

## Are Disney Characters 'Frozen' in Stereotypes? An Intersectional Analysis of *Frozen*

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### Abstract

This paper analyzes changes and continuities in the popular princess characters created by Walt Disney Studios, specifically in the 2013 movie *Frozen*. The analysis focuses on five themes suggested by an intersectionality framework: the historical and geographical contexts of Disney characters; the controlling images that are revealed; the power relations among the characters; the macro and micro conditions of Disney movies; and the intersection of gender, sexuality, race, and class in the portrayed characters. The main finding is that the traditional Disney princess has made way for a new and more modern princess character that seems to transcend the conventional stereotype of former characterizations. Yet, closer inspection of the *Frozen* movie also shows that a new stereotype has developed that depicts a princess as someone who merely thinks she is independent, but who often still needs to rely on a man.

**Keywords:** Popular culture, Disney, Frozen, Princess, Feminism, Intersectionality.

### Introduction

The aim of this study is to examine the popular princess character created by Walt Disney Studios. Exploring various Disney princess movies, this paper will specifically focus on an in-depth analysis of the Disney movie *Frozen* that was released in 2013. Arguably rivalled only by the classic *Snow White* movie of 1937, *Frozen* is among the most successful movies portraying a princess character (Cohen, 2014; Konnikova, 2014). The movie has generated more than a billion dollars in revenue and involves a global multi-billion dollar industry, including a multitude of merchandise products, a popular music soundtrack, and the sequel *Frozen II* releases in November 2019. As an analysis of an aspect of contemporary popular culture, the objectives of this research are not frivolous. Because Disney movies have become part of the socialization

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experience of children all over the world, many children will indeed rely on the images of Disney movies such as *Frozen* to help them form their own identities and even the identities of others around them.

Theoretically guided by the intersectionality perspective, the analysis in this paper is divided over five themes. First, situating *Frozen* and similar Disney movies in their respective historical and geographical contexts, plot changes are revealed in Disney movies with princess characters over time, along with changes in presenting historically inaccurate information. Second, controlling images are constructed by portraying princesses and related characters, specifically in the form of traditional gender roles, overly emotional female leads who become overly sexualized, and a persistent lack of characters of color. Third, the power relations between the movie characters, especially between the princess and the prince or another male hero, involve both traditional as well as novel cultural characteristics. Fourth, looking at both the macro conditions and micro implications of Disney movies, the impact of princesses and other characters on individual children should be examined along with a focus on the corporate business aspects of the Disney company. And, fifth and finally, gender, sexuality, class, and race are simultaneously experienced in the analyzed portrayals to reveal a high degree of homogeneity, albeit with some inroads into increasing diversity.

The overall conclusion of my study is that *Frozen* shows that the traditional Disney princess of old has been substituted for a more modern princess character that appears to break with the conventional and often sexist stereotypes of former characterizations. The traditional Disney princess is shown as very petite, with an hourglass figure and wide eyes. She is almost always in a nice dress, white, young, heterosexual, rich, and demure, with a naïve and reserved personality who always knows her true love as soon as she meets him. Her main goal is a happy ending with her prince, who almost always saves her from some evil in the world.

In *Frozen*, however, a new princess character is portrayed, one that is active, awkward, independent, and does not always look impeccable. As such, a role model for young girls has been formed that has a more realistic feel by showing one does not always have to be perfect. Yet, closer analysis of the *Frozen* movie shows that a new stereotype of the Disney princess has been developed. This new stereotype depicts a princess who thinks that she is independent, but who often still needs to rely on a man who will point her lack of autonomy out to her. While some progressive changes have been made in Disney's *Frozen*, several problematic stereotypes related to race, class, gender, and sexuality have still not been abandoned.

## Perspective and Theme

This analysis is theoretically guided by the intersectionality perspective, which will be shown to be especially useful to uncover the ideologies and controlling images created by Disney. The five themes that will be explored are specifically based on the influential intersectional model introduced by Lynn Weber (2010) in her groundbreaking work *Understanding Race, Class Gender, and Sexuality: A Conceptual Framework*. Weber's feminist sociology suggests examining cultural phenomena in relation to: their historical and geographical context; the social construction of controlling images; their power dynamics; the micro-macro interplay; and, most innovatively, the manner in which gender, sexuality, race, and class intersect and are simultaneously experienced.

