

## The Making of a Disney Princess



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### ABSTRACT

*Many girls grow up wanting to be the princess they see on their favorite Disney film. What we do not realize is that these princess films create a rhetorical vision that can be harmful to the way young girls of color perceive the concept of self-identity. Through fantasy theme analysis, the present researcher analyzed the traditional Disney princess film in attempt to view the complications caused by the element of race. Boreman's theory of fantasy theme analysis enabled the researcher to thoroughly analyze all of the Disney princess films and contribute knowledge using a different perspective than previously applied when dealing with this subject.*

As a child, I always knew that I wanted to be a princess. I wanted to travel to a different world, have a beautiful dress for every day of the week, and most of all, I wanted to meet my Prince Charming. I loved fairy tales, and Cinderella was my favorite story and my favorite character of them all because she was so beautiful and elegant. For Halloween one year I begged and pleaded with my mother to get me the Cinderella costume worn by the princess in the movie *Cinderella* (1950) that all the girls in my class would have, because just like them, I wanted to feel like a princess for the night. I had butterflies in my stomach that entire day anticipating that evening when I could finally be the princess I had seen on the movie. After getting dressed, I remember looking into the mirror and making a startling discovery. When comparing myself to the princess I saw in the film, I found few similarities and many differences. For one, Disney's *Cinderella* was white with long blonde hair, and I was black with short, curly black hair; in that moment, I felt inferior because I knew I could never be like the "real" Cinderella.

I was not the only little girl comparing herself to the Disney characters. Hurley (2005) stated, "Through the ages, children have formed mental images of the princess and other characters depicted in these tales from their representation in the written text as well as in the illustrations that have often accompanied those texts." Though I formed a mental image of Cinderella

in which she could have been black with short, curly black hair, like me, the Disney reference changed forever my mental image of how a princess should look. In the movie, Cinderella was white, and all of the other Disney princesses were white as well; none of the princesses I saw in my favorite films looked like me. Slowly, the imagery solidified and the message became more concrete: princesses are white, and if you are not white, then you cannot be a real princess. These Disney representations of what a girl should look like and how she should act, if she wants to be a princess, stay with many girls (Hurley 2005). Girls use these visual and mediated illustrations of “princess-ness” to understand their place in the world. Disney’s earliest princess films, or the films that capitalized women as main characters even if she was not a member of a royal family, including *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), were not original Disney storylines, but were actually based on European fairy tales. According to Bell (1995), Snow White was based on a story that Walt Disney took from the Grimm Brothers and changed to make it “peculiarly American.” The European origin of the stories, even after Disney’s edits, provides a possible explanation for the European appearance of those films’ main characters.

After 30 years of relatively sparse production since *Sleeping Beauty*, Disney crowned itself King of the Princess Film Mountain once again with *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Mulan* (1998), and *The Princess and The Frog* (2009). The obvious difference between the “classic” princesses (Snow White, Cinderella, and *Sleeping Beauty*) and the “new” princesses (Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*, Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*, Jasmine from *Aladdin*, Pocahontas, Mulan, and Tiana from *The Princess and The Frog*) is that the new princesses were much more diverse in their appearance than their classic sisters. With the more diverse princesses, young girls of different ethnic backgrounds could finally identify with their favorite beloved Disney princesses because they could actually see the physical and cultural characteristics they shared, but the addition still did not erase some of the impressions already bestowed upon little girls of color by the traditional white Disney princesses. This study aims to explore the relationship between the inclusion of the element of race/ethnicity and the creation of the powerful message told by the Disney movie princesses as a whole to all the little girls who are paying very close attention.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

