Branding the Disney Princess: Femininity, Family, and Franchising

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ABSTRACT

The Disney Princess is most popularly known as the dominating force in princess culture, where girls' identities are subsumed under a pile of pink tutus, plastic jewelry, and sparkling crowns. It is associated with antiquated feminine cultures that encourage girls to be passive, focus on looking pretty, and attract a "prince" who will marry them and facilitate a "happily ever after." A powerful criticism, this evaluation of Disney Princesses often precludes legitimate study of the characters' history and their significance today. I analyze the discursive, cultural, and economic power of the Disney Princess brand by investigating them as industry intertexts, icons of feminine cultures for audiences young and old, and a product and text within family consumer cultures. From this exploration I argue that the Disney Princess franchise evolves, reboots, and recycles in a careful dance between industry opportunism and ambivalent middle-class discourse. While Walt Disney Company producers work to retain legacy characters and create new characters for changing cultural contexts, they rely on the cyclical and vague promise of empowerment through girl-power consumer culture.

My project builds on interdisciplinary literatures, including franchising, branding, intertextuality, feminist and girls' media studies, kids' media studies, and consumer cultures to contextualize a girls' media icon. In doing so, I have discovered how discourses of the "can-do" girl are central to the contradictory brand management of these characters and their intertexts. Chapter 1 explores how discourse and cultural change shapes the evolution of the Disney Princess franchise and the relationship between its heroines. Chapter 2 illustrates how Disney Princess dolls reflect the negotiated significant of feminine cultures and the limitations of race and gender in the retail space. Chapter 3 explores how families and kids consume Disney Princess texts and the parental anxiety around this consumption. Finally, Chapter 4 explores the integration of the Disney Princess into the larger universe of Disney’s transgenerational franchises, dominated by masculinized media content. The overall project shows the inextricable links between industry practice, audience reception, and ideologies of gender that produce this feminine franchise.

INTRODUCTION

A PRINCESS PROBLEM?

She floats around the room with a faraway gaze, mumbling along with Idina Menzel's rendition of "Let It Go," the pop musical hit from Disney's *Frozen* (2013). She seems to have forgotten where she is, eyes half closed and occasionally bumping into another pair of kids who are dancing and laughing loudly. She spins and reaches outward with her arms and hands, then slowly strokes her bobbed hair, sweeping her palm back behind her as if tossing a waist-length tress of hair. I try not to laugh, remembering how I used to dream of possessing long, golden hair in place of my dark curls as I danced around the room to classical music. Maybe like I did, she's imagining herself in that story world, or a world of her own she's conjured up, taking on the gestures and passionate expressions of a fairytale princess.[1]

Princess culture is discussed in popular press as an unavoidable stage in the early life of girls[2]: a time when the obsession with the colors pink and purple, tiaras, twirl-y dresses, curled hair, and sparkly accessories dominate girls' lives. Parents will often say they anticipate and fear this stage as their daughters are indoctrinated into Disney's world of pink and purple; fewer say they look forward to it and the glittery array of outfits and accessories their daughter will enjoy.

This early childhood "phase" rests uncomfortably within third-wave feminist, postfeminist, and girl-power discourses on femininity, wherein an overindulgence in fantasy and feminine play is sometimes encouraged, and other times found suspect, if not shameful, as a gendered performance that replicates the decoration of cultural femininity under patriarchy. Girls and women watch *The Bachelor* but apologize for it. Mothers and fathers buy their daughters dolls while hemming and hawing over the possible damage they are inflicting upon their young ones. In a time characterized by an often-unconscious suspicion of femininity, the Disney Princess franchise is the perfect boogie (wo)man, an institutionalized and highly commoditized site of femininity.

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[1] Taken from observations at the Preschool Lab at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and de-identified.

[2] Peggy Orenstein, *Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches from the Front Lines of the New Girlie-Girl Culture*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2011); Martha Irvine, "Princess Pedestal: How Many Girls Are on One?," *Associated Press*, May 19, 2009, https://www.thestar.com/life/health_wellness/2009/05/19/princess_pedestal_how_many_girls_are_on_one.html; Valentina Zarya, "This Is the Latest Evidence That Disney Princesses Are Hurting Young Girls", *Fortune Magazine*, July 12, 2016, p. 1.

In spite of this cultural devaluation of the characters and their femininity, the Disney Princess has become a globally recognized and highly profitable brand through the strategic franchising of a series of Disney-adapted fairytale heroines; a kind of convergence of Princess texts into a product line influenced by intertextual spaces like Disney parks and Disney on Ice performances that audiences attend and make their own meanings out of. This franchise is emblematic of Disney's business model—cultivating a multi-platform, multi-franchise media business based on ideologies of family and gender, which serve as nexus points between industry strategy and practice and consumer cultures.

Existing academic literature on Disney Princesses primarily discuss the film narratives as sites of female empowerment or containment or express concern over the influence of the franchise over girls' identity formation.[3] I instead argue that femininity and gender are not simply the visible representations we see in the behavior and physical appearance of Princesses—rather, gender norms and negotiations of those norms are deeply woven into the cultural and industry practices of meaning-making in a U.S. context. To better understand this phenomenon, I investigate the Disney Princess as productive discourse in American culture, connecting ideologies of gender, age, and family with the production of an intertextual and transgenerational media franchise. In this sites and cultural spaces, femininity is discursively and materially influential in the multiple institutions of media and culture the Disney Princess touches. Branding, franchising, and intertextuality become central in the production and dispersal of Disney Princess value—value that is both economic and cultural. My analysis responds to the following questions:

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[3] Rebecca-Anne C. Do Rozario, "The Princess and the Magic Kingdom: Beyond Nostalgia, the Function of the Disney Princess," *Women's Studies in Communication* 27, issue 1 (2004): 35-59; Dawn Elizabeth England, Lara Descartes, and Melissa A. Collier-Meek, "Gender Role Portrayal and the Disney Princesses," *Sex Roles* 64, issue 7-8 (April 2011): 555-567, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-011-9930-7; Miriam Forman-Brunell and Rebecca Hains, eds., *Princess Cultures: Mediating Girls' Imaginations and Identities* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015); Celeste Lacroix, "Images of Animated Others: The Orientalization of Disney's Cartoon Heroines from *The Little Mermaid* to *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*," *Popular Communication* 2, issue 4 (November 2009): 213–229.

1. How does the Disney Princess franchise work to unify a disparate set of cultural texts into a brand of commodities with the media industries?
2. How does the Disney Princess franchise work in conjunction with evolving feminine cultures?
3. How do Disney Princesses fit into family consumer cultures?

As a cultural icon and franchising juggernaut, the Disney Princess must be investigated as industrial and reception discourse and practice. The scholarly importance of these characters is not their status as underwhelming examples of girls' media culture but rather a significant case study of how idealized girlhoods are branded, commodified, and interpreted by audiences in U.S. consumer culture. The Disney Princess brand prizes individualistic and heroic girlhood—reflecting girl-power rhetorics of the "can-do girl"[4]—but brand management of these characters reveals how franchised media brands contradict themselves in order to remain relevant and to connect to different audiences. The Disney Princess franchise reveals a story of brand management in communication and conflict with the middle-class, girl-power values that inform the brand's discursive—if not always its economic—power.

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[4] Anita Harris, "The 'Can-Do' Girl Versus The 'At-Risk' Girl," in *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century*, 13-36 (London: Routledge, 2003).

Intertextuality in a Conglomerate, Convergent World

As a highly commoditized family IP, I investigate the Disney Princess through brand stories, franchising practices, and intertextual meanings. In terms of valuing the texts themselves, I treat all iterations of the franchise as *media intertexts*, recognizing the connection between many types of media commodities, as Daniel Herbert does when he discusses industrial intertextuality[5], but also to level the potential hierarchy of one text over another, as Jonathan Gray does.[6] I do not use paratext to describe the dolls, clothes, TV shows and board games of the franchise, because Disney, and child consumers, do not necessarily treat their filmic folktale adaptations as central texts in the Disney Princess franchise. Instead, I treat all these media intertexts as valuable but the elevation of these *intertexts* allows me to treat them as central to the overall brand of Disney Princess. Disney Princess media intertexts are certainly character-based and look to build toward a cohesive world of Disney Princess products and experiences, but they also connect to a web of Disney franchises and Disney-branded sites of consumption: Disney parks, for instance. These media intertexts are modular and can stand alone—as Gray and Herbert stress—but they also portals that do not lead consumers to a "central" point of engagement but move audiences through multiple sites of engagement—within and outside the Disney empire.

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[5] Daniel Herbert, *Film Remakes and Franchises* (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, 2017).

[6] Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts (*New York: New York University Press, 2010).

Intertextuality, branding, and franchising overlap since they all express the productive value of texts and products. As we shall see below, all are integral to understand the proliferation of the Disney Princess as a cultural icon. Intertextuality, as opposed to branding and franchising, is a relatively authorless phenomenon, resting value and meaning in the hands of audiences. Branding and franchising, on the other hand, can express a dialogical relationship between consumer and producer, but they center intended meaning and value within industry strategy and practice.

Intertextuality, as discussed by Julia Kristeva, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Roland Barthes, is not only allusion or story continuation—as in a book series or epic poem—but also includes the importance of a text's context, both in terms of history and reception, which informs how readers absorb the meanings in a work and transfer it to other texts. Kristeva is particularly noted for characterizing the text as a process and not a fixed object[7], in opposition to New Criticism's supposition that textual meaning could be derived simply from within the pages of the work itself. She invoked Mikhail Bakhtin as an early writer on intertextuality, though he does not use the term, because of his work on the dialogic nature of texts. In broad terms, Bakhtin saw texts as an open-ended event in the human experience, as utterances, that are in constant communication with one another.[8] Barthes contribution to intertextuality speaks mainly to the deconstruction of authorial control and independence of original thought; he both argues that people, including authors, are created by their cultural influences and thus speak the words of their predecessors[9] and that readers are powerful in the understanding and interpretation of works, thus rendering the author “dead.”[10]

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[7] Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press).

[8] Tzvetan Todorov*, Mikhail Bakhtin : The Dialogical Principle*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

These earlier literary theorists open the text and remark upon the importance of reception, of history, and of connected texts. Thus, intertextuality connects to discussions of adaptation and remakes. First, Linda Hutcheon argues that despite the cultural bias that “original work” is superior to all copies, adaptations, and rewrites, adaptations are a creative and collaborative process of appropriation and salvaging of work, extending audience engagement with a work, and paying homage to former texts.[11] Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott use the figure of James Bond as an extended case study of intertextuality and adaptation, detailing how the flexibility of a character figure and popular culture hero allows room for intertextual growth and economic feasibility.[12] Hutcheon, and Bennett and Woollacott stress that the process of textual adaptation and change does not simply add meaning but transforms meaning. This earlier works on intertextuality and adaptation set the scene for the Disney Princess characters, a group of heroines whose cultural significance expanded beyond their Disney “origins” as film characters and whose importance is only partly constructed by industry producers. Audiences, including fans and cultural critics, have also shaped the trajectory of this character-centered franchise.

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[9] Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1974).

[10] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Claire Bishop (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 41-45.

[11] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

[12] Tony Bennet and Janet Woollacott, *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

Henry Jenkins' work on cultural convergence extends this relationship between a digital age and the relationships between texts. Convergence identifies the movement of stories and commodities across platforms—increasing sites of fan and producer interpretation.[13] Intertextuality at the site of convergence and transmedia storytelling is necessarily tied to consumption and commercial culture. Audience participation provides pleasure and creates popular culture, which in turn industries use to sell products in the forms of films, toys, spin-off TV shows, and other cultural intertexts.

The interplay between producer intention and audience reception is also explored in Jonathan Gray's discussion of paratexts in *Shows Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*.[14] Taken from Gerard Genette's term "paratext"[15]—information surrounding the text that offers the reader context and meaning for the text itself, from titles and prefaces to footnotes and illustrations. Gray expands this essential meaning of paratext—that it provides a way of accessing the text—to the promotional work done around media texts. Gray highlights the tension between the "proper interpretations" industry producers seek to convey through text promotion and the reaction of audiences. In Gray's work, the text cannot be understood without its paratexts: the often-derided promotional work done for a text, such as hype campaigns, advertising, and merchandising. Gray argues that these paratexts are not ancillary or secondary to the text's meaning, but in fact shape the audience's interpretation of texts and create cultural meaning for texts. Just as Hutcheon sought to break down a hierarchy between originals and copies, here Gray elevates the value of paratexts to the level of the "central" text itself. Paratexts inch us closer to the ways in which industrial workers attempt to shape meaning for audiences, while audiences do not necessarily agree with these meanings, nor do they always pass through paratexts to any one central text that producers hope they will encounter. This is especially important in kid-oriented franchises like the Disney Princess, since the merchandise around the films are as central to audiences' experiences of the franchise. In addition, much of the criticism around the Disney Princess franchise today is targeted at branded merchandise that highlights the femininity of the franchise. In some ways, as I'll explore in Chapter 1, new film texts sometimes work as damage control as opportunities for future toys and clothing, rather than central texts from which ancillary products come into being.

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[13] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

[14] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*.

[15] Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

The commodified intertextuality of Disney Princesses supports industry strategies of branding and franchising as well. As terms that are rooted in business logics, some scholars and critics believe that branding and franchising are abuses of "authentic" culture and art. Media franchises are often deemed shameless "cash grabs" and brands threaten to inundate citizen consumers with messaging. Branding and franchising also intend to capitalize upon the interconnection of meanings in a product or group of products, so that consumers can find and commit to a brand they like, purchasing its products.[16] Such meanings prove to contribute to people's identity formation—a sense of self, a relation or status among peers, and a greater connection to culture and history[17], like the ways in which consumption discourses should foreground their social function.

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[16] Douglas B. Holt, *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2004); Derek Johnson, *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Avi Santo, *Selling the Silver Bullet: The Lone Ranger and Transmedia Brand Licensing* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015); Marc Steinberg, *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

David A. Aaker describes the brand in its simplest terms: "a distinguishing name and or symbol (such as a logo, trademark, or package design) intended to identify the goods or services of either one seller or a group of sellers, and to differentiate those goods or services from those of competitors."[18] Aaker's definition is about perceived difference, if not material difference, in relation to market competition. Other scholars argue that, at least as branding has evolved, it has become something more social and cultural: a reflection upon the consumer's lifestyle. For instance, Sarah Banet-Weiser separates the brand from the product in terms of its value, remarking that the branding process

> entails the making and selling of immaterial things--feelings and affects, personalities and values--rather than actual goods….The engagement of consumers as part of building brands, through such practices as consumer-generated content online and the coproduction of brands by consumers through customization, potentially engenders new relationships between the buyer and the bought, the latest in an every-expanding catalog of branding logic and language.[19]

Banet-Weiser's acknowledgment of audience participation in the growth and value of the brand emphasizes branding's value to consumer culture, as well as the dialogical production of branding between producer and audience. Branding's major difference from intertextuality as a concept is the commercial management of boundaries, circling back to Aaker's point about differentiation. A brand intends to make itself different as a means of competing. However, brands today also make intentional connections between themselves and other brands, as in the case of "green", or "sustainable" brands that sell the promise that their products, or their company, may save the planet from environmental decline, whether or not they are able to deliver on such a promise.