*Frozen* tells the story of two sisters in the Kingdom of Arendelle (Disney Films, 2013). Elsa, the older sister, is born with a magical power to freeze things and create ice and snow. Anna, the younger sister, was accidentally hurt by Elsa's power when she was a young child, and Elsa must be separated from everyone until she learns to control her power. Upon her parents' death, Elsa is to be queen of Arendelle. On coronation day, Elsa accidentally freezes the entire kingdom and puts it in an eternal winter. After Elsa runs away because of the accident she caused, Anna goes after her, leaving her love interest, Prince Hans, behind to care for the kingdom. Anna teams up with a poor local ice salesman, Kristoff, to find Anna. Along the way, they come across Olaf, a snowman created by Elsa, and he joins their journey. At the conclusion of the movie, it is revealed that Prince Hans is actually the villain of the movie. The true love that saves the day is between the sisters, Anna and Elsa. Elsa has by then learned to control her powers and becomes Queen, leading to the movie's happy ending.

In the form of the character of Anna, *Frozen* has a new take on the Disney princess. Anna is active, awkward, independent, and does not always look or act perfect. She eventually realizes that the true love she met is actually the villain of the story. Thus, at first sight, it appears that Disney has constructed a role model for young women that has a more realistic feel and that shows it is okay to not always be perfect. However, careful analysis of the movie shows that an old stereotype has been substituted with a new one. The new stereotype depicts a princess who thinks she is independent, but actually is not and often still needs a man to point her lack of independence out to her. Elsa, who is a princess-like character that spends the majority of the movie as a (young) queen, also presents a traditional stereotype as she is shown as an over-emotional woman. As such, while Disney has made some positive changes in *Frozen*, it still depicts certain negative stereotypes.

Methodologically relying on a qualitative strategy, research for this paper was undertaken in two stages. First, I conducted a content analysis of extant

research. Second, I undertook an in-depth analysis of *Frozen*. I viewed the film a total of ten times and took notes during each viewing. Guided by the intersectionality perspective, I especially looked for dominant themes that emerged in relation to race, class, gender, and sexuality. I also looked at the characters' physical appearance and looked for quotes of things said in the movie that fit into the dominant themes. After each individual viewing of the film, I coded my notes based on the discovered findings in relation to the five specified themes. In the following pages, I have chosen to weave the analysis of *Frozen* together with observations from previous research analyzed under the five specified themes in order to reveal conceptually relevant differences and similarities.

### **Historical and Geographical Context**

The context of cultural portrayals is central to understanding how their characteristics are rooted in history and geographically related (Weber, 2010). In terms of popular culture, contextual variables are important to show how and why certain cultural forms can become influential in the media. For something to become popular, it should reflect some of the values that are present for that specific time in history and for the specific location of that market. Popular culture becomes a gateway to explore the underlying structure of society and the hierarchies that exist.

#### *Disney Visions of Race and Gender*

Disney has been making movies for close to a century now, revealing various changes in relation to plot, image, and other key aspects of its movies. A study by Dorothy L. Hurley (2005) explores how Disney has kept the same binary color symbolism in all of its movies, even though many decades have passed since the first Disney princess movies *Snow White* in 1937, *Cinderella* in 1950, and *Sleeping Beauty* in 1959. In these early Disney movies, there is a clear binary color symbolism between black and white. Throughout these movies there are countless references to the 'good' side as being white or having white features and the 'bad' side as being black or having black features (Hurley, 2005, p. 223). Even though it can be argued that these stories only have white characters because of their European origins, there is still no explanation for the overwhelming use of the colors black and white as moral symbols. This binary continues in movies like *The Little Mermaid* of 1989 and *Beauty and the Beast* of 1991 (Hurley, 2005, p. 225). If these movies were

originally based on social values at specific historical periods, the plot lines of the movies should also have reflected the changes that society experienced.

Disney has occasionally been criticized for the purported racism in its movies (Barker, 2010; Breaux, 2010; Moffitt and Harris, 2014; Sandlin and Maudlin, 2017). One recent Disney movie that caused quite a stir over race issues was the 1992 production of *Aladdin*, an issue that is explored in the video documentary *Mickey Mouse Monopoly* (Sun and Picker, 2001). Among other issues, the opening song in the movie had lines that portrayed Arabs negatively. Disney ultimately decided to change some parts of the movie, but left some scenes that are considered to be racist. Specifically, the movie kept the line “it’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home” in the opening song and also left intact a scene that shows Jasmine almost getting her hand cut off just for giving an apple to a hungry boy because it was presumed she stole it. A recent remake of the movie in 2019 was judged not to be satisfactory in its attempt to redress such cultural insensitivities (Romano, 2019).

The most important change that *Frozen* brought about relates to gender. As always, true love must save the princess at the end of the movie to secure a happy ending. The shocking change is that true love is between two sisters and not a man character and woman character in a romantic relationship. At the end of the movie, it is Anna who gives her life to save Elsa, which ultimately saves Anna as well, because her act of true love melts the ice that was accidentally put in her heart by Elsa. Also relating to the theme of true love is that the Prince in *Frozen* whom Anna falls in love with eventually actually turns out to be the villain of the movie. In almost all of the other Disney princess movies, the two main characters fall in love at first sight. *Frozen* instead makes a clear point to show that it is impossible to fall in love without knowing someone’s true personality, thus offering a more realistic view of romance (Koontz et al., 2019). Anna falls for Kristoff, who is not a prince, when their romance evolves out of a friendship and only after they have spent a lot of time together.

