your time and help in this study.

1. Do you still watch Disney films released prior to 1990 (e.g. *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*)?

If yes what sort of emotions do the older Disney films produce in you when you watch them?

2. Do you watch Disney films released after 1990 (*Beauty and the Beast*, *The Lion King*, *Lilo and Stitch*)?

Do you like the newer Disney films more than the older ones? Why?

3. Why do you enjoy Disney films today?

4. Why did you enjoy Disney films when you were younger (13 and younger)?

5. When you were younger what kind of pretend play did you engage in (e.g. house, war, and type of animal, etc.)?

6. When you were younger where did most of your ideas about romance come from?

7. When you were younger where did most of your ideas about gender come from?

8. How would you characterize Disney's portrayal of romance in their films?

9. Describe some common characteristics of lead Disney female characters (physical and personality).

10. Describe major experiences that have changed your expectations of romantic relationships over the years.

11. How would you describe a healthy relationship?

12. From where, whom, or how did you learn what is needed for a healthy relationship?

13. Do you believe in living happily ever after if you meet the right person? Why?

14. What are your thoughts on love at first sight?

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15. Do you think TV/movies influence the perceptions of children concerning relationships?

1	2	3	4
disagree	somewhat disagree	somewhat agree	agree

16. Do you think TV/movies influenced you perceptions concerning romantic relationships?

1	2	3	4
disagree	somewhat disagree	somewhat agree	agree