

November 2020

## Disney's Portrayal of Women: An Analysis of Female Villains and Princesses

Natalie S. Wellman

Concordia University Irvine, [natalie.wellman@eagles.cui.edu](mailto:natalie.wellman@eagles.cui.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/comjournal>



Part of the [Broadcast and Video Studies Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), and the [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Wellman, Natalie S. (2020) "Disney's Portrayal of Women: An Analysis of Female Villains and Princesses," *Concordia Journal of Communication Research*: Vol. 7 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/comjournal/vol7/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Journal of Communication Research by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@CSP. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@csp.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@csp.edu).

## Disney's Portrayal of Women: An Analysis of Female Villains and Princesses

Media plays a key role in a child's development. In fact, Pew Research Center finds, one-third of parents are concerned about their child's technology use (Duggan, Lenhart, Lampe, & Ellison, 2015). As technology continues to evolve, children become more exposed to media on a mass scale. Consequently, there are a variety of implications for their growth as productive members of society. For example, many parents are both supportive and wary of their child's technology use because of the exposure to potentially inappropriate content as well as the lack of control they have within the realm of the internet (Duggan et al., 2015). One of the most well-known media producers is Disney, and in 2018, the corporation was listed as the strongest, most powerful company in the world (Fuller, 2018). As Disney continues to dominate the market, we must ask: *how does Disney's portrayal of female villains shape our understanding of women in the real world?* First, this paper will discuss how the amount of media a child consumes increased and how that can negatively impact them. Next, the study will analyze the effect Disney has on development to uncover the power they wield through media. Finally, the paper will highlight differences between male and female characters both outside of and within Disney.

### **Media Consumption and Disney Control**

In 1970, technology research found children began media consumption at four years old (Chassiakos, Radesky, Christakis, Moreno, & Cross, 2016). Today, however, children begin as early as four months (Chassiakos et al., 2016). Chassiakos et al. (2016) states, allowing children and teenagers of all ages to have instant access to a variety of media platforms such as entertainment, knowledge, and marketing creates a continuous immersion of the digital environment for this generation. The Pew Research Center furthers that 77% of adults state they are online daily, and 26% say they are online almost constantly (Perrin & Jiang, 2018). With individuals spending more time online, those within media are gaining a wider platform for influence, which can impact their interactants significantly. Many parents report their children watch more than two hours of TV a day, allowing companies to use the fictional world to influence the real one (Chassiakos et al., 2016).

Interestingly, researchers Coyne, Rasmussen, Linder, Nelson, and Birkbeck (2016) found that while both genders are strongly influenced by the media, specifically about differences in gender, the influence was stronger for females than males. Coyne et al. (2016) notes, both boys and girls were likely to have higher levels of female gender-stereotypical behaviors after engaging with princess movies that express this stereotypical behavior. As children begin to navigate the

media landscape more rapidly than in years past, the content they engage in consistently impacts them.

The amount of movies created by Disney has allowed them to continue to influence the world around them. As these movies continue to dominate the entertainment industry, Disney's parks have allowed animated fantasies to become achievable realities for fans. The Walt Disney Company is one of the world's biggest entertainment companies; thus, "its size and scope are significant," and it has a strong influence on consumer culture (Birkbine, Gomez, & Wasko, 2016, p. 24). The company is actively shaping what we value in our society because its power allows it to define the lives of children and adults (Birkbine et al., 2016). As a whole, the amount of media Disney produces, coupled with the rate our society consumes media, illustrates the intense influence Disney holds.

### **Women in Media**

In order to understand the impacts media can have, understanding the role gender plays is vital. Numerous studies (Collins, 2011; Hunt et al., 2018; "Geena Davis Institute of Gender and Media," 2018) suggest that women are consistently portrayed in an unrealistic light as well as have far less screen time than their male counterparts. Not only are women underrepresented in film, women are often oversexualized and portrayed in a negative light (Collins, 2011). Additionally, females are shown almost exclusively in stereotypical roles such as wives, homemakers, and nonprofessionals, which negatively impacts their viewers' ideas on women (Collins, 2011). In an analysis of Hollywood films and television shows, research indicates women are consistently misrepresented, especially regarding being lead actresses (Hunt et al., 2018). Defined as "significant figures in film and television because the storytelling [...] revolves around the characters they play," lead actor roles spotlight discrepancies in casting (Hunt et al., 2018, p. 16). Hunt et al. (2018) notes that of the top theatrical films, women accounted for only 31.2% of the lead actors, while males accounted for 68.8%. Though women were beginning to close the gender gap in cable shows due to an increase from 2015, the differences persist (Hunt et al., 2018). Ultimately, Hunt et al. (2018) argues while there has been some progress, Hollywood is a long way from gaining a proportionate representation in a variety of areas.

Representation goes beyond just being seen; this includes the amount of speaking and screen time given to the character. A study conducted by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media analyzed 100 of the top-grossing (non-animated) family films of 2017 by decoding the amount of screen to speaking time ratio of each character using an automated tool (the Geena Davis Inclusion Quotient or GD-IQ). This GD-IQ found "persistent gaps in gender and race representations in family films" ("Geena Davis Institute of Gender in Media," 2018, p.3).

Researchers contended that progress was made in reference to the number of films with female leads and larger box office returns are seen for films that are racially and gender diverse (“Geena Davis Institute of Gender in Media,” 2018). Additionally, male characters are given significantly more screen time than their female counterparts (60.9% compared to 39.1%), and males speak twice as often as female characters (63.7% compared to 36.3%) (“Geena Davis Institute of Gender in Media,” 2018). The amount of speaking and screen time indicates severe discrepancies in gender equality within film. Thus, male characters are consistently the leading role as well as speak and appear more on screen while women remain unseen and unheard.

