

**The Everlasting Damsel in Distress?:  
Analyzing the evolution of the female Disney character over time**

Lisa van Kessel, BA<sup>1</sup> & Serena Daalmans, MSc<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Department of Arts, Radboud University Nijmegen. E-mail: [lisavkessel@gmail.com](mailto:lisavkessel@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Behavioral Science Institute, Department of Communication Science, Radboud University Nijmegen. P.O. Box 9104, 6500 HE Nijmegen, The Netherlands.

E-mail: [s.daalmans@maw.ru.nl](mailto:s.daalmans@maw.ru.nl)

## **Abstract**

Children's television and movies aimed at children provide young viewers with male and female characters representing behaviors and traits that can promote or counter gender stereotyped perceptions. The present study examined twenty-three Disney features as a major source of gender stereotypical images that may influence children's gender perceptions. A qualitative content analysis was conducted to explore the development of the representation of gender within these features, starting with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and ending with *Frozen* (2013). The analysis revealed that while Disney has seemingly made an effort to make main characters less stereotypical, but the gender stereotypical norms and values have shifted to secondary characters. Only in its latest features, *Brave* and *Frozen*, there are indications of Disney's abandonment of the gender stereotyped characters and a move towards more realistic and aspirational role models for children.

**Keywords:** Disney, gender, qualitative content analysis, children

## Introduction

The *Disney Princess* line of movies, even though adored by children and adults around the world, have once more sparked controversy as a source of gender stereotyping with release of the Merida doll from Disney's *Brave* (Child 2013; Wohlwend 2012). The *Disney Princesses* line form an immersive commercial transmedia experience for children (with over 40,000 *Princess* items, and over 4 billion dollar annually in retail sales), which allows children to engage with these characters and their narratives from breakfast (with *Disney Princess* cereals) to bedtime (princess pajamas, storybooks and bedding)(Linn 2008; Wohlwend 2012). The discussions that surround the *Princess* line often converge around the idea that the commercial industry are cornering children into stereotyped gender roles from a very early age (Bartyzel 2013; Linn 2008). These concerns are based on the realization that children's gender perceptions are influenced by the immersive stream of transmedia franchises of dolls, toys, collectibles, food, television programs, movies and websites with which they play (Messner 2000; Thompson and Zerbinos 1997; Wagner-Ott 2002).

With the release of the Merida doll, new controversies sparked around the thin frame, full bosom and flowy hair the doll showcased which was a abrupt departure from her representation in the film *Brave* (2013) (Child 2013; Peppers 2013; Samakow 2013). Disney Chairman Bob Iger said that “Merida was the princess that countless girls and their parents were waiting for – a strong, confident, self-rescuing princess ... She was a princess who looked like a real girl, complete with the 'imperfections' that all people have” (in Child 2013). He added “by making her skinnier, sexier and more mature in appearance, you are sending a message to girls that the original, realistic, teenage-appearing version of Merida is inferior” (in Child 2013). The toys children play with form one of the influences on the stereotypes children try to live up to, and just like toys, other media products can influences children's perception of gender roles (Hurley 2005). Considering the commercial media-infused

landscape children grow up in it is important to analyze the different images and gendered representations they are immersed in. Next to toys, children's films form one of the most persistent and pervasive sources of gender representation and as a result the focal point of this study.

Through the release of Disney Pixar's movies *Brave* (2012) and *Frozen* (2013) the interest in the position and the presentation of the Disney Princess was renewed. Contrary to previous Disney movies *Brave* tomboy princess sparked reactions such as, "Is this the end of the soppy princess who always needs a man?" (Shoard 2011), "...a Disney princess who fights her own battles, fixes her own mistakes, and doesn't need a prince? That's something special" (Munkittrick 2012) and reacting to *Frozen* one commentator even argued that Disney was no longer 'Frozen' in antiquated gender stereotypes and that these new princesses were not waiting for Prince Charming ([Lighezzolo](#) 2014; Weekend 2014). On the other hand, there are also critics that posit that Disney's gender representations have not changed even in *Brave* and *Frozen* (Hankin 2012; Langmack 2014). Which begs the question if and how these latest releases are different in their representation of gender from the past?

### **Gender Stereotyped Representations in the Media**

Over the last decades a lot has changed in society concerning gender and stereotypical gender roles. However, even though there is no longer an unfair division of labor and many western women feel they have "equal rights and privileges", women are "still frequently underrepresented in both the workplace and popular culture" (Benshoff and Griffin 2004, 204). This under representation of women can influence the preconceptions of gender, as gender is not something that is a given, but something that is learned through ideological institutions such as the media (O'Bryant and Corder 1978; Benshoff and Griffin 2004, 205).

In the many hours children spend with television they are exposed to images and beliefs television promotes about for instance gender, family, and sexuality (Morgan 2007, 153). Social learning theory and cultivation theory suggest that gender role portrayal in film and television can influence children's beliefs and ideas about gender, gender appropriate behavior, and norms (Bandura 2002; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli and Shanahan 2002). And while children may conceptualize gender in different ways depending on their age (i.e. stage of development) viewing gender stereotyped content is often assumed to affect children's personal gender schemas (O'Bryant and Corder 1978). For example, a study conducted by Signorelli and Lears (1992) on attitudes and behaviors relating to chores in television lead to the conclusion that children and adolescents that viewed a lot of television would replicate the expectations of what chores are appropriate for boys and girls as seen on television. And McGhee and Frueh (1980, 179) found that heavy television viewers "have more stereotypical perceptions" of gender roles "than light viewers".