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[17] Holt, *How Brands Become Icons*; Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

[18] David A. Aaker, *Managing Brand Equity: Capitalizing on the Value of a Brand Name* (New York: The Free Press, 1991): 48.

[19] Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM*, 8.

Thus, I argue that in the case of the Disney Princesses and other franchised entertainment media brands the brand is the ideologically bound, commodifiable story or set of ideas that connects multiple texts within a brand. For the Disney Princess, as I'll argue below, the brand encompasses specific ideologies of modern girlhood and fantasy. This brand both evolves and recycles girl-power ideologies as the brand evolves through multiple decades.

Critics of a brand culture worry that brands contain or limit meanings and that imbuing objects with meaning and spirit reduces all culture to the "level" of products, to the point, as Scott Lash and Celia Lury argue, that culture is caught up in a mediation of things and objects. This concern that goods prevail over authentic culture is shared by Sut Jhally, who argues that branding and advertising tend to empty materials or texts of their real meanings and refill them with symbols.[20] However, branding does not seem to reduce meaning, as brand stories and evolutions are complex and deeply cultural, as they are influenced by consumer/audience's everyday lives. If anything, it is the management of brands that can be insidious. Disney scholarship tends to take this political economy perspective—outlining concerns about a corporate world order instigated by Disney. This includes criticisms for its neo-imperialist approach to conglomeration, its litigious stranglehold on intellectual properties, and its sanitization of folktales, histories, and park experiences.[21] However, as we see with Derek Johnson's assessment of franchising, the process of perfect IP control is not a matter of total domination by one party.

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[20] Sut Jhally, *The Codes of Advertising: Fetishism and the Political Economy of Meaning in the Consumer Society* (New York: Routledge, 1987) qtd. In Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 27.

As opposed to branding, which is the set of ideas and evolving story of a set of texts and products, franchising is the process of disseminating, proliferating, and reviving branded texts. Importantly, these processes do not always obey the brand stories or ideologies perfectly because of the complicated systems and industry relations franchises move through. Derek Johnson describes franchising as "an economic system for exchanging cultural resources across a network of industrial relations" as well as "a shifting set of structures, relations, and imaginative frames for organizing and making sense of the industrial exchange and reproduction of culture."[22] While franchising often relates to a series of interconnected texts, Johnson focuses on production relationships that make the franchise possible and characterize contemporary media industries. As Johnson makes clear, the importance of franchising has much to do with its identity and community value to consumers as well as producers.[23] Daniel Herbert concurs with Johnson's structural and cultural premise but defines a franchise as a product and a text, or "the exploitation of an intellectual property across multiple cultural texts and consumer products, from movies and video games to backpacks and toy jewelry. Franchises are cultural texts whose intertextual linkages are encouraged by industrial design with the aim to expand and spread the same property as far and wide as possible."[24]

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[21] Giroux & Pollock, *The Mouse that Roared*; Karal Ann Marling, *Redesigning Disney's Theme Parks: The Architecture of Reassurance* (Montreal: Centre Canadien d'Architecture, 1997); Wasko, *Understanding Disney*.

[22] Johnson, *Media Franchising*, 29.

[23] Johnson, *Media Franchising*, 26.

Franchising and branding encounter intertextuality when we consider how the Disney Princesses became a franchise and continued to grow and expand across other brand spaces, companies, media, and audiences. The Disney Princess is a character-centered franchise rather than a world or narrative-based one. It is also a franchise that connects characters across decades by reason of their gender expression. Princesses are girls and young women of varying races and personalities, but their convergence as girl icons and later brand builds on the backbone of girl-power consumer cultures. Initially a way of consolidating and growing the girl consumer market, the Disney Princess's history and contemporary transmedia presence reveal a complex industrial negotiation around textual meaning, toy licensing, and related Disney "worlds" and texts. Whereas girls' fascination and adults' criticism of Disney heroines started earlier, the calculated and accidental creation of new intertexts, sites of consumption, and production styles after the 2000 start of the Princess franchise is what turned it into an institution that helps us as scholars understand how gendered franchises contain commodifiable and cultural meaning and how gender itself becomes an organizing principle and intertextual strategy in the Disney Princess franchise.

Princesses as Girly Icons

Popular press books *Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches from the Front Lines of the New Girlie-Girl Culture* by Peggy Orenstein and *The Princess Problem: Guiding Our Girls through the Princess-Obsessed Years* by Dr. Rebecca C. Haines define the popular press response to the Disney Princess and frame much of the academic literature on the franchise. Both speak definitively from the perspective of the parent, and thus foreground and respond to deep anxieties they hold.

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[24] Herbert, *Film Remakes and Franchises*.

Orenstein's approach is to be candidly vulnerable and concerned about her daughter—and girls everywhere—that the Disney Princess is undercutting everything girls are supposed to *unlearn* about femininity, a concept she reduces to the embodiment of patriarchal oppression. Her initial proclamation in her book and title of her first chapter, "Why I hoped for a boy," is provocative as it is misguided, indicating that if she'd had a boy, she wouldn't have to deal with this pest we call "princess culture." She forgets that this future son may also have been interested in Disney Princesses, despite it being a "girl" thing. Like many before and after her, Orenstein considers the Princess a plague to girlhood—a means of oppressing girls' independence and proof of Disney's masterful colonization of innocent children's lives.

Hains, on the other hand, addresses the Disney Princess more holistically—with the understanding that the Disney Princess franchise is more than a "problem" (though the continuous, if playful, use of the word colors the tone of the book). Haines acknowledges that families and promotional cultures in the media industries are part of the "princess problem." Much of her book addresses the concerns of parents and offers tools for them to enhance their children's media literacy. While her approach is nuanced, it services first and foremost the anxieties of parents, offering them an expert-informed analysis of princess cultures and methods that will not "de-princess" their daughters but will "help girls reason through the problems with princesses and see that there are many other ways to be a girl."[25] While Hains' work is a valuable toolkit for parents, it still positions the Disney Princess as a problem to be solved—in particular by girls and their parents.

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[25] Rebecca Hains, *The Princess Problem: Guiding Our Girls through the Princess-Obsessed Years* (Naperville: Sourcebooks, 2014), xvii.

These two books together align with much of the academic discussion of Disney Princesses, which aside from the nuance and complexity that comes from an interdisciplinary field of inquiry, tends to focus on discontents with the Disney Princesses as representations or the effects of Disney Princesses on children. The former discourse—more common to the humanities—addresses representational issues in relation to race[26], class[27], and gender[28] while the latter discourse—at home in the social sciences—tends to focus on the effects[29] of the Disney Princesses on children's behaviors and sense of self. Both approaches often frame the Disney Princess as a child's role model and/or a litmus test for (Western) society's progression in terms of gender politics. Papers from the humanities side tend to assess the Princesses qualitatively and generally find them lacking in terms of equitable representations of race, gender, and class. Many social scientists argue that the Disney Princess franchise provides potentially dangerous role models for kids: "Through their screen and product media, Disney Princess presents highly gendered messages that girls recognize and, which our study demonstrates, can manifest in their own behaviors. Repeated exposure to such messages could negatively affect children's gender identities. As a result, parents and educators should examine the number of Disney Princess products and screen media available to their children and consider the potential effects of excessive Disney Princess exposure."[30] Exceptions to the pervading conclusion in the social sciences, that princesses are dangerous to kids, come from the works of Karen Wohlend[31], who explores children's use of Disney Princesses in classrooms—as storytelling devices, play narratives, gendered identities, tools of social power, etc. Wohlend's interventions also add boys to the story, identifying femininity as more than a girls' game. I use Wohlend's premise to understand children's use of Disney Princesses in play.

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[26] Megan Condis, "Applying for the Position of Princess: Race, Labor, and the Privileging of Whiteness in the Disney Princess Line" in *Princess Cultures: Mediating Girls' Imaginations & Identities*, eds. Miriam Forman-Brunell & Rebecca C. Haines (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 25-44; Celeste Lacroix, "Images of Animated Others: The Orientalization of Disney's Cartoon Heroines from *The Little Mermaid* to *The Hunchback of Notre Dame,*" *Popular Communication* 2, no. 4, 213-229; Gary Edgerton & Jackson, Kathy Merlock, "Redesigning Pocahontas," *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 24, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 90-99; Kimberly R. Moffitt and Heather E. Harris, "Of Negation, Princesses, Beauty, and Work: Black Mothers Reflect on Disney's *The Princess and the Frog*," *The Howard Journal of Communication* 25 (2014): 56-71; Dorothy Hurley, "Seeing White: Children of Color and the Disney Fairy Tale Princess," *Journal of Negro Education* 74, no. 3 (2005): 221-232.

[27] Megan Condis, "Applying for the Position of Princess," 25-44.

[28] Lacroix, "Images of Animated Others," 213-229; Cassandra Stover, "Damsels and Heroines: The Conundrum of the Post-Feminist Disney Princess," *LUX: A Journal of Transdisciplinary Writing and Research from Claremont Graduate University* 2, no. 1 (2013): Article 29.

[29] Sarah M. Coyne, Jennifer Ruth Linder, Eric. E. Rasmussen, David A. Nelson, and Victoria Birkbeck, "Pretty as a Princess: Longitudinal Effects of Engagement with Disney Princesses on Gender Stereotypes, Body Esteem, and Prosocial Behavior in Children," *Child Development* 87, No. 6 (November/December 2016): 1909-1925; Julia C. Golden and Jennifer Wallace Jacoby, "Playing Princess: Preschool Girls' Interpretations of Gender Stereotypes in Disney Princess Media," *Sex Roles* 79, no. 5-6 (September 2018): 299-313.

Some attention to Disney Princesses also comes from feminist discourses influenced by girls' media and cultural studies, especially from girl-power culture, which contradictorily draw from feminist themes of female solidarity and empower and encourages girls to adopt neoliberal ideologies of self-reliance and individualism to thrive in a masculinist world. Girls' media studies have developed this and other discourses and practices within girl's culture, giving girl audiences more agency in their use of media and cultural objects but framing this use within a historical landscape where female identity is plagued by persistent patriarchal and capitalist, consumerist ideologies. Girls' studies came about in order to privilege girls' experiences as valuable to discourses of youth cultures and women's studies. Angela McRobbie is one of the first academics to react to masculine-focused studies of youth cultures and examine girls' experiences of fandom and media consumption as importance to the study of young people.[32] Histories of the child have long focused more specifically on boys' culture, so girls' media and cultural studies is in part the feminist reaction to the exclusion of gender in kids' and youth studies.[33] Significant interventions in girls' studies focus on girls' social experiences, bedroom cultures, cultural constraints, and productive behaviors.

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[30] Golden and Jacoby, "Playing Princess."

[31] Karen E. Wohlend, "Are You Guys Girls? Boys, Identity Texts, and Disney Princess Play," *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy* 12, no. 3 (2012): 3-23; Karen E. Wohlend, "The Boys who would be Princesses: Playing with Gender Identity Intertexts in Disney Princess Transmedia," *Gender and Education* 24, no. 6 (2012): 593-610; Karen E. Wohlend, "Damsels in Discourse: Girls Consuming and Producing Identity Texts Through Disney Princess Play," *Reading Research Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (2009): 57-83.

Girls' studies in this area are primarily centered on a "new" girlhood starting in the 1980s and 1990s and heavily influenced by the start of third-wave feminism, postfeminism, and girl power. Both postfeminism and girl power discourses deal with a re-emergence of the feminine as powerful and problematic, addressing issues of body image, female friendships, self-sufficiency, and sexuality.[34] The assumption of popular discourses on girl power especially tend to privilege the affluent white girl as a paragon of female empowerment[35] and girls' studies has continued to reflect on its own legacy in terms of race and class. Postfeminism is best described by Rosalind Gill as a "sensibility" following second-wave feminism that contradictorily promotes traditional femininity and feminism in the neoliberal landscape of late modernity. Sharon Mazzarella and Norma Pecora characterize postfeminism as "the popularization of feminist ideas, presented as if widely accepted and assumed, even while taking distance from feminism as a politics of the past."[36] Angela McRobbie also condemns postfeminism for simultaneously imitating and repudiating feminism: "elements of contemporary pop culture are perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to 'feminism.'"[37] Girl power is often referred to as an element of postfeminism tied to girl empowerment through female friendship, promoting an "all-female world of fun, sassiness, and dressing up."[38] Girl power's ambivalent relationship to femininity and feminism is demonstrated by Emilie Zaslow, who describes girl power as "the playful border crossings between girlishness and female empowerment, the offer of demureness

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[32] Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture: From* Jackie *to* Just Seventeen (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1991).

[33] Mary Celeste Kearney, *Mediated Girlhoods: New Explorations of Girls' Media Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011); Sharon R. Mazzarella & Norma Odom Pecora, *Growing Up Girls: Popular Culture and the Construction of Identity* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999).

[34] Meenakshi Gigi Durham, "The Girling of America: Critical Reflections on Gender and Popular Communication," *Popular Communication* 1, no. 1 (March 2003): 23-31; Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (May 2007): 147-166; Anita Harris, *All about the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Kearney, *Mediated Girlhoods*, 2011; Barbara Hudson,

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"Femininity and Adolescence," in *Gender and Generation*, ed. Angela McRobbie and Mica Nava (London: Macmillan, 1984).

[35] Christine Griffin, "Good Girls, Bad Girls: Anglocentrism and Diversity in the Constitution of Contemporary Girlhood," in *All about the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, ed. Anita Harris (New York: Routledge, 2004), 29-43.

[36] Sharon R. Mazzarella and Norma Odom Pecora, introduction to *Growing Up Girls: Popular Culture and the Construction of Identity* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 38.

[37] Angela McRobbie, "Post-feminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime," in *Interrogating Post-Feminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, eds. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 27.

[38] Griffin, "Good Girls, Bad Girls," 33.

and the demand for independence, and the ambiguity surrounding feminist intention," encouraging "girls and women to identify both as traditionally feminine objects *and* as powerful feminist agents."[39] Girl power and postfeminism build off the "choice" narrative rooted in second-wave feminism's fight for abortion rights and against domestic containment. However, this "choice" narrative also plays into a neoliberal subjectivity[40] including privatizing women's issues as self-empowerment through consumption rather than encouraging public rights attained through government regulation.

Girls' studies and its interaction with the discourses of girl power is deeply important to this study because of my primary object—Disney Princesses—and their centrality to the ambivalence surrounding feminine cultures and feminized consumer products. Disney imagines Princesses as role models for present and future girlhood through girl-power narratives, but also relies on the gender binaries in children's toy cultures, which thrive on stereotypical representations of women and girls.[41] Scholars have tracked the evolution of the Disney Princess characters, from Snow White (1937) to Ariel (1989) to Rapunzel (2010), noting the ways in which these princesses mirror contemporary elements of girlhood and teen culture while battling the same sexist problems inherited by centuries of gender inequity.[42] The Princesses of the

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[39] Emilie Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc.: Coming of Age in Girl Power Media Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 2-3.

[40] Harris, *All about the Girl*, 4.