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Disney is one of the biggest powerhouses in the media world. As a company, they hold a controlling interest in 20 television stations, ownership of over 21 radio stations, three music studios, the popular and powerful ABC television

network, and five motion picture studios (Giroux 1999). It is safe to say that with this much control over the media, Disney is very influential to those who partake in the culture. As of April 3, 2010, Disney Media Network grossed 3.8 billion dollars, the Disney parks and resorts grossed 2.4 billion dollars, Disney Studio Entertainment grossed 1.5 billion dollars, Disney consumer products (including Disney-themed toys and merchandise) grossed 596 million dollars, and Disney interactive media grossed 155 million dollars (*Disney Annual Report*, Glendale CA: Walt Disney 2009). With all of the media outlets Disney has readily available, the relatively new Disney “princess package,” which refers to the way Disney markets the princesses, has no problem getting the marketing exposure it needs. The package consists of all the Disney princess movies, and though these films are very popular, there has also been a heightened concern for the negative portrayals of women and the emphasis being placed on gender roles.

### **Gender and the Disney Princess**

Current research suggests that Walt Disney may have had a sexist view of women, as evidenced by some of his films. The roles he chose to represent women were attributed to the patriarchal beliefs of the 1940s and the roles he believed women should play in society (O'Brien 1996). The problem that is present, however, is that some of the beliefs that were prominent in the 1940s were outdated by the 1990s and in the new millennium when Disney's classic movies were re-released. The Disney company encountered a lot of criticism about the messages its animated movies send, and one of the more important concerns referenced the portrayal of the female characters in these films (Kincheloe and Steinberg 1997). Ariel of *The Little Mermaid*, for example, is portrayed as a rebellious teenager whose only hope is to be able to see what life on land is like. She often disobeys her father, keeping the audience entertained with her adventures. Ariel exchanges her voice for a pair of legs so that she can pursue Prince Eric. The message sent to the young women watching this movie is that love and submission are most important in life than self, even if it means concealing or letting go of a gift or talent you may possess to obtain it. The same message was sent through the choices Ariel has to make in *The Little Mermaid* regarding love and her former life, Disney introduces the nature of female choice in a way that children are able to understand (Kincheloe and Steinberg 1997). Research also suggests that through the gender roles displayed by Disney films, men's control and abuse of women is romanticized (Tanner et al. 2003). Women do encounter these situations and decisions on a daily basis, but is it fair to expose girls to this notion at such a young, impressionable age? An older example was in the movie *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), in which princess Aurora's only dream is to fall in love, and when she falls into a deep sleep, only a kiss from the handsome

prince can awaken her. As with Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*, the message being sent to the audience is that, for a woman, love is most important and without it she cannot be complete. Along with these potentially harmful messages being sent to young girls about gender, race is also a concern.

### **Race and the Disney Princess**

For a long time, Disney films struggled to connect with their audience of color. Prior to *Aladdin* (1992), girls of color had a harder time identifying with the ideal princess marketed by Disney. Hurley (2005) states that some forms of children's literature and other forms of print and electronic media (including films) play a role "in providing visual images to children that give them cultural information about themselves, others, and the relative status of group membership." Thus, young viewers of color could gain cultural information about themselves and about their place in society by viewing these Disney films. Young female viewers of color could think that if Disney does not consider them important enough to represent on screen, then they must not be that important. Lack of representation attacks the self-worth of children, causing them to have a negative outlook on themselves and on people who look like them, and that is not fair (Hurley 2005).

Many scholars (Haddock 2004; Brode 2005; Hurley 2005) have studied the roles that race and gender play in Disney films, but there has not been much discussion on the effect of race on what Bormann (1972) calls the "rhetorical vision" created by stories and storytelling. The arrival of *The Princess and the Frog* in 2009 created an interest in the analysis and discussion about race, and the identification of young girls and the Disney princesses they see in films. Disney has created separate fantasy themes for its white princesses and its princesses of color, and the present research employs fantasy theme analysis to reveal the process by which these separate themes were constructed, and the implications that this separation has on media, race and ethnicity, gender, and society in general. Current research suggests that the portrayal of female characters in Disney movies influences children's beliefs about gender roles and stereotypes, along with how women should conduct themselves in society. Research also suggests that when children are not able to identify with the images they see in books and on television, they will struggle with self-worth later on in life (Hurley 2005). What scholars have yet to do is approach the element of race from a fantasy theme analysis perspective, and the present research explores how the race factor complicates the traditional princess fantasy theme using this method.

