

The Evolving Constructions of Femininity in Animated Films: Their Effects on Female Gender Beliefs with a Focus on the Characters of Mulan and Cinderella

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Abstract

The research investigates how femininity is represented in animated films by comparing the characters of Mulan and Cinderella. While Mulan portrays a strong and independent female lead, Cinderella adheres to traditional gender norms. The study aims to analyze how animated films can reinforce or challenge gender stereotypes and emphasizes the importance of diverse and inclusive media portrayals.

Introduction

“Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Has the Princess Changed at All?” (Paraskevi Markopoulou, n.d.)

Animated films have been a source of entertainment that brings all generations together. From Disney classics to modern Pixar creations, these colorful narratives have a unique power to shape our understanding of the world around us. However, beyond their value as pure entertainment, animated films can also play a significant role in shaping our beliefs and worldviews, especially in terms of gender and societal norms. This is particularly relevant to the topic at hand, which is "The Evolving Constructions of Femininity in Animated Films: Their Effects on Gender Beliefs- with a focus on the characters of Mulan and Cinderella."

The project recognizes the playful nature of animation while acknowledging its potential to challenge or reinforce cultural boundaries. As children, we learn many of our beliefs and values from the media we consume, including animated films. The project's analysis of the portrayal of gender in animated films can help shed light on how these films shape our beliefs about gender roles, expectations, and stereotypes.

In the context of contemporary times, gender equality has become more relevant than ever. As Paraskevi Markopoulou notes, Naomi Wolf, author of "The Beauty Myth," believes that the concept of gender equality or feminism should be viewed as the logical extension of the core idea of democracy (2012). This is particularly important when considering the impact of animated films on our beliefs and worldviews. Animated films uniquely shape our understanding of the world around us, including our perceptions of gender and societal norms. Therefore, analyzing the portrayal of characters, narratives, and themes in animated films can help us uncover the nuanced ways these elements influence and reflect prevailing gender norms, and contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between media and gender sociology.

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consume, including animated films. The project's analysis of the portrayal of gender in animated films can help shed light on how these films shape our beliefs about gender roles, expectations, and stereotypes.

Analysis

In my survey and research on this topic, I found that one approach to analysis is quantitative analysis, which involves using datasets from websites like IMDB to examine the representation of gender norms in leading roles across different film genres, with a particular emphasis on animated films. This method is effective in identifying any gender imbalances that may exist and shedding light on the underlying gender stereotypes prevalent in the film industry.

By integrating online data into the analysis, it becomes more reliable and fact-based. This enables you to go beyond personal experiences and provide a more precise understanding of the impact of animated movies on gender stereotypes.

One can use case studies to challenge and compare said gender norms being developed. For example, you can put the movie *Mulan* against a movie like *Cinderella* which traditionally reinforces certain stereotypes. Speaking of stereotypes, to understand and analyze people's perceptions better, you can explore online discussions or hashtags related to body image in animation, and how it would affect or have a potential impact on expectations for young viewers. You could also identify how these characters achieve their goals- does success rely on masculine traits like physical strength or more traditional feminine traits like empathy?

Qualitative analysis can help explore the perception of character portrayals in movies, such as the themes of "strong female leads" or "challenging established stereotypes," which can provide insights into the discourse around the representation of gender in media.

Speaking of *Mulan* and *Cinderella*, both characters have been widely discussed in terms of their portrayal of gender stereotypes in the media.

Upon completion of a survey, I had the opportunity to analyze the gathered data and gain valuable insights into the audience's perceptions of these two characters.

Firstly, *Cinderella* is a passive character who relies heavily on external forces like magic and the Prince to solve her problems. She waits for her situation to change rather than actively taking charge, which reinforces the "damsel in distress" trope, where a woman needs a man to solve her problems. On the other hand, *Mulan* takes matters into her own hands (Garcia). She disguises herself as a man, trains rigorously, and actively fights to save her father and her country. This demonstrates agency, independence, and a willingness to defy expectations.

Secondly, while *Cinderella*'s focus is primarily on beauty and achieving a more "socially acceptable" appearance, *Mulan* values inner strength, courage, and resourcefulness. She cares for her appearance as part of her social role, but it's her inner qualities that truly shine through. Her journey emphasizes qualities not typically associated with femininity, challenging those stereotypes.

Thirdly, *Cinderella* embodies the traditional "princess" stereotype, focused on domesticity and finding a husband. This reinforces societal expectations that limit women's roles in society. On the contrary, *Mulan* breaks free from gender limitations. She excels in traditionally male domains like warfare and combat, proving that women can be strong, capable warriors. This challenges the cultural taboo of women engaging in activities deemed masculine.

Lastly, *Cinderella*'s primary goal is to find a romantic partner (the Prince) who will rescue her from her current situation. This reinforces the notion that a woman's happiness is incomplete without a romantic

relationship. However, Mulan's motivation stems from filial piety, the duty to honor her family. Her journey is driven by a desire to protect her father, highlighting the importance of family bonds over romantic love.