[41] Kearney, "Pink Technology."

[42] Bridget Whelan, "Power to the Princess: Disney and the Creation of the 20th Century Princess Narrative," *Interdisciplinary Humanities* 29, no. 1 (2012): 21-34.

Disney Renaissance[43] are more rebellious, fighting against the tradition of the "good girl" image, but they tend to rebel according to postfeminist and girl power rules, which still bind girls' to certain feminine expectations of gender performance.

Much of the literature that focuses on the Disney Princess focuses on the importance of the franchise to girls' cultures, while also critically analyzing the franchise's prominence and influence. Scholars often use postfeminism as a frame through which to explore Princess texts[44], paratexts and promotions[45], production cultures[46], and feminist movements.[47] Postfeminist and girl power cultures are deeply influential in the production, distribution, retailing and reception of the franchise, including the ways in which Disney Princess commodities move through Disney texts and the reception of Disney Princess texts by parents and children, as films, toys, and games. At these sites we will see Princesses harken back to early folklore and attempt to represent every girl’s experience, especially considering the most current “Dream Big, Princess” campaign by Disney. Rather than simply exploring Disney’s promotional and production work, I interview young girls and boys about this feminine franchise, answering a call by Mary Celeste Kearney to add younger voices to girls’ cultural studies.[48]

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[43] The Disney Renaissance is used in academic and public discourse to reference the revival of Disney Animation Studios from the mid-1980s to the end of the 1990s. It is characterized as a period led by strong creative workers that grew Disney's animation aesthetics and business. See Chris Pallant, *Demystifying Disney: A History of Disney Feature Animation* (New York: Continuum, 2011); Maureen Furniss, *A New History of Animation* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2016); Claudia Puig, "Documentary Takes Animated Look at Disney Renaissance," *USA Today*, 2010, 06D.

[44] Sarah Wilde, "Repackaging the Disney Princess: A Post-feminist Reading of Modern Day Fairy Tales," *Journal of Promotional Communications* 2, no. 1 (2014): 132-153; Katie Kapurch, "Something Else Besides a Daughter?: Maternal Melodrama Meets Postfeminist Girlhood in *Tangled* and *Brave*," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 40, no. 1 (January 2016): 39-61; Do Rozario, "The Princess and the Magic Kingdom."

[45] Wilde, "Repackaging the Disney Princess."

[46] Caroline Ferris Leader, "Magical Manes and Untamable Tresses: (En)Coding Computer-Animated Hair for the Post-Feminist Disney Princess," *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 6 (2018): 1086-1101, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2017.1390688.

[47] Stover, "Damsels and Heroines"; Do Rozario, "Princess and the Magic Kingdom," 2004.

But the Disney Princess is also an institutionalized site of femininity and thus often evokes people’s feelings about women, and women’s feelings about femininity in relation to feminism. Like Barbie and other hyperfeminine icons, the Disney Princesses elicit anger and dissatisfaction from women and cultural critics both because femininity is devalued in a misogynistic society and because the Princesses remind people of gender inequity: the visual markers of limitations that historically shackled women.

I investigate this problem of feminine cultures[49], which Elana Levine notes have a long history as a less valuable and even detested set of cultures, in two major contexts: the discursive and intertextual strategies of Disney and its licensees and in family consumer cultures. This is particularly salient as Disney’s girl-led films quickly turned to try and appeal to boys with gender-neutral titles like *Tangled* and *Brave* and *Frozen.* Girl-oriented fairytales have by no means run their course as Disney, but Disney’s acquisition and promotion of historically masculine franchises *Star Wars* and *Marvel* challenge the Disney Princess’s infantile and girly reputation.

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[48] Mary Celeste Kearney, ed. *Mediated Girlhoods: New Explorations of Girls’ Media Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 2.

[49] Elana Levine, ed., *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

The seemingly innate pleasure of gendered intertexts and feminine performance are commodified and pathologized in a discourse of concern and empowerment that informs the marketing strategies of media corporations to American families.

Family as Institution

Today's family exists in what Estella Tincknell calls the "long shadow of the nuclear family" that was solidified in the post-WWII era.[50] This family ideal is informed by the institutionalization of mass industrialization (late 19th and early 20th centuries), but the effects of suburbanization in the mid-20th century intensified expectations of intimacy among members of the nuclear family. In this long shadow, the family is a primary hub of culture and growth for children, but also a site of work and intimate relations for adults and parents. My dissertation seeks to expand the notion of "family media," as opposed to children's media versus adult media. I argue that the study of children's media is necessarily connected to ideas of the family. Like Stephen Kline[51], I argue that adults have a significant role in defining children's culture, but I also seek to recognize how children influence family consumption. My study of family media acknowledges an exchange of power and love within family cultures and in intimate spheres, but it also recognizes how public economic and cultural concerns are also part of domestic family consumption and taste. With the Disney Princess and other major IPs, Disney uses familial themes and familial programming networks to intensify the intergenerationality and transgenerationality of its franchises.

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[50] Estella Tincknell, *Mediating the Family: Gender, Culture and Representation* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), 1.

[51] Stephen Kline, "The Making of Children's Culture," in *The Children's Culture Reader*, ed. Henry Jenkins (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 95-109.

As we shall see, the history of the family reveals it to be an economic and public system as much as it is a private system of loving relationships. Family prepares children for their futures, influences their tastes, and supports them emotionally and financially. The sentimentalization of the family and privatization of children's culture is a historical and economic process, influenced both by women's oppression and industrial modernization. This means that the modern nuclear family, focused on love and support, is also a cultural institution influenced by class, race, age, and gender.

The history of the family provides context for its cultural importance today, as well as undermining some assumptions about sentimental value of the family. As an example, the age hierarchies in the family today, whether between adults and children or siblings, are premised on the idea that children and adults are essentially different; the child is vulnerable and innocent, in need of room to play and grow in isolation from economic, civic, and generally public concerns in general.[52] While this does not reflect the lived experience of every child, or even most children, it helps to explain why discourses around kids' media always privilege intellectual development and growth, as well as a protection of their innocence.[53] This was not always the prevailing age ideology, however, which helps to remind us that the careful distinctions in age and parental control are not simply *natural* to families but heavily influenced by cultural history.

While scholars may disagree on the timing and pervasiveness of certain cultural shifts, most concur that the modern, Western definition of family as a structure and domestic culture started during the European Industrial Revolution. Before this era, the family unit combined work and leisure at all age levels. The only reason to chart development in working classes was because children were vital to the family economy. Age, especially in the lower classes, was imprecise at best and most often calculated and understand by the child's size and physical abilities.[54] Families of all classes also sent children away as early as age five to work or study with other family members and friends who might be more conveniently located near commercial or educational opportunities.[55] Families became progressively more private and morally driven by the development of the child and the spiritual sanctity of the home leading into the modern age.[56] While the exact details that led to a more sentimental approach to childhood, motherhood and the family is muddy at best, most cultural historians believe that the increasing distance traveled to work, the mechanization and dehumanization of industry, and the exploitation of young workers in factories resulted in a moral and logistical backlash. However, this shift should not negate the cultural influences on family development that remain significant to gender and age hierarchies. As Carole Pateman argues in her book *The Sexual Contract*, the social contract between civic subjects and the government was accompanied by a sexual contract, a gendered agreement that men were the primary individual subjects and that their rights as men entailed access to women's bodies as objects.[57] This ownership also applied to women's work, in that the woman does not own her labor but instead that labor, including children and waged work, belongs to the husband. This historical relationship between men and women is bolstered on policy decisions over property ownership and rights to children, all of which privileged the man exclusively until after the Industrial Revolution. Even with modern advances for women, their infantilized history as property affected how we perceived women's tastes and opinions. Also, women have remained the spiritual, moral, and relational center in the family while men have continued to be perceived as more rational, decisive, powerful, and individual. This gender divide is an important tension to establish early on, as it affects which media objects even today are valued and substantiated as culturally important.

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[52] Henry Jenkins, "Introduction: Childhood Innocence and Other Modern Myths," in *The Children's Culture Reader*, ed. Henry Jenkins (New York: New York University Press, 1998); 1-39; Phillipe Ariès, "From Immodesty to Innocence," in *The Children's Culture Reader*, ed. Henry Jenkins (New York: New York University Press, 1998); 41-57.

[53] David Buckingham, "Selling Childhood? Children and Consumer Culture," *Journal of Children and Media* 1, no. 1 (2007), 15-24.

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[54] Joseph F. Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present*. New York: Basic Books, 1977).

[55] Kett, *Rites of Passage*.

[56] David Buckingham, *After the Death of Childhood: Growing up in the Age of Electronic Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

[57] Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

While children were spending more time at home with their mothers, the education of children in the U.S. and elsewhere was still considered a national project, one that the future national economy and culture depended on. The rise in popularity of modern institutions in the United States across industry and government resulted in the formation of an important "children's" institution, public schooling. The public schooling system was supposed to act as a second, public family to kids, providing more moral uplift and intellectual growth.[58] It was also seen a national equalizer, or really sanitizer, of national culture where all children would learn to behave as white, Christian, middle class citizens. This moral structure implicated women as the primary educators in public schooling, as they conformed to domestic ideals of child-rearing and care.[59] Women's roles in schools solidified education as women's work, and therefore the underpaid work of a "domestic" citizen. Again, we see how women are hailed as mothers whether or not they are, further naturalizing motherhood to women.

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[58] Michael B. Katz, *The Origins of Public Education: A Reassessment* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Kett, *Rites of Passage*.

[59] Katz, *The Origins of Public Education*, 99.

The modern nuclear family significantly reinforced a separation of public and private spheres in terms of waged and free labor, men's spaces and women's spaces. This gave women more moral oversight in the home but also isolated them from wage work. It also separated children from the work world, furthering sentimentalizing children as innocent beings[60]. Today, conditions of late modernity inform some transitions and tensions in the (typically) heterosexual family, including a "crisis" of masculinity and the rise of the active father[61], and including the phenomenon of "mobile moms" in a digital age.[62] Gender performance and power have shifted to where the mother is often as much in the public eye, if not more, than the father—but we should not see this shift as the undoing of binary gender influences as cultural ideologies. The pressures to be masculine and feminine persist in the "shadow" Tincknell speaks of. This is important to my conceptualization of the family both as an intimate space of power exchange and love as well as an institution negotiating systemic cultural and political change alongside other institutions.

Family is central to culture, and as such, serves as a relational intersection of ideas about identity, nationality, and overall belonging. The family and the home as a space come to symbolize social status, cultural identity, and adherence (or lack of adherence) to cultural norms.[63] Family is used just as much to symbolize exclusion. For instance, the primacy of heteronormativity excludes and Others queerness and racial difference, as Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner explore in their seminal work "Sex in Public."[64] By sentimentalizing and privatizing heterosexuality, they argue, queerness becomes the moral panic in public discourse while heterosexuality remains the invisible norm. So, the home and the family are both an expression of intimacy and bonds as well as a defined space of exclusion where those who conform as normative subjects are mostly likely to receive preferable treatment by peers and the state. This extends to child-rearing where, as Stephen Kline points out, socialization of children is geared toward "fitting in" first and foremost.[65] Indeed, the family is seen as the origin and space of the development of knowledge production for citizens, and especially children, as part of a disciplining project that creates national and cultural stability and unity.[66] Because family and childhood are both social and historical constructs, they do not reflect all lived experiences so much as they represent models of living that people often deviate from. These social constructs are integral to Disney's production and promotion of the Disney Princesses as well as audience's reception of the characters. The Princess characters are widely disparaged as feminine objects that promote the frivolous and unrealistic expectations of girls and women. They are also a popular children's cultural object used widely as a social text for young children—making them desirable to kids who wish to communicate with peers and parents who want to encourage their children's socialization process. Disney has also begun to target parents more directly in Princess films that center the important relationships between children and adults and between siblings. Building on the primacy of the nuclear family as an intimate and economic system, the Disney Princess is one of several franchises that helps Disney to expand consumption opportunities within its empire by targeting multiple members of the family.

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[60] Katz, *The Origins of Public Education*; Kett, *Rites of Passage*; Kline, "The Making of Children's Culture"; Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*.

[61] Amanda Lotz, *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Tincknell, *Mediating the Family*.

[62] Julie Frizzo-Barker and Peter A. Chow-White, "'There's an App for That:' Mediating Mobile Moms and Connected Careerists Through Smartphones and Networked Individualism," *Feminist Media Studies* 12, no. 4 (December 2012), 580-589.

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[63] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984); David Morley, *The* Nationwide *Audience: Structure and Decoding* (London: British Film Institute, 1980).

[64] Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 547-566.

[65] Kline, "The Making of Children's Culture."

[66] Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: Volume I*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978).

Part of the effect of sentimentalizing family is the protection of children against media technologies and content. This pertains to families in so far as parents, and especially moms, are often the group that advocates for children. Concerns around new media technologies and other such systemic disruptions center on children, and often surface as issues of control—parents' control of their children, domestic control in an uncontrollable global society, and resistance to unknown changes. Media technologies present a potential disruption to parents' perception of their own control over children's experiences.[67] Media offers access to the public space and represent a generally porous boundary between public and private spaces. Radio programs early on recognized the consumer potential in child audiences, something that parents sometimes fought against in battle with networks like NBC. Avi Santo looked in particular at *The Lone Ranger* and other NBC radio programs that enthralled child audiences and angered many parents.[68] The beginning of widespread film distribution presented a frightening opportunity for children to consume content outside the home and watch films made primarily for adults—

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[67] Sonia Livingstone and Alicia Blum-Ross (forthcoming), *Parenting for a Digital Future: How Hopes and Fears About Technology Shape Our Children's Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

[68] Santo, *Selling the Silver Bullet*

containing violent and sexual content. Movies were, and are, violent and sexually suggestive, representing the two biggest supposed corrupters of innocence/childhood.[69] The study of TV has more expansive literature on the family. Frequently termed the "family medium," TV was the first audiovisual medium to enter the home after cinema's heyday in the public arena. Since the distribution of TVs was primarily a post-World War II event, TV entered mass culture while the family was becoming more privately oriented in suburbs and generally away from cities[70]. Much like past media, the Internet offers unprecedented access to knowledge, and is accused of "hurrying up" childhood.[71]

But the Internet is materially and socially unique, as Rivka Ribak argues, in that users, including children, can communicate with one another on semi-public forums.[72] This means that aspects of kids' culture that were previously exclusive to peer culture, or semi-private, can now be seen by adults, and so, some of the less-than-ideal aspects of children's culture are available to adult scrutiny. It reveals the messiness of children's lived experiences, which adults may find repugnant or frightening in comparison to the supposed innocence of kids. I seek to evoke a sense of family media culture in the digital age by acknowledging the connective tissue between children's consumption of toys and apps and parental curation and transference of media culture. Because of the organization and intimacy of the family, both adult and child audiences are engaged in cultural sharing and developmental concern that frames consumption of the Disney Princess.

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[69] Buckingham, "*After the Death of Childhood*."

[70] Lynne Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[71] Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 22.

[72] Rivka Ribak, "Children & New Media: Some Reflections on the Ampersand," Journal of Children and Media 1, no. 1 (2007): 68-76.