## METHODOLOGY

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According to Bormann (1972), a “fantasy theme” is a dramatic message in which the characters “enact an incident or series of incidents in a setting somewhere other than the here-and-now of the people involved in the communication episode. Fantasy themes are often narratives about living people or historic personages or about an envisioned future.” Bormann developed an analysis method for these fantasy themes as a way to examine how groups of people use stories or dramas to come to shared understandings about the way the world is and how it should be (Stoner and Perkins 2008). Fantasy theme analysis is appropriate for the study of Disney princess films because it allows for an audience-centered perspective. It also allows for the exploration of how Disney movies shape the way young people, especially young girls, view the world. According to Stoner and Perkins (2008), Bormann explained that,

*The process of fantasy theme analysis includes becoming familiar with the text, looking for patterns among the dramatic elements of the characters, reconstructing the rhetorical vision from the representative fantasy chains, and asking probing questions about the patterns of the fantasy themes that are discovered.*

Many scholars, including Towbin (2004) and Kincheloe (1997), have conducted feminist and racial analyses on Disney movies, but none have considered those topic areas through the lens of fantasy theme analysis.

## FINDINGS

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The traditional definition of a princess would probably include the mention of a daughter of a king, but Disney’s definition is a little different. Disney’s princess films are the films with plots with a heavy focus on female characters instead of, or in addition to, male main characters. Disney markets these movies as the “princess package.” So, in these films, even if the females are not the main characters (as is the case with Princess Jasmine in *Aladdin*), they are still known in the Disney world as princesses. The Disney films featuring male main characters, even those featuring a male who could possibly be considered a prince (such as *The Sword in the Stone* in 1963, *The Jungle Book* in 1967, *The Lion King* in 1994, *Hercules* in 1997, or *The Emperor’s New Groove* in 2000) are not grouped together and marketed as a “prince package,” nor are these films referred to as Disney prince movies. The linking of Disney films featuring female main characters is significant and unique.

Many of the earlier versions of Disney princess films were based on literary fairy tales and, eventually, these versions became what most people know as

the only version of the story (Bell 1995). Through *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), Disney created the iconic image of a princess in a fairy tale and the company achieved much success in doing so.

In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, the princesses encountered adversity brought upon them by evil older female counterparts, and it was up to a prince to rescue them, thus producing the traditional princess theme that suggests a girl can be a main character as long as there is a man present to save her. Some years later, Disney added more princesses to the line-up with *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), giving the audience a more updated storyline than those in the earlier films. *The Little Mermaid* (1989) took place in an underwater kingdom, which was a unique princess environment. In the years following the release of *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), the films *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), and *Mulan* (1998) entered the princess circuit. These three films were the first to depict ethnic Disney princesses, and with these films the more traditional princess theme started to slowly fade. No longer were these princesses victims of their circumstances; they were now at the forefront of change in their given stories. Pocahontas ended a war and saved the life of her love interest. In *Aladdin* (1992), Jasmine was instrumental in the defeat of the movie's villain, and Mulan took on the responsibility of helping to defend China and protect her father's legacy. In the most recent Disney princess film, *The Princess and The Frog* (2009), the main character, Tiana, does not become a princess until the end of the film. Prior to the ending, she was portrayed as a hard worker whose only desire was to own a restaurant; after turning into a frog during the movie, she was also responsible for the demise of the villain in her story. The modern Disney princesses are active and heroic and, interestingly, are also increasingly diverse in their appearance. The last four Disney princesses representing racial/ethnic minority groups.