In society gender roles have become more flexible, and so have many aspirational models, but on film these modern models are rarely represented (McGhee and Frueh 1980; Prinsloo 1996). Instead, sex-role portrayals are highly stereotypical in "virtually every aspect of television programming" (McGhee and Frueh 1980, 180). Stereotypes can be defined as a "very simple, striking, easily-grasped form of representation", they are easily recognizable by an audience and are expected to have certain characteristics (Dyer 1999, 2). Stereotypically, men are career-orientated and are therefore more often portrayed in work environments, while women play roles that involve the home and the family (McGhee and Frueh 1980, 180). In films and television the use of stereotypes can be useful as it removes the need for character development, but the problem remains that ideas about social groups are formed and cultivated by these stereotypes (Dyer 1999). While adults and most adolescents have the ability to distinguish the flat characters on screen from people in real life, children have yet to

develop this ability. Children are exposed to many hours of television before they experience life themselves, and that is why the stereotypical portrayal of social groups is expected to have the largest effect on them.

As previously indicated, media aimed at children have been the subject of many studies on stereotypes and gender representations. The development of gender roles in animated television has frequently been examined, because cartoons are the preferred type of children's TV programming (Thompson and Zerbinos 1995). Many of these studies expressed concerns about the influence of media on the gendered socialization process of children (e.g. Remafedi 1990; Thompson and Zerbinos 1995). Remafedi (1990, 60) argues that the "realistic and varied portrayals of men and women will enhance healthy development" and "unrealistic stereotypes [...] will negatively influence young viewers". Thompson and Zerbinos (1995, 651) found that female characters are still under-represented in cartoons, that they often have lower status occupations and less knowledge than male characters. Children find cartoons appealing and will watch them regularly (Huston and Wright 1998, 10), and due to the repetitive watching of the same television programs and movies children develop gender-role stereotypes as they are "a result of their observation and imitation of relevant social models in their environment" (Albert and Porter 1988, 186). The danger in this is that "television may not only reflect contemporary standards in gender roles, but may also generate such standards", which will lead to more stereotypical role models (Hess and Grant 1983, 371).

But even though stereotyped representations of gender roles are persistent, research shows that gendered images are improving (Aubrey and Harrison 2004; Hentges and Case 2013; Thompson and Zerbinos 1995). For example, Thompson and Zerbinos' research (1995) showed that after 1980, cartoons showed a growth in female presence, and that those female characters were, "more independent, assertive, intelligent, competent, responsible and helpful" as well as "less emotional," had more leadership skills, "gave more guidance, and

showed less helplessness” (669). In other words it seems that the role models in children's cartoons have begun to change, leading to the question if Disney’s female role models are also changing?

### **Disney's Gendered Representations**

The interest in effects of film and television on children has made Disney an interesting field of study, especially concerning the representation of gender stereotypes and children’s views on gender (for example, Aubrey and Harrison 2004; Hentges and Case 2013; Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, and Tanner 2008). Disney is a major producer of children’s movies, sells DVDs of their movies worldwide, and has several *Disney Channels* with which they reach over 600 million people (Disney Channel 2011). This influence is only enhanced by the common practice of repeat viewing of Disney films at home which may increase the chance that events and images of major and minor characters influence the children watching them (Hubka, Hovdestad, and Tonmyr 2009; Robertson 1998; Robinson, 2007).

The majority of research has focused on the female Disney characters, in particular the Disney Princesses (Bell 1995; England, Descartes, and Collier-Meer 2011; Hurley 2005; Lacroix 2004; Rozario 2004). These studies focus on the representation of gender, race, and religion as well as the effect these characterizations have on young viewers (Hurley 2005). The construction of gender identity for girls is even “one of the most controversial issues in Disney's animated films” (Giroux and Pollock 2010, 104). The subject that has been the most prevalent, however, is the development of the female Disney character, with each new film that is released some see the creation of a new, modern heroine with modern goals and ambitions, while others are convinced nothing has changed (Dundes 2001).

Pocahontas, has been seen as the creation of a new heroine, as she strays from the stereotyped female character who has to be rescued by a male hero (Dundes 2001). But

Dundes (2001) also states that by the end of the film, Pocahontas stills fulfils the stereotypical female script as she says that she is needed at home. *The Little Mermaid's* Ariel, though often seen as a turning point around the 1990s, is not really a modern heroine either since she gives up her voice and true appearance to get her prince. Giroux (1994, 580) states that “although children might be delighted by Ariel's teenage rebelliousness, they are strongly positioned to believe, in the end, that desire, choice, and empowerment are closely linked to catching and loving handsome man” and that Ursula taking Ariel's voice away “is not so bad because men don't like women who talk”. Most authors agree that the gendered images presented in Disney have not held pace with the developments in society, and instead have stayed remarkably similar to Disney's first animated feature *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Towbin et al. 2008; Wiersma 2000). Disney's representation of female agency and empowerment is limited, offering its female viewers little more than a continued focus on marriage, dependence of their prince and unrealistic beauty standards that are equated with goodness (Giroux 1994; Giroux and Pollock 2001; Lacroix 2004; Rozario 2004).

But while it is important to be aware of the shortcomings of these films, it is as important to know that some films do avoid “these pitfalls, not just incidentally but purposefully and interestingly, offering young viewers, and the rest of us, important messages about alternative families and alternative heroines” (Frankel 2004, 75). The question remains if the conclusions about the stereotypical nature of Disney's female characters is still valid after another half decade of films (England, Descartes, and Collier-Meer 2011; Towbin et al. 2008; Wiersma 2000), in which several new features have been added to the Disney corpus.

This study will, therefore, focus on the development of the female characters of Disney, from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs'* Snow White to *Frozen's* Anna and Elsa, in order to answer the following research question: in what way has the female Disney character changed since the first film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, in 1937?



