



Media Portrayal of Female Characteristics within Disney Movies Influencing Children's Body Image

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Young girls are negatively affected by the appearances of female characters in Disney movies with fair-skin-tones and slimmer bodies, especially when less diversity is shown with regards to ethnicity, body type, or overall appearance (Hayes & Tantleff-Dunn, 2010; Rutherford & Baker, 2021). According to prior studies, body dissatisfaction begins as early as five to six years old children perceiving the ideal body size as thinner than the actual average (De Coen et al., 2021; Hayes & Tantleff-Dunn, 2010; Herbozo et al., 2004; Tatangelo & Ricciardelli, 2017). Growing up with Disney princesses as idols can create a negative impact on young girls' body images when they compare themselves to their favorite Disney princess (De Coen et al., 2021). Historically, beauty ideals have been socially constructed centering on physical attractiveness and thinness through media images. The body positivity movement, focusing on acceptance and promotion of all body sizes and appearances, is challenging the thin-idealized and unrealistic standards of beauty being presented in the media since 2012 (Bahr, 2018). In an effort to look into Disney's progressive representation of female characters, this study examined whether there was a change in the way that Disney portrayed female characters' physical attractiveness, body thinness, breast size, and ethnicity after the body positivity movement. A comparison of Disney movies before and after the body positivity movement would reveal changes and improvements in the media representation of female characters.

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) was applied to explain how Disney movies shaped the social and cultural ideals of beauty and influenced young girls' perceptions toward their bodies and appearance through social comparisons of the self with beauty ideals in Disney movies. Young girls who evaluate their appearance through comparisons with Disney princesses would engage in upward social comparisons, which could result in body dissatisfaction and

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lower self-esteem (Hayes & Tantleff-Dunn, 2010; De Coen et al., 2021). However, social comparisons could enhance body image and self-esteem when comparing with female characters with diversity in appearance or body type (Hayes & Tantleff-Dunn, 2010).

Content analysis was conducted by collecting data from two female characters in 30 Disney movies for a total of 60 key female characters. Of the 30 movies, 15 were shown before 2012, and 15 were shown after 2012. For each female character, physical attractiveness, body thinness, breast size, and ethnicity were analyzed. Adapted from Petroski and Crocker (1989), perceived attractiveness was measured using a 5-point semantic differential scale, ranging from 1 = *very unattractive* to 5 = *very attractive*. Body thinness was evaluated, using The Contour Drawing Rating Scale (Thompson & Gary, 1995) that consisted of nine body figures ranging from 1 = *very thin* to 9 = *very curvaceous*. Breast size was assessed using The Breast/Chest Rating Scale (Thompson & Tantleff, 1992) consisting of five breast/chest figures ranging from 1 = *very small* to 5 = *very large*. Two coders independently analyzed the same Disney characters and negotiated coding if there were discrepancies. Raters' agreements for data coding of female Disney characters were over 75%, indicating acceptable inter-rater reliability.

Results indicated Disney female characters before 2012 had big eyes, perfect lips, and amazing hair which made them super attractive to viewers. Of the female characters included, 50% were very attractive, 30% were attractive, 10% were neutral, 6.67% were unattractive, and 3.33% were very unattractive. After 2012, Disney slowly removed perfect attractiveness traits in female characters and added more normal human features. Characters were still deemed attractive with 36.60% considered very attractive, 33.33% considered neutral, 13.33% considered attractive, 10% considered unattractive, and 6.67% considered very unattractive. Regarding body thinness, of the 30 pre-2012 female characters, 36.70% were rated a body thinness of 3, 33.30% were rated 2, 13.30% were rated 4, 6.70% were rated both 7 and 9, and 3.30% were rated 6. Of the 30 post-2012 female characters, 33.30% were rated a body thinness of 3, 23% were rated 4, 16.70% were rated 2, 10% were rated 5 and 8, 6.70% were rated 6. The female characters before 2012 (3.57) had a lower average on body thinness and less diverse body sizes in comparison with those after 2012 (3.97). Regarding breast size, 37% of the 30 female characters in movies prior to 2012 were rated with a breast size of 3, followed by 27% with 2, 17% with 5, 13% with 1, and 7% with 4. The 30 female characters in movies after 2012 reported 33% with a breast size of 2, followed by 27% with 3, 20% with 4, 10% with 5, and 10%

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with 1. The average breast sizes for both female characters were the same at 2.87. For ethnicity, 63% of female Disney characters before 2012 were Caucasian American, followed by 13.30% Asian, 6.70% African, 6.70% Native American, 6.70% Romani, and 3.30% other. Caucasian American characters were still dominant in Disney movies after 2012 at 53.30%, followed by Asian (13.30%), Hispanic (13.30%), Polynesian (6.70%), and African (3.30%).

Overall, results indicated female Disney characters presented after the body positivity movement in 2012 had more diversity in physical attractiveness, body thinness, and ethnicity, portraying more diverse and realistic body types. However, progress moved very slowly but in a positive way by straying away from the Disney “perfect” female character and promoting body positivity. It is uncertain how long it will take for Disney to completely take away “perfect” beauty ideals. Disney movies have a significant impact on children’s body image and how they view themselves. A change toward more diversity and inclusion of different body sizes and appearances would help children develop more positive body images and feel less pressure to look like the ‘perfect’ female characters currently presented in Disney movies. Results from this study show how companies can change overtime to become more inclusive and body positive as society becomes more accepting of diverse individuals. This study provides insights on the importance of diversity and inclusion in media to reduce a great threat to children’s body images. Future research utilizing a variety of different media contexts would illustrate the lack of diversity and inclusion of all body sizes and appearances in media and further demonstrate the need to protect vulnerable children due to their high consumption of media. Our study provides an insight of how Disney movies made after the body positivity movement represent the female body, appearance, and ethnicity within female characters and how they influence young girls' body images.

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