

*Someday my Prince Will Come*: How are gender roles enabled and constrained in  
Disney Music, during Classic Disney, the Disney Renaissance, and Modern  
Disney?

By

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## DEDICATIONS

To my parents, there are no words for how thankful I am for you. I don't know how I would have succeeded in life without your love, support, and encouragement.

To Nora, Sam, Maureen, and Mary Kate, thank you for being such an inspiration. I can only hope to make you all as proud as you make me.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this project is to study how Disney has promoted gender roles through its music over three different Disney eras: Classic, Renaissance, and Modern Disney. While Disney movies have been criticized in the past for having characters with unattainable bodies and unrealistic views on love and life, the role that Disney music plays in promoting gender roles has not been as thoroughly researched or as widely criticized. With the immensity that children learn and are surrounded by Disney music, it is imperative that the message that the children take in is a healthy one. Through the analysis of lyrics from ten different Disney musical feature films, this study examines the degree to which Disney music reflects gender norms, across time.

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## INTRODUCTION

It is a story that almost every American child for the past fifty years can relate to—the children come home from school, they grab a snack, and they turn on their favorite Disney movie for the millionth time. Rewind forty years and they are sitting with their families, listening to a Disney record and singing along with every familiar tune. Whether it is the music from *Cinderella* or *Snow White* on a record from the mid-twentieth century or it is the *Frozen* CD that has been played at least once on every road trip for the past three years, children have been surrounded by Disney music for decades, but somehow they never tire of it. Not even adults are immune to the magic of Disney music—parents may know the lyrics just as well, if not better than their children.

Disney music has played a huge role in the lives of children from multiple generations. Regardless of the movie, if you ask a millennial the specifics about Disney characters, the location of the movies, or the different dance breaks in the movie, more than likely you will get some vague, non-specific answers. However, if you begin playing a song from a Disney feature film, it is not unreasonable to expect that person to quickly identify the song and know most of the lyrics. The music is what sticks to us. It is used to teach us lessons about cleaning and love at first sight and taking a stand in what you believe.



Additionally, as my research shows, Disney music has played a large role in the gendering of children.

Disney music reflects the gender roles and norms that were common during each era of Disney movie production—Classic, Renaissance, and Modern. Classic Disney music communicated through Cinderella, Snow White, and Aurora (from *Sleeping Beauty*) that the key factors in fulfilling a happy life were dreaming, wishing, and patiently waiting for your prince to save you. My generation grew up with the music of the Disney Renaissance—these Disney princesses were our role models. We were told that Ariel, Mulan, Belle, and Pocahontas promoted much better messages than past Disney princesses like Cinderella, Snow White, and Aurora, but what messages did we absorb while listening to this music on repeat? From *The Little Mermaid*, did we learn that we should be allowed to explore our desires and resist being boxed up, or did we learn that it was okay to abandon everyone we know and give up everything we have to pursue a relationship with someone we barely know? From *Beauty and the Beast*, did we learn that it was good to be bookish and smart and stand up for the people we love, or did we learn that it's okay to be with someone who's tough on the outside because we can change them with our unconditional love? And from *Pocahontas*, did we learn to go with the flow and follow our hearts, or did we learn from John Smith that persistence wears down resistance? Modern Disney music comes from Rapunzel, Tiana, Elsa, and Anna, who are applauded for their progressive goals and perspectives on the world; however, the music,

regardless of how progressive it may seem, contributes to the gendering process of children.

To better understand how scholars have studied gender representation with Disney, I studied journal articles about the change in female Disney characters overtime. I studied documentaries such as *Mickey Mouse Monopoly*, which brings to light many of the gender and sexuality norms that are taught in Disney movies, and *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, which shows a behind the scenes look at the Disney Renaissance and the circumstances that inspired another generation of Disney princesses. I also opened up my research to literature that explores feminist theory and performance and performativity theories, as well literature that explores the cultural influence of music and its ability to shape and reflect the values of a society.

To get my findings, I used a grounded theory approach in analyzing the lyrics of Disney music. Through the strategic content analysis and coding of song lyrics from ten Disney feature films, found in each era, I discovered what gender norms were being communicated and how the characteristics of an ideal woman changed over time. To narrow my research, I concentrated on Disney princess movies with lyrical melodies sung by the lead princess characters. Most Disney movies contain music from symphonies and songs from supporting characters that surely affect the plot and the interactions of the characters; however, since lyrical content is how the princess might communicate lessons, goals, and expectations of a woman, it serves the research best to attend only to the lead female's lyrical content. I split the music into three eras: Classic (1937-1959), Renaissance

(1989-1998), and Modern (2009-present). From there, I analyzed all of the song lyrics within each era while looking for common concepts regarding the princess's life goals, expectations regarding the princess's behavior, and the general communication of ideal femininity. After this, I established categories under which groups of concepts would fall, and then looked for common themes that connected many of the concepts. I took the themes regarding ideal femininity found in the song lyrics and compared them to articles and advertisements from each era to see how closely the Disney portrayal of women related to societal ideals of the time period.

Finally, I will discuss the implications of these findings and what they could mean for the future of music in Disney feature films.

### *Background*

Throughout the past century, Hollywood and media have not been kind to women. The images and portrayals of women on screen are often the reflection of a socially constructed ideal that women are expected to live up to. Unfortunately, Disney and its princess line are no different. Since its establishment in 1923, Disney has been the topic of many social criticisms. One of the most consistent complaints Disney has encountered as an industry has been in regards to its princess line of characters. For example, Lacroix (2004) found that there exists a prominent focus on the sexual and "exotic" aspects of many of the Disney princesses. The characters have also been criticized for having both unattainable body images and a severe lack of racial diversity. According to Best

and Lowney (2009), “American critics have tended to focus on Disney’s willingness to present racial and gender stereotypes and on its presentation of a sanitized version of American history.” For example, until *Pocahontas*, all of the lead female characters sported “extremely pale skin tones, small waists, delicate limbs, and full breasts” (England, Descartes, Collier-Meek 2011). Additionally, Disney has been criticized on numerous occasions for the romantic content in the films, as they provide an unrealistic view of what love looks like and a skewed view of what a happy life entails. Hecht (2011), for example, writes, “The films portray happiness as finding a man...[and] a new hairstyle and clothes have the ability to save a young woman living in undesirable conditions.”

One of the more popular documentations of these criticisms is the “Mickey Mouse Monopoly” documentary from 2001. The film highlights issues of race, class, and gender hidden in each of the children’s stories, and the affect that these issues have on the audiences they reach. Through constructed notions of femininity and masculinity, and stereotypical portrayals of minority races, Disney has influenced the way children see and learn about people of a different gender, race, or ethnicity. Additionally, children begin to compare themselves to the Disney characters to learn what society is expecting of them. This is backed up by Klein, Shiffman, and Welka (2000), who state that through cultivation theory, “people develop beliefs, attitudes, and expectations about the real world based on what they see and hear on television, on video, in film, and in other mass media forms”, then they use those learned behaviors to make real world decisions.

Unfortunately, the majority of Disney's reproductions of gender, especially women, are seen as negative representations. For example, Lee (2008:11) states:

Of such culture for children, Disney has often been reproached because its distorted female images can have a potentially negative influence on young children. According to some scholars, the female characters' roles in Disney films are determined not by the characters' own intentions, but by the stereotypes of women in the overarching patriarchal narrative. Furthermore, these female protagonists are generally portrayed as weak, passive, and victimized, so they are incapable of independent action or of living an authentic life.

This means that exposure to stereotypical images of race, ethnicity, and gender could have very damaging affects on how viewers interact with people in everyday life. In the documentary (2001), there is a question of whether or not the racism and sexism in the films are intentional. A quote taken from Michael Eisner, the chief executive officer of The Walt Disney Company until 2005, sums up Disney's view of their intention: "We have no obligation to make history...art... [or] a statement. To make money is our only objective" (Sun et al. 2002). This point of view is understandable considering that according to Hahn et al. (2010), the purpose of the Disney Renaissance was to bring Disney out of a financial gutter. However, the statement is also irrelevant, according to Sun et al. (2002), because whether intentional or not, the films have the same affect on their audiences.