The previous illustrations are just a few examples of how Disney characters have changed over time with respect to race and gender. These changes generally reveal a trend towards more egalitarian roles (England et al., 2011). However, to date, there are still no gay characters in Disney movies. If movie plot lines change in response to societal developments, we would expect to see gay characters appear in the future. Notably, as I will further explore below, *Frozen* has a lead female character with an ambiguous sexual identity.

### *Historical Inaccuracies*

Many examples could be mentioned to show the historical inaccuracies that

are portrayed in Disney movies. Among the best illustrations is the 1995 movie *Pocahontas*, which misrepresents what happened to the Native Americans when the English settlers came over and violently took their land. In the movie, it appears that both the Native Americans and the English settlers were confused about each other's culture and that they both viewed each other's group as "savages". Once the mutual misunderstanding is realized, there is a resolution through cooperation and a happy ending. When children were asked what they think about the movie, they took its story for historical fact (Sun and Picker, 2001).

### **Social Construction of Controlling Images**

The social constructions of characters in Disney movies are created in and based on the hierarchies that exist at a particular moment in time and location in space. Once made, a movie does not change and represents that localization, even though cultural values with respect to such important issues as race, class, gender, and sexuality change over time. Cinematic social constructions can become controlling images that serve as tools that make a given power structure appear as "normal and natural" (Collins, 2000, p. 77). As humans tend to think in binaries, people who are different become "othered" and objectified (Collins, 2000, p. 78). This notion of controlling images can indeed also be applied to Disney movies.

### *Ambiguous Sexual Identities*

The issue of sexuality, specifically sexual orientation, is the least studied area on Disney because there are no openly homosexual characters in any of its films. However, a 2004 study looked at how characters are treated when they at least display some opposite gender behavior (Towbin et al., 2004, p. 33). Some Disney movies, such as *Aladdin* and *Pocahontas*, show a negative view of men having feminine qualities, while other movies such as *Tarzan* or *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* do not sanction male characters when they act feminine (Towbin et al., 2004, p. 34). In *Mulan* of 1998 and *Beauty and the Beast* of 1991 it is considered simply disgusting when two men are affectionate with each other, yet in *The Lion King* it is acceptable in the relationship between the characters of Timon and Pumbaa (Towbin et al., 2004, p. 34). Interestingly, *Mulan* is entirely devoted to a woman acting as a male soldier. She is viewed as a hero for what she does, but at the end of the film, ultimately chooses to stay

at home with her family rather than accepting a prestigious leadership position for her country.

Looking at *Frozen* in this context, the lead princess of Elsa is portrayed without a love interest at all during the entire story. At one point, she even refuses to dance with a man at a ball and pushes her sister Anna forward to take her place. Elsa's sexual orientation is thereby left somewhat ambiguous, which might be a first step in the direction towards having an openly gay character. On social media, Elsa's ambiguous sexual identity led to many posts using the hashtag #makeelsagay in hopes of having an explicitly gay Disney character (Siede, 2016). In another scene in *Frozen*, a family situation is shown that could be understood to be headed by a gay couple. When Anna meets Kristoff in a store in the woods, she also meets a man with a Swedish accent who runs the store. At one point, a door opens to a sauna where his children and another older man are standing together. As there is no older woman character in the scene that could pass as a mother/wife, it is possible that the older man in the room is, or at least acts as the substitute of, the romantic partner of the storekeeper.

#### *Over-Emotional Women*

In *Frozen*, Elsa is the epitome of the stereotype of the over-emotional woman. She has the power to freeze things only and precisely when her emotions are out of control and she has to spend the entire movie trying to learn how to control this power. Every time she becomes angry or sad she begins to uncontrollably freeze things, which ultimately destroys the kingdom she is to rule over as queen. Elsa is portrayed as white with extremely fair skin and very light blonde hair. She is thin with an hourglass figure and is always seen wearing a dress.

Yet, the Elsa character also goes against some of the more traditionally presented woman Disney leads. Elsa has mixed messages about what it means to be a woman, going against the conventional stereotype Disney created many decades ago. For example, Elsa speaks one of the most famous quotes from the movie after Anna tells her she is going to marry Prince Hans (whom she had just met hours earlier) when she says, "You can't marry a man you just met." Such insight contradicts the example of earlier Disney princesses who would fall in love instantly. Elsa is also much less awkward than Anna's character and appears to be more confident in what she says.