By showcasing these contrasting portrayals, Mulan actively works against the stereotypes established by Cinderella. It presents a more empowering image of femininity, where women are capable, independent, and can defy societal limitations. Mulan's portrayal of a strong, independent female character resonates with audiences, particularly young girls, providing them with a more diverse and empowering range of role models. It's important to recognize the impact of these representations, as they play a significant role in shaping societal attitudes towards gender. the trope” to see how people react to gender characterizations.

Literature Review

Animation has enthralled audiences with its colorful graphics and imaginative narratives for many years. These movies have the power to gently alter our perceptions of the world, including the intricate complexities of gender roles, beyond just being enjoyable viewing. This research explores how femininity has been portrayed in animated movies over time, comparing and contrasting Mulan (1998) and Cinderella (1950). We may learn a great deal about how animated stories have both reinforced and challenged conventional gender stereotypes by examining how these characters are portrayed.

Gender stereotypes are oversimplified beliefs and expectations about the qualities, behaviors, and roles that go along with being male or female. These stereotypes are strongly established in numerous sectors of society, and the media, especially animated films, has a huge impact on reinforcing or questioning them. Aubrey and Harrison (2000) found that gender stereotypes are ubiquitous across several media genres, with children's programming being more powerful. This is important since youngsters are particularly vulnerable to the messages they absorb through media. Stereotypical depictions can alter people's perceptions of gender roles, as well as their behavior and expectations.

Early research on animated films indicated a worrying pattern: female characters were consistently underrepresented as compared to male characters. This lack of equity was exacerbated by the presentation of female characters as stereotyped figures. Thompson and Zerbinos (1995) discovered a consistent pattern of females depicted as princesses, damsels in peril, or entirely focused on domestic tasks. In sharp contrast, male characters were frequently depicted as heroes, adventurers, and leaders. These portrayals reinforced the masculine/feminine binary, limiting female characters' ability to defy these assumptions.

Mulan represents a watershed point in the development of animated female characters. The film breaks the pattern by featuring a protagonist who deliberately rejects traditional ideals of gender. Mulan's journey begins not with a desire for romance or to comply with society norms, but with a strong feeling of filial piety, or the obligation to honor her family. She is disguised as a male and goes through intense military training, exhibiting incredible power, resourcefulness, and intelligence. Her accomplishment on the battlefield calls into question the notion that physical prowess is exclusively a masculine quality. Furthermore, Mulan's devotion to her family and readiness to make sacrifices for them demonstrate the power and emotional depth that are frequently linked with femininity.

Notably, her character journey does not need her to give up her feminine attributes to become a hero. Instead, Mulan teaches that power can take many forms, redefining what it means to be a hero. This uplifting portrayal resonates strongly with viewers, particularly young girls, who see a heroine who is both strong and caring, breaking traditional gender norms.

Cinderella (1950) represents a more conventional view of women. The video emphasizes her physical beauty and desire to escape her current predicament by marrying a prince. Cinderella's passiveness and reliance on external forces, such as her fairy godmother and the prince, strengthen the "damsel in distress" cliché. Her main purpose is to locate a romantic partner, reinforcing the idea that a woman's happiness is incomplete without a male. Cinderella demonstrates kindness and resilience, however, these attributes are mostly focused on domestic responsibilities and having a happy attitude in the face of hardship. Cinderella's path, unlike Mulan's, lacks any element of personal growth or self-discovery. She is essentially passive throughout the story, achieving her objectives through external action rather than her initiative.

The opposing depictions of Mulan and Cinderella show the dynamic nature of gender representation in animated films. Mulan is a notable departure from previous movies that frequently upheld gender stereotypes by presenting a strong, self-reliant female lead who redefines what it means to be a hero. This development is a reflection of how society is evolving and how there is an increasing need for media representations that are inclusive and diverse. It is imperative to acknowledge the influence of animated films on molding gender stereotypes. By dissecting these representations, we may educate young audiences to think critically and inspire the development of stories that defy preconceptions and feature a more diverse range of female characters. In animation and the media, the battle for gender parity is far from over. To find out how media literacy instruction affects kids' perceptions of gender norms, more research is required.

Conclusion

The present study has examined the role of animated films in shaping and reinforcing societal norms related to gender beliefs, including the portrayal of female characters in Disney's *Mulan* and *Cinderella*. Analyzing character portrayals, narrative structures, and visual representations has shown how these films can perpetuate or challenge cultural taboos.

For instance, the study has revealed how *Mulan* defies traditional gender expectations by portraying a strong and independent female character who saves the day, while *Cinderella* perpetuates the damsel-in-distress stereotype by portraying the female character as helpless and dependent on a male savior.

However, animated films can also subvert societal norms by showcasing female characters in positions of power and defying traditional gender expectations. By encouraging the creation and promotion of such films, we can pave the way for a future where animated stories reflect the richness and complexity of gender experiences in our society.

In conclusion, a nuanced understanding of the influence of animated films on shaping gender beliefs provides us with the tools to advocate for positive change. To create a more diverse and inclusive media landscape, it is essential to critically engage with the narratives portrayed in animated films, promote inclusive storytelling that represents various cultures, races, and genders, and bridge the gaps to promote a more equitable and diverse society where everyone feels represented and empowered.

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