A study by England et al. (2011) touches on the effect that gendered content can have on childhood development: "Consistently portrayed gender role images may be interpreted as 'normal' by children and become connected with their concepts of socially acceptable behavior and morality." Examples of these "consistently portrayed gender role images" found in Disney films include the

female character as a damsel-in-distress, the male character as the savior, a female villain as masculine, and a male villain as effeminate. Franke (1995) found that most, if not all, of the female Disney characters until Pocahontas fell into one of three categories: “insipid girls who could hold a tune”, “batty matrons”, and “ruthless femme fatales”. In addition to these frequent images, most of the female characters in these children’s movies exhibit extremely sexual behavior.

*Mickey Mouse Monopoly* (2001) discusses how throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Disney films included female characters with “highly sexualized female [bodies], with the big breasts, tiny waists, fluttering eyelashes, coy expressions, and seductiveness.” Even the female animals in Disney are sexualized. One of the many dangers of these images is that they are teaching young girls, not only that they are seen only as sexual beings, but they also teach them how they are supposed to use their sexuality. In *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), the female broom playfully says “no” multiple times to Lumiere, the candle, when they flirt, pushing the idea that “no” means “yes”. Likewise, in *Aladdin* (1992), Jasmine attempts to seduce Jafar in order to save Aladdin, teaching girls to use their sexuality to get what they want. These images also teach children what to expect from relationships, so it is frightening that relationships such as the one between Belle and the Beast are acceptable, as it promotes that women can change the terrible behavior of their significant other if they just stick by their side. Because of this, Towbin et al. (2003) states that “in some cases, women may interpret abuse as a sign that their partner cares for them and as a sign that they have a powerful partner.”

In the first four Disney princess movies (*Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and The Little Mermaid*), the only strong female characters that were not sexualized were the villains. Pamela O'Brien (2002) suggests that the presence of these femme fatales was Walt Disney's way to "foster the patriarchal views that strong women are evil and detrimental to the proper upbringing of children." This negativity towards females is also present between many of the relationships between women found in Disney. Initially, there is an issue in that there are not many healthy relationships between women shown in Disney princess movies. The positive few include the relationship found between Aurora and the Three Good Fairies in *Sleeping Beauty*, the relationship Pocahontas has with her grandmother Willow in *Pocahontas*, the friendship between Tiana and Charlotte La Bouff in *The Princess and the Frog*, and the sisterhood between Anna and Elsa in *Frozen*. The rest of the female-to-female relationships are mostly negative: Cinderella and her step-mother and step-sisters, Snow White and her step-mother, Aurora and Maleficent, Ariel and Ursula, and Rapunzel and Mother Gothel. Do Rozario (2004) explored this negative commonality: "The conflict between the princess and her mature adversary is often read in terms of daughter-mother relationships, with the mature adversary acting as a wicked maternal substitute, simultaneously erasing the mother and replacing her with a negative image." This consistent portrayal of negative relationships between women could arguably encourage the stereotypes that women become bitter and jealous with age and that women just do not get along with each other.

In addition to a lack of positive female relationships, there is also a serious lack of female characters and female dialogue in these Disney princess movies, according to a new study by linguists Carmen Fought and Karen Eisenhauer (2016). Jeff Guo (2016) from *The Washington Post* published the findings of Fought and Eisenhauer, in which they show that men have more speaking roles than women in every Disney princess movie except Cinderella, which has equal speaking roles. Because of this, women speak less than fifty percent of the words spoken in seven out of twelve films in the study. The five films that contain more female dialogue are all from the classic and modern eras. Male characters control at least seventy-five percent of the dialogue in the renaissance era movies. Fought (2016) argues that this issue has to do with how few meaningful female characters exist in Disney films: “There are no women leading the townspeople to go against the Beast, no women bonding in the tavern together singing drinking songs, women giving each other directions, or women inventing things. Everybody who’s doing anything else, other than finding a husband in the movie, pretty much, is a male.” A good example of this is the sidekick character in the films; Flounder, Sebastian, Lumiere, Cogsworth, Iago, Genie, and Mushu are all male characters that play sidekick to the lead female (Guo, 2016). In addition to these findings, Fought and Eisenhauer (2016) also discovered that female characters were complimented on their appearance more often than their skill in two out of the three eras (Fifty-five percent of classic era (1937-1959) compliments and thirty-eight percent of renaissance era (1989-1998) compliments were based on appearances, while only twenty-two percent of modern era (2009-present)



compliments were on the female character's appearance). Guo (2016) reports on Fought and Eisenhauer's research: "Fought and Eisenhauer's research reminds us that it's not just how the princesses are portrayed. It's also important to consider the kinds of worlds these princesses inhabit, who rules these worlds, who has the power — and even who gets to open their mouths. In a large number of cases, the princesses are outspoken by men in their own movies."

Unfortunately, the negative portrayal of women is not the only thing of which Disney is guilty. Disney has been accused on multiple occasions of marginalizing race groups. Though racism in Disney is not the concentration of this project, it is important to notice how Disney can have many different affects on the socialization of people through its music. It is pointed out in *Mickey Mouse Monopoly* (2001) that much of this marginalization occurs through the stereotypical representation of minorities through animal characters. For example, in *Oliver and Company* (1988), there is a Chihuahua character with a Latino accent that has a fascination with cars. In *The Jungle Book* (1967), multiple orangutan characters sing jazzy tunes about wanting to be "real men" like Mowgli, a white boy, and in *Tarzan* (1999), there are no black people in Africa; there is just a white man and multiple gorillas, including one that raises a white boy, similar to an era when white children were raised by black household workers. One of the most transparent stereotypical representations occurs in *Lady and the Tramp* (1955), in which there are two Siamese cats who have heavy accents, slanted eyes, and who are portrayed as cunning and sinister. This marginalization of minorities, however, is not limited to representation in animal

form. Characters in *Peter Pan* (1953) mock Native Americans in “What Makes the Red Man Red” and *Pocahontas* (1995) trivializes the political and diplomatic position Pocahontas held in history, while *Mulan* (1998) portrays China as a very sexist country in which women have no worth unless married:

“Men want girls with good taste  
Calm, obedient, who work fast-paced  
With good breeding and a tiny waist  
You’ll bring honor to us all.” (Wilder & Zippel 1998)

*Aladdin* (1992) portrays Middle Easterners as unfriendly merchants who “cut off your ear if they don’t like your face” (Menken 1992). This line is taken from the film’s first song “Arabian Nights”, which is full of other racially charged lines, including “it’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home” (Menken 1992). Perhaps the most alarming part of this song choice is that there was a less racially discriminating version that Disney decided to not use.

In addition to these offenses, Disney movies also have a fascination with portraying Disney princesses of color as exotic. Appropriately, the princesses of color have darker skin, but the physical difference stops there. According to Lacroix (2004), costuming is used to set the exotic tone: “Jasmine’s costuming emphasizes the Middle Eastern influence of the setting of *Aladdin* and depicts Jasmine in a more sexualized light... In *Pocahontas*, as well, the costuming references the character’s ethnicity, but is ultimately constructed in such a way as to privilege physical characteristics.” While the white princess characters are often seen as innocent and modest, the princesses of color are hyper-sexualized. It is evident that these issues are not only present in Disney films and music, but also affecting the socialization of the children in the audiences over the past

century. Children are exposed to these images at early ages, and remain exposed throughout childhood, leaving little question as to whether or not they are affected by the content.