## Method

Since the purpose of this study was to explore and analyze the development of the female character in Disney films over time, qualitative content analysis was chosen. Qualitative content analysis is a method for uncovering the manifest and latent meaning (structures) of a text through identifying specific themes or patterns (Krippendorff 2012). Qualitative research aims to produce a well-rounded and contextual insight and understanding of how (parts of) the social world are reflected and experienced based on rich and detailed data (Mason 2002). It involves a cyclic process in which the data gathering and analysis alternate, and are guided by continuous reflection (Wester and Peters 2004). The data in our sample consisted of transcripts of all full feature Disney films (N = 23, Table 1) that incorporated an important human female character in a primary or secondary role (sequels were excluded from the sample).

<Table 1 around here>

The current study is based on the premise that a mediated narrative gives the viewer information about (gendered) cultural categories such as goals, values, life lessons, and norms that are enacted in the narrative and are represented by the characters and their actions (Wester and Weijers 2006). The narrative is constituted by the characters, since they carry the plot, and as a result the narrative is shaped by their problems, choices, and decisions, and studying these provides researchers with insight in the character's personality and goals (Wester and Weijers 2006). Starting from this premise, the twenty-three features in our sample were transcribed and then analyzed through qualitative content analysis, grounded in a systematic comparison of the characters' problems and solutions, motivators, and goals based on theoretical insights from the literature (Wester and Peters 2004). The analysis focused on certain "gendered" aspects for all the important male and female characters - who had their

own narrative cycle (i.e. push the storyline forward) - that were derived from the literature on gendered representations (e.g. Dundes 2001; Hoerrner 1996; Lacroix 2004; Rozario 2004; Thompson and Zerbinos 1995). The analysis was structured at two levels, the manifest level and the latent level.

At the manifest level the analysis first conducted the Bechdel test for each feature (i.e. categorizing the features by 1) the presence of at least two female characters; 2) that have a conversation; 3) about something other than men; Bechdel 1988, 22), and it then provided thick descriptions for each of characters from the feature that included an overview of their behavioral characteristics, personality traits and objectives. The latent level of the analysis was focused on reconstructing the latent gendered norms and values structures for each feature (Wester and Weijers 2006).

The analysis was executed and checked by the two researchers, which enabled *peer debriefing* (i.e. discussing results and developing the conceptual framework in order to increase the quality of the analysis, the conclusions and interpretations; Wester and Peters, 2004). This setup study also enabled *researcher triangulation*, since two independent researchers can compensate for single-researcher bias (Denzin 1989).

## **Results**

There are many gendered differences to be found in the Disney films released since *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, but there are also still many similarities. The amount of differences and similarities, however, depends greatly on the level of analysis. This analysis was structured to examine the twenty-three films on a manifest level, looking at the "surface" gendered representations, and on a latent level, focusing on the underlying gender messages portrayed in the films.

### **The Manifest Level**

Within the manifest level three separate categories were examined, namely the principle of the Bechdel Test (Bechdel 1988, 22), the behavioral characteristics of the female characters, and their objectives.

**The Bechdel Test.** Most Disney films analyzed pass the first test which means that the films contains at least two female characters with speaking parts. *Aladdin* is the only film that only has one female character with a speaking part. Three other films, *The Hunchback of the Notre Dame*, *Hercules*, and *Tarzan*, fail the second and the third test: two female characters having a conversation, and this conversation being about something other than men. But while the other 19 films do pass this test, they do not manage to do so because their portrayal of gender is not stereotyped. Instead many films manage to pass the test by sheer luck as they only feature conversations between women that are not related to furthering the story line and are merely fillers. For example, *Cinderella* (1950) has many of these filler conversations that focus mainly on household issues:

Drizella: "Huh, as if you care. Take that ironing and have it back in an hour.

One hour you hear."

Cinderella: "Yes, Drizella. Good morning, Anastasia."

Anastasia: "Well it's about time. Don't forget the mending. Don't be all day getting it done either."

Cinderella: "Yes, Anastasia." (Disney and Geronimi and Jackson and Luske, 1950)

The conversations between the women are often extremely gendered, like the example from *Cinderella*. The exchanges between women are often about subjects such as the household, dreams, and food, subjects which are seen as feminine and adhering to the stereotype of the

nurturing caretaker. Only a few films have storylines in which the conversation between the two female characters is essential to either the development of the plot or the development of the character. This is the case in for example *Pocahontas* (1995), *Mulan* (1998), *Lilo and Stitch* (2002), *The Incredibles* (2004), *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Brave* (2012) and *Frozen* (2013). In these films the conversations are about the importance of education and discussions about how to rescue someone. The slight shift from conversations that reaffirm stereotypes to those that show actual character development for female characters or have importance to the plot line seems to be a development of the later years. Starting with *Lilo and Stitch* (2002) conversations between women regularly take a more central role in the plotline.

The Bechdel test shows that the first films manage to pass the test by sheer luck while the later films have conversations that manage to pass the Bechdel test and show actual character development for females.

**Behavioural Characteristics.** Over time the female characters embodied many different behavioral characteristics, but only a few truly stand out: Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora. They stand out because they are the only female characters that embody passivity without any signs of activity and do not act on their own initiative. They are also the only characters, apart from Penny in *The Rescuers'* (1971), who have to be rescued by others, but do not rescue someone else in return.