### **The Women of Disney**

Disney mirrors the way women are portrayed in media by utilizing stereotypes within their animated films. The 2013 book *Diversity in Disney Films* notes that in many Disney films, animators “accentuate the ideal heterosexual female figure,” contributing to their usage of stereotypical female behaviors (Putnam, 2013, p.150). Conversely, many of the female villains have non-normal and deviant gendered characteristics, as many of the female villains are given masculine physical traits. The book explains that, in many ways, “female villains become more and more separated from their dainty heroines” which contributes to the gendered stereotypes of our culture (Putnam, 2013, p.155). The villain’s masculine image is intended to indicate evil behavior; however, it may be detrimental to the children watching.

Researchers Sharmin and Sattar (2018) found that Disney villains offer a problematic pattern through their appearance and behavior. They found that while the male villains were portrayed in a variety of ways, female villains were portrayed similarly in terms of looks, noting three out of four female villains are shown as old, ugly, and unattractive (Sarmin & Sattar, 2018). Sharmin and Sattar (2018) argue many female villains become villains for trivial matters, finding the top motives for female villains are jealousy/vanity (28%) and inherent evil (27%), compared to 4% and 8% of male villains, respectively. Comparatively, most male villains are driven by obtaining wealth (38%) and power (35%) (Sarmin & Sattar, 2018). The study argues these depictions of the differences between male and female villains indicate the continuation of problematic messages within Disney (Sarmin & Sattar, 2018). These stereotypes have numerous implications for the reinforcing of current gender roles embedded in American society. Ultimately, the portrayal of women in Disney indicates a stereotypical picture of gender roles, which have the potential to reinforce current societal structures.

This research indicates that female villains and princesses may be portrayed differently in Disney which could influence a child’s perception of societal

structures. Understanding these differences is vital as media has become a defining feature of modern society. The misrepresentation of women is consistent across media platforms; thus, Disney is no exception. Disney's media specifically is highly consumed; as such, it is important to analyze how women are being portrayed by the media giant. Due to the scope and impact of Disney on society, the following research question is proposed: *how are female villains and princesses depicted within Disney princess films?*

## Methods

### Sample

A thematic analysis was conducted by coding for common themes or messages within Disney princess movies. The sample was gathered based on two criteria: having a female villain and having a storyline focused on a princess. A total of eight Disney movies were chosen based on the criteria and included movies from 1937-2016. This sample included both animated and live-action movies in order to gather data from different aspects of the Disney movie-making corporation. To easily classify the movies, they were divided by the original Disney movies (four movies before 1990), newer Disney movies (four from 1990 and on), and Disney live-action films (two also included in the after 1990 count). This division occurred to easily analyze the differences between the movies in order to code for themes. The movies in the sample include: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Tangled* (2010), *Maleficent* (2014), *Cinderella* (2015), and *Moana* (2016).<sup>1</sup>

The author and a second coder watched three out of the eight movies together, 37.5% of the sample, to obtain inter-coder reliability before proceeding to code the rest of the data. The two coders focused on the specific behavior or dialogue and context involving females within the Disney movies. Ranging from how the characters dressed to how they interacted with other characters in the movies, coders analyzed different aspects of the films in an attempt to look for trends throughout the princess films. Each coder recorded notes on relevant material, and then the two met to compare their results. The second coder was asked to code an original Disney movie, a newer Disney movie, and a live-action film to maintain balance among the different genres of movies. If there were any discrepancies between the coders, they were discussed to gain a consensus on the presence and interpretation of the themes. The author continued coding the rest of the movies. There was no inter-rater reliability calculated; however, the notes taken

<sup>1</sup> In the original analysis, *Frozen* (2016) was analyzed; however, the analysis was removed because although Elsa was portrayed as the villain for the majority of the movie, Hans is the true villain.

while watching the movies were detailed which allowed confidence in the themes that existed throughout the movies.

Multiple strategies were established to strengthen the validity and trustworthiness of the research findings. First, Face validity is defined as evidence that a test is measuring what it claims to be measuring and was conducted to ensure coders were analyzing accurately (Cozby, 2007). The author discussed the topic and research with an expert on how media impacts communication. Second, both coders coded a third of the sample to establish reliability. Finally, both peer review and clarifying biases were utilized in order to ensure the integrity of qualitative research. Coders' biases were recognized and understood before coding the movies which allowed them to be aware of the ways their beliefs could possibly influence the interpretations of their findings.

## Results

There were a number of similarities found within the films. They have been separated here into four categories: villains, princesses, interactions between the two, and new vs. old movies. Within these, more specific similarities between movies are discussed. In order to provide an in-depth analysis, the findings each have multiple, vivid examples to establish the consistency of the results.

### Villains

**Nonverbal Power.** In the sample of Disney movies analyzed, the villains show their power nonverbally which reinforces the princess' weaknesses. All of the female villains are dressed in power colors such as black, blue, green, red, and brown (Knapp, Hall, & Horgan, 2014). Researchers Grzybowski and Kupidura-Majewski (2019) explain that black is the absence of color; however, the study argues that both black and purple has been linked to mourning. The study furthers, while red may be viewed positively in some Eastern cultures, Western cultures often see red negatively and relate it to aggression, defiance, and strain (Grzybowski & Kupidura-Majewski, 2019). Maleficent in both *Sleeping Beauty* and *Maleficent* is shown in a black dress with purple on the inside sleeves (see Appendix A, image 5 and 11). Te-Ka in *Moana* is shown to be completely black and red (see Appendix A, image 15). *Tangled* depicts Mother Gothel in a flowing red dress with large sleeves (see Appendix A, image 9). Consequently, the power of the villains is enhanced by clothing color because it nonverbally conveys negative attributes about their characters.