While the above criticisms are well documented, Disney music seems to be mostly left out of the picture. The music in Disney feature films, especially the princess movies, remains an integral part of the “Disney experience”. While the movies are often watched in excess, the soundtracks are listened to as much, if not more often. The music can be potentially heard at home, in the car, during television commercials, in the background at work, over the speaker system while shopping, etc. Considering the vast amounts of opportunities consumers have to be exposed to Disney music, it is curious that its effects have not been as widely studied. Music, in general, plays a key role in the defining of culture. As Robert Garfias writes in *Music: The Cultural Context* (2004:1):

If we look at all the societies and cultures known to us and look at all the historical societies of the past to the degree that we can discern, we can deduce with a high degree of certainty that music has always played an important role in human society...if we consider the number of people who consume it in some way and millions of economic units consumed in its production and consumption, we are not simply talking about a very big business enterprise. If we ask ourselves what is driving it and we realize that it is largely voluntarily and self willed then we must ask the question, what is it that music does that makes people behave in this manner? The very fact that it is all pervasive and has been so for many cultures through the ages strongly suggests that music in our lives does much more than make us feel good or happy. It must be that music fulfills some important function in what we regard as humanness. It must be linked in some vital way to the health of the species.

With music being such a vital part of culture, there is no surprise that it could potentially assist in the gendering and socializing of a generation, or in this case,

three generations. This would be made possible through the “gender schema” theory in which “the developing child invariably learns his or her society’s cultural definitions of femaleness and maleness” through the observation of “sex-linked associations encompassing not only those features directly related to female and male persons—such as anatomy, reproductive function, division of labor, and personality attributes” many of which can and have been communicated through song lyrics (Bem 1983). So, what are these songs actually teaching children? What norms are children learning about gender roles and relationships? Have gender norms in music changed since the days of Cinderella? In what ways does the music reflect the qualities of an ideal woman in each Disney era? These are the questions I sought to answer in this thesis.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review primarily focuses on two subjects. The first subject is “The Importance of Music to Culture” which contains literature supporting the stance that music in itself plays an important role in the lives of children and potentially in the gendering and socialization process. The second subject is “Theory” which contains research and academic literature explaining and placing into context the gender, performance, and performativity theories. These theories are what the project and the research are grounded in and will serve to support the findings. The literature review provides a contextual background for the study of how Disney music portrays ideal femininity and gender roles, and exposes areas of research that have been overlooked, such as the impact that Disney music has on the gendering process.

### *The Importance of Music to Culture*

It is hard to definitively say when music first developed, but it is clear that over time music has changed and advanced with each culture and generation. In the past century alone, music has developed into a way for generations to define themselves, as much of music is better understood under cultural context. A study done by Robert Garfias (2004) explores the importance of cultural context to music: “Music adds to the culture and is an important form and avenue for

personal and group expression in it. It is also very much a product of that culture and of all the influences, historical, political, economic as well as aesthetic which have played upon it.” While technical advances may change the way music is produced and consumed, historical and political influences, such as the World Wars, changes in gender roles, and each wave of feminism, change what music communicates to the consumers. These influences can be found in music of all genres, including the music of Disney.

Each Disney era with its respective music has a theme. The cultural changes affect the themes, and in return, the themes affect cultural change. Vikas Shah (2015) from *Thought Economics* describes the relationship between music and culture as a “messy symbiotic” relationship, because it is hard to tell if the music imitates cultural values or if the cultural values imitate the music. Because of the relationship between music and culture, it is very easy for music to affect, and sometimes promote, cultural and political views--in Disney’s case, traditional or modern gender roles, depending on the era.

While the music of Classic Disney very clearly promoted traditional gender roles and portrayed the ideal woman as a passive and domestic being, the music of the Disney Renaissance and Modern eras carried the potential to bring third wave feminism into a better light, as the Disney heroines mostly reflected independent and likable women, as opposed to aggressive, bra-burning, man-hating, women that society sometimes associated with feminism. Shah (2015) states “Music has a way of being informative, and has a lot of capabilities...For decades music has also legitimized certain world views. Music has taken-in world

views that are often time left of center and made them seem legitimate in the political, hedonistic or public realm.” Political and social agendas are easily and often pushed through music lyrics and Disney songs are no different in regards to gender and sex roles. Lyrics from many, if not all, of the Disney princess movies promote a heterosexual and fantasy like version of love and relationships. The notion of love at first sight, the need to be rescued, and the need to change oneself in order to become worthy of love are all themes found in all eras of Disney music. Children who listen to Disney music enough may embody these ideals at a very young age, affecting the way they believe they are supposed to act around the opposite sex, including the roles they default to in a romantic relationship.

One theory of this process, found in a DeNora (2000) study is called “entrainment” or “the alignment or integration of bodily features with some recurrent features in the environment.” Musical entrainment familiarizes and associates body movement and thought processes with certain rhythms and tunes in music. Though the entrainment is more visual in dance choreography, its effects can be found in the lessons that are taught through the lyrics of songs. In *Music in Everyday Life* (2000), Tia Denora uses the children’s skipping song “I like coffee, I like tea/ I like the boys, And the boys like me” to make this point: “Music is used as a basis for marching in step or otherwise synchronizing bodily movement (with lessons about ‘normal’ adult sexual orientation literally drummed in via the text!)”. Furthermore, music allows members of society to both find their identity as an individual and discover what collective identity they most relate to. Roy and Dowd (2010) credit Tia DeNora with determining that

“individuals construct an identity by using music to mark and document important aspects of their lives.” Additionally, music is often used to connect groups of people of a certain gender, race, or class. Roy and Dowd (2010) state that “music is identified by people inside the group...and membership in the group is marked by embracing this music.”

The following section reveals the many criticisms that Disney has received for marginalizing females and people of color. It is important to understand that many of these offenses occur in the form of song. Since it is evident that music plays a critical role in the socialization process of children as well as in the establishment of cultural values, it is surprising that the music of Disney is not under further speculation.

### *Theory*

The goal of this section is to synthesize and scaffold Gender Role, Feminist, Performance, and Performativity theories to understand the greater question at hand: What role, if any, does Disney Music play in the ongoing construction of gender norms among children? The section will show how the theories address the questions, but also how they may come up short and how we can add to what is missing.

To understand the role Disney plays in enabling and restricting traditional gender roles, it is important to first understand what gender is. Contemporary studies of gender consider it a social construct, with little biological influence. For example, Lindsey (2005) writes that concepts, such as gender, that are used to



group people “do not exist objectively, but emerge through a socially constructed process.” Additionally, as socialization is an ongoing process, gender is learned across the life-course. As Lippa (2002) states, “gender is something that’s ‘done to us’ by society, not something we’re born with.” As it pertains to Disney and child development, this gender development through media and socialization easily shapes the way children interact with and learn about gender. Though a seemingly harmless form of entertainment, Disney music and films contain many “gender cues” that children are very receptive to. According to Martin and Ruble (2004), “By the age of 5, children develop an impressive constellation of stereotypes about gender (often amusing and incorrect) that they apply to themselves and others. They use these stereotypes to form impressions of others, to help guide their own behavior, to direct their attention, and to organize their memories.”

Michael Foucault, the author of *The History of Sexuality* and an influential theorist, moved the conversation about the social construction of sexuality to a more nuanced understanding of power and its role in shaping gender and sexuality. He argued against the theory that sexuality was repressed from the seventeenth century through the mid-twentieth century. Despite its strength in its ability to identify discourse, *The History of Sexuality* does not provide a clear understanding of where this power originates. Judith Butler, author of *Gender Trouble* follows Foucault in that she considers how knowledge about sex, sexuality, and gender has been constituted over time. Through *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1990) illuminates how these concepts are not nearly as stable or coherent

as prior theories of gender, sex, and sexuality have suggested: “For the most part, feminist theory has assumed that there is some existing identity, understood through the category of women, who not only initiates feminist interests and goals within discourse, but constitutes the subject for whom political representation is pursued.”