*Brave's* Merida, does not stand out in behavior. Instead, the way she behaves resembles a merge of earlier characters, such as *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Rapunzel* (2011). Merida shows characteristics such as courage like *Pocahontas*, but does not have her intelligence and resourcefulness, nor her leadership abilities. Merida shows emotion like *Rapunzel* while simultaneously being much more troublesome than *Rapunzel*. Anna from

*Frozen* showcases a strong will, loyalty, bravery and resourcefulness from the start of her narrative arc and in her quest to find her sister, while she is also naive and playful in her approach of love. Elsa from *Frozen* is at first paralyzed by and fearful of the potential of her powers (ingrained in her by her parents), but grows towards self-acceptance and exploration of and creativity with her powers which are tied to her affections (especially for her sister).

Merida, Elsa and Anna show a remarkable progress from Snow White. They rescue others, are curious and interested in the world around them, they are brave and resourceful, and they believe in their own ideas. These princesses are light-years away from the dreamy, but helpless and passive princess of the 1930s.

Returning to the characteristics of activity and passivity, the characters can be placed on a continuum ranging from most passive to most active (see Figure 1). Within this continuum three groups can be formed: a completely passive group, ranging from Aurora to Cinderella, a completely active group, ranging from Eilonwy to Anna, and the characters in between that feature characteristics of both ranging from Ariel to Elsa. The results reveal that the characters can be ranked in these three groups, and surprisingly the ranking is not chronological.

<Figure 1 around here>

The completely passive group consists of the princesses Aurora, Snow White, and Cinderella, (*Sleeping Beauty*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*) with Aurora being the most passive character since apart from lacking agency she also spends most of the film asleep.

These characters are from the first three decades of Disney Films, but the characters are not ranked in a chronological order. For example, Snow White was Disney's first female character, but she is less passive than *Sleeping Beauty's* Aurora because she spends most of the film asleep while Snow White showcases more character development.

The group of active characters consists of Eilonwy, Alice, Wendy, Penny, Violet, Lilo, Nani, Helen, Merida, Tiana, Mulan, Pocahontas and Anna, (*The Black Cauldron*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, *The Rescuers*, *The Incredibles*, *Lilo and Stitch*, *Lilo and Stitch*, *The Incredibles*, *Brave*, *The Princess and the Frog*, *Mulan*, *Pocahontas* and *Frozen*). Anna is the most active character since from the onset of her narrative arc she is active and pursues her goals with fervor, dedication and heart. Pocahontas is the second most active character as she is willing to go against her own people for what she believes in and makes decisions based on thought and reason instead of impulse. The active group is, notably, the least chronological of all three as it overlaps with the other two groups featuring characters ranging from the 1950s to the 2010s.

The characters in the group in between shows characteristics of both. They are, or want to be, active characters but spend moments in passivity as well, either forced or voluntarily. The characters in this group are Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, Esmeralda, Megera, Jane, Kida, Rapunzel, Elinor, and Elsa (*The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, *The Hunchback of the Notre Dame*, *Hercules*, *Tarzan*, *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*, *Tangled*, *Brave*, *Frozen*) with Ariel as the most passive as she voluntarily and naively gives up her agency (her voice). This group ranges roughly from the 1990s to the 2010s, but in this group the order they receive is also not chronological. Even though Ariel is the earliest character in this group and the most passive, the most active in this group are Esmeralda from the *Hunchback of the Notre Dame* from 1996 and Elsa from *Frozen* which was released in 2013. Esmeralda is actively pursuing freedom and acceptance - not just for herself but for all gypsies - and she never stops expressing her beliefs, even when she is tied to the stake by Frollo; nor is she willing to compromise. *Frozen's* Elsa is a fearful character for a long period, afraid of hurting others she let fear control and dictate her confinement/imprisonment her life. Eventually she

comes to accept her powers and gains self-acceptance as well as agency. By contrast her sister Anna is much more active, outgoing and resourceful from the start.

The results show that while *Brave's* Merida is definitely an active character, she is not the most active characters of all. Tiana, Mulan, and Pocahontas (00's and 90's) are characters who actively resist being passive and also have higher goals in mind when making decisions. Anna from *Frozen* is by far the most active character, as she from the onset of her arc showcases a strong will, and an almost stubborn dedication to her goals (ranging from playfully wanting her sister to build a snowman thereby spending quality time together to saving her sister from herself when she unwittingly freezes Arendelle).

The results also reveal that while female children are all active, only adolescents female characters appear in all three categories. When leaving out the children, there does seem to be a somewhat more chronological pattern, while there is still overlap. The passive group then spans the 1930s to the 1950s. The other two groups both span the 1980s to the 2010s, with the active group having the majority of the characters from the 2000s.

Interestingly, the development from passivity to activity in the female characters does not occur in the evil female characters, who appear in seven of the twenty-three films analyzed. No matter the year of appearance, the evil female leads are all active characters who make decisions themselves. They, The Queen, Madame Tremaine, Maleficent, Medusa, Ursula, Yzma, and Gothel (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Rescuers*, *The Little Mermaid*, *The Emperor's New Groove*, *Tangled*), are active throughout the film and do not - like many 'good' female leads - undergo phases of passivity. Another thing they have in common is that they show intelligence and resourcefulness in solving their problems and chasing their goals. All 'bad' female characters are also seemingly unemotional, as they do not mind hurting others to reach their goal. As a result of agency and

these contra-stereotypical traits it seems the evil female characters are less gender stereotyped or differently stereotyped than the good characters.

However, there might be a different kind of development in the character of the evil females though it can only be seen in one character so far. The first six evil females, The Queen, Madame Tremaine, Maleficent, Medusa, Ursula, and Yzma (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Rescuers*, *The Little Mermaid*, *The Emperor's New Groove*) all show aggressiveness to reach their goals either with words or with physical violence. The seventh, Gothel (*Tangled*) does not show physical aggressiveness; instead she is a more nurturing character and takes care of Rapunzel as she grows up. This shows that *Tangled* may be the start of a more ambiguous villain or at least that Gothel is an exception to the rule.

