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Learning from *Cinderella*: Disney's Contribution to Social Construction of Female Roles Over Time

Introduction

The Walt Disney Corporation (Disney) is one of the most powerful international companies in entertainment and communication. According to the Forbes Lists, it ranks at the seventh both "World's Most Valuable Brands 2020" (measures the values of a brand by incomes) and "Top Regarded Companies 2019" (compares companies' credibility strength of goods and services, social behavior, etc.) Undoubtedly, Disney has tremendous influence over the world. Disney's fairy tale films are one of the reasons the company is so successful..

Fairy tales are stories told to young children, who have little social experience and are still developing moral and cognitive abilities. They can hardly distinguish what is acceptable to their lives. Simultaneously, they are good imitators, gathering various

information from the environment. So, as they watch Disney fairy tales, they imitate the characters' behaviors and appearances, and gradually their minds are shaped by values implied in these films. As a result, when children become grown-ups and construct society, they will act as the norm sculptured in childhood. They all agree and interact with it. The consensus on a perception is described by the sociological term "social construction." This is how Disney's fairy tale films substantially affect the social construction of cultural values. Therefore, it is critical to learn how Disney films contribute to the social construction of values and norms, especially about gender roles.

Disney's contribution to socially constructed ideas of female roles has changed between 1950 to 2015 to reflect the culture's changing values around gender. Specifically, its productions of the well-known Cinderella story are discussed, along with the supporting characters: her stepfamily and the prince. The shift in characters' appearances, behaviors, and plots between the two versions are important elements for understanding how Disney helps construct society's perceptions about gender.

The first film *Cinderella* was released in 1950 based on Charles Perrault's 1967 version of the story. Cinderella lost her parents and was forced to tolerate her stepfamily's horrible treatment. She finally attained help from her fairy godmother, won the prince's love and was found by the prince with the magical glass slipper. The film earned over $96,300,000 globally (boxofficemojo.com), and on Rotten Tomatoes, acquired an audience score of 80%.

Cinderella 2015 is a live-action of the 1950 film, keeping all the main stories and adding new plots to other characters. Famous actresses were cast to recreate the story

including Lily James as Cinderella and Cate Blanchett as the stepmother. When it was first released, the film earned over $542,300,000 worldwide (boxofficemojo.com) and scored 78% on Rotten Tomatoes. Both versions of *Cinderella* were worldwide box office hits, which illustrates the tectonic power of Disney and its impact on how we perceive gender.

Positive Female Standard: Cinderella

In *Cinderella* 1950, Cinderella is a young white girl with blonde hair. Yet she wears a gray maid outfit, the clothes fit her body shape perfectly and show her slim body figure. At the end of the film, a close-up shows Cinderella's small feet, and when the Duke tries on the glass slipper, his hands are portrayed larger than the glass slipper and her foot. The mainstream of the society preferred smaller feet on females and related this feature with sexiness, while males were expected to have bigger feet and hands (Fessler et al. 147-164). Disney knew the convention, reflected it back to society, and advertised the preference of females' body parts.

As a girl treated unfairly by her family, Cinderella swallows all the pain and tries to satisfy her family's requirements by spending every day doing household chores like scrubbing the floor and doing dishes. Her obedience is rewarded with magic from the fairy godmother and love from the prince. Disney implicitly delivers this message to the audience: no matter how harsh your family treats you,tolerate them because this is a good quality. In *Cinderella* 2015, Cinderella's physical appearance is similar to the appearance of Cinderella 1950. In an interview with Lily James by *Nightline*, she said

that she had "naturally a small waist." Nonetheless, she was still required to wear a corset to slenderize how she looks in the film, and she described the experience as "horrible". From the casting, Disney's intention to demonstrate a perfectly shaped woman to audiences was obvious. Apart from her appearance, her line "have courage and be kind" was an even worse idea: explicitly confusing tolerance and weakness with courage and kindness, which would mislead the young audience to perceive unconditional forbearance as good femininity.