Butler (1990) argues that gender, and thus femininity, is socially constructed and performed and therefore cannot be mapped onto a certain sex: “If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way... When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one.” Butler also analyzes Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1973), in which de Beauvoir claims, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”. Butler (1986:36) uses this framework to further separate gender and sex:

One is female, then, to the extent that the copula asserts a fixed and self-identical relation... Immeasurably more difficult, however, is the claim that one is a woman in the same sense... To be a gender, whether man, woman, or otherwise, is to be engaged in an ongoing cultural interpretation of bodies and, hence, to be dynamically positioned within a field of cultural possibilities... In other words, to be a woman is to become a woman... [it is] an active process of appropriating, interpreting, and reinterpreting received cultural possibilities.

While de Beauvoir notes that to enact gender one must draw upon cultural resources, Butler notes that *how* one draws upon culture to interpret gender is discursively limited. In her work, Butler (1990) uses the concepts of

“performance” and “performativity” to describe these limitations. According to Butler (1990), “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.” The performance aspect of gender is the “set of repeated acts” while the performativity is the “rigid regulatory frame”.

Sarah Banet-Weiser, author of *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World*, also mentions this performance of gender in reference to gender performance in beauty pageants. Banet-Weiser (1999) speaks to how “gender is continually reenacted” in both the participation in and the protesting of beauty pageants, stating, “To assume that nonparticipation in beauty pageants or other overt beauty rituals exempts a woman from dominant definitions of femininity not only obscures ways in which gender both produces and is produced by a particular definition of the self, but also implies an illusory notion of choice.” What remains an issue, in this case, is the need for critics to define femininity in an either/or fashion—femininity is either what is represented on stage at beauty pageants or it is not based on beauty at all. Banet-Weiser (1999) also mentions how many feminist critics of this particular form of gender performance focus on “the notion that dominant feminist discourse has produced a society of victims,” which in turn creates, “a society of women who are so focused on their own “victimhood” that they actually reinforce female passivity and powerlessness.”

The discussion of these theories may better establish an understanding of why and how a constructed view of gender is performed in society and media.

Additionally, we know the impact that these performances have on gender role interpretation in child development. However, there are still a few holes in the research regarding the necessity of these performances in Disney music. In need of discussion is why a somewhat restricted and traditional representation of gender is still so marketable in Disney music and entertainment. Has Disney's performance of gender changed at all since the Classic Era, and is there more continuity than differences between the eras? We, as a society, have seen the impact that media has on the perception of gender ideals, so if Disney were to alter its character's performance of gender in the future, would society follow?

## RESEARCH METHODS

### *Research Design*

This study utilized a qualitative content analysis of Disney music lyrics in order to determine how powerful the role of music can be in gender socialization, especially in children. By interpreting and coding the text found in Disney music, this study can begin to understand the relationship between Disney music and gender socialization. The content analysis is purposefully limited to two factors: Disney and lyrical content of music. First, this study is limited to Disney content because of the popularity and overall impact the company has within the United States. According to the Walt Disney Corporation Annual Financial Report and Shareholder Letter from the 2015 fiscal year, the company's total revenue is stated to be at \$52.5 billion, while the net income is stated to be at \$8.9 billion (Iger, 2015). This enormous income is a testament to how strong a position Disney holds in American consumerism, and consequently, in the socialization of American citizens. Second, this study is limited to Disney music and excludes other Disney content, such as films, television, toy sales, etc. This specification was made in an effort to research an area of Disney that has not been heavily written about or criticized, despite the large consumption and impact music has on Disney consumers. Revenues for "Studio Entertainment", under which Disney musical recordings are nestled, totaled to \$7.3 billion, proving that music and

Disney entertainment have quite the impact among consumers (Iger 2015).

Additionally, it is important to study music in this context to analyze what impact lyrical content can have on socialization without the presence of the images found in film. While many critics of Disney choose to perform a content analysis of gender cues in Disney films (England et al. 2011; Sun et al. 2002; Towbin et al. 2003), this study focuses on gender representations perpetuated by actions, feelings, expectations, fulfillment, and desires as stated by Disney characters in musical lyrics.

### *Methods*

To conduct my research, I chose music from ten Disney Princess films: *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Pocahontas*, *Mulan*, *Tangled*, *Princess and the Frog*, and *Frozen*. I chose these films based on the presence of a female protagonist and the presence of musical content. These qualifications excluded films such as *Peter Pan*, *The Lion King*, *Aladdin*, *Tarzan*, and *Brave*, though their impact on gender socialization should not be discounted. From there, I chose to analyze the following twenty-nine songs from the group of films: “A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes”, “So This is Love”, “I’m Wishing”, “With a Smile and a Song”, “Whistle While you Work”, “Some Day My Prince Will Come”, “Once Upon a Dream”, “I Wonder”, “Part of That World” (original and reprise), “Belle” (original and reprise), “Something There”, “Just Around the Riverbend”, “Colors of the Wind”, “If I Never Knew You”, “Reflection”, “Honor to Us All”, “A Girl Worth Fighting

For”, “When Will My Life Begin” (original and reprise 1 & 2), “I See the Light”, “Almost There”, “When We’re Human”, “For the First Time in Forever” (original and reprise), “Love is an Open Door”, and “Let it Go”. The selection of songs averages about three songs per film, and the specific song choices are based on the presence of lyrical content by the protagonist, even if limited. Though many versions of the listed songs exist, I chose to analyze only the film versions of the songs in order to fully understand the power of music in the context that children most often experience it.

In this study, I used Critical Discourse Analysis to analyze the Disney song lyrics. The goal of using this method was to understand the relationship between the language of the lyrics and societal power. Within each song, I searched for phrases or lines that described or captured a feeling or characteristic of the person singing—typically the female protagonist. Examples of this include “lack of fulfillment”, “fulfillment through love/marriage (or desire for such)”, “fulfillment through freedom, career, adventure (or desire for such)”, “desire to make family proud”, “problem avoidance”, “activity” vs. “passivity”, “patience” vs. “impatience”, etc. This process reveals how Disney has communicated, through the eyes of the female protagonist or society, what the ideal woman is, how she must behave, and how she must feel. In addition to analyzing the groups of lyrics within each era, I felt that it was important to compare and contrast themes across the different eras to discover if Disney had changed what it was communicating about female expectations.

The first step I took in coding lyrical content was open coding—I went through the lyrics of every song I had chosen and noted the different concepts that I found in the lyrics (e.g. “passivity”, “cheerful disposition”, “lack of fulfillment”, etc.). Once I completed my list of concepts, I created categories by grouping together the most common concepts found in the lyrics. Finally, I took the list of categories and went back through each song to find how these concepts connected to create themes in the music of each Disney era. Every time a theme was present in a song, I tallied next to the theme and under the Disney era the song belongs to, resulting in a table showing the percentage of theme presence in each era.

### *Limitations*

Though the methodological choices I made to conduct the research were necessary, they did present some limitations when collecting data. One such limitation was created by the choice to only code and analyze song lyrics from songs that the female protagonist sings. While this did not present a problem within the Classic era, some of the Renaissance and Modern era films lack in the number of songs that the female protagonist sings, limiting the data that I was able to collect. For example, in *Mulan*, the only song that Mulan sings by herself is “Reflection”. The other two songs from this film that I analyzed—“Honor to Us All” and “A Girl Worth Fighting For”—contained minimal input from Mulan, and are actually more representative of society’s view of the female role—wife, cook, mother, etc. The same issue was found in *Princess and the Frog*, *Pocahontas*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Tangled*, and *Frozen*. In



some cases, the female protagonist simply had a limited amount of songs she took part in. For example, Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*, does not have a voice for half of the movie, so songs are limited. In other cases, most of the songs that the female protagonist sings are shared with either a male character or a large group of people. Though I kept some of these songs in the study (“Belle”, “When We’re Human”, “If I Never Knew You”, “Something There”, “Love is an Open Door”) there were a few that I chose to exclude, as they did little to characterize the protagonist (“I Have a Dream”, “Down in New Orleans”). This limitation is indicative of a bigger sociological paradox, in which female protagonists, though seemingly more progressive in character, are given less of a voice. This issue can be related back to the Jeff Guo (2016) article, which found that female character dialogue from the Renaissance and Modern eras is limited in comparison to the male character dialogue.