Consumption as Social Ritual

Consumption is a social ritual, relating to identity formation, social community building and distinction from others in the community—and therefore perceptions of consumption reveal how many people value their own consumption and not others. Analyses and studies of consumption are historically framed in dichotomies. In cultural theory and media studies, consumption tends to be framed by political economy and cultural studies, treating consumption as a restricted form of participation in a Western, capitalist system and as an act of meaning-making and social bonding within fan studies, respectively. In childhood studies in particular, scholars remark on the historical battle over children's agency in the market.[73] While some tend to see children as innocents exploited by industry[74], others see children as empowered consumer citizens, and still others believe children negotiate and create meaning for themselves in a consumer culture.[75] Some of the same scholars and others have since rejected this dichotomy and see the powerful forces of corporations alongside children's potential power to make their own meanings within a consumer culture.[76] More precisely, I explore a framework that acknowledges the complexity of consumption as a social, pre-capitalist ritual commoditized and institutionalized within capitalism, which allows some ambivalence and potential distance to observe how multiple forces converge at sites of consumption.

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[73] Daniel Thomas Cook, "The Missing Child in Consumption Theory," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8, no. 2 (July 2008): 219-243; David Buckingham, "Selling Childhood? Children and Consumer Culture," *Journal of Children and Media* 1, no. 1 (2007): 15-24.

[74] Kline, "The Making of Children's Culture"; Giroux & Pollock, *The Mouse that Roared*; Naomi Klein, *No Logo: No Space, No Choice, No Jobs*, 3rd ed. (New York: Picador, 2010).

[75] Buckingham, "Selling Childhood?"; Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993)**.**

[76] Beryl Langer, "The Business of Branded Enchantment: Ambivalence and Disjuncture in the Global Children's Culture Industry," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 4, no. 2 (2004): 251-277; Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Kids Rule!: Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship* (Durham: Duke

Concerns over children's consumption mirrors concerns over women's consumption as well as that of people of color and lower-class people. Perspectives on consumption are frequently defined by who is consuming, as we saw in the case of children. Don Slater points out this contradiction in terms of gender, contrasting the construction of the ideal consumer, a "hero of modernity," distant from interest in pure material gain and engaged in rational self-interest, against the "bad" consumer—often female—who is an irrational slave to trends and trivial, materialistic desires.[77] In turn, when people engage passionately in consumption, as is the case with fans, they are feminized and infantilized, deemed irrational, obsessive, and childish.[78] This shows how identity does not always qualify one's consumption, but that women and children's consumption is often suspect and that fervent and passionate consumption seems to indicate a lack of rational distance from consumption and is often colored a feminine or infantile.

Many have argued against the idea that consumption of texts and objects is irrational and overly emotional. Ellen Seiter warns against the assumption that children's consumption is simply hedonistic and instead that children seek ways to share culture through the acquisition of

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University Press, 2007); Buckingham, "Selling Childhood?"; Cook, "The Missing Child in Consumption Theory."

[77] Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1997).

[78] Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

objects.[79] Earlier interventions into women's studies include Janice Radway's and Tania Modleski's work on romance novels and soap operas, which interpret women's consumption as a calculated means of escape from patriarchy and demands of the home.[80] Charlotte Brunsdon's early work on the soap opera indicates that women use extensive, learned skills to interpret and access the pleasure of consuming soap operas.[81] In a less identity-fixed discourse, both Henry Jenkins and Cornell Sandvoss contend that fandom is not simply a material obsession, but a ritual for community building and identity formation.[82]

More specifically, methods of consumption mirror both elemental social structures and institutionalized inequities. Daniel Thomas Cook takes up this call by re-introducing mothers into theories around children's consumption and consumption theory at large, dispelling the myth that consumption is individual.[83] As he argues, consumption starts before birth, with baby showers and "nesting" traditions that prepare the home for the arrival of a child. In her analysis of low-income consumption in Newhallville, Connecticut, Elizabeth Chin argues that black kids in Newhallville show a nuanced consumption framework based on kids' experiences, their families, their communities, and the U.S. as a nation.[84] As Chin's research shows, consumption spaces often fit into social infrastructures that exclude some classes and races of people *from* buying opportunities.

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[79] Seiter, *Sold Separately*.

[80] Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984)*;* Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1982).

[81] Charlotte Brunsdon, "*Crossroads*: Notes on Soap Opera," *Screen* 22, no. 4 (December 1981): 32-37.

[82] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*; Cornel Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).

[83] Daniel Thomas Cook, "The Missing Child in Consumption Theory," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8, no. 2 (July 2008): 219-243.

As Chin's work explores, considering consumption social does not by any means make it empowering, given that consumption as hierarchical and biased toward certain social *distinctions*. To locate this social distinction within the family, Pierre Bourdieu focuses on the acquisition of refined tastes as class- and family-dependent. He characterizes consumption as "a stage in the process of communication" involving the "act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code."[85] Importantly, Bourdieu expresses the consumption process as a function of habitus and cultural transference. He explains that although public education purports to teach children about culture, the ability to express one's refinement and cultural aptitude require extra-curricular learning in the home and from the family. He recognizes too that children are typically deemed lower, less refined, and crude as consumers, so the process of attaining cultural capital involved a disciplining of their naivety and wonder. For Bourdieu, valued cultural consumption is not just "seeing" but "knowing" what you are seeing, which allows the consumer some refined distance from the thing they are consuming.

This is one of many reasons people distrust children and their avid consumption of toys and other trinkets that much of the adult world treats as frivolous. The Disney Princess franchise is made up of countless toys, from dolls to lipsticks, that play on people's desires for familiar brands. Adults' dismissal or disapproval of children's investment in material culture may betray a greater concern of adults over their own interest in material objects. Celia Lury and Don Slater both argue for the importance of objects in human lives, though while Lury cautions against consumer-driven economies that exploit our connection to objects, Slater valorizes object-subject interaction as vital to our human culture development: "The world of things is really culture in its objective form, it is the form that humans have given the world through their mental and material practices."[86] As Brian Sutton-Smith discusses in his book *Toys as Culture*, we must see toys as integral to social ritual, as gifts, status symbols, and play objects.[87] An exchange of toys and trinkets, between grandparents and grandchildren, children and their peers, adult and adult, expresses our relationships to one another. However, due to the many structural inequities and exclusions built into consumption, those of us with Bourdieu's "refined" tastes become suspicious of supposedly low-brow forms of consumption and the people who consume them in order to distance ourselves socially from these bad consumers.

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[84] Elizabeth Chin, *Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

[85] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 2.

I center families' conception through interviews with kids and adults. Families reflect on their own consumption and the consumption of their extended family and friends based on biases around this activity and its potential to be irrational and foolish. Whole families consume experiences at Walt Disney parks to experience the same kind of wonder associated with irrational consumption—but they access this wonder intentionally to revisit their own pasts—, while other families stay away to avoid the Disney marketing machine. They also consume, sometimes unconsciously, based on their intimate relationships: parents' love for their children, grandparents' privileging their own visions by overstepping parents' tastes and gifting unwanted toys to children, and children fighting over treasured objects. Consumption is vital to parents' nurturing and raising their children, which often includes sharing consumer objects from their youth.

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[86] Celia Lury, *Consumer Culture*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011); Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity*, 103.

[87] Brian Sutton-Smith, *Toys as Culture* (New York: Gardner Press, 1986).

I also keep in mind the ways in which perceptions of consumption are biased against children, women, working-class people, and people of color. Since the Disney Princess brand is primarily pitched at young girls, Disney produces materials with an unrelentingly association with fantasy and femininity. Therefore, I am vigilant of the ways the franchise is produced and received with gendered limitations, but especially of the ways the franchise is *discussed*, as such consumption is perceived as obsessive and frivolous—tinged with biases according to gender, age, and race. Disney, Mattel, Hasbro, and other stakeholders produce the franchise according to historical patterns of consumption, ideologies around children's consumption, and changing taste cultures of families, which sometimes clash.

Even as the franchise evolves, Disney cannot change the wider cultural devaluation of femininity and feminine consume products.[88] Importantly, and in reaction to public discourses that feminist scholars in girls' studies have previously acknowledged, the constructed difference between boys' and girls' consumption has resulted in some rejection of feminine tastes. To prepare girls for careers and the "real world" outside the domestic space, part of girls' developmental journey and processes of self-discipline is a negotiation of their femininity, as elucidated in my earlier discussion of postfeminism and girl power. The sheer girliness of Princess objects—their garish sparkle and pink-purple color saturation—is objectionable to a public masculine culture and therefore parents who wish their little girls to “succeed” professionally and personally as citizens today must negotiate their daughters’ femininity as it pertains to media consumption. Femininity, long associated with passivity, weakness, and sexual objectification, is both understandably limiting to girls’ self-image and signals a disturbing limitation in popular understandings of feminine culture.

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[88] Lesa Lockford, *Performing Femininity: Rewriting Gender Identity* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2004), 7; Elana Levine, introduction to *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century*, ed. Elana Levine (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately*, 158.

Contents and Chapters

I see the Disney Princess as a cultural icon and media franchise that connects multiple institutions or organized and entrenched systems of culture and economy. I focus on the relationship between media industries and families, exploring how family consumption practices and industrial production strategies characterize and understand the Disney Princess.

By examining a gendered cultural icon through the convergence of institutions, I can evaluate how gender, consumerism, transgenerationality, and material cultures are key elements in the construction of legacy brands like Disney Princess. In doing so, I expand the boundaries of the brand’s significance and the political power of girl-centered texts, by adding it to existing discourses on intertextuality, consumption, franchising, and family reception.

Chapter 1 explores the history of the Disney Princess franchise, emphasizing how public discourses around gender and Disney’s intertextual strategies mutually inform the evolution of the Disney Princess franchise. Starting with Disney’s first feature film and the emergence of its first Princess character, *Snow White*, and continuing through its tenuous connections with princess characters Sofia (of *Sofia the First*, 2014-present), Elena (of *Elena of Avalor*, 2016-present), Elsa and Anna (of *Frozen*, 2013), and non-princess Moana (of *Moana*, 2017), I argue that the Disney Princess brand and the princess archetype flourish even as producers’ create contradictory franchised texts in response to audiences’ intertextual readings of the Disney

Princess heroines and the brand as a whole. I lay this out as a history to better understand how different industrial and cultural trends influenced the formation and progression of the brand. The pre-brand phase is when Disney fairytale heroines were part of the greater Disney transmedia experience. Audiences would start to focus on female representation in the Disney Renaissance (mid-1980s-1999), building a cultural connection between female Disney heroines in terms of gender politics. Second, the 2000-2009 period marks the beginning of the branded franchise and the proliferation of merchandise and Disney experiences around girlhood and womanhood, still focusing mainly on girl-power culture.

From 2009 to the present, Disney introduced more “Princess” films, with promotion around additions to the franchise, like Disney’s first black Princess, Tiana. This period, which I call the Disney Princess Renaissance, would seek to react against criticisms of female representation in the 1990s, expand Princess experiences to grown women, and blur the boundaries of the Princess brand with characters like Elsa, Moana, Sofia, and Elena—princesses and heroines outside the official brand who overlap with the Princess narrative universes. The other path questions the logic of the princess in general, blending princess characters with other franchises and Disney worlds and repudiating the notion of the hyper-feminine princess. The changes in the franchise are influenced by evolving feminist and girl-power cultures, including popular feminism[89], and result in Disney’s sometimes chaotic management of the lucrative brand. What is evident in the creation of the Disney Princess brand and the proliferation of the franchise is that branded franchises and their associated narrative worlds are not secure or consistent, and that global brands—especially tied to childhood and girlhood—invite conflict and contradiction.

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[89] Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

Chapter 2 analyses one of the most profitable and femininized sectors of the Disney Princess franchise—Princess dolls. Produced in line with commercial doll before them—like Mattel's Barbie and Pleasant Company's American Girl doll—Disney Princess dolls reproduce some of the same doll bodies and promotional rhetoric popularized in the 1990s, as well as generating the same feminist critiques of dolls and feminine toys in general. I argue, though, that the more concrete limitation of dolls is the industrial production of sameness in retailed toys. I first examine how fashion dolls are historically constructed as liminal feminine figures, avoiding some limitations of cultural femininity and reinforcing others. I then show how the Disney Princess doll was deeply influenced by production practices by Mattel and peer companies like Please Company. Lastly, I look at how this production of sameness creates fissures in the retailing of these dolls: one of racial difference that marginalizes some Princesses of color and the other of gender distinction, which clearly separated girl toys from boy toys.

Chapter 3 delves into the Disney Princess franchise in middle-class ideals, children's play, and family consumption cultures. Analyzed through interviews with children, classroom observation, and family interviews, I argue that the incompatibility between parental discourses, which prompt parents to overdetermine children's development, and children's play, which is highly flexible and ambiguous, help to craft the public discourse of ambivalence around the consumption of Disney Princesses and obscure the interpretive power of social context in consumption. Some parents fear the influence of the highly gendered brand but acquiesce to their children's desire to play with Princesses. Other parents attempt to define the outcomes of their children's play by characterizing kids' gender-bending performances as empowering and as positive developmental steps. Meanwhile, children use their expertise to define what a princess is, revealing some of the same confusion around definitional boundaries that Disney itself struggles with in managing the franchise. Ultimately, Princess consumption and play show how audiences of different ages and gender perspectives within primarily middle-class systems of critique and self-conscious reflection interpret the Disney Princess's influence and value.

Chapter 4 indicates how the contradictory evolution of the Disney Princess franchise, and the persistence of branding language around girl-power and the can-do girl, become tools of marketing within a greater universe of Disney franchises all attempting to revive or maintain transgenerational franchises. I connect the idea of "family branding" to brand management, corporate brand architecture, and Disney's management of its many acquired franchises—including the Muppets, Marvel Entertainment, and Star Wars. By marketing to an intergenerational market separately and together, and by using media stories that have already lasted generations, Disney hopes to ensure its franchises' longevity. In addition, the use of themes like nostalgia, familial love, and father-daughter relationships trade on the P/princess culture Disney already explores during the Disney Princess Renaissance and applies it to its other more masculine franchises. While attempting to react to shifting gender politics that include some implicit and other explicit queer content in Disney media, the girl-power rhetoric draws on historical, heteronormative traditions of audience engagement, where girls can explore their feminine franchise corner and are welcome to join the masculine mainstream..

This project sees the Disney Princess as an essential site for understanding logics of franchising—which plays off branding as a differentiated and culturally relevant market practice and intertextuality as a long-time cultural phenomenon exploited by corporations and practiced by audiences. It centers a feminine franchise, exploring how gender influences the production, consumption, and discourses around Disney Princesses. It also investigates the intergenerational value of a girl-oriented franchise wherein families play an important role in shaping the discourses around Disney Princess culture. The following chapters will reveal the Disney Princess to be a girl-centered franchise with much larger and longer implications for our cultural institutions, including families and media industries.