**Objectives.** The objectives of the female characters are very varied and go through some developments. Romantic love is the most dominant motivator until the 1990s with characters such as Aurora, Snow White, and Ariel. Autonomy is also a recurrent objective of the female characters, but this only becomes prevalent in the late 1980s with Eilonwy. Interestingly, autonomy as a motivator does appear before the 1980s in the case of Alice and Wendy, which is not completely unexpected as they are also active characters. *Cinderella* (1950) also expresses a want for autonomy and freedom while *Cinderella* is a passive character and the films of the same time are more concerned with love as a sole motivator. The results do show that while autonomy becomes a more dominant motivator from the 1980s onward, romantic love as an objective is ever present. It is a motivator in *Cinderella* to films such as *Aladdin*, *Hercules*, and *Tangled*. It is not until the 1990s that other objectives appear as frequently as autonomy and love, such as family and acceptance. In *Brave* and *Frozen* the objectives range from family, autonomy to acceptance, objectives that appear frequently in the previous years as well. However, Merida and Elsa (though of a marriageable age) might



just be the first princesses for which romantic love or marriage is never an objective, and where in the case of *Frozen* the act of true love was the love between siblings instead of the classic true love's kiss.

When comparing the objectives of the female characters to those of their male counterparts in the film there are a few things that are worth mentioning. One is that of all the objectives female characters have, autonomy is the most frequent, while autonomy is never a motivator for the male characters. They do not have to fight for control over their own lives as nobody questions their want for independence. Instead, status, honor, and romantic love are the dominant objectives represented by the male characters. This shows that stereotypical ideas about motivation for men and women have not changed that much and that those specific gender roles are still present in the films, even in those of the last years.

### **The Latent Level**

The latent level of analysis focuses on gender related norms and values. The way these norms and values are perceived is influenced; by the way they are represented by a character, or in a scene and the context in which they are presented. In addition to that, it is also important to take into account if the norms and values portrayed are confirmed or negated in the narrative.

The first films show a very stereotypical portrayal of gender related norms and values. Disney's first film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* for instance portrays norms such as 'women should do housework' and 'women should not fight' as well as values such as 'beauty is the most important thing', 'beauty is good' and 'love at first sight'. These norms and values are portrayed by the female character or immediately internalized after someone has told them how women are supposed to act. Even in *Peter Pan* in which Wendy is still a young girl, these norms are shown as Wendy immediately takes control over household issues. Peter also

stereotypically assumes that Wendy is going to be a mother because she is a girl and that she will take care of the Lost Boys.

Peter: "I bring you a mother to tell you stories" (Disney, Geronimi, Jackson, and Luske 1953)

This trend of women being the representation of stereotypical gendered values continues until the 1991 release of *The Beauty and the Beast*. *The Beauty and the Beast* seems to be the first in a line of new approaches to incorporating old-fashioned norms and values. Whereas previously the female leads were the personifications of stereotyped norms and values in the narrative, the stereotypical behavioral norms are now portrayed on a different level. In films released after 1991, the secondary characters or nemeses are the ones that often mention the values and norms the female leads are supposed to conform to while the main characters often express the desire to move away from the stereotype.

*The Beauty and the Beast* is the first clear example of this development. While Belle is very outspoken about wanting to flee the "poor provincial town" she lives in, she is pulled back in that society by characters such as Gaston who tells her she is not supposed to want freedom, instead she is supposed to dream about being his wife and massaging his feet. This is also true for films later in the 1990s such as *Mulan* in which Mulan is still trying to figure out who she is while her mother and the rest of society keep telling her she is supposed to conform to what men want, "girls with good taste / calm / obedient / who work fast-paced / with good breeding / and a tiny waist" (Coats, Bancroft, and Cook 1998). This trend is still ongoing, as it is present in *Brave* as well. Merida is outspoken about wanting to grow up at her own pace and is constantly corrected by her mother who believes Merida should conform to tradition. This development shows that while the female leads may appear to be forward

thinking and representations of modern women, that the traditional stereotypes about female and male roles in society are still incorporated in the narrative.

The results do show that the way in which the stereotyped norms and values are reinforced is changing. In *The Beauty and the Beast*, Belle still ends up married to the Beast and spends most of the film as a prisoner in a castle and Mulan only manages to save her family honor because she saved China. They still need to conform to rules set by society or do something exceptional that transcends traditions as in *Mulan*. In contrast, Merida manages to change her mother's view on her situation, giving Merida the time to grow up at her own pace and without being forced to marry or conform to other traditions. And in *Frozen* Elsa urges Anna to take her time before plunging into marriage. This last development was not yet present in *The Princess and the Frog* or *Tangled*. Tiana was also able to realize her own dream of opening a restaurant, but had to realize her mother's dream for her as well as she married Naveen and thus, conformed to the stereotype that girls should marry instead of have a career. Rapunzel also shows that while girls are allowed to be resourceful and explore the world, they are also supposed to settle down and to 'tame' the man they fall in love with so he will settle down as well.

### **Discussion**

This study has explored the representations of gender in Disney films over time, as it is important to know what children are being taught from the repeat viewings of the animated features (Hubka, Hovdestad, and Tonmyr 2009). What has become clear is that Disney's female characters have undergone a transition over time. The main characters have become more autonomous and although romantic love has been present in every film until *Brave*, it seems to be losing its status as most important motivator to autonomy, independence and other types of love. The female characters have also gained more agency and have become

more active, actually making decisions that influence the progression of the storyline. While many Disney films have in the past passed the Bechdel test by sheer luck, female characters now appear more and often have meaningful conversations with each other. So on the surface it seems that the position of female characters in Disney has changed for the better since findings reported by for example Wiersma (2000) and Towbin et al. (2008).