## FINDINGS

There is a significant amount of literature covering how women have been viewed in society and the media. The ideal woman is a figure that has changed over time, and has been defined and portrayed through many different mediums. Poetry and novels of the nineteenth century defined the role of women, while the ideal woman of the early to mid-twentieth century was portrayed through commercial and print advertising, in the form of television characters like June Cleaver from “Leave it to Beaver”, and also through the princess characters in the Disney classic movies. The “ideal” has certainly changed over the years and a different ideal is presented in each era.

### *Classic Era [1937-1959]*

Women’s magazines and Disney music alike painted very similar pictures of who the ideal woman of the 1950’s was. In Betty Friedan’s study, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), she revealed the stereotype of the ideal woman as one that “held that women could find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love. It denied women a career or any commitment outside the home and narrowed woman’s world down to the home, cut her role back to housewife.” This is very prominently heard in the music of

Classic Disney. “A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes”, sung by Cinderella, contains the following lyrics:

“Have faith in your dreams and someday  
Your rainbow will come smiling through  
No matter how your heart is grieving, if you keep on believing  
The dream that you wish will come true” (David, Hoffman, Livingston 1950).

These lyrics, though seemingly harmless, support Friedan’s findings that the ideal woman was culturally defined as passive and fulfilled only through marriage, as Cinderella’s dream was to be loved and married. Additionally, Courtney and Lockeretz (1967), authors of *A Woman’s Place: An Analysis of Roles Portrayed by Women in Print Advertising*, discuss four stereotypes that defined the ideal woman of the 1950’s: Firstly, “A woman’s place is in the home”; secondly, “Women do not make important decisions or do important things”; thirdly, “Women are dependent and need men’s protection”; finally, “Men regard women primarily as sexual objects; they are not interested in women as people.” These stereotypes were prominent in advertising as well as in the Classic Disney music. Women in media were domestic and passive, only pursuing the happiness of her husband and children. Even thirteen years before *Cinderella*, in 1937, the music of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* featured music in line with these female stereotypes. With songs like “Some Day My Prince Will Come”, “I’m Wishing”, and “With a Smile and a Song”, Snow White fulfills the stereotypical female character that is happily, and passively, waiting for a prince to come rescue her and take her away to his castle. Stover (2013) commented on why this character style existed: “After the early 1930s, when strong leading women prospered in the

wake of liberated flappers and newly-won suffrage, a heavy increase in censorship began to limit female characters in action and dialogue, resulting in the elimination of silent screen vamps and early talkie spitfires, and the embrace of Snow White's pure maiden innocence." Additionally, the expectation for women to be domestic is very obvious in *Snow White* and *Cinderella*. *Cinderella* is practically a slave to domesticity, while *Snow White* has a song that teaches how to clean up a house:

"Just whistle while you work  
And cheerfully together we can tidy up the place  
...And as you sweep the room  
Imagine that the broom is someone that you love  
And soon you'll find you're dancing to the tune" (Churchill & Morey 1938).

Even in 1959, *Sleeping Beauty* contained themes of extreme passivity, dreaming, and fulfillment through marriage and love:

"I wonder, I wonder/If my heart keeps singing  
Will my song go winging  
To someone who'll find me  
And bring back a love song to me?" (Hibler & Sears 1959).

"For over fifteen years, the words written for women, and the words women used when they talked to each other...were about problems with their children, or how to keep their husbands happy, or improve their children's school, or cook chicken or make slipcovers" (Friedan 1963). Women of the mid-twentieth century were portrayed as though they were supposed to feel fulfilled as a housewife and mother. Though many women may have wished to return to work, many were socially discouraged to do so through media portrayals. "Studies of postwar culture found that government propaganda, popular magazines, and films reinforced traditional concepts of femininity and instructed women to subordinate

their interests to those of returning male veterans” (Meyerowitz 1994). Women of the mid-twentieth century were socially rewarded for conforming to the stereotype of the “ideal woman”. However, despite the extreme frequency with which this image appeared, not everyone wanted to adhere to the stereotype. In fact, studies suggest that approximately 80% of post-war women felt working outside of the home would lead to a more satisfying life (Renzetti & Curran 2004). Additionally, the 1960’s brought with it many new opportunities for women that contrasted the position of the ideal woman of the 1950’s. “The 1960s, with its increase in women workforce participation, increased education and availability of birth control, appears to be the antithesis of the “ideal woman” of the 1950s” (Holt 2006). Still, women struggled with their desire for a more fulfilling life and the social expectation that they remain in the very domestic role of the typical good woman, mother, and wife. Gradually, more and more women made the decision to enter or re-enter the work force. “When women began flooding the U.S. labor market in the early 1970s, the jobs available were traditional ones of secretary, nurse, librarian, telephone operator and teacher” (Kleiman 1996). This limitation to available jobs may have been because women were not thought capable enough for positions of higher power. However, as the 1990’s approached, women began to fill more powerful and higher paying job positions, creating a divide between women who wanted to have a career and women who wanted a family.

*Renaissance Era [1989-1998]*

The “Disney Renaissance” began with the production of *The Little Mermaid* in 1989, which created the commercial success that Disney so desperately needed—the success that had been missing since the death of Walt Disney in 1966 (Hahn et al. 2010). This period ended after the 1999 production of *Tarzan*, as many of the productions following were not as successful.

With its release of *The Little Mermaid*, Disney underwent a shift towards a “New Wave” of princess films, which transformed the damsel into a heroine of sorts, with both a voice and a desire for adventure. This new approach ushered in two decades of go-getting, proactive heroines, with progressive qualities and character traits that corresponded completely to the increasingly acceptable gender roles in a society where women hold the same jobs as men (Stover 2013).

Though the 1990’s brought many new job opportunities for women, there was still a well-known struggle for women between going to work and staying at home. The most significant difference between this struggle and the one in the mid-twentieth century is that women had many more opportunities to get an education and have a career. “Twenty-seven percent of industrial engineers in 1990 were women, up from 3 percent in 1970; 26 percent of lawyers and judges, up from 6 percent; 21 percent of physicians and surgeons, up from 11 percent; and 13 percent of police officers and detectives, up from 5 percent” (Kleiman 1996).

However, accompanying these new opportunities in the work force was the assumption that working women were foregoing marriage and children all together since they were not willing to spend all of their time in the home caring for their husband and children. Many also falsely associated working women and

marriage with high divorce rates based on figures from the 70's: "As women entered the labor force in great numbers during the 1960s and 1970s, divorce rates increased, helping cement a widespread belief that marital instability and dissolution are costs of a gender-balanced workforce... [However], there is actually a negative relationship between the divorce rate and the rate of married female labor force participation (MFLP) across U.S. states" (Newman & Olivetti 2015).

Despite how false these claims were, women were still being criticized for wanting both a career and a family, and for not being satisfied with just being a stay at home mom or housewife. This controversial issue seeped into many different forms of media, including Disney music. Almost all of the lead female Disney characters sing "want songs" describing the goals they have for their lives; however, the want songs from the Disney Renaissance princesses differ greatly from the want songs of the Classic Disney princesses. While Classic Disney princesses mostly sing about how they passively wish for fulfillment through love and marriage, the songs of the Disney Renaissance princesses contain plans of action and desire for freedom—both eras were reflective of the times. Just as women of the late twentieth century were often criticized for not being satisfied with what they had, many Disney Renaissance princesses were criticized for the same thing. The following lyrics are from *The Little Mermaid's* "Part of That World", Ariel's "want song":

"... Wouldn't you think I'm the girl  
The girl who has everything?  
... I've got gadgets and gizmos a-plenty  
I've got whozits and whatzits galore

...But who cares?  
No big deal  
I want more  
...Up where they walk, up where they run  
Up where they stay all day in the sun  
Wanderin' free - wish I could be  
Part of that world” (Ashman & Menken 1989).