CHAPTER 1

DISNEY PRINCESS WORLDS: THE HISTORY OF A FRANCHISE

Disney executive Andy Mooney walks into a Disney on Ice performance and comes out with the idea that would launch a one of the most profitable media brands in the 2000s—or so the story goes when authors cite the 2000 launch of the Disney Princess franchise.[1] It's a pretty fairy tale, but like most origin stories, it obscures the complex history and negotiations that inspired Mooney and his team. Rather than a moment, the franchise was constructed over decades of licensing film characters, co-creating toys and merchandise to compete for the girl market, leveraging character popularity across several media platforms to build a more extensive physical and virtual Disney worlds, and reacting to audience criticism over representations of Disney heroines. In creation and production of the Disney Princess franchise, producers leveraged the intertextuality of girl-centered narratives to produce a brand centered on girl-power ideals, but the different iterations of the franchise show the inconsistent approaches characteristic of media franchises that juggle transmedia stories and multiple audience markets. In this chapter, I examine phases in the history and formation of the Disney Princess—emphasizing how producers "bent" Disney Princess characters and narratives in order to build a branded world that could adapt to the criticisms and intertextual readings of multiple active audience groups. Rather than a stable brand story, the Disney Princess became a loosely defined girl empowerment ethos inspired by girl-power culture and brand rules were broken continuously and revised to attempt to adjust to corporate and cultural realities.

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[1] Ramin Setoodeh, "Disney's $4B 'Princess' Brand." *Newsweek*, November 17, 2007, https://www.newsweek.com/disneys-4b-princess-brand-96993; Peggy Orenstein, *Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches from the Front Lines of the New Girlie-Girl Culture*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2011).

I refer to all Disney media texts, experiences, and promotional work as “intertexts” since they work within a larger historical and social context. This prescribed intertextuality, or what Daniel Herbert calls industrial intertextuality, of Disney Princesses occurs in four major industry sectors—consumer products, films, TV shows, and park experiences. Disney has integrated all four as connected *worlds of consumption*—worlds being an apt term for how Disney imagines its different narrative universes in films and spaces in parks, but also how its cross-promotional strategies relate various texts and sectors with one another as connected spaces. Because of this corporate strategy, the Disney Princess brand is not a secure set of characters in fixed narrative worlds but a flexible set of gender ideologies embodied in several teen and young adult heroines.

In order to understand the evolution of the franchising and its strategies, I will address Princess history in chronological phases. First, I set the scene of the pre-franchise, focusing primarily on the 1990s, an era in which Disney’s relationship with its licensees gave the company a strong foothold in retail while it revitalized its film animation production studio. It is also during this period that third-wave feminism, postfeminism, and girl power coalesce around the increasingly important girl consumer. Most clearly created to profit from existing fandom among young girls, Disney and Mattel began to leverage the intertextuality of Disney’s would-be Princesses for home video, toys, and television shows. Second, I tackle the brand-building phase of the franchise (2000-2009). During this time, Disney did not release any “Princess” films[2], but instead determined the membership of the Disney Princess brand, revitalized the meaning of Disney Princess, and intensified merchandise production of “princess culture”—pink and purple clothing, toys, and accessories focused on beauty and performance of traditional femininity. The strategies Disney and its partners used did not always represent the franchise's branding, which at its center still promoted a culture of female empowerment through consumption, but rather indicate how Disney bent the role and personality of the independent Disney Princess for different audiences. Third and finally, from the end of 2009 until today, the Disney Princess came back to the big screen and the small screens—what I call the "Disney Princess Renaissance." While Disney introduced more Princesses, the company also distanced itself from the overtly feminine connotation of Princesses and their fairy tales in light of a revival of popular feminism[3] and girl power in the 2010s.

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[2] In fact, *The Princess and the Frog* would be released in late 2009, so the eras 2000-2009 and 2009-present end and start with that film’s release.

The Disney Princess is at a crossroads today. New heroines avoid induction into the brand, but Disney encourages cohesion and expansion of the princess idea under their "Dream Big, Princess" campaign. Small screen princesses and Princesses on *Sofia the First, Elena of Avalor*, and ABC's *Once Upon a Time* solidify some sense of a Princess multiverse. Even a 2010 announcement that Disney's animation production team would move away from fairytale storylines did not foretell an end to the Princess franchise, but instead an era of reflexivity in Princess films and extensions of princess culture into television and elsewhere. These revisions and remixes of Princess story worlds show efforts on the part of Disney to speak to multiple audiences at once with contradictory messaging and to sound relevant in the current discursive landscape celebrating gender equity and identity. Disney balances this with persistent popularity of girl-oriented consumer products and stories that feature frills, sparkles and magic. This franchise history illustrates how brands are produced discursively and invite contradiction. In the case of the Disney Princess brand, Disney producers bend narrative and industrial worlds to reconfigure the Princess characters and their relationships to one another under changing cultural, commercial, and corporate realities in order to react to continual criticisms and expectations of their audiences. Rather than a seamless brand story or unified narrative world, the Disney Princess brand shows how media franchising produces inconsistency, revision, and discursive tension.

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[3] Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

World-Bending

The work of industry and audience shapes Disney Princess texts, experiences, and brand worlds. As separate film narratives, Disney's would-be Princesses incited criticism for the way the characters represented girls and women. As a branded franchise, the Disney Princess more explicitly became an icon of commodified girlhood, amplifying criticism while increasing potential revenue for Disney. While the company is famous for its strict adherence to legacy and brand management, as well as its litigious history[4], Disney's frequent licensing of products and continuous expansion into new realms of consumption make it almost impossible to maintain perfect control over its characters and properties. In addition, passing decades and changing cultures have required the company to expand its practices and production strategies to answer shifting middle-class values. These dynamics of franchising oblige Disney to continually reconfigure the Disney Princess characters and the worlds in which they exist to react to critical reception and the dispersed mechanisms of production to continually extract financial and cultural value from the brand. Thus, I add "world-bending" to established academic literature on "world-building" and "world-sharing" to better explain the Disney Princess franchise.

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[4] Janet Wasko, *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001).

The concept of world-building in media studies references the producer and audience work that creates deep story worlds and interconnected narratives, often in reference to franchised texts. In reference to literature, world-building most often refers to the story world itself. Mark J.P. Wolf describes world-building as the background of a narrative, or the contextual detailing within a story world that makes it more vibrant and engaging. Henry Jenkins, in contrast, refers to world-building as "compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium."[5] World-building for Jenkins explicitly indicates that a narrative world has room to grow and expand beyond one story or medium. World-building often brings to mind franchised series like J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* or J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*, where the detailing of written worlds manifests later as richly constructed visual worlds on film, in park experiences (The Wizarding World of Harry Potter at Universal Studios in Orlando), and media tourism (the constructed sets of *The Lord of the Rings* in New Zealand). Both these previous cases involved the participation of multiple media conglomerates and licensees to expand a book world into other media. Kristen Thompson argues that franchises "lend themselves to worldmaking, since the length of the storytelling and the breadth of the ancillaries offer the possibility of exploring the created world in a more leisurely fashion than is ordinarily possible."[6] Here, Thompson is comparing the editorial deadlines of a single book author to the decades-long production and revivals of franchised narratives that are now conventional to the global media industries.

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[5] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2008),116.

[6] Kristin Thompson, *The Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 84.

While franchising is not inevitably part of world-building, Jenkins' parallel concept "transmedia storytelling" signals the overlapping practices of world-building and franchising. Jenkins describes transmedia storytelling as stories "dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience."[7] Deep engagement with a narrative world is driven not only by the detailing and "building" of that world but in the multiple media access points available to target audiences use to engage in that world. Producers' transmedia production of franchises for multiple audiences over multiple decades, though, do not necessarily work to build a "coordinated entertainment experience" as Jenkins argues, but instead leverage branded characters and story worlds in service of a licensor and/or licensee's goals—which sometimes results in contradictory story worlds and brand values.

Derek Johnson (2013) explains the connection between world-building and franchising as a productive mechanism for understanding the context for franchise production. Johnson argues the definitions of worlds lend themselves to franchising less in terms of narrative qualities and more so in terms of the multiplicity of iterations across production communities: "media franchising does not end with the building of the world; instead, worlds are continually used and dynamically altered by creative laborers who may or may not have played any role in their genesis."[8] In this way, Johnson argues that "world-sharing" may be a better way to understand the expansion of worlds through franchising than world-building.

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[7] Henry Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling 101," *Confessions of an Aca-fan*, March 21, 2007, http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html.

[8] Derek Johnson, *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 112-113.

Disney Princesses show how ongoing productions and releases from the same resource—in this instance the Princess characters—result in coexisting and possibly conflicting narratives. Because the Disney Princesses are essentially a sub-brand in Disney's network of branded narratives—which are connected by theme parks, linear television programming, video games, and more—they are necessarily woven into a larger world of Disney. Simultaneously, the Disney Princess brand is connected to the consumer-oriented world of girlhood—where ideologies of the successful and thriving girl have shifted over time, necessitating film intertexts especially to shift and change with them. Such dynamics are not particular to feminized media properties, but the Disney Princess forces scholars to investigate franchises as discursive entities shaped by different audience groups, producers, and various cultural intermediaries like film critics, journalists, and activists. For this reason, I refer to the work of creators at Disney, licensees, and audiences as "world-bending."

World-bending develops scholarly work on franchising by privileging the potential contradiction and chaos of managing the brand reputation of a set of characters, narratives, and commodities. Particularly with a feminine franchise—which contains ambivalent and contradictory messages about idealized girlhoods—world-bending is as much an ideological and practical limitation as it is an opportunity. In the pre-franchise era, Disney bent its animated heroines to accommodate the rise in girls' consumer cultures, adopting the rhetorics of girl power and postfeminism. With the creation of the Disney Princess franchise in 2000, Disney solidified these rhetorics into the Disney Princess brand while bending its rules to craft the Princess identity—with princesses and non-princess characters alike. This era essentialized and stigmatized the brand as a feminine toy line while creating new value and meaning for past Disney heroines.

However, world-bending is flexible enough to change a narrative over time and thrives on audience's forgetfulness or distraction to maintain contradictory storylines, characters, and ideologies. In Disney's Princess Renaissance of the 2010s, the company re-invigorated girl-power rhetoric to promote its new Princess characters and challenge the meaning of "princess" to audiences. Disney's bending of Disney Princess worlds—films, park experiences, etc.—constitutes a complex and changing process of managing a feminine franchise. Potential profit compels the production of intertexts within the franchise and in the larger network of Disney sub-brands, and diverse audience expectations and middle-class criticisms of the Disney Princesses compels Disney to react both by retaining the traditional Princess identity and developing new Princesses and rhetoric to satisfy changing gender discourses.

The Pre-Princess Timeline

Before they were Disney Princesses, they were each one in series of folklore and historic Disney heroines, many of whom were the title characters in feature film hits for the company. This pre-brand history details how these characters started as part of the greater Disney character network and later, due to the strong intertextual links between Disney heroines, became the focus of critical reception and industry production in the 1990s. Narrative and consumptive worlds collided from the beginning of the Walt Disney Company, as Walt himself was an early proponent of media franchising and branding, but gender and girl power later became the greater narrative that bound these characters together for audiences—and presented an economic foothold in the girls' consumer market for the empire-building media conglomerate. As they became a girls' consumer label, the pre-branded franchise of Disney heroines took on a collective "can-do girl" identity, bending their original narratives to serve the company's overall brand image of 1990s ideal girlhood.

Early Years: It's a Small Disney World

Initial Disney world-building was based around characters; licensing characters for merchandise promoted feature films and created downstream revenue for the company. Merchandise also made Disney a media empire early on, rather than merely a film production company. In the 1930s, Walt and Roy Disney, Sr., had licensed out characters liberally to support existing and ongoing film productions.[9] Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse, and Donald Duck, though, were early iconic characters whose fame extended beyond film shorts, exposing mass audiences to characters year-round, as opposed to exclusively at events or as part of film releases. Famously, the Ingersoll-Waterbury Company sold 2.5 million Mickey Mouse watches in two years at the height of the Great Depression, reminding historians of the incredible popularity of the Disney brand in times of extreme austerity.[10]

Merchandise-heavy film releases were popularized with *Snow White* (1937), from branded "coats to cheese, from dresses to dolls, from rayons to rubber balloons."[11] Headed by advertiser Herman "Kay" Kamen, head of Kamen-Blair Company, film-branded merchandise flooded department stores[12] in tandem with the film's release. Kamen specialized in department stores, which were, and are to a certain extent still, hot spots for affluent female consumers.[13] So female-centered narratives were already strategically targeted at women and feminized spaces.

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[9] J.P. Telotte, *Disney TV* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004): x-xi.

[10] Telotte, *Disney TV*, xi.

[11] Betty Green, "A Fairytale of Retail Profits Realized in Snow White Fashions," *Women's Wear Daily*, February 9, 1938, 8.

[12] Steven Watts, *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney And the American Way of Life* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001): 149.

Advertisements in *Women's Wear Daily*, a retail trade paper for department store buyers, show Disney's effort to push licensed products into stores with promises of retail profit. Ranging from *Snow White*-inspired dresses to branded prints on clothing and accessories, the products were advertised as high-quality Disney fashion pieces. The advertiser write-ups claimed that audiences were already "'Snow White' conscious" and eager to buy, whether the film had arrived in their home town or not.[14] For consumers, such offerings created branded means for girls to imitate the future princesses of Disney "in colorings of fairylike [sic] charm" and "tailored yet dressy" styles for everyday wear.[15] These ads focused on romantic and ethereal associations with feminine glamor, reminiscent of Simone de Beauvoir's characterizations of feminine performance, that of "studied grace and charm."[16] Dressing like Snow White was not simply about rehearsing a film narrative, but also embodying iconic femininity. Merchandise was part of the paratextual, promotional work done to guide audiences to the theater and teach them how to interpret the family-friendly animation film, as Jonathan Gray argues.[17] It is also, however, a tangible realization of represented ideologies: an opportunity to embody the grace and charm of the idealized girl onscreen. Films with title heroines, therefore, worked within Disney's network of branded characters, but also played to specifically feminine-gendered audiences with girl and woman-oriented consumer goods.