Elsa's physical appearance is of interest because it undergoes a distinct change in the middle of the film. Elsa starts out as very conservative, wearing a dress that covers her arms and entire body up to her neck. She also wears gloves. During this part of the movie, her entire focus is to learn to control her

powers. She is locked up alone in her room and has no contact with anyone. When she finally does have to come out of her room for the coronation, she is extremely nervous that she will not be able to control her powers. She is able to keep control, until she gets into a confrontation with Anna and becomes emotional and again uncontrollable. When Elsa decides to run away (in the most famous scene of the movie, featuring the Oscar-winning song “Let it Go”), she decides she no longer has to be “the good girl she always had to be” and for the first time appears happy. While singing the song, Elsa changes her outfit, hair, and demeanor. She becomes more sexualized in appearance, with bigger, looser hair and a dress that is tighter, has a large split up her legs, and even shows some cleavage. She also appears to be happier, sexier, and much more confident as she has finally accepted her power and the beautiful things she can do with it.

The “Let It Go” scene reveals a distinct ambiguity. It shows that in order for people to be truly happy, they must be themselves and that it is okay to be different, letting go of whatever it was that was holding them back. Earlier in the movie, Elsa was forced to be locked in a room and live alone while trying to learn to control her power. “Conceal it, don’t feel it,” her father tells her. But after she has taken her gloves off and sees how her powers can create beauty, she is finally happy. She rejects any (man’s) advice to conform to the emotionless, reserved, and conservative stereotype of the perfect traditional princess. She even tosses her crown away.

However, it is also striking that in gaining control, Elsa becomes more sexualized in her appearance, conforming to the patriarchal idea that women should be sexy. Anna duly comments on Elsa’s change in appearance when she sees her for the first time after the transformation, saying “Whoa Elsa... you look different... It’s a good different.” Thus, Elsa displays stereotypes in her transformation from looking very conservative to becoming sexualized. This portrayal is different from prior Disney movies, where white princesses are shown as demure and covered up, while princesses of color are more sexualized and in provocative clothing.

Breaking with past Disney images, the character of Elsa never has to be saved by a man. She takes care of herself. At some point, when Prince Hans and another man are attacking her, she uses her powers to protect herself. And when she is locked up in the dungeon, she is able to free herself by freezing off the chains. The only time in the entire movie Elsa needs saving is when she is about to be killed by Prince Hans. She most likely could have saved herself, but because she had just been told she killed Anna, she does not fight back and Anna comes to her rescue and sacrifices herself to save Elsa. The only time Elsa needs to be saved, then, it is her sister, not a prince, who saves her.



### *Characters of Color*

In *Frozen*, a group of trolls are in charge of raising the character of Kristoff. A white actor voices the lead troll, but some of the other trolls appear to have ethnic/minority voices, the only instance in the movie where there is any reference to someone who is not white. This lack of characters of color in a leading role is reminiscent of the 1994 production of *The Lion King* in which the memorable roles voiced by African Americans are the ‘bad’ hyenas (Sun and Picker, 2001). Ethnic voices in Disney movies are quite commonly attached to specific animals, such as crows, monkeys, and hyenas. In the 1967 movie *The Jungle Book*, the orangutans sing a song about wanting to “Be Like You” while jive dancing and using African American dialect. Shockingly, in the 1999 animated movie *Tarzan*, there are no African characters although the movie is set in Africa. Besides the white human characters in *Tarzan*, there are only apes, which has been argued to create a context where both African and African American children who view the film see themselves reflected more in the characters of the apes rather than the (white) humans (Sun and Picker, 2001). Similarly, in the 2008 Disney movie *Beverly Hills Chihuahua*, most all Latino/a characters are chihuahuas who do something wrong. In *Mulan* of 1998, similarly, Chinese culture is portrayed as one of the most sexist in the world (Sun and Picker, 2001).

In *Frozen*, it would have been possible to put characters of color in the story. Even though the story is based on the Hans Christian Andersen fairy Tale “The Snow Queen” and therefore set in a Nordic context, the movie is released in 2013 with a contemporary appeal to a global, multicultural audience. During the coronation scene, for instance, many guests from all over Arendelle and beyond are shown, speaking with many different accents. However, all guests are white, with the single exception of one person of color, a dark-skinned woman who appears only for a few second in the background and can hardly be seen. In fact, it wasn’t until after multiple viewings that the author noticed the character. Unlikely to even be seen by many viewers, one singular background character who is a person of color does not alter the overall racial uniformity presented in *Frozen*.