On the one hand, these lyrics convey that Ariel was a selfish teenager who had no regard for her family and wants more, even though she has “everything”. On the other hand, analysis of the lyrics highlights many similarities between Ariel and the working woman of the late twentieth century. Housewives could own every household item advertised in *Better Homes and Gardens Magazine*, yet still felt unfulfilled. Does this make the woman selfish? For Ariel, the water was a prison—she was expected to behave a certain way and attend all of the appropriate functions, and she was not just discouraged from having an interest in humans, she was forbidden. Warner (2014) argues that this is reflective of the problems women face in society: “Ariel forfeits her body and voice in order to conform to a patriarchal system. This is similar to women who were not able to speak their mind, or voice their own decisions. Ariel is not forced to be silent; she chooses to silence herself in order to live in a masculine society.” Similarly, the home often felt like a prison for women who could not leave or show interest in work or otherwise without facing extreme criticism. Similar themes can be found in “Just Around the Riverbend” from *Pocahontas*:

“...The water's always changing, always flowing  
But people, I guess, can't live like that  
...To be safe, we lose our chance of ever knowing what's around the  
riverbend  
...Can I ignore that sound of distant drumming  
For a handsome sturdy husband



Who builds handsome sturdy walls  
And never dreams that something might be coming just around the  
riverbend” (Menken & Schwartz 1995).

The song explicitly addresses the question, “Should I settle and marry or should I see what else life has to offer first?” that many women were asking at the time.

The median age of a woman at first marriage in 1960 was 20.3. By 1995, the year *Pocahontas* was released in theaters, the median age was 24.5 (U.S. Census Bureau 2015). This struggle is present in *Mulan*, as well, in which the lead female laments her inability to make her family proud:

“I will never pass for a perfect bride, or a perfect daughter.  
...Now I see, that if I were truly to be myself,  
I would break my family's heart.  
...How I pray, that a time will come,  
I can free myself from their expectations  
On that day, I'll discover someday to be myself,  
And to make my family proud” (Wilder & Zippel 1998).

For decades, there existed a pressure for women to marry young and to start a family, but the women of the 1990's had other plans.

As the 1990's progressed, the princess characters became increasingly more modern—they were intelligent, independent, and driven, just like the women of the decade. Belle, from *Beauty and the Beast*, was no different; she expresses the woes of monotony in her everyday life while everyone around her mocks her for dreaming of a something greater:

“I want adventure in the great, wide, somewhere.  
I want it more than I can stand.  
And for once it might be grand,  
To have someone understand.  
I want so much more than they've got planned” (Ashman & Menken 1991)

None of the characters were satisfied with their current situation, but they made plans of action and followed through. The growth of the characters reflected the growth of the Women's Rights campaigns and accomplishments such as the passage of Title IX in 1972, the flight of the shuttle *Challenger* with the first American woman in space, Sally Ride, in 1983, the appointment of the first woman U.S. attorney general, Janet Reno, in 1993, and the appointment of the first female United States Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, in 1997 (U.S. Embassy, 2016).

However, even with these important changes, the female leads of the Disney Renaissance had one key thing in common with the classic Disney movies: a “happy ever after” ending with the prince/love interest. Though, to clarify, the “happy ever after” ending is not necessarily the primary issue in regards to this project, but instead the complete alteration of the princess's goals to make this happen. This can be heard, for example, in the reprise of “Part of Your World”, which takes place after Ariel saves Prince Eric:

“What would I give to live where you are?  
What would I pay to stay here beside you?  
What would I do to see you Smiling at me?  
... Watch and you'll see  
Someday I'll be  
Part of your world” (Ashman & Menken, 1989).

This is also heard in “If I Never Knew You” from *Pocahontas* after John Smith is captured:

“If I never knew you  
If I never felt this love  
I would have no inkling of  
How precious life can be  
... And I'm so grateful to you

I'd have lived my whole life through  
Lost forever  
If I never knew you” (Menken & Schwartz 1995).

Though many women focused on their career goals, there still existed an expectation that they would eventually step away from their goals to marry well and start a family. This was reflected in *The Little Mermaid*, *Pocahontas*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and even *Mulan*. Mulan practically wins the war on her own, yet when she returns home she is still expected to marry. Ariel and Pocahontas sing their initial “want song” containing all the goals they want to accomplish in her life, but once they meet the prince/ lead male character, the goals shift to finding a way to obtain a fairytale ending. This occurs also in *Beauty and the Beast*, even though the love for the Beast grows out of an initial disgust. Either way, the Disney Renaissance stories, though more progressive than Disney Classic, still placed a strong emphasis on the love story rather than on the goals of the lead female character. Disney made many changes to the female characters to keep up with the themes of society, but the Disney Renaissance era still failed to produce an independently strong female character. As stated in *Mickey Mouse Monopoly* (2001), “However strong a female character may be, she still needs the help of a male to survive.” However, as Disney moved into the new century, the Disney female leads modernized even further to reflect the continued progress in the Women’s Rights movement.

#### *Modern Era [2009-present]*

The Modern Disney era, also known as the “Disney Revival” era began with the production of *The Princess and the Frog* in 2009 and continues through

to present day. Princess movies in this era include *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled*, and *Frozen*. These films each brought new and exciting advances to the world of Disney. For example, *The Princess and the Frog* featured Tiana, Disney's first African American Disney princess. Additionally, *Tangled* pleased critics with multiple flips in expected gender roles and behaviors, and *Frozen* captivated audiences with its many changes to the cliché Disney script, including the replacement of "true love's kiss" with the unconditional love of a sister. Additionally, the lead female characters began to be referred to as Disney "heroines" instead of "princesses". Through these changes, it seems likely that Disney was catering to an ever-present group of Disney critics—Feminists. By 2009, the Women's Rights movement had made large strides of progress. In 2007, Nancy Pelosi became the first woman to hold the position of Speaker of the House, and in 2008, Hillary Clinton became the first woman to win a presidential primary and Ann Dunwoody became the first four-star general of the United States Armed Services. It is fitting that the modern Disney heroines be included in this ever-increasing progress.

Though the Disney Renaissance movies were greatly affected by the Second-wave Feminist movement, which broadened the gender equality fight to include issues such as sexuality, equality in the workplace, and domestic violence, the female characters were still lacking qualities that allowed them to stand on their own. The frequent dissolving and shifting of goals after meeting the prince promoted the idea that a woman would not and could not pursue her dreams and goals after falling in love, because love was the ultimate goal. Though romantic

relationships still exist in the modern Disney films, they exist as more of a sub-plot while the female lead pursues her original goal. This change in where romantic relationships fall on a woman's priority list seems to line up with the viewpoints of "Millennial" women, or women who came into adulthood after the turn of the millennium.

Levi Strauss & Co. conducted a global quantitative study, in 2010, in an effort to better understand the women that they are marketing their jeans to. Not surprisingly, they found that millennial women are less willing to follow the traditional path of adulthood (education⇒career⇒marriage⇒motherhood) than previous cohorts. Millennial women show shifts in priorities and different definitions of success:

...a distinct majority of women worldwide (83 percent) feel like they are forging their own path, while a similar number (87 percent) are happy they have the opportunity to do so because they define success as being able to shape their future...traditional milestones such as being a mother (68 percent), getting married (50 percent) and being wealthy (43 percent) were seen as far less essential to how they define success. This makes complete sense when you learn that 96 percent of Millennial women list independence as their most important life goal – again a noticeably higher priority than being a mother (82 percent) and getting married (67 percent) (StrategyOne/Edelman 2010:9).