All of the villains also utilize space and gestures in order to express their power over others. When they walk somewhere, they walk slower so that the amount of time it takes them to get from one place to another is longer than other

characters. The villains are also more purposeful when they move. Villains such as the Evil Queen, Maleficent, and the Stepmother carry themselves with a straight back and solemn face, contributing to their presence when they walk. This posture communicates they are moving to a specific place of importance and thus enhances their power. *Tangled's* Mother Gothel and *The Little Mermaid's* Ursula utilize gestures and over the top movements to enhance their presence. For example, when Mother Gothel sings her song *Mother Knows Best*, she is shown leaning on the floor with one arm against her forehead as well as against the wall in order to show her distress. These dramatic movements enhance her power by allowing her to take up more space within each scene. They are also both extremely expressive and loud. This contrasts with the other characters within their stories. Te-Ka in *Moana* is larger than Moana, so her movements seem larger, and in order to move, she requires more space. Ultimately, a large portion of the villains utilize space and gestures to nonverbally portray their power.

**Nontraditional Beauty Standards.** The female villains within Disney are consistently portrayed as expressing nontraditional beauty standards. In all of the Disney movies studied, the villains are bigger than the princesses. Moreover, in six of the eight Disney movies, female villains express attributes that separate them from the traditional realm of beauty. They are consistently portrayed as ugly, overweight, or nonsymmetrical. Ursula in *The Little Mermaid* is shown to be overweight with large breasts and a large body (see Appendix A, image 7). The Evil Queen becomes an old woman in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* to trick Snow White into eating the poison apple. Mother Gothel in *Tangled* is shown to be curvy with large breasts (see Appendix A, image 9). The stepsisters in *Cinderella* are portrayed as nonsymmetrical with large noses and flat chests (see Appendix A, image 3 and 13). Many of the female villains (five out of eight) also have extremely pointed/harsh features such as pointed chins or more defined cheekbones. They include *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella*, *Cinderella*, and *Maleficent* (see Appendix A, images 1, 3, 5, 11, and 13). In a number of Disney movies (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Maleficent*), they also have deeper or harsher voices than the princesses.

In seven of the eight Disney movies (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Tangled*, *Maleficent*, and *Cinderella*), Disney villains are portrayed as wearing heavy, dark makeup, and many of them wear bright red lipstick with heavy eyeshadow. In the original *Cinderella*, the stepmother and stepsisters are portrayed with a full face of makeup that appears unnatural as one watches the movie (see Appendix A, image 3). The evil queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* is shown with dark eyeshadow, clearly drawn eyebrows, bright red blush circles, and red lipstick (see Appendix A, image 1). Even in the live-action *Maleficent*, Maleficent has dark eye makeup,

distinct contour, and red lipstick (see Appendix A, image 11). *Moana* was the only movie that did not show the villain with a large amount of dark makeup because she was portrayed as a fire demon.

**Reasons for becoming villains.** The majority of villains are not given adequate reasons for being villains or become villains over very trivial matters. In five of the eight Disney movies (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Cinderella*, and *Tangled*), the villains turn to evil because of their search for beauty or because they are jealous. The Evil Queen attempts to have Snow White killed so she can be the fairest in the land. In both the live-action and the original movie, Cinderella's stepmother is jealous of Cinderella's beauty and grace, so she treats her like a servant. Mother Gothel hides and steals Rapunzel to keep herself young and beautiful. These trivial matters are seen as the main reason many female villains become evil.

The other three Disney movies, as well as *Tangled* to some extent, portray the villains becoming villains because a man has taken from them or forced something upon them. The live-action *Cinderella* shows the stepmother as becoming evil after she has lost both of her husbands and is left with Cinderella. In *Moana*, Te-Feiti becomes the villain Te-Ka because Maui takes her heart. Maleficent becomes a villain in *Maleficent* because King Stephen enters her home and drugs her while they are talking. After she has been drugged, he cuts off her wings and takes them to the castle.

**How they speak about men.** A number of female villains portray men in a way that contrasts the view the princesses hold. In four of the eight Disney movies (*The Little Mermaid*, *Cinderella*, *Maleficent*, *Tangled*), the female villains portray men negatively through direct references to love. In *The Little Mermaid*, Ursula explains that men don't like girls who talk a lot, and they would rather have a girl that doesn't say a word. She states, "It's she who holds her tongue who gets a man" (*The Little Mermaid*, 1989). The stepmother in the live-action *Cinderella* states that love is not free; it is something that costs people greatly. In *Maleficent*, Maleficent finds Prince Philip, and when he states that he's looking for a girl, she implies they always are. Mother Gothel tells Rapunzel in *Tangled* that the romance she's created in her head makes her too naïve to be alone and that as soon as she gives Flynn the crown, he will leave her.

## Princesses

**How they perceive the world.** The majority of the princesses perceive the world in a naïve way which allows them to continue with blind hope. All of the Disney movies in the sample, to varying degrees, show princesses believing in the best possible outcome, even in dire circumstances. Ariel sees the best in humanity and has an obsession with the way they interact with one another, going as far as

stating “betcha on land they understand. Bet they don’t reprimand their daughters. Bright young women [...] ready to stand” (*The Little Mermaid*, 1989). Snow White is shown to believe that everything is going to work out after she has nearly been killed and has no place to go. In *Tangled*, Rapunzel trusts Flynn and believes that everything will end well if she follows her dreams. In the live-action movie, Cinderella is described as innocent and good. When Cinderella faces difficulties, the movie makes it clear that her soul is never broken but remains pure. In *Moana*, Moana believes she will be able to sail across the ocean and complete her journey with no experience; however, this was not solely based on blind faith or naïve hope, but because she was chosen by the ocean.