Though the female characters seem to have changed tremendously since *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), the evil female characters continue to be the least stereotypical of all. They are active, make their own decisions, are strong, and have power, but these features that connote agency appear almost exclusively in the evil female characters. Which seems to suggest that they conform to another female stereotype, namely that of the bitch (Deaux, Winton, Crowley and Lewis 1985; Shubart 2007). It is curious that these personality traits are characterized as being bad, while - like Dyer (1999) has stated - images seen in films can be internalized by children and influence their thoughts on gender representations. The portrayal of the strong, but evil woman might lead female children to believe that being strong and independent is equated with badness, i.e. that not conforming to the “good” stereotype set for women is bad.

On the latent level, however, the norms and values portrayed by Disney have not changed as much as the analysis of the lead female characters on the manifest level would suggest. These stereotyped gendered norms and values have just shifted from main characters to secondary characters and appear in their behavior and songs. This way, while hidden in secondary characters, the messages are still absorbed by the audience.

However, it seems that the latest princess films, while still featuring characters focused on conforming, repressing and adapting, the main character fights conformity and gains (self)acceptance. Merida manages to convince her mother and the leaders of the other clans

that the practices of her society are old fashioned and that she should be free to make her own decisions. Merida, Anna and Elsa as a characters might not be revolutionary as critics implied (Lighezzolo 2014; Munkittrick 2012; Shoard 2011; Weekend 2014), they were born in high society, but with a want to escape the confines of that society brings - like Jasmine (*Aladdin* 1992), wants to explore the world just like Jane (*Tarzan* 1999) and Rapunzel (*Tangled* 2011) and like Pocahontas (*Pocahontas* 1995) they stray from the typical heroine that is rescued by a male (Dundes 2001). But the message that Merida, Anna and Elsa, as a characters and in their relationships with other characters, convey might just be that - revolutionary. *Brave* and *Frozen* just might be the first of a new set of films that show characters, and especially female characters, who do not need to be strong or invincible to achieve autonomy and independence. A good female character that shows society can be shaped by the needs of its people instead of forcing those people to conform to gendered perceptions of the past and a female character that redefines true love's powerful potential when invoked as a sisterly pact.

As with all projects, this study does have its limitations, with only the expectancy of a new trend in Disney films and only the two in that new trend analyzed it cannot offer a definite prediction on future films. Further research should include the newest Disney features such as *Monoa* (2018), which is supposed to introduce the next Disney princess, to see if it follows the trend set by *Brave* and *Frozen*. Another interesting avenue for further research is a quantitative analysis of the conforming gendered pressures exerted by secondary characters to see if those pressures decline in Disney features over time. Lastly, these analyses offer no insight in how children actually engage with these often gender stereotyped narratives. Studies by for example Wohlwend (2012) and Änggård (2005) showcase blurring and negotiation of gender stereotypes in children's play as well as reaffirmation of gender stereotyped schemas. New research should endeavor to untangle how these gendered scripts are consumed by children and how the potentially affect their gender schemas.

Remafedi (1990) argued, stereotyped representations of women can influence children negatively and our results seem to suggest that Disney is actively trying to make their characters more aspirational to their viewers. While not all characters have developed as much as others - good female characters versus the evil female characters - it does seem that the representation of female characters is moving in the right direction. The new female characters are less and less stereotypical, this does not mean they do not have flaws - but it is their flaws that make them believable and aspirational role models for young viewers.

## References

- Albert, Alexa A., and Judith R. Porter. 1988. "Children's Gender-Role Stereotypes: A Sociological Investigation of Psychological Models." *Sociological Forum* 3 (2): 184-210. doi: 10.1007/BF01115290
- Änggård, Eva. 2005. "Barbie princesses and dinosaur dragons: narration as a way of doing gender." *Gender and Education* 17 (5): 539-553, doi: 10.1080/09540250500192777
- Aubrey, Jennifer Stevens, and Kristen Harrison. 2004. "The gender-role content of children's favorite television programs and its links to their gender-related perceptions." *Media Psychology* 6: 111 – 146, doi:10.1207/s1532785xmep0602\_1.
- Bandura, Albert. 2002. "Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication." In *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research 2nd edition*, edited by Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillman, 121-153. Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates.
- Bartyzel, Monika. 2013. "Girls on Film: The real problem with the Disney Princess brand." *The Week*, May 17. <http://theweek.com/article/index/244284/girls-on-film-the-real-problem-with-the-disney-princess-brand>
- Bechdel, Alison. 1988. *The rule: More dykes to watch out for*. New York: Firebrand Books.
- Bell, Elizabeth. 1995. "Somatexts at the Disney Shop." In *From Mouse to Mermaid: the Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, edited by Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells, 107-124. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Benshoff, Harry M, and Sean Griffin. 2004. *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