Like millennium women, the Disney heroines from *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled*, and *Frozen* also express their desire for independence, adventure, and the fulfillment of long-standing career goals, rather than for marriage, love, or wealth. In *The Princess and the Frog*, Tiana's want song is "Almost There", and it describes the determination she has to achieve the life-long goal of owning a restaurant:

"Ain't got time for messing around

And it's not my style  
This old town can slow you down  
People taking the easy way  
But I know exactly where I'm going  
Getting closer and closer every day” (Newman 2009)

Tiana was not only the first African-American Disney princess, but she was also the first Disney female lead whose “happy ever after” was born of hard work and determination. Tiana does become a real princess by marrying Prince Naveem, but the marriage did not fulfill her. Her fulfillment came from the ability to finally own a restaurant, an accomplishment that she earned and worked hard for. Similarly, Rapunzel, from *Tangled*, was stuck in a tower and spent her days cooking, cleaning, painting, reading, and brushing her hair. Not once, however, did she mention a longing for a prince to come save her. Instead, she wished for a way to escape the monotony of her life and explore life outside the tower. Rapunzel could easily be seen as a reflection of young adults today. This generation has grown up with helicopter parents, planned activities for every hour of the day, and a high expectation for success. Rapunzel’s “mom” Gothel is the definition of a helicopter parent and Rapunzel is kept busy all day. Similar to millennial women, Rapunzel wants adventure and a change of scenery. “Young women today value life’s journeys more than its destinations. Rather than wanting to “have it all,” Millennial women want to try it all” (StrategyOne/Edelman 2010). Just like in *The Princess and the Frog*, Rapunzel eventually gets married, but the marriage does not serve as a life fulfillment.

*Frozen* is the most recent of the modern Disney films and certainly the most progressive of the Disney films. Though “Sociologists for Women in

Society” (2014) refers to it as a “lukewarm” attempt at a feminist film, *Frozen* still manages to break a lot of Disney clichés. There is self-deprecating humor throughout concerning love at first sight, “true love’s kiss”, and handsome princes who come save the day. The most progressive of all is how love between sisters solves the conflict instead of a kiss from a prince. *Frozen*, like the other films in the modern era, also caters to a millennial audience with its anthems about freedom and the fear that must be conquered to receive it:

“And the fears that once controlled me  
Can't get to me at all  
It's time to see what I can do  
To test the limits and break through  
No right, no wrong, no rules for me I'm free!” (Anderson-Lopez et al.  
2013)

Comparable to Disney Renaissance princesses, Modern Disney heroines are active in the pursuit of their own happiness. They want to carve their own paths in life and they strive for independence—just like millennial women.

### *Theory*

As expected, there are many instances of gender performance in much of Disney music. An example of can be found in Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* in the heroine’s song “Part of Your World”. Polanco (2010:43) analyzed songs from the Disney movie partially to show how they contained performance of gender performativity:

Analysis of “Part of Your World” provides insight into the way in which the two differentiated spheres functioned discursively to regulate narrative performance. Here, the narrative distribution of knowledge becomes

especially relevant. “Part of Your World” characterizes Ariel as ignorant yet desiring of knowledge. At several points throughout the song Ariel forgets the word for some aspect of human life she attempts to describe. For example, she sings, “Walking along down a...what’s that word again? Street” (Clements et al. 1989). As the song continues she describes herself as “Ready to know what the people know. Ask them my questions and get some answers. What’s a fire and why does it...what’s the word...burn?” (Clements et al. 1989).

In this example, Ariel is not only performing female gender, she is performing human, and furthermore, the female human. Similarly, much of Disney’s music features a performance of gender, in which gender is both reproduced and expanded through the lyrics. Another example of this gender performance can be found in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) in Gaston’s description, sung by the “Silly Girls”:

“Look there he goes! Isn't he dreamy?  
Monsieur Gaston! Oh, he's so cute!  
Be still my heart! I'm hardly breathing!  
He's such a tall, dark, strong, and handsome brute!” (Ashman & Menken 1991)

In this case, both Gaston and the Silly girls are performing gender. Gaston is representing himself as the stereotypical “tall, dark, and handsome” man that every woman is supposed to fall for, while the “Silly Girls” play directly into this performance by performing the role of the wooed woman and showing their approval of Gaston’s masculinity. Though this gender performance is seen throughout Disney music, there are also some examples of the expanding of gender roles. In *Tangled*, Rapunzel, though limited in location, shows a wide arrange of activities, including cooking, cleaning, and self-grooming, but also



painting, reading, climbing, and other activities outside of this rigid frame of the perceived female gender Disney stuck to in many of its films.

Table 1

Themes	% of theme presence in each era (# of songs)		
	Classic (out of 8)	Renaissance (out of 11)	Modern (out of 10)
Lack of Fulfillment	50%	46%	50%
Passivity	75%	0%	0%
Patience	63%	0%	20%
Problem Avoidance	38%	0%	20%
Fulfillment through love/marriage (or desire for such)	75%	27%	30%
Discovery	13%	18%	60%
Positivity amidst negative situation	50%	9%	40%
Cheerful Disposition	100%	0%	40%
Fulfillment through freedom/different life/career/adventure (or desire for such)	0%	36%	70%
Active/Plan of Action	13%	27%	50%
Impatience	0%	36%	20%
Driven/Ambitious	0%	27%	20%
Knowledge Seeker/Curiosity	0%	46%	20%
Non-interest in Marriage	0%	27%	0%
Disappointment in Self	0%	9%	20%
Desire to please family	0%	27%	50%
Self- Sacrifice to benefit other	0%	18%	40%

### Findings

After analyzing eight songs from three Classic era Disney films (*Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty*). I found that the majority of the songs from each film communicated that the ideal female is someone who is passive, patient, cheerful, and unfulfilled with a desire to be fulfilled through love or marriage, as shown in *Table 1*. Passivity and patience are communicated through lines such as “have faith in your dreams” (David et al. 1950), “make a wish into the well”, “some day my prince will come” (Churchill & Morey 1938) and “someone who’ll find me and bring back a love song to me” (Hibler & Sears 1959). A cheerful

disposition is extremely important to the Classic era ideal woman, as it is present in every song I analyzed. Half of the songs portray this positivity in the midst of a negative situation, with lines such as: “no matter how your heart is grieving” (David et al. 1950), “with a smile and a song, life is just like a bright sunny day”, “just whistle while you work and cheerfully together we can tidy up the place”, “there’s no use in grumbling when raindrops come tumbling” (Churchill & Morey 1938), and “a gay little love melody” (Hibler & Sears 1959).

Additionally, though only 50% of the songs portray an unfulfilled woman, 75% of the songs featured the female protagonist singing about her desire for love and marriage: “So this is love...so this is what makes life divine” (David et al. 1950), “I’m wishing for the one I love to find me today”, “Wedding bells will ring some day when my dreams come true” (Churchill & Morey 1938) “I dreamed we’d be together in love forever”, “Will my song go winging to someone who’ll find me” (Hibler & Sears 1959). Only one song, “Whistle While You Work” displays an active woman; however, the activity is cleaning. Additionally, only one song, “So this is Love” features a woman discovering something new. The rest of the themes, such as a non-interest in marriage, impatience, and curiosity, are not found until the Renaissance era.

The research from the Renaissance era included the analysis of eleven songs from four Disney films (*The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Pocahontas*, *Mulan*). As shown in *Table 1*, there is a broad spectrum of characteristics that the Renaissance era female protagonists possess and they appear to be more well rounded than Classic era female protagonists. By contrast,

four themes that appear heavily in the Classic era songs—passivity, patience, problem avoidance, and a cheerful disposition—do not appear at all in the Renaissance era songs that were analyzed. Additionally, Renaissance era lyrics feature almost 50% as many themes than the Classic era lyrics and none of the themes are present more than 46% of the time, making the Renaissance female protagonists a slightly more diverse group than their predecessors.