### **Power Relations**

Social constructions lead to hierarchies whereby one group has control over another (Weber, 2010, p. 109). In this section I explore the dynamics of power shown in Disney movies and how the created social constructs reinforce who

should be in power and why. I will show that power in *Frozen* still remains with the main male character despite the focus on Elsa and Anna.

### *The Traditional Disney Princess*

Race and gender issues in Disney movies have been well researched. Useful for the present analysis, Lacroix (2004) examines five heroines from popular Disney movies in the 1990s, finding that the heroines become increasingly more sexualized in each new movie and that the women of color are subject to orientalization. Orientalization implies that characters are stereotypically connected to their culture through their style of dress and body build, iconography of the films, personalities, and the dynamics of their relationships with men. The white heroines Belle and Ariel from *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Little Mermaid*, respectively, are depicted as teenagers who are very small and delicate. They are dressed in conservative dresses and show little skin (other than the time while Ariel is a mermaid and wears a bikini top). These physical characteristics can be traced back to the traditional Disney princesses like Snow White and Aurora (Lacroix, 2004, p. 220). By contrast, the character of Jasmine from *Aladdin* who has darker skin and larger eyes is physically more active than Belle or Ariel. Jasmine also uses her sexuality to try to defeat Jafar, the villain, and wears an outfit that shows her midriff and shoulders.

The Disney princess look changes with Pocahontas, who is tall, strong, and more curvaceous than previous princess characters. Her outfit accents her small waist and has a high slit in the thigh (Lacroix, 2004, p. 220). The character of Esmeralda (from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*) has a very dark skin tone and is the most physically mature and sexual. Her outfit shows cleavage and an hourglass figure. Overall, then, these physical images show white women as dainty and non-active and women of color as athletic and physically mature. Their outfits are stereotypically representative of the culture they come from, in a sexualized and exotic way. The iconography of the films also over-sexualizes the women of color by having more zoomed-in shots of these characters in action (Lacroix, 2004, p. 222).

Despite the stereotypical characterizations of women of color in Disney movies, they are also shown as strong-willed and independent. Yet, unlike white characters, these attributes are linked to their group culture, not any individual personality traits (Lacroix, 2004, p. 223). Ariel and Belle, for instance, are independent through strong-willed personality traits that have nothing to do with their ethnicity or the color of their skin. But when Jasmine tries to escape from Jafar, showing her independent qualities, she has to resort to using her sexuality to get what she wants, something which Belle and Ariel

need not do. Likewise, Pocahontas continually makes sacrifices for her people, and ultimately cannot leave with her love John Smith because her people must come first. Esmeralda is strong-willed and independent, but her independence is depicted as a learned behavior from being a “streetwise gypsy”. It is also worth noting that the only two characters who do not end up with their loves are Pocahontas and Esmeralda, the only two heroines of color to fall in love with a white man.

### *Frozen’s New Princess*

The character of Anna in *Frozen* is very active, awkward, and wants to be around people. She has strawberry blonde hair that she wears in two braids. She wears a conservative dress and is never as sexualized as Elsa. She appears to be more naïve about life and often speaks without thinking things through, causing her to frequently stumble over her words. Thus, Disney has traded in the traditional princess stereotype for a new stereotype, most clearly depicted in Anna’s character. Anna is awkward, talkative, and active, and she thinks she is independent. As such, Anna’s character is portrayed to be more independent, relatable, and realistic. But a new Disney stereotype is created whereby the princess merely thinks she is independent, but often has to be told differently by a man.

The awkwardness of Anna can be seen as a refreshing change to the Disney princess. In one scene in the movie, the townspeople are talking about how beautiful they imagine the princesses to be, which is immediately followed by a shot of Anna waking up with extremely frizzy and messy hair and drool running down her face. Messy hair is something the traditional Disney princess would never have, even if she is being active and doing something that would normally mess up her hair. After waking up, Anna has a very active song scene where she is running, jumping, and climbing, again activities very different from traditional princesses who are rarely seen as active, unless they are one of the women of color. Singing a song, Anna says she has a strange feeling, but is unsure if it is excitement or gas. This mention of gas is stereotypically extremely unfeminine, which again goes against what it means to be a conventional princess.

Viewers quickly learn that Anna is heterosexual when she starts to discuss finding true love. Shortly after singing about true love, she awkwardly bumps into Prince Hans, a scene that heavily follows the traditional Disney love at first sight theme. Anna then falls into a boat and Hans catches her, much like a damsel in distress. Remaining true to her awkward character, she also says she wishes she hadn’t fallen, then stumbling over her words saying, “Uh you’re

gorgeous... Wait, what?" During the following duet scene, Anna and Hans fall in love, much like would happen in older Disney movies.