**What they look like and how they are described.** In seven of the eight Disney movies, the princesses are portrayed with European beauty standards and are seen wearing lighter colors. Moana is the only princess who does not fit that stereotype. For example, Snow White is extremely fair with red lips, black hair, and wearing a blue, red, and yellow dress (see Appendix A, image 2). Cinderella has a tiny waist, bright blonde hair, fair skin, and is wearing a light blue dress (see Appendix A, image 4 and 14). Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* has bright red hair and is wearing a purple bikini top with a green tail (see Appendix A, image 8). Aurora in *Sleeping Beauty* is dressed very plainly while she is living in the cottage in the woods; however, she wears a light pink dress that goes along with her blonde hair and light skin when in the palace (see Appendix A, image 6). Aurora is also extremely skinny and is what would stereotypically be considered perfect (see Appendix A, image 6). The live-action Aurora also is extremely fair with blonde hair and plain clothes (see Appendix A, image 12). Rapunzel is shown to be wearing a light pink and purple dress with long blonde hair and light eyes (see Appendix A, image 10). Moana, on the other hand, is shown to be larger than the other princesses with black curly hair and dark skin and is wearing an orange and crème outfit (see Appendix A, image 16).

Six of the eight Disney movies (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Maleficent*, *Cinderella*, and *Ariel*) portray the princesses based on fleeting attributes such as their voice or beauty. Snow White is described as the fairest of the land which makes the queen extremely jealous of her. She also is an excellent singer. In *Sleeping Beauty*, the good fairies give Aurora first the gift of beauty and then the gift of song. In *Maleficent*, the fairies also give Aurora gifts, but this time they are the gifts of beauty and happiness. The original *Cinderella* describes Cinderella as beautiful and charming, which is why the stepmother was jealous. In both movies, Cinderella is also shown to be singing very well to the animals and while she does her work. Ariel is described as having a wonderful voice which is why Ursula takes it from her.

**How they interact with men.** In seven of the eight Disney movies studied, the princesses either need a man in order to accomplish something or view falling

in love as their main goal. Snow White is saved by the Prince, and they fall in love and ride off into the sunset. Ariel is incomplete without Eric and needs help from her friends, notably all male, in order to accomplish her goal of winning his heart. Furthermore, in the original *Sleeping Beauty*, Prince Philip is the person that wakes Aurora from her sleep, and they fall in love and live happily ever after. In *Tangled*, although Rapunzel and Flynn are shown to have a more equal partnership, Rapunzel would have never left the tower if she had not gotten Flynn to guide her to the lights. In the newest Disney movie, *Moana*, Moana's original goal is to get Maui so he can return the heart to Te-Fiti. In the end, she is the one who saves her people. The only movie that does not need a man to save or assist the princesses is *Maleficent*. In the original movie, Prince Philip is the one who saves Aurora; thus, the live-action movie first shows Prince Philip as the savior. However, in the end, Maleficent herself is the one who saves Aurora.

In many of the Disney movies (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Maleficent*), the princesses have an unrealistic standard of men, despite these men doing relatively little besides saving the princess. Aurora is described as having a dream of her perfect man. Then, when she meets a man in the forest, she assumes this is the man of her dreams and falls in love with him. Ultimately, Prince Philip saves Aurora by kissing her and awakening her from her sleep. Snow White is shown singing with the prince in one of the first scenes and talks with her animal friends about how she fell in love with Prince Charming because he was handsome, big, tall, romantic, and nobody was like him. In the end, Prince Charming also saves Snow White by waking her up from a deep sleep with a kiss. Ariel sees Eric once and immediately falls in love with him. In *Maleficent*, Aurora meets Prince Philip and begins to believe in true love.

Disney princesses also largely base their happily ever after around men. In six of the eight Disney movies, the princess ends up falling in love with a man in order to achieve or further their happily ever after. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and both *Cinderella* movies, the princess relies on the prince to save her from her detrimental situation. Snow White and Aurora are awoken from their sleep with a prince's true love kiss and live happily ever after. *Tangled* is narrated by Flynn Rider the whole movie, and while Rapunzel's happily ever after was mostly being a part of her family again, marrying Flynn was also a major component of living a happy life. Ariel's entire goal in *The Little Mermaid* is to get Eric to fall in love with her, and when she accomplishes that, she achieves her happily ever after. Moana and the live-action Aurora are the only two who both achieve a happily ever after without the help of a man.

Six of the eight Disney movies also show male characters as the princesses' sidekicks. Rapunzel's best friend is Pascal the chameleon, and later she later meets Maximus, the horse, when she is on her journey with Flynn. Both characters

provide comedy within the story as well as support Rapunzel throughout her journey. The seven dwarves help Snow White and offer her a place to stay, ultimately ending up doing everything they can to protect her. Sebastian, the lobster, is charged with looking after Ariel and Flounder the tropical fish is shown as her supportive best friend. Cinderella originally was good friends with two mice, Jaq and Gus-Gus; however, in the live-action, Jaq was portrayed as a girl. Aurora is the only one shown without a sidekick in either movie, original or live-action.