### **Shared Characteristics**

When examining the princesses as a whole (classic and modern, white and ethnic), they all have certain shared characteristics. Each princess is portrayed as young, energetic, attractive, and relatable. Each princess also gives off a certain amount of sex appeal that attracts her given love interest, and she is often admired or envied by her female counterparts. In *Cinderella* (1950), Cinderella's stepmother and stepsisters were jealous of her beauty, while Pocahontas was admired for her beauty and the opportunities she was afforded because her father was the head chief of their village. Disney wants these princesses to be young and pretty for a reason. In U.S. society, beauty is highly valued, and the audience targeted by these movies is full of young

girls who also want to be beautiful. The more relatable the characters are, the more the audience will become attracted (if not addicted) to these films, giving Disney their loyalty and ensuring a lucrative future for the company. In *The Princess and The Frog* (2009), when Tiana was denied her restaurant because she did not have enough money, the audience understands and sympathizes with her disappointment. In some instances, the audience even shares the same envisioned future as the characters. Pocahontas wanted to be able to interact with the colonists peacefully and to enjoy the love of her life openly. The general nature of that story ensures that the audience can share emotions with the princess.

Another Disney princess similarity is the struggle against a villain. For some of the princesses, the villain is a family member who is cruel to the princess; for others, the villain is someone who is a threat to everyone in the movie. Aurora, in *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), had to struggle with the wicked fairy Maleficent, who placed a spell only on Aurora, but Mulan had to deal with the evil Shan Yu, who was a threat to the entire country.

### **Differences in Princess Representations**

The Disney princesses share these similarities and more, but there are obvious differences between them as well. When contrasting the white Disney princess movies and the ethnic Disney princess movies, the white Disney princesses are always praised for their gifts and especially for their beauty. In *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), and *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), each princess is blessed with the gift of song. Although most Disney princesses sing at least one song, the white Disney princesses are the only ones who are praised for their voices by the rest of the characters in the movie. For example, Ariel of *The Little Mermaid* (1989) was known throughout her father's kingdom for her magical singing voice, and it was envied by the movie's villain, Ursula. Conversely, the ethnic Disney princesses receive praise for being hardworking, dedicated, and courageous, attributes that are frowned upon by the rest of the characters in their narratives. In *The Princess and The Frog* (2009), Tiana works a number of jobs to try to buy her restaurant, but the people around her think she works too hard and they deride her for trying to take on all of that responsibility. *Mulan* (1998) takes place in the middle of a war; because her father is disabled, Mulan signs up to fight in her father's place by posing as a man. When the army finds out Mulan is a woman, they ostracize her, and instead of recognizing her honorable heroic deed, they send her home. Fantasy theme analysis allows for the identification of the patterns in the dramatic elements of these stories (including characterization and storyline), and

reveals distinct differences and overt similarities between the fantasy theme of the traditional and ethnic Disney princesses.

Perhaps the most significant difference in fantasy theme exists in the dramatic element of setting. When observing the settings of the Disney princess films, there is a big contrast between the white and ethnic princesses. In the white Disney princess films, the setting always takes place in an unknown forest, town, or unrecognizable location, while the ethnic Disney princess films almost always take place in an easily identifiable location. *Mulan* is set in China, *Pocahontas* is based on a true story and a real place in North America, and *The Princess and The Frog* takes place in New Orleans, but *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is set in an unknown forest, and *Beauty and the Beast* takes place in an unrecognizable town. The recognizable cultural aspect personalizes the ethnic characters, while simultaneously facilitating the creation of negative stereotypes about them.