However, the Disney tradition is radically broken when it turns out Prince Hans is actually the villain in the movie. The twist ending reveals that Anna's love at first sight moment was misguided, a situation that is rectified with Anna's other love interest, Kristoff, who is not a prince but a poor orphan who was raised by trolls and whose only friend is a reindeer. This situation is reminiscent of the story of *Aladdin*, in which the princess loves a male lead who is poor and also has an animal, a monkey, as his best friend.

The two main scenes where Anna believes she is independent and can do anything she wants, when in reality she cannot, are both scenes that include Kristoff. In both scenes, Kristoff tries to tell Anna that she is making a mistake or she is attempting to do something Kristoff is sure she cannot possibly do. In the first scene, Anna and Kristoff come to a mountain that they have to climb to reach Elsa. Kristoff says that they only have enough rope for one person to do the climbing. Anna blows him off and immediately begins climbing the mountain without any equipment, saying she can do it on her own. But Kristoff tells her she cannot, saying "You're gonna kill yourself" and "I wouldn't put my foot there." Anna responds by saying she needs to concentrate and for him to leave her alone. "Am I almost there?" she asks, only to discover she has made it only a few inches off the ground. The scene is deliberately meant to be comical as viewers will have assumed that she accomplished a lot in the amount of time that had passed. This scene is done by zooming in on Anna's face and showing her sweat, the amount of determination on her face, and the struggle she is having while 'climbing' the mountain. However, once the camera zooms back out she is only a few inches off the ground. Thus, it is shown that Kristoff was correct when he told her she would not be able to do it.

In a scene that follows shortly after this encounter, Anna again makes a mistake, one that is very costly to the group. After Elsa creates a large snow monster that throws Anna, Kristoff, and Hans out of the castle, Anna makes a snowball and is about to throw it at the snow monster because it was being mean to them. Kristoff grabs her hand and tells her she shouldn't throw it. She ignores him and throws the snowball anyway, thereby angering the snow monster and causing the group to have to escape over a cliff, where they eventually fall. So, again, Anna thinks she is independent but has to be told she is wrong. Similarly, in another scene, Anna takes charge of the groups' journey and says, "The mountain is this way," pointing her hand in one direction. Kristoff then grabs her hand and points in the opposite direction, saying "No, it's more like this way." Anna's dependence on Kristoff can be compared to Belle's position in *Beauty and the Beast*, where the heroic focus is transferred from her (the beauty) to the man (the beast) (Craven, 2002).

Anna at other times also shows her strength and that she is an active character, especially when compared with the traditional white Disney Princesses. For example, many times Anna has to save Kristoff. In one scene, Anna and Kristoff are riding a sleigh and are under attack from a group of wolves. Anna saves Kristoff by hitting one of the wolves in the face with Kristoff's guitar. Another time, Kristoff is knocked out and unable to cut himself loose while hanging from a rope along a cliff. Anna cuts him loose and saves him. At the same time, Kristoff also saves Anna a few times throughout their journey, thus showing a more mutual relationship between two people and how they can work together to help each other. In the traditional Disney movies, the princess almost always has to be saved by the prince.

Anna does have a damsel in distress moment that requires Kristoff to come to her rescue in a dramatic and prolonged scene. After Elsa accidentally strikes Anna in the heart with ice, Anna becomes very sick because she is starting to freeze solid. Kristoff realizes he must save her or she will die. He takes her to his troll family, who assume she is his girlfriend. They check her out physically and say, "She will do," thus showing that even though Anna needed help, the first priority of Kristoff's family was to make sure she was attractive enough to be his love interest. When the leader of the trolls tells Kristoff that the only thing that will save Anna is an act of true love, Kristoff immediately jumps on his reindeer and rushes her back to the Kingdom of Arendelle. This scene is especially traditional in the sense that Kristoff is seen riding a horse in a dramatic rescue scene, and Anna is very sickly and curled up like a baby in his arms, her life clearly resting in his hands. This rescue scene is one of the most climatic, and arguably memorable, moments of the movie. Thus, even though it is the true love of the two sisters that saves Anna's life, there was still a scene depicting a traditional heroic masculine moment for Kristoff and a damsel-in-distress moment for Anna.

There are also a few instances in *Frozen* where Anna makes statements, usually in a stumbling manner, that enforce traditional gender ideals of how women are supposed to look. For example, when at the coronation Elsa tells Anna she looks beautiful, she replies, "Well, you look beautifuller... well, not fuller..." adhering to the conventional expectation that a woman should be thin. Later in the film, after Elsa has struck Anna with her power, Anna's first concern is with her appearance, not her health or well-being. When Kristoff tells Anna her hair is changing, she worries, "does it look bad?"