**Doing Housework.** Many of the Disney movies (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella*, *Tangled*, *Cinderella*, and *Maleficent*) portray the princesses as doing stereotypically woman activities, such as cleaning and housework, joyfully. Snow White is shown finding a home and cleaning it with the help of her animals. Aurora is first introduced into the movie *Sleeping Beauty* when she is cleaning the house. Cinderella is shown singing and talking with her animal friends while she does chores such as laundry, dishes, and cleaning. *Tangled* has a whole song dedicated to Rapunzel getting ready in the morning, where she does dishes, cooks, bakes, and cleans her house. Moana is the only one who is not shown doing something stereotypically feminine; rather, she is shown doing things that fulfill what her job is, preparing to be a leader.

### **Interactions between Princesses and Female Villains**

**How the villains speak about princesses.** In many Disney movies (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella*, *Maleficent*, and *Tangled*), villains view the princess' beauty in a negative light. For example, the Evil Queen and the Stepmother are jealous of Snow White and Cinderella because of their beauty and grace. In the live-action *Cinderella*, the first thing the stepsisters comment about Cinderella is her appearance, namely her style and weight. Maleficent calls Aurora a "curious little beastly" and does not refer to her by her real name (*Maleficent*, 2014). Mother Gothel tells Rapunzel that she sees a beautiful young lady in the mirror and then states, "oh look, you're here too" (*Tangled*, 2010).

In both *Tangled* and the live-action and original *Cinderella*, the mother characters manipulate the princesses into doing what they want. Mother Gothel reminds Rapunzel that she is incapable of handling the world outside; thus, she must stay inside the tower. The Stepmother in both movies humiliates and belittles Cinderella and forces her to become a servant in her own home. Both Rapunzel and Cinderella were diminished in order to further the villains getting what they wanted.

**Princess' power in relation to the villains.** All eight of the Disney movies portray the princesses as less powerful than the villains physically. None of the princesses are able to defeat the villain on their own, if they even help at all. For example, Cinderella is unable to escape from her stepmother until the prince comes

and asks her to marry him. In *Sleeping Beauty*, Prince Philip defeats Maleficent, who has turned herself into a giant dragon. The seven dwarves chase the Evil Queen off a cliff after she puts Snow White to sleep. Moana is unable to stop Te-Ka by herself; she needs Maui to provide her support. *Maleficent* is the only movie where the princess does not defeat the villain at all. Despite this, Maleficent is clearly more powerful than Aurora because she possesses strong magic while Aurora does not.

All of the Disney movies also create a nonverbal power distance between the princesses and villains through height, size, and abilities. *Tangled* portrays Rapunzel in submissive positions (sitting) while Mother Gothel is in more dominating positions (standing above her). Cinderella is shorter than her stepmother. Ursula's character is much bigger than Ariel's dainty frame which contributes to the power gap. Snow White is also much more delicate looking than the Evil Queen because Snow White is shorter and takes up less space. Maleficent, the Evil Queen, Ursula, Te-Ka, and Elsa all have powers that enhance their ability and potential to dominate over others. Maleficent has the power to shapeshift (in the original movie) and has the strongest magic in the land (in both the original and live-action). Te-Ka utilizes fire to keep people away from the island, and Elsa has control over ice. These abilities directly contrast the princesses such as Aurora, Snow White, Ariel, and Moana who rely on things outside of themselves to be successful.

### **New vs. Old Disney Movies**

**Screen Time.** In a number of the original Disney movies (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Little Mermaid*), the princesses are in the movies for a relatively short amount of time. In comparison to other characters, especially the main characters, they did not have very many lines. For example, in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, the majority of the movie focuses on the seven dwarves and their interactions as well as the Evil Queen plotting to get revenge on Snow White. In the scenes where Snow White is in the picture, she is either interacting with the dwarves or talking to the queen. While she does have some scenes alone, they are minimal. Additionally, while *The Little Mermaid* provides Ariel with more scenes, the majority of the movie involves her not having a voice. Therefore, in the scenes she is in, she is not heard. While the amount of time she spends in this movie may not be drastically less than the other main characters but, the amount of lines she has impacts her importance in the movie. Aurora only says about eighteen lines throughout her entire film, despite it being called *Sleeping Beauty* ("Sleeping Beauty," 2019). Furthermore, these princesses are not given clear reasons for doing things. Princesses like Snow White, Aurora, Cinderella, and Ariel are shown as two-dimensional characters. For example, Snow

White hides from the queen to survive, but beyond that, she performs very stereotypical duties, such as cleaning or singing. Cinderella is shown to cook, clean, and do laundry joyously until she falls in love and gets married to the prince. Besides that, she is not given much motivation to do things.

The newer Disney movies (*Tangled*, *Cinderella*, *Maleficent*, and *Moana*), on the other hand, show more developed characters for longer periods of time. Rapunzel is shown as a character who has a more realistic motivation for doing things. Her goal is not to fall in love; rather, it is to experience the lights that are sent out every year on her birthday. She is in nearly every scene as well as has a significant portion of the lines. In both the live-action movies, *Maleficent* and *Cinderella*, the princesses play a bigger role and have more three-dimensional characterization than in the original movies. While *Maleficent* does largely focus on Maleficent and her personal character development, Aurora plays a large role in the movie itself. She has a significant portion of lines and is provided a developed character that not only has motivations of her own, such as learning about the world and understanding Maleficent, she provides justification and explanation for Maleficent's character development. Cinderella is also given clear motivations for why she does things and is the center of the movie. For example, she stays and serves at the house because it was her family's, and she doesn't want to lose that, and she remains kind and courageous because her mother had her promise to do so before she passed away. When Cinderella meets a man, she is excited to see him at the ball because he is her friend.