Negative Female Standard: The Stepfamily

In the 1950's film, Cinderella's stepfamily was completely villainous. The stepmother forced Cinderella to take charge of all the chores and was selfish. The stepsisters were jealous and arrogant, always talking to Cinderella with hurtful words. All the harshness had no reason. It seemed the stepmother was naturally mean to the stepdaughter.

Zooming in to their outer appearance, they all had sharp lineaments. Near the end of the film, when the stepsisters are trying the glass slipper, their feet areugly and even bigger than the servant's face. Compared to Cinderella's petite foot-size it is apparent that Disney connected big-sized feet of females to villains, which would hurt some groups and bring stereotypes of standard women. I remember in my childhood, my feet grew faster than other peers and my family joked about it. Gradually, I became afraid to tell others my foot size. When I watched this plot in *Cinderella* on television, I felt insulted to have such unusual feet.

Disney's portrayal of the step family evolved in 2015 Though their behaviors and languages are still mean, the director provided a few reasons to sympathize with them. In the beginning, the narrator points out that the stepmother also had "grief" – she was a sorrowful woman who lost her husband; but just "wore it well", since she had two girls to raise (09:50). Women had low social status at the time, so as a single widow, she had to appear tough and suspicious to survive in the turbulent fate and take care of her daughters. The film explained her pain and dilemma to reverse the prejudge on a stepmother in previous Disney princess films. Likewise, the stepsisters were also excused to some extent - they had been under the domineering mother's wings in the growth. The film depicts more tolerance and forgiveness for the unfortunate woman and her daughters from society.

The Romantic Relationship: Cinderella and the prince

In *Cinderella* 1950, the prince directly walked to Cinderella in the Ball as he saw her. Here is always where the problem rises. What made him fond of Cinderella and fall in love with her instantly? The answer is her appearance; it must not be the kindness of Cinderella. Cinderella's good qualities had never been exhibited to the prince and thus having no relation to the start of their romantic relationship. Additionally, the progress of their relationship was too fast. Disney hid the truth to girls that quickly falling in love with the person just met was dangerous and even assigned an excuse to the dangerous action, that is the prince was rich and prestigious.

It was probably logical to women in the mid-19th Century - the society was still conservative. However, as time goes, the culture has changed, and people start to think differently. So, the old theme is no longer appropriate to women living in the 21st century, who pursue inner beauty more than the outer looks in a healthy, long-term relationship.

Hence, to profit, Disney had to revise. In *Cinderella*'s live-action released in 2015, the scriptwriters gave the prince and Cinderella a chance to meet before the Ball when Cinderella didn't know the prince's royal identity (*Cinderella*, 27:50) . They have a casual chat about their philosophy of life. This short conversation made the concept of romantic relationships different from Cinderella 1950. Disney emphasized mutual communication between two people - "opening up the hearts"   - was an important prerequisite to attain the right relationship (Verheij 7:00). Moreover, in the conversation between the prince and his servant, the prince appreciated Cinderella's "spirit" and "goodness" rather than her body (*Cinderella* 38:15). Meanwhile, Cinderella expressed her worries about marriage without knowing the partner well to stepsisters (39:30). Conclusively, Disney changed the impression of love at first sight of its princess movies. It educated girls that the partner's personalities were more critical than his properties.

Conclusion

Disney's fairy tale films illustrate how some of our socially constructed ideas about gender have changed with time - but some ideas have not changed. The physical portrayals of positive female characters remain: slim figures, white skin, small feet, and

an innocent face. But Disney did shift regarding the notion of romantic relationships and "love at first sight." This change helps construct young audiences' perceptions on healthy relationships: being frank and open to your partner, and valuing their soul instead of appearances or identity.

The changes might be blamed as unrespectful to the original story. However, people should embrace these differences. Cinderella's fairy tale itself indeed has hundreds of variations. The variants are meaningful, since they reflect the progress of people's beliefs, often help develop societal perceptions and prepare children for their adulthood. (Lynda & Trapedo 187)

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