### **Macro and Micro Conditions**

Disney movies are successful on a global scale, being seen by children from

across cultural, national, and other boundaries (e.g., Adriany, 2019). At the macro level, Disney is a successful corporation driven by profit that controls a substantial part of popular culture media. At the micro level, individual children who are exposed to Disney movies may internalize some of the values and characteristics shown in the images. Macro and micro conditions as such interact.

Economically speaking, the Walt Disney Company is first and foremost a corporation, in which capacity it is oriented at making money, even though it mostly does so behind the image of childlike innocence (Sun and Picker, 2001). In 2019, the company had a market value of almost \$120 billion (Fortune 500). The company owns dozens of businesses, including 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, Marvel Studios, and US television stations ABC and ESPN. As such, Disney transcends its audiences from children to adults. With controlling interests in media all over the world, the company can choose advertisements, news stories, and ultimately decide what information is distributed through its own products and activities. By portraying a friendly face known as Mickey Mouse, it can hide behind an innocent image, which allows one of the world's largest corporations and shield itself from potential criticisms.

The impact of Disney movies on children has been studied by several scholars. Hurley (2005), for instance, shows the socialization and learning effects of Disney movies inasmuch as they rely on the idealizations and distortions of diverse cultures in classic fairy tales. Children are thereby exposed to texts and visuals that depict white as good and black as bad (Hurley, 2005, p. 221). A study by Yeoman (1999) found that children from different racial groups tend to perceive of good fictional characters as white. This finding is confirmed by a study by Lori Baker-Sperry (2007), who examined how children interpreted the story told in Disney's 1950 movie *Cinderella*. She found that while children were aware that they could never have a fairy godmother or animals that talked to them, but almost every girl in the study was adamant that she if she could be beautiful like Cinderella that she would one day marry a prince. The boys who showed an interest in the story were made fun of and picked on for liking a "girl" story. No matter how fictional and unrealistic, then, pop culture portrayals of men's and women's roles and ideals influence children's expectations and the problems that may ensue when such expectations are not met.

### **Intersectionality**

Finally, Disney movies like *Frozen* and those that came before it can be analyzed in terms of how gender, sexuality, race, and class are experienced

simultaneously. Even when one of these dimensions at times seems to be predominant, it is still crucial to explore the other dimensions at the same time as well. Most of the characters in *Frozen* are in these respects very homogenous, as they are rich, white, and heterosexual women and men who largely follow traditional gender norms, though there are some differences nonetheless.

Besides its white, rich, and heterosexual men and women, *Frozen* has a few characters that introduce a measure of diversity. Kristoff is a poor, white, heterosexual male who sells ice for a living. He is an orphan who was raised by trolls and his best friend is his reindeer, Sven. Kristoff is the only poor character in the movie and a few references are made to his lower class status. In one scene, he is unable to afford the rope and axe he wants to purchase, leading Anna to purchase it for him in the hopes of convincing him to help her find her sister. In another scene, his sleigh is destroyed and he appears to be devastated, saying "I just paid it off." Kristoff's lower class background does not appear to hold him back in the movie though. He never thinks he is not good enough for Anna because she is a princess, which traditionally was the case in Disney movies like *Aladdin*.

Olaf is the snowman created by Elsa for Anna when she was a young child. Olaf is a funny character in the movie that provides many moments of comic relief. A favorite character to many children, Olaf has no apparent race because he is a snowman. As a humanized version of a snowman though, he appears to be a man, albeit with androgynous characteristics. Olaf is very naïve and has a song where he dreams about summer and how much fun he will have because he doesn't realize that he is made of snow, which will melt when it's warm and the sun is out. He sings in a very dramatic and over the top voice and dances during the song, saying multiple times that he "loves warm hugs." Usually, nonhuman Disney characters have very distinctive masculine or feminine traits making their gender clear, but this is not the case with Olaf. Traditionally, if characters in a Disney movie would break the expectations associated with their gender role, they would receive a negative sanction to re-establish gender boundaries.

Finally, there is also a noticeable difference in the body type and size of some of the women who are dancing at the coronation ball in *Frozen* and its main female characters. The women dancing at the ball are generally bigger in size than Elsa and Anna. This is innovative for a Disney movie inasmuch (relatively) overweight, that is, bigger-than-thin characters are usually villains or at least not portrayed in a desirable way. While these 'plus-sized' women are very minor characters and have no speaking parts, they exist as neutral characters. To date, nonetheless, most Disney princesses remain slim.