**Changing to match current times.** Disney movies also have begun to adapt to changes in society. The old Disney movies consistently portrayed the princesses as in need of saving and as women who loved to do housework. Currently, Disney does still exhibit those tropes, but there are some movies that begin to go against them. *Moana* is the two newest animated Disney princess movies, and it exhibited fewer similarities to the rest of the Disney movies. In terms of appearance, for example, Moana does not match the stereotypical body of a Disney princess. She has darker skin and is not as thin (see Appendix A, image 16). Te-Ka in *Moana* is not jealous of the princess' beauty. The live-action Disney movies also indicate a change towards modern western culture. *Maleficent* provides a different storyline than the original *Sleeping Beauty*. In *Maleficent*, she is given a clear reason for being a villain, and she ends up being both a villain and a hero. The live-action *Cinderella* provided a slightly different storyline which indicates if themes are problematic, they can be adapted to the current society. These differences indicate Disney is beginning to change the way princesses are viewed and understood in reference to other female characters.

There is also beginning to be a blurred line between who is the villain. At the end of *Maleficent* and *Moana*, the villains turn out to be not as evil as first believed. While the original Disney movies portray the villains and princesses as

black and white, newer Disney movies create a grey. That is, the villains are given more complex reasons for becoming villains, and princesses are given more complicated characteristics. In *Maleficent* (2014), Aurora narrates, “in the end, my kingdom was not united by a hero or a villain, as legend had predicted, but by one who was both hero and villain. And her name was Maleficent.” This blurring of good and evil directly contrasts the old Maleficent who was only shown as being jealous of Aurora. Te-Ka in *Moana* turns out to be Te-Feiti who became evil because she had her heart stolen from her.

While the old Disney movies (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Cinderella*) utilized reasons such as jealousy, vanity, or inherent evil as the main reasons villains turn into villains, current Disney movies (*Tangled*, *Maleficent*, *Cinderella*, and *Moana*) analyze the impact of a man taking something from a woman. This trend expresses the changes occurring within the Disney production. While Mother Gothel is obsessed with youth and beauty, she is also shown as losing access to something that has kept her safe for hundreds of years because the soldiers take it from her. Maleficent and Te-Feiti also have their wings and heart taken away which are both vital to each of their survival. Overall, current Disney villains are shown as having something taken away from them, while other villains become villains for more trivial matters.

## Discussion

This qualitative analysis presents a number of key distinctions and themes within Disney films. Although some of the Disney movies indicated a change or progression in reference to current social guidelines, there are multiple similarities between them. A variety of themes noted indicated a lack of healthy options for young girls to look up to through Disney’s use of female stereotypes associated with beauty, power, and their interactions with others. This lack of healthy options ultimately negatively impacts society because it does not give young girls choices of personality traits they can imitate.

The female villains within Disney films are often portrayed as ugly, overweight, or nonsymmetrical while simultaneously exhibiting characteristics of power and strength. The princesses, on the other hand, are shown to be extremely beautiful which contributes to their overall success in life. This may lead to children watching the Disney movies and associating powerful women with attributes society views as negative. Previous research notes that many Disney movies promote the stereotype that what is beautiful is good (Bazzini, Curtin, Joslin, Regan, & Martz, 2010). Moreover, attractive characters are portrayed as morally virtuous, less aggressive, and set to achieve positive life outcomes (Bazzini et al., 2010). This “halo effect” causes people to assume attractive people have desirable attributes; thus, we are more likely to perceive attractive people as being more

socially desirable than unattractive people (Knapp, Hall, & Horgan, 2014). Because the villains are portrayed with nontraditional beauty standards, Disney nonverbally communicates that they do not have redeeming qualities about them. That is, we naturally assign villains other negative characteristics because of how they initially look. This prejudice perpetuates the idea that beauty is necessary for success and teaches audience members that if they are not beautiful, or if that is not something they want to strive for, they are not deserving of a happily ever after.

When powerful women are portrayed with negative beauty standards while princesses needing assistance have traditional beauty standards, Disney reinforces which type of woman society favors. Solis' (2016) analysis explains the myriad of ways women have been misrepresented in media as well as how this adversely affects society's attitude towards women. Solis (2016) states that the idea of a man coming to the aid of a woman and rescuing her has extreme appeal in Western cultures. The expression of women as a damsel in distress, or weak and in need of help, therefore, imitates what we believe should be the case in real life. Consequently, the women who are powerful on their own are given negative attributes by both Disney and society. Thus, young girls are given two main options: to be the beautiful and skinny princess in need of saving and/or unable to do anything on her own or the ugly but powerful villain that is feared by everyone in the movie until they are overtaken by the hero.

Villains within the older Disney movies are also not given significant reasons for being villains. A number of the female villains become villains due to jealousy, vanity, or because they are inherently evil. As researchers Sharmin and Sattar (2018) argue, villains turn into villains for extremely trivial matters. This understanding of why villains become evil creates the idea that women are more likely to become angry for petty reasons or because they were created a certain way which reinforces a negative stereotype of women. While Disney has made progress, many famous Disney villains are still shown as powerful and angry because of a trivial reason. Ultimately diminishing the idea that women's power can be appropriately motivated through legitimate reasons. Solis (2016) highlights that the attitudes expressed in comic books, cartoons, tv shows, and movies express an integral part of American identity and psyche. Interestingly, while older Disney movies focused on villains becoming villains for trivial matters, newer films indicate a shift to understanding the consequences of taking something from a woman. This shift indicates there has been some progress in how society views women; however, it also communicates that men mistreating or taking things from women is more commonplace than many would like to admit.