Stereotyping the white Disney princesses based on their environments becomes difficult if not impossible, because the settings are unrecognizable and the audience cannot associate any characteristics with them. By contrast, it is very easy to associate characteristics with the ethnic Disney princesses just based on the setting. In *Aladdin*, the setting is vaguely Middle Eastern, complete with people wearing turbans, riding camels, and having thick beards and dark skin. The release date for *Aladdin* pre-dates September 11, 2001, and the War on Terror, but since Disney films become more valuable with age thanks to the Disney “vault” (a term used to describe the discontinuation and re-release of Disney movies), additional meanings can be attached to current viewings of the film. Surely, negative stereotypes about the Middle East existed before the release of *Aladdin* (1992), and some of those stereotypes were evident in the film through the images of the characters and their behaviors (Lent 1999; Tehranian 2009; Hasan 2002). Another example is in *The Princess and The Frog* (2009), which is situated in New Orleans, where almost all the characters there have thick southern accents, dance in the streets, practice voodoo, and use broken English. The racism that is present through these films exists because there are no complex (i.e., non-stereotypical) African American characters present to counteract those stereotypes (Pinsky 2004). The stereotypes in each of the ethnic Disney princess movies are ones that already surround each of the groups of people represented by the characters, and by only applying recognizable settings to ethnic films, Disney brings more attention to those stereotypes.

### **Fantasy Themes at Work**

Fantasy themes work to attract the unconverted audience to the traditional Disney princess films by allowing the audience to sympathize with the

story of the princess. Since most people have had to overcome adversity at one point in their lives, when the characters go through their trials and tribulations, the audience relates to and feels the emotions that Disney wants to invoke.

The animated delivery of these films is also important to the creation of the fantasy theme because the target audience is comprised of children. Children pay attention to entertainment and, in this case, through the cartoons and musical selections within the movies, Disney can fully capture a child's attention. Often, music can serve as a reminder or mechanism that allows the audience member to retrieve messages or personal memories (Walker and Herrmann 2005). So, by including musical numbers in each princess film, Disney ensures that its impressionable and eager young audience members will remember the messages in a powerful and lasting way. Along with music, major transitions such as commercials, applause, sound effects, and animation tend to evoke children's attention (Berger et al. 2009). Through this type of delivery, Disney can be reassured that kids will grasp and recall whatever message Disney sends, and as mentioned previously, animated delivery and a musical-genre focus are similarities across the Disney princess films.

## DISCUSSION

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The rhetorical vision (shared vision of the audience) that traditional or classic Disney princess movies impose on young girls is that all princesses are beautiful, young, white women who live in exotic and unrecognizable lands. This placement contributes to the dreamy effect this rhetorical vision creates. When parts of the story are less real, they create a state of fantasy bliss. Stated simply, life in the unrecognizable "Far Far Away" *must* be better than the reality of life in New Orleans, China, the Middle East, or any other recognizable location. Far Far Away also has the benefits of no history, no secrets, and no shameful past. *The Princess and the Frog*, while not set in post-Katrina New Orleans, still speaks to an audience that remembers the devastation that a hurricane can cause. The separation between the traditionally white princess fantasy theme and the ethnic princess fantasy theme in the pattern of settings only solidifies the rhetorical vision (how the world is and how it should be).

The circumstances faced by the princesses represent another area of difference between the traditional and ethnic Disney princess fantasy themes. The traditional princess is almost always held captive by her circumstances, but in the end, a handsome white prince is always there to rescue her and they live happily ever after. In the ethnic Disney princess fantasy theme, the princess has a goal to reach or a circumstance to overcome and after much

hard work, she eventually proves to be victorious in her efforts and then she gets her version of Prince Charming. This is the dream Disney feeds young girls if they aspire to be a princess and, after years and years of consuming offerings from the Disney empire, what young girl would *not* aspire to be a princess? Disney princess films shape how girls view themselves and the world around them. Ward (2002) states that the center of Disney's power begins with children who cannot resist Disney products. These children learn life lessons and build "dreamscapes" out of the raw Disney material (Ward 2002). In short, "Children grow into adults, who are fond of Disney because it shaped the way they think about the world" (Ward 2002). Thus, little girls who watch Disney princess films can grow up to be women who experience life and understand the world based on a rhetorical vision created by Disney.