- Callister, Mark A, Tom Robinson, and Bradley R. Clark. 2007. "Media Portrayals of the Family in Children's Television Programming during the 2005-2006 season in the US." *Journal of Children and Media* 1 (2): 142-161, doi: 10.1080/17482790701339142
- Child, Ben. 2013. "Brave Director Criticises Disney's 'Sexualised' Princess Merida Redesign." *The Guardian*, May 13. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/may/13/brave-director-criticises-sexualised-merida-redesign>
- Coats, Pam (Producer), Bancroft, Tony, and Cook, Barry (Directors). 1998. *Mulan* [Motion Picture]. The United States: Walt Disney Studios.
- Deaux, K, Ward Winton, Maureen Crowley, and Laurie L. Lewis. 1985. Level of categorization and content of gender stereotypes. *Social Cognition* 2, 145-167.
- Denzin, Norman K. 1989. *Interpretive biography*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Disney Channel's World Wide Fact Sheet. 2011. *Disney Channel Media Net*. from [http://www.disneychannelmedianet.com/include\\_file/facts/disneychannelfacts.pdf](http://www.disneychannelmedianet.com/include_file/facts/disneychannelfacts.pdf)
- Disney, Walt (Producer), Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, and Hamilton Luske (Directors). 1950. *Cinderella* [Motion Picture]. The United States: Walt Disney Studios.
- Disney, Walt (Producer), Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, and Hamilton Luske (Directors). (1953). *Peter Pan* [Motion Picture]. The United States: Walt Disney Studios.
- Do Rozario, Rebecca-Anne C. 2004. "The Princess and the Magic Kingdom: Beyond Nostalgia, the Function of the Disney Princess." *Women's Studies in Communication*, 27(1), 34-59.



- Dundes, Lauren. 2001. "Disney's Modern Heroine Pocahontas: Revealing Age-Old Gender Stereotypes and Role Discontinuity under a Façade of Liberation." *The Social Science Journal* 38 (3): 353-366. doi: 10.1016/S0362-3319(01)00137-9
- Dyer, Richard. (1999). The Role of Stereotypes. In *Media Studies: A Reader*, edited by Paul Marris and Sue Thornham, 245-251. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- England, Dawn Elizabeth, Lara Descartes, and Melissa A. Collier-Meek. 2011. "Gender Role Portrayal and the Disney Princesses." *Sex Roles* 64: 555-567. doi: 10.1007/s11199-011-9930-7
- Frankel, L. (2004). "Finding Nemo." *Film and History*, 34(1), 75-6.
- Gerbner, Georg, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, Nancy Signorielli, and James Shanahan. 2002. Growing Up with Television: Cultivation Processes . In *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research, 2nd edition*, edited by Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillman, 43-67. Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates.
- Giroux, Henry A. 1994. "Animating Youth: The Disneyfication of Children's Literature." *Socialist Review* 94 (3): 65-79.
- Giroux, Henry A. 2011. *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Hankin, Laura. 2012. "Brave vs Finding Nemo: Pixar Is Still Stuck On Traditional Gender Stereotypes." <http://mic.com/articles/10192/brave-vs-finding-nemo-pixar-is-still-stuck-on-traditional-gender-stereotypes>
- Hentges, Beth, and Kim Case. 2013. "Gender Representations on Disney Channel,

- Cartoon Network, and Nickelodeon Broadcasts in the United States.” *Journal of Children and Media* 7(3): 319-333, doi: 10.1080/17482798.2012.729150
- Hess, Donna J, and Geoffrey W. Grant. 1983. “Prime-Time Television and Gender-Role Behavior.” *Teaching Sociology* 10 (3): 371-88.
- Hoerrner, Keisha L. 1996. “Gender roles in Disney films: Analyzing behaviors from Snow White to Simba.” *Women ’s Studies in Communication* 19: 213–228.
- Hubka, David, Wendy Hovdestad, and Lil Tonmyr. 2009. “Child Maltreatment in Disney Animated Feature Films: 1937-2006.” *The Social Science Journal* 46: 427-441. doi: 10.1016/j.soscij.2009.03.001
- Hurley, Dorothy L. 2005. “Seeing White: Children of Color and the Disney Fairy Tale Princess.” *Journal of Negro Education* 74 (3): 221-232.
- Huston, Aletha C, and John C. Wright. 1998. “Television and the Informational and Educational Needs of Children.” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 557: 9-23.
- Krippendorff, Klaus. 2012. *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Lacroix, Celeste. 2004. “Images of Animated Others: The Orientalization of Disney's Cartoon Heroines From The Little Mermaid to The Hunchback of the Notre Dame.” *Popular Communication: The International Journal of Media and Culture* 2 (4): 213-229. doi: 10.1207/s15405710pc0204\_2
- Langmack, Lucy. 2014. “Disney continues to promote gender stereotypes in ‘Frozen’”  
<http://sahsponyexpress.com/disney-continues-to-promote-gender-stereotypes-in-frozen/>

- Lighezollo, Emily. 2014. "Disney no longer 'Frozen' in antiquated gender stereotypes." *The Artifice*, February 3. <http://the-artifice.com/disney-gender-stereotypes/>
- Linn, Susan. 2008. *The Case for Make Believe: Saving Play in a Commercialized World*. New York: New Press
- Mason, Jennifer. 2002. *Qualitative researching* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London: Sage.
- McGhee, Paul E, and Terry Frueh. 1980. "Television Viewing and the Learning of Sex-Role Stereotypes." *Sex Roles* 6 (2): 179-188. doi: 10.1007/BF00287341
- Messner, Michael A. 2000. "Barbie Girls versus Sea Monsters: Children Constructing Gender." *Gender and Society* 14 (6): 765-784. doi: 10.1177/089124300014006004
- Morgan, Michael. 2007. "What Do Young People Learn About the World from Watching Television." In *20 Questions about Youth & the Media*, edited by Sharon R. Mazzarella, 153-166. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing Inc.
- Munkittrick, Kyle. 2012. "Breaking the 'Disney Princess' Tradition - Why the Film 'Brave' is a Big Deal." *Institute for Emerging Ethics & Technologies*, June 28. <http://www.popbioethics.com/2012/06/why-brave-is-a-big-deal/>
- O'Bryant, Shirley, and [Charles R. Corder-Bolz](#). 1978. "The effects of television on children's stereotyping of women's work roles." *Journal of vocational behavior* 12 (2): 233-244. doi: 10.1016/0001-8791(78)90038-6
- Peppers, Margot. 2013. "Merida gets another make-over as Target releases Barbie-like doll that looks nothing like the Brave princess." *Daily Mail Online*, May 20. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2327875/Merida-gets-ANOTHER-make-Target-releases-Barbie-like-doll-looks-like-Brave-princess.html>