In 2009, Disney featured its first black princess, Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog*. There was much anticipation about this movie, considering it

took many decades from the first Disney princess movie to have a black princess. Some changes were also made during production out of concern over purported racist accusations that might follow. Specifically, the princess's name was changed from Maddy to Tiana and she was eventually portrayed as a waitress rather than a chambermaid (Gregory, 2010, p. 442). Tiana spends the majority of the movie as a frog (until she is transformed after kissing Naveen), which is consistent with the stereotypical image of black women as being invisible characters (Gregory, 2010, p. 433). Likewise conventional is the portrayal of Tiana as a "respectable" black character who works hard and saves money in the hopes of having her own restaurant (Gregory, 2010, p. 446). Tellingly, also, the princess movies made by Disney following *The Princess and the Frog* were *Brave* (2002), *Tangled* (2010), and *Frozen* (2013). All these movies lack any main characters of color, as if the groundbreaking effort of *The Princess and the Frog* would suffice. Additional diversity of color was introduced in 2016 with the release of the 3D computer-animated Disney movie *Moana*, in which the lead character is the daughter of a Polynesian chief.

## Conclusion

Noticeable changes can be observed in the evolution of Disney princess movies with respect to gender, sexuality, race, and class. Contemporary princesses such as *Frozen*'s Elsa and Anna are depicted as having moments where they are not perfect, able to rescue themselves and others, and not in need of true love and marriage at the end of their happy story. Some commentators have interpreted *Frozen* as a feminist movie (Nagra, 2018; Nel, 2015), while others find that it remains conventional in its gender stereo-typing (Streif and Dundes, 2017). My analysis shows, more ambiguously, that some traditional views are broken in *Frozen* at the same time as some gender stereotypes persist, revealing what Frasl (2018) calls a 'double entanglement' of feminist and anti-feminist discourses.

Looking into the further development of Disney princesses and extending the perspective beyond *Frozen*, the 2012 Disney movie *Brave* presents an interesting comparison case, especially in connection to the central theme of gender. Set in a medieval Scottish background, *Brave* tells the story of Princess Merida who, quite unlike a traditional Disney princess, uses a bow and arrow. In defiance of tradition, she ironically fights for her own hand to choose her mate, and in subsequent adventures has a very active role in saving her family. From a feminist perspective, commentators have praised the character of Merida for its non-traditional elements of femininity and beauty. Yet, there were initial criticisms against Disney for its possible plan, as evinced from early images posted online before the movie was released, that Merida would be



portrayed as a thin woman with conventionally feminine hair and big round eyes. A petition was organized to keep the character in its original appearance in order to provide young (women) viewers with a stronger role model (Danckaert, 2013). Appearing in the intended form of a non-traditional woman who exhibits courage and independence, the Merida character in *Brave* has been praised as “Disney’s most feminist princess” for taking matters into her own hands, not being a typical damsel in distress, remaining single, and not looking like the typical Disney princess (Flynn, 2015). However, it remains too soon to say, as some have (Garcia, 2019), whether Merida presents the future of the Disney princess. Though very successful, *Brave* was less popular than *Frozen* and, receiving less glowing reviews, did not gain the latter’s global following and sustained attention. Thus, traditional and, with respect to gender, more ambivalent princesses may well remain more common in the Disney universe.

Despite the gains that have been made, Disney movies princesses could still be constructed in somewhat more realistic ways if they would not primarily be presented as conventionally beautiful and extremely thin with an hourglass figure (Golden and Jacoby, 2018). Today’s princesses remain mostly white (with few but notable exceptions) and still experience their occasional damsel-in-distress moments. Yet, a new stereotype has been created of a princess who is awkward, confident, not always perfect looking, and active. This new princess thinks, like Anna in *Frozen*, that she is independent, even when it turns out that sometimes she is not. While Disney movies have broadened their scope with positive changes in the portrayal of women as princesses, they are still largely restrictive in regards to race. *Frozen* features only white characters with speaking roles and, to date, the only black Princess is Tiana from 2009’s *The Princess and the Frog*. There is still no black Disney prince. There are no openly gay characters in Disney films, not even in minor roles. And most of the main characters are still presented as rich and upper class.

Since experiencing the enormous success of *Frozen*, the Disney company has proliferated its production of princess and other live-action movies with the production of *Cinderella* in 2015, *The Jungle Book* and *Moana* in 2016, *Beauty and the Beast* in 2017, and *The Lion King*, *Aladdin*, and *Frozen II* in 2019. In view of the steady popularity of the princess movie genre, it would be useful to research the development of the princess and other central characters in these new movies. As I argued in this paper, children from across the globe view these movies when they are still forming crucial aspects of their identities and learning about the identities of those around them. Should Disney movies perpetuate and teach distorted controlling images, it might at a societal level reinforce privilege for some and the neglect or even the oppression of others. Future research should consider if and how stories are developed that have characters that children from all walks of life are able to connect with in a

manner useful to their real-life expectations. Judging from the actual impact Disney movies have on children's ideas and ideals, it can only be judged to be beneficial to have diverse characters that can appeal to many audiences.

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