The portrayal of female villains also encourages the idea that the most dangerous people in the world are powerful women. They highlight women being pitted against each other as a natural and key occurrence within everyday life. Antony and Sheldon (2019) note, males typically have issues revolving around

overstepping boundaries of other intimate relationships or theft, while females experience problems due to disclosing personal communication beyond the friendship boundary. Thus, when handling conflict, Antony and Sheldon (2019) find males are more likely to escalate to verbal aggression, and females are more likely to sabotage other close relationships that threaten their friendship (Antony & Sheldon, 2019). Encouraging conflict between women has the potential to perpetuate what is already occurring more effectively. It creates a situation where girls are fighting each other partially because of what they see in the media. Rather than changing what is seen, the media continues showing the same dangerous situations.

The only female characters within Disney films that are able to do things completely on their own are the villains. Consequently, girls who look up to the princesses are not seeing independent role models. This has the potential to create a system where strong and independent girls are viewed as less valuable or important in comparison to those who need assistance from others. In certain circumstances, relying on others is not inherently bad, but when a person is unable to experience life on their own, they run the risk of experiencing problems in things such as the daily tasks associated with life. Furthermore, both villains and princesses speak about men, but in vastly different ways. Villains portray men as the worst people on earth, while the princesses often see them as their savior or someone they desperately want in their lives. Jaclyn Friedman explains in her 2017 book that most men are well-meaning but have never been held to a standard that required them to act differently than what is common in society. In fact, many males experience social shaming when they are deemed “too” respectful of women (Friedman, 2017). Socially shaming those who are respecting women leads to a dangerous disconnect between what should be expected and what actually is. This cognitive dissonance between what society teaches men and what should be occurring shrouds a clear image of how men currently act and how they should. On one hand, villains are expressing no matter what men do, they will not live up to any standard. On the other hand, princesses are showing audience members men are already above any standard we set because they are one of the keys to a happily ever after. Therefore, both men and women experience difficulty attempting to understand how to healthily experience relationships.

In a number of the Disney movies in this sample, princesses have a male sidekick. While this relationship is not necessarily harmful, when there is not a female friendship in the movies, the film fails to provide a complete picture of healthy relationships to young viewers. In some cases, the female villain is the only other female the princess has a relationship with. This lack of healthy female friendships hinders the audience’s understandings of the complexity of female relationships. The ability to create lasting relationships based on trust is key to functioning in larger society; however, there are many gender differences between

how relationships form (David-Barnet et al., 2015). Research shows women, in particular, tend to focus on building intimate relationships with a few people (David-Barnet et al., 2015). When Disney does not show these intimate relationships with other women, those watching can be left with a lack of media representation, which has the potential to negatively impact society. This lack of understanding of relationships creates dangerous and detrimental experiences within something that is necessary for our interpersonal development. When a number of Disney movies portray the main female-female relationship as between the villain and the princess, it creates a negative tone for all female friendships. While society might recognize that it is an incorrect relationship based on abuse, distrust, or power, Disney provides very few alternatives to a functioning female friendship.

However, it must be noted that there has been progress within the Disney movies. Produced in 2016, *Moana* is the most recent Disney movie produced with both a female villain and a princess. It was also the film that fit into the least number of stereotypes. This progress indicates a shift between old and new Disney movies that attempts to create a healthier understanding of women. While this shift is beneficial, it is occurring at such a slow rate that original Disney movies are still greatly impacting society. Thus, to create a more diverse understanding of what it means to be an effective and powerful woman, Disney must continue changing their tropes at a faster rate.

Despite this progress, the introduction of Disney+ has the potential to reintroduce and reinforce old stereotypes. Released on November 12, 2019, Disney+ costs only \$6.99 per month (or \$69.99 per year) (Chen, 2019). The site itself boasts of a section titled “Out of the Vault,” allowing viewers access to princess movies that were previously difficult to acquire such as *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, and *The Little Mermaid* (Disney). The results indicated there are consistent and dangerous stereotypes shown in these movies. While Disney is working to change the tropes within the movies, Disney+ may pose unintended problems to this progress due to the access to negative stereotypes.

Overall, there is currently a gap between the villains and princesses that has not been filled by Disney. Girls are forced to choose to relate to either a heinous villain or a dainty princess with little room to choose a middle route. Research explains that having a combination of traits, namely beauty, courage, independence, action, intelligence, and kindness, is the most effective way to create and understand strong female characters that are autonomous (McDonough, 2017). However, Disney does not offer this portrayal for many young girls. Although they have begun to make progress with newer movies, such as *Moana*, the older Disney movies continue to be critical in the understanding of what it means to be a woman.

Consequently, their lack of a combination of effective traits makes them ineffective role models.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

A few limitations must be addressed when looking at this study. First, the sample size of the Disney movies was small. While the movies were specifically Disney films that had a female villain and a princess, expanding the lens of the research has the potential to lead to broader findings. By expanding the sample size, one would be able to understand themes from a variety of types of Disney movies, which has the potential to strengthen the analysis. Second, there was a second coder used to assure reliability. This coder was responsible for watching three of the Disney movies, and the author watched all eight. The study could have utilized both coders for all eight Disney movies to increase the reliability of the findings even more.

Future research should focus on a variety of different avenues. Initially, there has been some change between the original and current Disney movies. Disney has been making changes concerning the traditional fairy-tale script with movies such as *Frozen* and *Moana*. However, there is currently little research as to how these changes actually impact individuals. Disney is creating a number of live-action movies which allows future research to analyze how the same storylines have remained consistent as well as changed over time. Future research should be directed specifically at what changes have occurred within Disney movies in order to better understand how that impacts society as a whole. Second, research should focus on how different types of Disney movies (princess movies with a male villain, non-princess movies with a female villain, and non-princess movies with a male villain) express and understand traditional beliefs about gender. This information provides an opportunity to compare and contrast the way females are portrayed across Disney to analyze the implications of these similarities and differences within American culture. Finally, quantitative research should be done to better analyze whether these portrayals are impacting people within America. This research, such as a survey, an experiment, a focus group, etc., provides the potential to gain knowledge because it can specifically analyze the impact consistent with themes found in Disney movies.