Though the rhetorical vision regarding the Disney princess may be the same for all who share it, the people sharing this vision are not the same. There is a difference between the way a white girl may understand this rhetorical vision of the princess, and the way a girl of color interprets the same rhetorical vision. If a young white girl wants to be a princess based off the rhetorical vision, or at least imagines herself being one, there are not many limitations stopping her. Disney allows children to enter another world through their imagination fueled by the fantasy given to them by Disney (Giroux 2001). The young white audience member possesses all the variables she needs in order to identify with the princess in the story, and those she does not have she can imagine herself having. A young girl of color is different because she does not have all the variables she needs to identify with the traditional Disney princess theme. A white girl can imagine that she will someday be able to sing like Ariel, but a girl of color cannot as easily imagine that she will someday be white like Cinderella. When Tarpley (1995) asked a group of young African American girls to discuss the nature of being a princess, the girls readily acknowledged the race factor; in fact, "they stated the white Disney princess was the authentic one, and wanted to identify with her." Girls of color can use their imagination to try to apply the rhetorical vision to themselves, but, because they cannot change their skin color, they find themselves identifying with a rhetorical vision that excludes them by design.

The effects on these children from not being able to identify with parts of this rhetorical vision can be very detrimental to their future. In order for children to develop a strong sense of self-worth, they have to see themselves or their images in text (Hurley 2005). Since the Disney princess rhetorical vision contains the notion that princesses are white, the positive self-image of children (especially girls) of color is at stake. Even though ethnic Disney princesses, like Tiana from *The Princess and The Frog* (2009), represent a chance

for children of color to see their skin colors represented in animated film, Olfman (2009) suggests that we must still consider,

*...what values a black princess will teach our children. Will she reinforce white standards of beauty? To what extent will she contribute to what is already an intense over-commercialization of our children's lives? Any benefits will probably be outweighed by the cost.*

Thus, even if the racial/ethnic part of a girl's self-image is boosted by the presence of ethnic Disney princesses, the girl's entire self-image might still be at risk, due to the other flaws present in the Disney princess fantasy theme.

This study offers evidence on how race complicates the fantasy theme of the traditional Disney princess film. The rhetorical vision created by traditional Disney films affects the growth and self-image of young children of color. Despite Disney's addition of ethnic princesses, there are still damaging messages in the films that affirm the negative stereotypes surrounding different ethnic groups.

## CONCLUSION

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Future research could explore areas of interest raised in the present study, including the African American community's reactions to and opinions about the most recent Disney princess film, *The Princess and The Frog* (2009). Many critical approaches, such as the fantasy theme analysis used in the present study, examine texts and phenomena without the benefit of feedback from an audience. The present study suggests that even ethnic Disney princess fantasy themes do not alter the existence of a traditional princess rhetorical vision. Perhaps audience survey, in-depth interviews, or focus groups would reveal information that contradicts the present results.

However, a change in approach does not mean that the method used in the present study failed to produce important findings. In fact, the method could easily be applied to other areas where race/ethnicity, gender, and audience intersect, including reality-based television programs such as MTV's *The Hills*, or VH1's *Dad Camp*.

This intersection between race/ethnicity, gender, and audience is significant, important, and ripe for additional study. The present study examined this intersection, and included the fascinating variables of youth, animation, and the Disney princess. Fantasy theme analysis revealed that Disney could make its future film princesses ethnic and it would not matter because the rhetorical vision of a traditional (white) princess has already been formed and ingrained into the audience. Little girls still have access to *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty* even when Disney puts them in the vault to eventually re-release them.

Retail locations continue to sell the Disney princess merchandise, allowing the rhetorical vision to reach generation after generation of consumers. The present research argues that the rhetorical vision described here has power and permanence, but future research could (and hopefully will) suggest a way to alter or amend this rhetorical vision, or to create a new rhetorical vision that young girls (both white and ethnic) find even more compelling.

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