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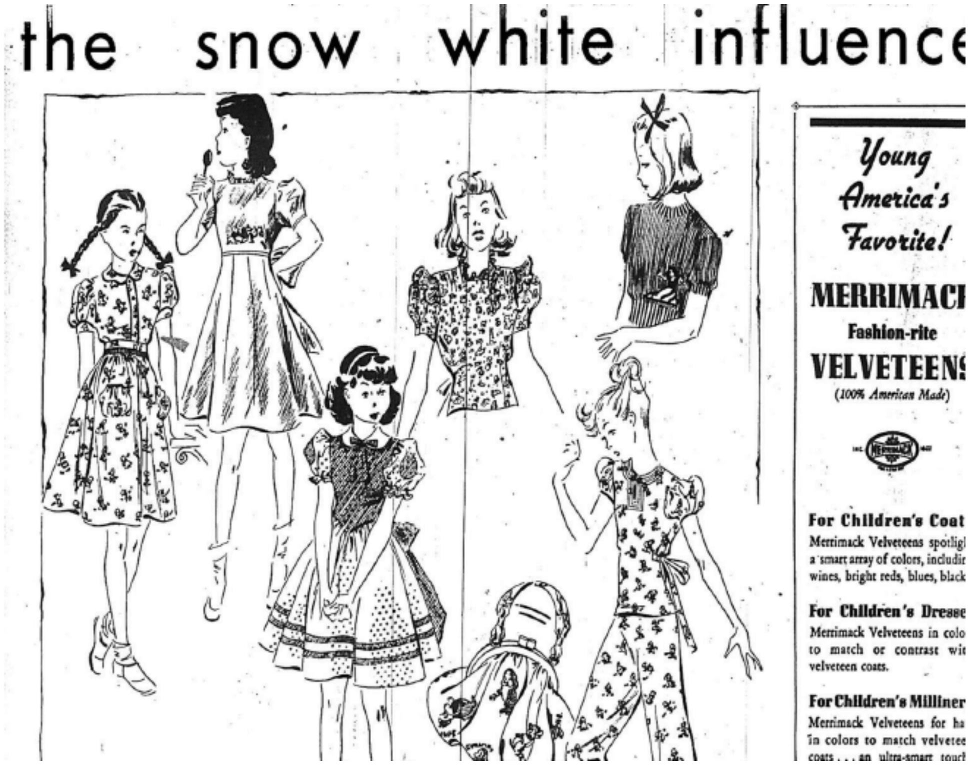
[13] Daniel Thomas Cook, *The Commodification of Childhood: The Children's Clothing Industry and the Rise of the Child Consumer* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004): 58.

[14] Green, "A Fairytale of Retail."

[15] *Women's Wear Daily,* "Coast to Coast Merchants Plan "Snow White" Tie-Ins," February 9, 1938, 10.

[16] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Random House, 1953), 336.

[17] Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).


the snow white influence
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(100% American Made)
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wines, bright reds, blues, black
For Children's Dresse
Merrimack Velveteens in colo
to match or contrast wi
velveteen coats.
For Children's Milliner
Merrimack Velveteens for ha
in colors to match velvete
coats . . . an ultra-smart touc

Snow White merchandise in *Women's Wear Daily*[18]

Around the *Cinderella* film release in 1950, Disney featured an apron pattern in a free J.C. Penny pamphlet. Consumers would buy a J.C. Penny fabric to make the Disney-inspired garment. Rather than a branded piece of merchandise, the pattern was offered or "sponsored" by Disney and J.C. Penny jointly, inviting women to create "an everyday apron" or a "dress up accessory" for daughters.[19] The pattern invited the reader to see the film and apply its fantastical plot to the audience's life: "It's as simple as good things always are, as new as the Walt Disney 'Cinderella' film, as full of promise as the pumpkin that turned into a coach instead of a pie."[20] This appeal privileges cultures of femininity around dress up and crafting, with an undercurrent of cynicism or longing to escape the mundanity of the everyday.

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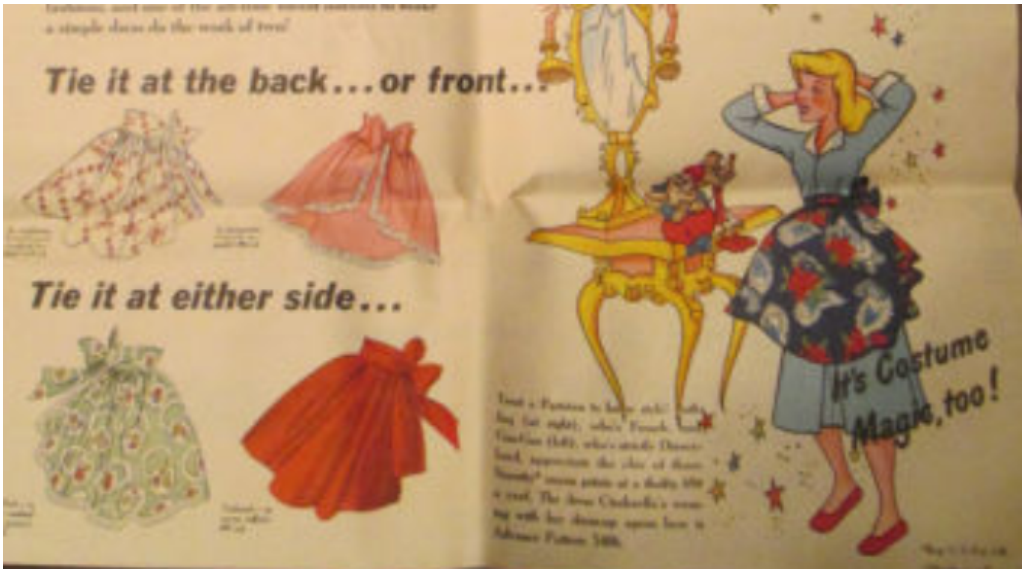
[18] *Women's Wear Daily*, "The Snow White Influence." January 19, 1938.

[19] Quoted from the J.C. Penny give-away pattern pamphlet, likely distributed before the film's release, given the pamphlet cover's promotion of *Cinderella*'s which stipulates that the film if


Tie it at the back....or front...
Tie it at either side...
It's Costume Magic, too!

Apron ad from J.C. Penny catalogue[21]

The rhetoric of the J.C. Penny pamphlet could register with homemakers who wished to escape the drudgery of their domestic work. While merchandising might seem to work solely in tandem with its associated film, it also created encounters with consumer products in everyday sites of consumption, like the department store, and such paratexts have their interpretive power

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full length and in Techni-color. http://serendipityhandmade.blogspot.com/2012/11/fortunate-finds-disney-cinderella-apron.html

[20] http://serendipityhandmade.blogspot.com/2012/11/fortunate-finds-disney-cinderella-apron.html

[21] "Vintage 1950s Walt Disney Cinderella Apron Pattern JC Penny Co Uncut," *Ebay*, accessed March 8, 2016, https://www.ebay.com/itm/Vintage-1950s-Walt-Disney-Cinderella-Apron-Pattern-J-C-Penney-Co-Uncut-/322216696209.

and value, as Jonathan Gray argues.[22] Playing off idealized femininity and feminine crafting cultures, as well as potential discontent among women and girls, these film paratexts engaged in the gender discourses of their moment. Already the intertextual value of would-be Princess films intersected with the lived reality of women and girls, acknowledging potential affinity between the worlds these heroines lived in and the worlds female audiences might be experiencing. This relationship would grow with filmic interpretations of girlhood and cultures of femininity in the 1990s.

Still in the middle of the twentieth century, Disney began to transform into a company with significant investment in experiences beyond the film screen. The new domestic medium television offered the company unprecedented reach for its messaging. Shows like *The Wonderful World of Disney* and *Disneyland* on the ABC network gave regular exposure to the Disney empire and offered the company TV audiences to whom they could promote their new theme park outside Los Angeles: Disneyland.[23] These early productions with ABC were just the beginning of that relationship—Disney would purchase ABC in 1995 and add it to the storytelling conglomerate. Christopher Anderson comments on Disney's 1950s foray into television and Walt's mastery of consumer experiences: "Products aimed at baby boom families and stamped with the Disney imprint…would weave a vast commercial web, a tangle of advertising and entertainment in which Disney products…promoted all Disney products. And television was the beacon that would draw the American public to the domain of Disney."[24] As Andersen sees it, television becomes a grand intertext for Disney's branded series of experiences, whether films, parks, or toys. This last product sector grew out of TV as well, starting with Mattel's Burp Gun in 1955 on *The Mickey Mouse Club* series.[25] This Disney-ABC-Mattel working relationship began an inter-industrial partnering that would grow substantially in the late 1980s and 1990s and led to an exclusive licensing deal between Disney and Mattel for the Disney Princess brand in 2000.

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[22] Gray, *Show Sold Separately.*

[23] Telotte, *Disney TV*; Alexandre Bohas, *The Political Economy of Disney: The Cultural Capitalism of Hollywood* (London: Palgrave McMillan, 2016): 63.

Television histories show how Disney built interconnected "worlds of consumption" through films, TV shows, merchandise, and park visits. Walt Disney himself called the investment in transmedia consumer experiences "total merchandising," mirroring Andrew Wernick's critique of a promotional culture, which he argues leads audiences not to a center point but from commodity to commodity in an endless cycle of consumption.[26] In Walt Disney's vision, each Disney experience would lead to another, making him an early master of synergy and cross-promotion. During the 1950s film was still a primary revenue generator, but by the late 1960s Disney had invested in another park, Disney World. Disney parks are also significant as worlds of consumption and world-bending spaces. Disneyland and Disney World—not to mention parks near Paris, Tokyo, Shanghai, and Hong Kong—create a series of worlds, some text-specific, others generic to Walt Disney's nostalgic and utopian visions of past, present, and future, necessarily present Disney worlds in relation to each other, enhanced by the slippage of character and place. For instance, multiple versions of Cinderella may wander different parts of the park at one time. Aurora may be greeting families in the Magic Kingdom and wandering with her Prince Philip in Epcot at the same time. This kind of universe, or multiverse, in the park world would begin to infect other media spaces—games and TV in particular—within and parallel to the Disney Princess franchise, creating pressure for the brand to be an independent girl sub-brand and to simultaneously play to a larger Disney fan base.

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[24] Christopher Anderson, *Hollywood TV: The Studio System in the Fifties* (Austin: University of Texas Press): 134.

[25] Katy Merlock Jackson, "Synergistic Disney: New Directions for Mickey and Media in 1954-1955," in *Disneyland and Culture: Essays on the Park and their Influence*, eds. Katy Merlock Jackson and Mark I. West (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), 25.

[26] Andrew Wernick, *Promotional Cultures: Advertising, Ideology and Symbolic Expression* (London: Sage Publications, 1991): 94.

These sectors, or operating segments, are still cornerstones of Disney's revenue, as reported to the SEC in 2018; TV and other "media networks" lead around 41 percent of revenue, parks create 34 percent of revenue, studio entertainment (film) produces 17 percent of revenue, and consumer products and games—profits which must be shared with multiple licensees—pulls in 8 percent.[27] This networked set of industrial intertexts necessarily change and evolve due to the influence of competitors, subsidiaries, licensees, and, importantly, audiences. The Walt Disney Company's early foothold in multiple entertainment sectors created platforms that would influence how the Disney Princess brand grew from a set of Disney characters into an iconic girl brand. Already, in merchandising, the princess characters were examples of ideal girlhood and womanhood and translated their filmic hopes and dreams into consumable goods for audiences. This would intensify as Disney combined the characters into a line-up of spunky, pretty, and kind-hearted girls on toy shelves and big and small screens.

The Disney Renaissance and Feminism

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[27] The Walt Disney Company, Fiscal Year 2018 Annual Financial Report, Burbank: Securities and Exchange Commission, accessed March 7, 2019. https://www.thewaltdisneycompany.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/2018-Annual-Report.pdf.

10-15 years out from the beginning of the Disney Princess franchise in 2000, media toy merchandise was on the rise, Disney was re-investing in animation production in what would be called its Animation Renaissance, and women's and girls' popular culture was continuing to react to strides made by the second-wave feminist movements in the 1960s and 1970s. The third wave of feminism, initiated in writing by black feminists Rebecca Walker[28] and developed in Kimberle Williams Crenshaw's work on intersectionality, expanded the public conversation around the feminist movement to privilege women of color and to welcome more diverse voices into the fight: queer women, girls, women of marginalized classes, and women from non-Western countries. Third-wave feminism also, as characterized by Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, focused in on the politics of representation, acknowledging the systemic material and symbolic biases against women and feminine-identifying people in media culture.[29] In the commercial uptake of such movements, the 1990s signaled an era when identity politics became profitable through marketing efforts that privileged, among other things, multiculturalism, postfeminism, and girl power.[30] For the decade preceding the creation of the Disney Princess franchise, these movements and their quasi-endorsement in commercial culture would result in more world-bending; Disney's renewed efforts in animated feature films created a new kind of young Disney heroine who they hoped would be particularly attractive to girl consumers.[31] What it also created was a persistent countering discourse of resistance and criticism from audiences.

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[28] Rebecca Walker, "Becoming the Third Wave," *Ms* 2, no. 4 (1992): 39-41.

[29] Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, eds., *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 102.

[30] Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 31; Janet P. Palmer, "Animating Cultural Politics: Disney, Race, and Social Movements in the 1990s," (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2000), 4-5.

Girl Power: Flexible, Ambivalent, and Consumer-Oriented

Contemporaneous with the rise of third-wave feminism were girl-power culture and postfeminist discourse. As discussed in the introduction, both girl power and postfeminism rely on individualized and consumer-oriented “empowerment” rather than institutionalized gender equity. They also tend to privilege youthful and feminine gender performances. Postfeminism, as explained by Angela McRobbie, undermines the feminist project through superficial imitations and rejections of feminism’s political goals. This may manifest as the sexually free and aggressive woman who gains power through her sexual attractiveness to others, mimicking the empowerment of the feminist movement while relying of patriarchal tropes of female (self-)objectification.

While postfeminism is often implicit in the following pages, I focus on girl power as a structuring narrative that articulates the filmic representations of Disney heroines and contextualizes the expansion of these characters into the girls’ consumer market. Anita Harris explains that girl power is tied to the late capitalist, neoliberal values that followed civil rights movements. So, while girl power stems from feminism and recognizes girls as systematically marginalized, girl power relies on the girl—as manifested in popular media discourse—to succeed on her own, to become “the narrative of the successful new young woman who is selfinventing, ambitious, and confident."[32] Harris even names this discursive phenomenon as the "can-do girl" who embodies values of girl power to succeed in a neoliberal, masculinist landscape. This understanding of girl power recognizes that the structural forces around the can-do girl do not privilege collective, feminist politics, but that the can-do girl can overcome systemic obstacles—at least for herself—and gain some (economic, sexual, relational) power in the process.

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[31] Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Kids Rule! Nickelodeon Consumer Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); 112.; Morgan Genevieve Blue, *Girlhood and Disney Channel: Branding, Celebrity, and Femininit*y (New York: Routledge, 2017).

Some popular and academic critics recorded with cautious optimism the positive changes to Disney heroines in the 1990s, citing their independence, smarts, and athleticism as notable traits.[33] However, many note how easily these characteristics map onto postfeminist and girl-power discourses that de-politicize feminism and center whiteness as an idealized form of girlhood.[34] Such criticisms reflect the broader discontents of girl's consumer culture, and especially of the "pinking" of girls' consumer products wherein product producers rely on stereotypically feminine colors and imagery to sell girls products typically targeted at boys.[35] In other words, representations of girls and women then and now privilege some of the characteristics historically reserved for male characters—physical strength, decisiveness, leadership, and aggression—while preserving feminine traits as well—sexual attractiveness, feminine costuming, kindness, and investment in romance.