- Prinsloo, Jeanne. 1996. "Where Are the Women?" *Agenda* 31: 40-49. doi:  
10.1080/10130950.1996.9675564
- Remafedi, Gary. 1990. "Study Group Report on the Impact of Television Portrayals of Gender Roles on Youth." *Journal of Adolescent Health Care* 11: 59-61. doi:  
10.1016/0197-0070(90)90130-T
- Robertson, Gail. 1998. "Snowy Whitey?" *Canadian dimensions* 32, 42-44.
- Robinson, Tom, Mark Callister, Dawn Magoffin, and Jennifer Moore. 2007. "The portrayal of older characters in Disney animated films." *Journal of Aging Studies* 21, 203-213. doi: 10.1016/j.jaging.2006.10.001
- Samakow, Jessica. 2013. "Merida From 'Brave' Gets An Unnecessary Makeover, Sparks Change.org Petition." *Huffington Post*, August 5.  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/08/merida-brave-makeover\\_n\\_3238223.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/08/merida-brave-makeover_n_3238223.html)
- Shoard, Catherine. 2011. "No Knight Required: in a First for Disney, a Female Warrior Fronts Brave, its Latest Animation." *The Guardian*, December 1.  
<http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/dec/01/pixar-female-fronts-brave>
- Shubart, Rikke. 2007. *Super bitches and action babes: The female hero in popular cinema, 1970-2006*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company
- Signorielli, Nancy, and Margaret Lears. 1992. "Children, Television, and Conceptions about Chores: Attitudes and Behaviors." *Sex Roles* 27: 157-170. doi: 10.1007/BF00290015
- Thompson, Theresa L, and Eugenia Zerbinos. 1995. "Gender Roles in Animated Cartoons: Has the Picture Changed in 20 Years?" *Sex Roles* 32 (9/10): 651-673.

Towbin, Mia Adessa, Shelley A. Haddock, Toni Schindler Zimmerman, Lori K. Lund, and Litsa Renee Tanner. 2008. "Images of Gender, Race, Age, and Sexual Orientation in Disney Feature-Length Animated Films." *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 15(4): 19-44.

Wagner-Ott, Anna. 2002. "Analysis of Gender Identity Through Doll and Action Figure Politics in Art Education." *Studies in Art Education* 43(3): 246-263. doi: 10.2307/1321088

Weekend, Anna Brain. 2014. "Forget waiting for Prince Charming, modern Princesses are breaking gender stereotypes." *Herald Sun*, April 5.  
<http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/forget-waiting-for-prince-charming-modern-princesses-are-breaking-gender-stereotypes/story-fni0fiyv-1226874621619>

Wester, Fred, and Vincent Peters. 2004. *Kwalitatieve analyse: Uitgangspunten en procedures* [*Qualitative analysis: Basic assumptions and procedures*]. Bussum: Coutinho.

Wester, Fred, and Addy Weijers. 2006. "Narratieve analyse en transcriptie; culturele thema's in de sitcom" [Narrative Analysis and transcription; cultural themes in the sitcom]. In *Inhoudsanalyse: Theorie en praktijk* [*Content Analysis: Theory & Practice*], edited by Fred Wester, 161-189. Deventer: Kluwer B.V.

Wiersma, Beth A. 2000. *The Gendered World of Disney: A Content Analysis of Gender Themes in Full-length Animated Disney Feature Films*. Brookings: South Dakota State University.

Wohlwend, Karen E. 2012. The boys who would be princesses: playing with gender identity intertexts in Disney Princess transmedia. *Gender and Education* 24 (6): 593-610. doi: 10.1080/09540253.2012.674495

Table 1: *Overview of the sample*

<b>Year of Release</b>	<b>Title of Feature</b>	<b>Primary Female Characters</b>	<b>Secondary Female Characters</b>
1937	Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs	Snow White	"Stepmother"  Lady Tremaine
1950	Cinderella	Cinderella	Anastasia  Drizella
1951	Alice in Wonderland	Alice	
1953	Peter Pan		Wendy  Tinkerbell
1959	Sleeping Beauty	Aurora	Malificent
1971	The Rescuers		Penny  Medusa
1985	The Black Cauldron		Eilonwy
1989	The Little Mermaid	Ariel	Ursula
1991	Beauty and the Beast	Belle	
1992	Aladdin		Jasmine
1995	Pocahontas	Pocahontas	
1996	The Hunchback of the Notre Dame		Esmeralda
1997	Hercules		Meg
1998	Mulan	Mulan	

---

1999	Tarzan		Jane
2000	The Emperor's New Groove		Izma
2001	Atlantis: The Lost Empire		Kida
2002	Lilo & Stitch	Lilo	Nani
2004	The Incredibles	Helen	
		Violet	
2009	The Princess and the Frog	Tiana	
2010	Tangled	Rapunzel	Gothel
2012	Brave	Merida	Elinor
2013	Frozen	Elsa	
		Anna	

---

Figure 1: Differentiation of characters along passive – active continuum