### **Conclusion**

This research study analyzed eight Disney movies in order to better understand the impacts they have on society. Media is a key aspect of our continuously advancing American culture, which makes understanding the common themes vital. It is clear there are many differences in gender portrayal. This work shows significant themes in a number of aspects such as appearance, interactions between characters, and belief systems held by characters. The themes

indicate several problematic tropes that Disney has continuously perpetuated as well as attempts made by Disney to break out of these stereotypes. These results have the potential to grow society's knowledge of women in media as well as the long-lasting impacts of an incomplete female portrayal within television and movies.

## References

- Antony, M.G. & Sheldon, P. (2019). "Is this friendship worth keeping?" Gender differences in communicating forgiveness in friendships. *Communication Quarterly*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2019.1573746>.
- Bazzini, D., Curtin, L., Joslin, S. Regan, S., & Martz, D. (2010). Do animated Disney characters portray and promote the beauty-goodness stereotype? *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *40*(10), 2687-2709. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2010.00676.x>
- Birkinbine, B.J., Gomez, R., Wasko, J. (2017) *Global Media Giants*. New York, New York: Taylor and Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315682334>
- Chassiakos, Y.L.R., Radesky, J., Christakis, D., Moreno, M.A., & Cross, C. (2016). Children and adolescents and digital media. *American Academy of Pediatrics*, *138*(5), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2016-2593>
- Chen, Connie. (2019, December 13). *Disney Plus: Everything you need to know about Disney's ad-free streaming service*. Retrieved from: <https://www.businessinsider.com/disney-plus>
- Collins, R.L. (2011). Content analysis of gender roles in media: Where are we now and where should we go? *Sex roles*, *64*, 290-298. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-010-9929-5>
- Coyne, S., Rasmussen, E., Linder, J.R., Nelson, D.A., & Birkbeck, V. (2016). Pretty as a Princess: longitudinal effects of engagement with Disney princesses on gender stereotypes, body esteem, and children. *Child Development* 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12569>
- Cozby, P.C. (2007) *Methods in Behavioral Research* (9<sup>th</sup> ed). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Higher Education.
- David-Barnett, T., Rotkirch, A., Carney, J., Izquierdo, I.B., Krems, J.A., Townley, D...Dunbar, R.I.M. (2015). Women favour dyadic relationships, but men prefer clubs: Cross-cultural evidence from social networking. *PLoS One*, *10*(3), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0118329>
- Disney. (n.d.). *Disney Plus*. <https://www.disneyplus.com/>
- Duggan, M., Lenhart, A., Lampe, C. & Ellison, N.B. (2015). *Concerns about children, social media and technology use*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/07/16/concerns-about-children-social-media-and-technology-use/>

- Friedman, J. (2017). *Unscrewed: Women, sex, power, and how to stop letting the system screw us all*. New York, New York: Hachette Book Group.
- Fuller, S. (2018). Disney: Statistics and Facts. Retrieved January 5, 2019, from <https://www.statista.com/topics/1824/disney/>
- Geena Davis Institute of Gender in Media. (2018). Gender and race representations in the top family films of 2017, *Geena Davis Institute*, 1-9.
- Grzybowski, A. & Kupidura-Majewski, K. (2019). What is color and how is it perceived? *Clinics in Dermatology*, 37, 392-401. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clindermatol.2019.07.008>
- Hunt, D., Ramon, A.C., Tran, M., Sargent, A., Roychoudhury, D., Stoddard, C. (2018). *Hollywood Diversity Report 2018* (Report No. 5). Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment.
- IMDb. (n.d.). retrieved from <https://www.imdb.com/>
- Knapp, M.L., Hall, J.A., Horgan, T.G. (2014). *Nonverbal communication in human interaction*. Boston, Massachusetts: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- McDonough, M.S. (2017). *From damsel in distress to active agent: Female agency in children's and young adult fiction* (Doctoral dissertation). Electronic Theses and Dissertations. <https://doi.org/10.18297/etd/2728>
- Sharmin, T. & Sattar, S. (2018). Gender politics in the projection of “Disney” villains. *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*, 8(1), 53-57. doi: 10.17265/2159-5836/2018.01.006
- Sleeping Beauty. (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0053285/trivia#spoilers>
- Smith, D. (2018). *List of Disney Films*. Retrieved from <https://d23.com/list-of-disney-films/>
- Solis, M.A. (2016). *The damsel in distress: Rescuing women from American mythology* (Master's thesis). Retrieved from <https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/52307/PDF/1/play/>
- Perrin, A. & Jiang, J. (2018 March 14). *About a quarter of U.S. adults say they are 'almost constantly' online*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/14/about-a-quarter-of-americans-report-going-online-almost-constantly/>
- Putnam, A. (2013). Mean ladies: Transgendered villains in Disney films. In Cheu, J. (Eds.), *Diversity in Disney films: critical essays on race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and disability* (147-162). Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc.

## Appendix A

### Images of Disney Villains and Princesses



Image 1, Evil Queen



Image 2, Snow White



Image 3, Stepmother and Stepsisters



Image 4, Cinderella



Image 5, Maleficent



Image 6, Aurora



Image 7, Ursula



Image 8, Ariel



Image 9, Mother Gothel



Image 10, Rapunzel



Image 11, Maleficent



Image 12, Aurora



Image 13, Stepmother and Stepsisters



Image 14, Cinderella



Image 15, Te-Ka



Image 16, Moana