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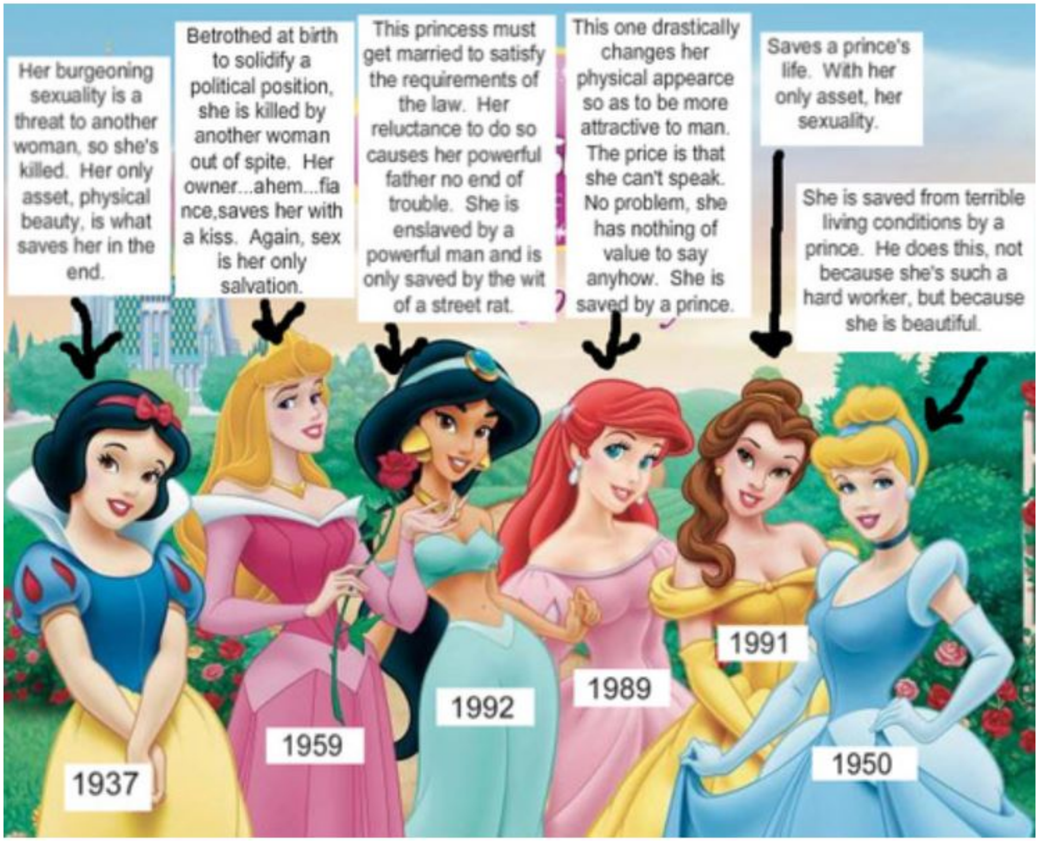
[32] Anita Harris, "The 'Can-Do' Girl Versus The 'At-Risk' Girl," in *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2003), 16-17.

[33] Kilpatrick, "Disney's 'Politically Correct' Pocahontas."; Janet Maslin, "Target: Boomers and Their Babies," *The New York Times*, November 24, 1991: 2:1; Palmer, "Animating Cultural Politics," 226.

[34] Rebecca Ann C. Do Rozario, "The Princess and the Magic Kingdom: Beyond Nostalgia, The Function of the Disney Princess. *Women's Studies in Communication* 27, no. 1 (2004): 35-59; Sarah Wilde, "Repackaging the Disney Princess: A Post-feminist Reading of Modern Day Fairy Tales," *Journal of Promotional Communications* 2, 1 (2014): 132-153.

[35] Mary Celeste Kearney, "Pink Technology: Mediamaking Gear for Girls," *Camera Obscura* 25, no. 2 (2010).


Her burgeoning sexuality is a threat to another woman, so she's killed. Her only asset, physical beauty, is what saves her in the end.
Betrothed at birth to solidify a political position, she is killed by another woman out of spite. Her owner...ahem...fia nce,saves her with a kiss. Again, sex is her only salvation.
This princess must get married to satisfy the requirements of the law. Her reluctance to do so causes her powerful father no end of trouble. She is enslaved by a powerful man and is only saved by the wit of a street rat.
This one drastically changes her physical appearce so as to be more attractive to man. The price is that she can't speak. No problem, she has nothing of value to say anyhow. She is saved by a prince.
Saves a prince's life. With her only asset, her sexuality.
She is saved from terrible living conditions by a prince. He does this, not because she's such a hard worker, but because she is beautiful.
1937
1959
1992
1989
1991
1950

The princess characters homogenized by feminine traits.[36]

For example, the overt sexualization of female bodies in Disney animation of the 1990s drew much attention. Scholars and critics pointed to characters' Barbie-esque, impossible proportions and various stages of undress as indications of the devaluation and objectification of women. Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*, Jasmine in *Aladdin*, Pocahontas in *Pocahontas*, and Esmeralda of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*—an erstwhile Disney Princess—were particularly noted by critics[37] who likely felt the gains of feminism and civil rights should have put an end to such clear objectification and racial Othering in Disney content.[38] Critics also questioned female characters' motivations; Ariel literally gives up her voice—not to mention her family—for a man and a chance at becoming human and Belle falls in love with a volatile beast holding her captive in his castle, which has definitively been labeled Belle's "Stockholm Syndrome" story in public discourse.[39] Some viewers even swore off Disney, with one mom in a 1997 study claiming, "I'm not taking my kids to see any Disney movies until they have a black woman playing the leading role."[40]

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[36] "Sociological Images: Lessons from Princesses," posted by "Brenner," *The Society Pages*, accessed March 15, 2016, https://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2009/10/25/disney-princesses-deconstructed/.

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[37] Palmer, "Animating Cultural Politics," 59; Celeste Lacroix, "Images of Animated Others: The Orientalization of Disney's Cartoon Heroines from *The Little Mermaid* to *The Hunchback of Notre Dame, Popular Communication* 2, no. 4, 2004, 221; Laura Shapiro and Yahlin Chang, "The Girls of Summer," *Newsweek*, May 22, 1995, 56-57.

[38] As discussed in Chapter 2, parents also criticize animated female bodies as too sexual for children's consumption.

[39] Sarah Boboltz, "Emma Watson Addresses that 'Beauty and the Beast" Stockholm Syndrome Question," *Huffington Post*, February 17, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/emma-watson-addresses-that-beauty-and-the-beast-stockholm-syndrome-question_us_58a6c224e4b045cd34c06912; Rachel Simon, "The 'Beauty And The Beast' Relationship Isn't "Stockholm Syndrome," No Matter How Screwed Up It May Be," *Bustle*, March 16, 2017, https://www.bustle.com/p/the-beauty-the-beast-relationship-isnt-stockholm-syndrome-no-matter-how-screwed-up-it-may-be-44217; Emily Landau, "Heroine Chic: The Problem with Feminist Fairy Tales," *Toronto Life*, December 22, 2014, https://torontolife.com/culture/heroine-chic-the-heart-of-robin-hood/; Caitlin Corsetti, "7 Horrible Things You Learned from *Beauty and the Beast*," *Gurl.com,* December 16, 2013, http://www.gurl.com/2013/12/16/bad-lessons-disney-beauty-and-the-beast/#3; Meredith Woerner, "How the new 'Beauty and the Beast' empowers Belle's inner feminist with books, not boys," *Los Angeles Times*, March 16, 2017, http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/herocomplex/la-et-mn-beauty-and-the-beast-bill-condon-20170316-story.html; Genevieve Valentine, "Once upon a Time," *Philadelphia Weekly,* Dec 2014, p. 12.

[40] Linda Christensen, "Unlearning the Myths that Bind Us: Critiquing Fairy Tales and Films," *New Moon Network*, June 30, 1996.

Janet Palmer explores some of this back-and-forth in her analysis of Disney's animation renaissance and 1990s cultural politics, noting the conglomerate's frequent missteps and offenses in the identity politics decade.[41] She notes how Disney's promotional work, whether interviews with producers or other press releases, began to respond to outrage and criticism by citing Disney producers' and animators' attention to cultural sensitivity and authenticity, as well as bringing on well-known activists as cultural liaisons for film productions.[42] For example, American Indian activist Russell Means was generously cited as a source of information on American Indian culture for the film *Pocahontas*, in addition to providing the voice of Pocahontas' father, Powhatan.[43] While thin in its application to Disney's films, which still today produce ample criticism on ethnic and racial representation, Disney's claim of creating "authentic" characters focused primarily on race and not gender. In both cases, though, the company leveraged political discourses of gender and race equity into a more consumptive space of multicultural and girl-power culture where audiences are offered entertainment and consumer products that align with a new vision of a diverse and thriving society. In doing so, the Disney Princess would become a brand of girl power, playing to both traditional and more progressive notions of idealized girlhoods.

In looking at two examples of Disney Animation Renaissance characters who would become Disney Princesses, we can see how adaptations of folktales are bent to fit into the girl-power 1990s. For example, the character Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) largely conforms to ideals of girl power, defying the gender limitations of her small town life and achieving material and romantic success through her own determination and grit. For example, she challenges traditions of femininity in her small town because she is both bookish and disinterested in the social and romantic pursuits of her peers. She's a likable oddball, following in the footsteps of her inventor father. The other townsfolk do not understand her obsession with reading—because a girl doesn't bother with learning. They also scoff at her reluctance to accept the advances of a local suitor, Gaston. Belle's only female peers are three blond women—indistinguishable from one another except by the color of their revealing dresses. They, unlike Belle, are consumed by their obsession with Gaston and question Belle's lack of interest in him in turn:

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[41] Palmer, "Animating Cultural Politics."

[42] Palmer, "Animating Cultural Politics."

[43] Palmer, "Animating Cultural Politics"; Gary Edgerton and Kathy Merlock Jackson, "Redesigning Pocahontas." *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 24, no. 2 (1996): 90-98; Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, "Disney's 'Politically Correct' Pocahontas," *Cineaste*, no. 4 (1995): 36-37.

> Girl 1: "What's wrong with her?"
>
> Girl 2: "She's crazy!"
>
> Girl 3: "He's gorgeous."

Even Gaston, who the viewer immediately identifies as an aggressive and vain bully, confronts Belle, suspicious of her lack of attraction to him and her interest in books: "It's not right for a woman to read. Pretty soon she starts getting ideas and thinking." These heavy-handed remarks invite the audience to see the antiquated and myopic world Belle inhabits and contextualize her ambition within an oppressive local culture. As with many Disney heroines, her dreams are unclear, but they reflect a longing, as she articulates in song, "to have someone understand, I've got so much more than they've got planned." While vague, Belle expresses the kind of ambition required of the can-do girl—the ability to overcome systemic obstacles through one's own resilience and personal strength.

However, it is also Disney's girl-power adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast* that ironically binds Belle to a dangerous narrative of feminine nurturance in the face of violent and aggressive masculinity. As the story goes—and has gone in other adaptations of the tale—Belle exchanges her life for the life of her father after he has been captured in the Beast's castle. It is at this point that the versions diverge. In older versions, Beauty/ Belle finds herself refusing polite but insistent nightly proposals from the Beast at dinner. In her dreams at the castle, she meets and becomes enamored with a handsome Prince who dwells on the castle grounds as well. At the end, Beauty breaks the spell that created the Beast and he reverts to the form of the dream prince Beauty fell in love with.[44]

In the Disney version, Belle must fall in love with the Beast himself, and not a dream prince. Belle and the Beast come to verbal blows when Belle refuses to "play nice" and join the Beast at dinner—an update from previous versions of the story where Beauty obediently endures those dinners. In this and other scenes, Belle stands her ground and refuses to be the passive and polite woman. Disney's Beast, on the other hand, is far more aggressive and violent than the courtly, if physically monstrous, Beast in earlier adaptations. As a result, the teen-like romance that develops between Belle and the Beast celebrates her ability to both withstand *and* understand the Beast's anger. Under Belle's maternal tutelage, the Beast softens and becomes worthy of Belle's affection—even in Beast form.

The film even replicates a teenage romance where the climax typically takes place at the prom—in *Beauty and the* Beast, this is a formal date in the Beauty's castle ballroom where Belle wears a revealing gown and blushes demurely at her suitor, a performative departure from other scenes in the film. The sexual implications of their romance are unsettling at best, and the celebration of Belle's maternal patience in juxtaposition with the Beast's frightening temper reinforce dangerous expectations of women and allowances for men. So Belle represents a can-do girl's ambition and strength within the broader girl-power culture that also celebrates Belle's generosity and toughness. She gets the prince in the end, as do most romantically successful media heroines, and through a dubious romance with a tempestuous Beast. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, Belle's storyline is often called a case of Stockholm Syndrome. This highlights the discomfort cemented in discourse critical of the film and the gendered criticisms that link the Disney Princess characters together, even before they become an official brand.

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[44] Betsey Hearne, *Beauty and the Beast: Visions and Revisions of an Old Tale* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).

An important bookend to the decade, 1998's *Mulan* presents an even greater challenge to the postfeminist economic agenda of earlier films but also exemplifies how the to-be-Princess characters are quickly minimized as a group of boy-crazy teenagers. Not without its own racist baggage, the film follows a young Chinese teenager who fails to perform the established feminine skills and norms of her village in a disastrous matchmaker ceremony; she later joins the Chinese Army disguised as a man to save her aging father from conscription. While the film indicates a romantic happily ever after—Mulan reunites with her family and her army captain shows up to court her—the narrative is more concerned with Mulan's devotion to her father and family. Henry Giroux and Pollack criticize *Mulan*'s focus on romance, but this criticism precludes any serious discussion of the film's lack of emphasis on female sexual objectification, as well as the (probably) unintentional queer implications of Mulan and her commanding officer's mutual admiration in the army scenes when Mulan is disguised as a man. Giroux and Pollock also contend that because Mulan is dressed as a man, her success as a female warrior goes uncelebrated, overlooking the important fact that the audience is in on the disguise from the moment Mulan invents it. No one watching believes that Mulan is a man; in fact, they're often made painfully aware of her female identity as she stumbles through ridiculously performative displays of masculinity. Her desire to prove herself propels her to outperform her male peers and save the nation at the climax of the film. Mulan's can-do spirit is more ambitious than Belle's, and she achieves heroic status due to multiple factors: her own physical and mental strength, help from magical sidekicks, and assistance from army buddies who she wins over with her determined spirit.

Mulan's journey would parallel a girl-power narrative of the power of female friendship if any of Mulan's friends were female. Mulan, like the can-do girl, is still the singular girl in her story of overcoming the odds. Still, I challenge Giroux and Pollock's intervention not because the film's representations challenge notions of idealized girlhoods, but because such critiques simplify the important nuance of popularized and commercialized girlhoods in the 1990s. While girl power is often made analogous to postfeminism because it similarly negotiates feminist politics within a masculinist framework that encourages girls to seek self-empowerment through consumerism and the body,[45] Mary Kearney importantly points out that girl power can also privilege female solidarity, political performances, and queer femininities,[46] the latter two of which *Mulan* makes good use of. In addition, both popular and academic critics are often too willing to group the Disney female characters together as anti-feminist and regressive representations of girlhood and womanhood, collapsing them together, as Disney would do officially just two years after the release of Mulan. Rather than only progressive or regressive, the Disney Princess brand indicates that media franchising thrives on the kind of contractions that invites in more audiences and greater revenue streams.