While there is still a significant percentage in lack of fulfillment among protagonists, there is a decrease in the desire for fulfillment through love and marriage, from 75% to 27%, and an increase in the desire for fulfillment through freedom, a different life, a career, or adventure, from 0 to 36%. Lines that feature this desire include the following: “Wandering free, wish I could be part of that world” (Ashman & Menken 1989), “There must be more than this provincial life”, “I want adventure in the great wide somewhere” (Ashman & Menken 1991). Themes of discovery, activity, impatience, ambition, and curiosity also rise in percentage during the renaissance era: “Watch and you’ll see, some day I’ll be part of your world (Ashman & Menken 1989), “What I dream the day might send, just around the river bend”, “If you walk the footsteps of a stranger, you’ll learn things you never knew” (Menken & Schwartz 1995).

There is also a significant rise in the non-interest in marriage, disappointment in self, the desire to please family, and self-sacrifice to benefit another: “If I were truly to be myself, I would break my family’s heart”, “Ancestors hear my plea...keep my father standing tall” (Wilder & Zippel 1998), “Madame Gaston, his little wife, no sir, not me” (Ashman & Menken 1991), “Can

I ignore that steady drumming for a handsome, sturdy husband” (Menken & Schwartz 1995). There still exists a desire for love in three of the songs, interestingly from female protagonists who previously show desire for fulfillment through freedom and adventure: Ariel, Belle, and Pocahontas.

The research from the Modern era included the analysis of ten songs from three Disney Modern era films (*The Princess and the Frog, Tangled, Frozen*). Featuring all but two themes (passivity and non-interest in marriage) within the song lyrics, the Modern era female protagonists appear to be the most varied group among the three eras, as seen in *Table 1*. Out of all of the themes, the most common (70%) is the desire for fulfillment through freedom, a different life, a career, or adventure: “For the first time ever, I’m completely free!” (Menken 2010), “I’m gonna do my best to take my place in the sun” (Newman 2009), “No right, no wrong, no rules for me. I’m free!” (Anderson-Lopez et al. 2013). The theme of discovery is in more than half of the songs, as three of the four female protagonists (Rapunzel, Anna, Elsa) are freed from various prison-like circumstances, whether physical or emotional: “Now I’m here suddenly I see” (Menken 2010), “The window is open, so’s that door. I didn’t know they did that anymore”, “That perfect girl is gone”, “Oh I’m such a fool, I can’t be free” (Anderson-Lopez et al. 2013).

Though the themes of patience, problem avoidance, impatience, ambition, curiosity, and disappointment in self are present, they each only appear in two songs. The desire for fulfillment through love or marriage, positivity amidst negativity, cheerfulness, the desire to please family, and self-sacrifice are all

themes that increased in presence in comparison to the Renaissance era: “I don’t have time for dancing! That’s just gonna have to wait a while”, “My daddy said that and I’ll never forget” (Newman 2009) “I’ve got my mother’s love, I shouldn’t ask for more” (Menken 2010), “A chance to find true love”, “Be the good girl you always have to be”, “Just stay away and you’ll be safe from me” (Anderson-Lopez et al. 2013). Additionally, excluding self-sacrifice and the desire to please family, the aforementioned themes and characteristics that were not progressive enough for Renaissance female protagonists, seem to have resurfaced from the Classic era.

### *Summary*

Through a review of the literature, it is clear that the female leads of Disney films from each era mirror the wants and desires of the average woman at the time of each film’s production. The way this is ultimately communicated is through song, as shown in the sets of lyrics above. Though each era alludes to a different feminine norm through song lyrics, the majority of the themes are present in every Disney era. Themes such as patience, passivity, cheerful disposition, positivity amidst negative situations, problem avoidance, and desire for fulfillment by love or marriage are heavily present in the Classic era and some even resurface in the Modern era, but seem to mostly disappear during the Renaissance era. Additionally, themes of impatience, ambition, curiosity, and a non-interest in marriage do not appear until the Renaissance era, but drop in significance during the Modern era. The themes that consistently become more present throughout the eras are the themes of discovery, desire for fulfillment

through something other than love or marriage, activity, disappointment in self, the desire to please family, and self-sacrifice to benefit others. As the eras progress, the Disney characters appear to become more nuanced and complex, especially when Modern heroines are compared to Classic princesses.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

### *Discussion*

Although Disney's social influence has been well documented, Disney music, for the most part, has managed to evade extensive critique for its participation in the socialization process. The goal of this project was to highlight how gender is represented in Disney music in an effort to analyze the message that children are receiving through this media. Though my findings communicate how messages of femininity have changed over almost a century of Disney production, there still remain questions in need of discussion and future research.

An important aspect of this project to note is that the way femininity is communicated through Disney music is only one piece of the big picture that is femininity in Hollywood. As previously mentioned, Hollywood has not been kind to women. From the limited characterization of female characters to a limited picture of femininity through the successes of only young, thin actresses, Hollywood has been shaping the way femininity is communicated to viewers of all ages. What makes Disney especially dangerous is its close relationship with children and the socialization process. Though Disney has done a decent job of changing female characters to better reflect reality, there is still, even in the Modern Disney era, a promotion of somewhat restricted and traditional representations of gender.

As my findings suggest, the message that communicates ideal femininity varies slightly over the three eras of Disney movies; however, the many commonalities between the eras may outweigh the differences. This calls into question whether Disney's performance of gender has really changed at all since the Classic Era. It is important to note that while the characteristics of Classic era princesses are not definitively "bad" characteristics for women to have, the limitation of characteristics to only those of domesticity and passivity contributes to long-term gender socialization and could affect the opportunities that women have, especially those that are career-related. When women are seen only as passive and domestic beings who are just biding their time until they find a husband, acquiring a job in a male-dominated workforce and obtaining and keeping the respect of employers becomes a much more difficult task. With Disney still promoting romantic subplots in the modern heroine films, it promotes the idea that a storyline with a female protagonist cannot stand on its own, diminishing a potentially powerful model of modern femininity to a Disney stock character.

With the existence of criticisms of even modern Disney heroines (Guo 2016; Jafar 2014), one question arises: Why is a restricted and traditional representation of gender still so marketable in Disney music and entertainment? This commercialization of gender representation is marketed directly to children, and has potentially disastrous effects on the way children continue to learn about and interact with the opposite gender (Sun et al. 2002). If the audience is calling for a more progressive Disney female protagonist, why hasn't Disney provided



one? Surely, the existence of a Disney female protagonist with no hint of a romantic subplot would still be a box-office success—it is Disney after all. Additionally, if Disney were to alter its characters' performance of gender in the future, there remains a possibility that society would follow. Just as Disney made adjustments during the Renaissance era to better reflect female reality, they should again adjust to the reality of the modern woman. Disney films and songs with messages that are relevant to the modern woman would prevent the possibility of women today being judged by the standards of yesterday. Such messages could include the following themes: independence without the neglect of responsibilities, fulfillment without romance, and the acknowledgement of societal pressures that women still face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### *Conclusion*

With the immensity that children learn and are surrounded by Disney music, it is imperative that the message that the children take in is a healthy one. Discovering the messages that are communicated through song lyrics is only the first step in positively affecting how children are socialized through Disney music. It would be ideal for media in its entirety to use its influence in the socialization process to promote healthy messages about gender representation; however, until this is a reality, society must remain aware of how children are a product of their surroundings and will repeat behaviors they are exposed to. As this project dealt mostly with the representation of female gender, moving forward I believe that this study could be made greater if extended to further

research the representation of the male gender and the message of masculinity that is perpetuated through Disney music and films. Disney still has a long way to go concerning the limited portrayal of gender within their music and films, and I look forward to witnessing the change and the effects it has on the socialization of its audience.

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