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[45] Christine Griffin, "Good Girls, Bad Girls: Anglocentrism and Diversity in the Constitution of Contemporary Girlhood,'' in *All about the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, ed. Anita Harris (New York: Routledge, 2004), 29-43; Emilie Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc.: Coming of Age in Girl Power Media Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

[46] Mary Celeste Kearney, *Girls Make Media* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

The Disney Princess Collection

This intertextual relationship bolstered by popular culture's uptake of feminism in the form of girl power and postfeminist products and narratives would inspire the "Disney Princess Collection" a merchandising and home video enterprise that predated the official Disney Princess brand. Disney also intensified princess culture appeals through girl-oriented experiences at parks and elsewhere. Disney's promotional work, in cooperation with Mattel, capitalized on the pre-franchise Disney's heroines' relevance and continued to grow Walt's mission of total merchandising, coupled with Michael Eisner's focus on corporate synergies, by pushing this group of female Disney characters and stories into people's homes. The Disney Princess Collection and other 1990s franchising efforts doubled-down on the "new" girl consumer, primarily through highly feminine appeals and girl-power themes of friends and fun, showing how Disney heroines not only represented girl power in their films, but how they could translate into girls' consumer products as a group of modern teens, rather than separate folktale characters.

Several factors contributed to a corporate media climate where franchising and merchandising intensified. Political deregulation in the 1980s had made way for more aggressive media merchandising, especially in children's television content. Cable television brought in kid-specific channels and opportunities to pitch brands at kids all day, every day. In addition, the expansion of Toys R Us and other retail chains created greater demand for ongoing toy production, rather than relying on seasonal sales.[47] This made way for toy franchises to grow their narratives and related merchandise. For Disney, these created more opportunities for everyday promotion of its texts, as well as more competition for families' attention. In pursuit of such opportunities, they partnered with Mattel in the late 1980s and early 1990s and developed franchised merchandise.[48] Along with other efforts by Mattel in the 1990s—including "Walk n' Wag Pluto" and "Bounce Around Tigger[49]," Disney and Mattel would start to feature Disney princesses in a series of "Princess Collection" doll releases in the mid 1990s.[50]

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[47] Johnson, *Media Franchising*, 78.

The Mattel-produced toys were only part of a new sub-brand called the Disney Princess Collection. Disney created albums, books, and short stories for the home video market poised to target the profitable "girl" market. They also pushed to keep the feminine "princess" identity alive through park experiences like the "Princess for a day" park sweepstakes.[51] The 1996 *Disney's Princess Album*, a collection of songs from girl-centered feature films, notably included a non-princess character who would join the Disney Princess franchise, Pocahontas, showing how Disney's "princesses" were becoming more synonymous with the word "girl," rather than a royal title.

Many products, like this album, were reconstitutions and reuses of existing content. This was the case with the "Disney's Princess Collection" VHS story compilations that took footage from Disney Channel TV shows based on feature films. Distributed by Buena Vista Home Entertainment in 1995 and 1996, the videotapes usually included two TV episodes. Belle's series, "Belle's Sing Me a Story," were from the live-action Disney Channel show *Sing Me a Story with Belle* (1995-1997), a preschool show that mixed prosocial lessons with folktales and archival Disney animated shorts. *Ariel's Songs & Stories* home videos were from *The Little Mermaid* TV show, and *Jasmine's Enchanted Tales* came from the *Aladdin* TV show.

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[48] Katie Fitzgerald, "Mattel Polishes its Star Power; New Toy Ties into Movies, TV Shows," *Advertising Age*, February 3, 1992, 10.

[49] Business Wire, "Disney Consumer Products, Mattel Announce Licensing Agreement for Mickey Mouse and Winnie the Pooh," September 21, 2000.

[50] Examples include Disney's Musical Princess Collection (1994), Disney's Perfume Princess Collection (1995), and Disney's Dancing Princess Collection (1997). These and other doll releases are explored in Chapter 2.

[51] Moira McCormick, "Disney Unleashes Flood of Soundtracks; New KES Site," *Merchants & Marketing*, March 23, 1996, 57.

Despite their separate worlds, there are hints of a larger convergence of characters within the same universe. In at least one of Jasmine's episodes, "Elementary My Dear Jasmine," Jasmine's world becomes very close to Ariel's. The story involves an evil mermaid who grows legs—just like Ariel—to win Aladdin's heart—similar to the way the evil witch Ursula competed with a newly human Ariel for Prince Eric's heart. Many children of the time were likely familiar with *The Little Mermaid* and would have noted this similarity. While the video includes no indication that Ariel was living in the same world as the evil mermaid, this intertextual relationship connects the two story worlds.

These home videos also connected some of the princess characters by way of early brand tactics. For example, the Ariel and Jasmine videos share an opening song, "Let's Play Princess," that hints at shared themes of girlhood and explicitly ties the video series to one another. The italicized text below indicates where the song lyrics vary:

> There's a special place,
> Where dreams come true,
> In a kingdom far away,
> *Where a Little Mermaid calls to you/Where Princess Jasmine calls to you*
> Please come on out and play.

Let's play Princess,
Splashing around and around/Flying around and around.
Let's play Princess,
Sharing the treasures,
And happiness we've found.
What a feeling,
Having a great time. Swimming in caves, Even riding the waves/Good times with Aladdin, Iago, Abu, and of course, Genie too.
Let's play princess,
Making some wonderful friends/Meeting unusual friends.
Let's play princess.
In our magical world,
Adventure never ends
What a Feeling,
Laughing and singing/Exploring fun places,
All that we do is exciting and new,
So, let's play Princess the whole day through. Come on, let's play Princess the whole day through.

This Princess Collection song mirrors girl-power media rhetoric—influenced both by third-wave feminism and postfeminism—in that it privileges friendship and fun as core elements of girlhood. Jasmine's tapes do not fit into girl power narrative as readily, given that the *Aladdin* TV show privileges the male character's perspective and focuses on his stories. The opening song for *Jasmine's Enchanted Tales* downplays the romantic relationship between Jasmine and

Aladdin, and the accompanying clips focus on Jasmine's adventures in the series, featuring short moments of action. The episodes, however, still rely on Jasmine's role as a sex object. Jasmine is often desired by and sometimes abducted by bad characters and in need of rescuing. Ariel's song aligns more directly with modern tween- or teen-hood. In her opening sequence, Ariel is shown dancing, playing, and swimming with mermaids. Her friends privilege representational multiculturalism as many of them are (mer)girls of color. Reused footage and a new song are thrown together in the pre-franchise princess era less thoughtfully than some post-franchise branding attempts, but this rebranding of old content served to remind kids of the Disney characters and unite Disney heroines within a "collection," not promote a clear Disney Princess brand image.

Like other endeavors of the 1990s, including their acquisition of ABC television in 1995, Eisner's Disney sought to reinvigorate Disney's holdings, promote more film productions, and create and capitalize on synergies between divisions of the Disney empire—parks, films, toys, and TV. While the Disney Princess brand wouldn't officially begin until 2000, the interconnections between Disney worlds and Disney heroines were already forming due to toy merchandising and the growing power of the girl consumer markets. Most of the early years of the Disney Princess franchise would continue down this road—lackluster efforts on Disney's part to catch up with the identity politics of 1990s remained during a decade during with Disney stopped making animated girl-power fairy tale films. Instead, Disney relied on expanding merchandise with the "Disney Princess" logo while it tried to define the new concept of "Disney Princess" to its fans. Considering these product experiences through the lens of intertextuality, audiences, critics, and producers co-created the representational connections between the teen heroines; it was then Disney producers and licensees that reconfigured these Disney characters to create products and experiences privileging a girl-power inspired consumer culture, both empowering girls through multicultural and quasi-feminist representations and reinforcing cultural femininity's preoccupation with self-objectification.

The Disney Princess Brand: 2000-2009

The Disney Princess brand came at the end of a decade of animation revival, with box office successes like *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, and *The Lion King.* Within the Disney company, leadership was at odds, with board member Roy Disney, Jr., Walt Disney's nephew, often disagreeing with Michael Eisner and his executive hires.[52] The company was also working to retain control of its IPs with stringent litigation and extensive licensing agreements.[53] The Disney Princesses' unveiling was subtle, with dolls and toys distributed under a Disney Princess label, but without initial fanfare. Over the next few years, Disney would host more lavish brand events, like a 2002 holiday Times Square event with Toys R US during which ice skater Michelle Kwan helped light a purple Disney Princess Christmas Tree.[54] Kwan had signed a three-year endorsement deal—highlighting the company's efforts at diverse representation in the U.S., and even more importantly, its work to open markets for production and distribution in East Asia[55], as it had started to with *Mulan*.

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[52] James Stewart, *Disney War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005).

[53] Janet Wasko, *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy* (Malden: Polity Press, 2001).

[54] Pat Nelson, "'Harry Potter' Leads Christmas Toy Parade," *UPI Hollywood Reporter*, November 2002, http://www.upi.com/Harry-Potter-leads-Christmas-toy-parade/86271037324852/.

[55] Bloomberg News, "Disney Signs Kwan to Endorsement Deal," *LA Times*, March 6, 2002, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2002-mar-06-fi-cotown6.1-story.html; "Endorsements," *The Michelle Kwan Fan Page*, http://heatherw.com/mk/olds/endorse.htm

This time period marked the start of the brand and the explosion of Disney Princess goods. But this era of building was also one of bending as the company produced more “Disney princesses” to suit different audiences and revised the “Disney Princess” membership, likely to capitalize on its most reliably popular, and more ethnically diverse, heroines. The newly crowned Princesses even played a role in masculinized console games, where the Princess brand image devolved into a more antiquated vision of girlhood. In the name of corporate synergies and brand recognition, the Disney Princess brand produced contradictions from its inception.

Branding Princesses

A network of characters within Disney’s larger universe of stories and iconic cartoon figures, the Disney Princesses are grouped together not by virtue of their royalty—much controversy and confusion has come from the promotion and denial of status to some characters over others. Instead, the Princess brand and its franchised intertexts, I argue, is Disney’s effort to make “Princess” synonymous with a social construction of “girl” in girl-power culture. The brand’s (limited) diversity, intergenerational value, and girl-centered consumer products and experiences clearly target a wide-ranging female market, even though the characters themselves embody a can-do tweenhood that young girls look up to and adult women find empowering and hopeful. Mooney has claimed that the loose definition of Princess makes the term essentially meaningless.[56] This answer acknowledges the sometimes seemingly arbitrary removal of Disney characters from the franchise, explored in the next paragraphs, but it also ignores the ideologically meaningful constructions of girlhood that Disney privileges.

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[56] Peggy Orenstein, *Cinderella Are My Daughter: Dispatches from the Frontline of the New Girlie Girl Culture* (New York: Harper Collins), 14.

The Disney Princess membership was partly constructed to create a diverse collection of playthings for children to choose from, and partly due to the past and projected value of the character to the greater Disney branded network. Every princess character in a Disney animated feature film has a place in the Disney Princess franchise, from Snow White (1937) to Merida (2012)—with some non-princesses included into the fold.[57] Older, popular characters like Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora, as well as characters in later box office hits—Ariel, Belle, and Jasmine—were represented as part of the Disney Princess brand from its beginning until today. Non-princesses Mulan and Pocahontas were also included as Disney Princesses—likely due to their induction during the multicultural 1990s and because of the growing global markets Disney's would continue to pursue.

In its early days, Esmeralda of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame,* Megara from *Hercules,* Alice from *Alice in Wonderland*, and Tinker Bell from *Peter Pan*, were featured in Disney Princess merchandise. The first two may have been later discarded because of diminishing recognition of their films, their status as side characters in boy-centered storylines and film paratexts[58], or because they did not contribute significantly to the ethnic rainbow Disney was building with other Princesses. In the case of Tinker Bell, a character central to the greater Disney Universe and brand history, the company would instead use her as an anchor character to build other branding properties. In 2004, Disney started a Disney Fairies line to complement Disney Princesses, with Tinker Bell as lead fairy. Disney Fairies would return $800 million in sales by 2009[59], and precipitate multiple straight-to-DVD fairy movies,[60] popular with both girls and boys. Fairies would never match Princesses in profit and cultural infamy, but clearly Disney saw the opportunity to put Tinker Bell to work elsewhere. Lastly, Alice stayed on as a Princess through 2006. Her role in Disney park spaces and in live-action films make her an essential Disney figure, but not a Princess character. Whether due to her age, attire, storyline, or toy sales, Alice was removed from the brand.

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[57] The franchise is mostly made up of girls and young women either born as princesses or who marry into royalty, though the inclusion of historical figures of color like Pocahontas and Mulan resulted in Disney bending its definition of a Disney Princess

[58] *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* failed to do well in toy sales while *Hercules* ended up attracting more boy audiences than girl audiences, de-emphasizing Megara's appeal. Linda Sandler and Robert McGough, "Mattel's Marriage to Disney Falters as Toys Based on 'Hunchback' Get Little Play Time," *Wall Street Journal,* August 16, 1996, C2; Kristen Kennedy, "Hercules Sports Disney Marketing Muscle," *Computer Retail Week*, August 4, 1997.

Overall, the brand is built more specifically around postfeminist and girl power popular culture starting in the 1980s and 1990s. Earlier Disney Princesses like Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora[61] display traditionally feminine traits—patience, domestication, and obedience. Their inclusion in the brand both folded them into a later concept of girlhood that privileged postfeminism and girl power and offered more traditionally feminine options for consumers. Many parents and children I spoke to in my interviews noted that Cinderella was a frequent favorite—even among reluctant parents who saw the Disney Princess image as retrograde and potentially damaging. While postfeminist discourse has largely centered its critiques on adults, I draw from Sarah Projansky's claim that "adolescent girlness epitomizes post-feminism," not only because of postfeminism's focus on youthful femininity, but also because the coming-of-age narrative of the teenager—and all Disney Princesses are teenagers—resonates with the adult woman's postfeminist pursuit of "having it all."[62] In general, the Disney Princess brand image is one of independent, ambitious, kind, and spunky girls with unimpeachable characters and physically attractive features. The Disney Princess, like many Hollywood protagonists, comes into her own through emotional, mental, and physical trials, and balances her own needs with a pursuit of the greater good—whether that is the good of her land and country or a more abstract set of community values. The Disney Princesses are promoted as role models, but they would also become the face of various consumer goods and experiences that did not necessarily adhere to the branding image presented above. The Disney Princess label sold tickets, clothes, books, and thousands of goods that put the group on the map and launched a profitable franchise.

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[59] "Walmart Welcomes Spring with Disney Fairies," *License! Global* 12, no. 4 (May 2009): 50.

[60] Tinker Bell and fairy-centered films include *Tinker Bell and the Lost Treasure* (2009), *Tinker Bell and the Great Fairy Rescue* (2010), *The Secret of the Wings* (2012), *The Pirate Fairy* (2014) *Tinker Bell and the Legend of the NeverBeast (2014).*

[61] From *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), respectively.

Branding Rules and Regulations

Whether on a shirt together, or in the same virtual room in a video game, the Disney Princess brand bent the characters' film narratives to extract monetary and cultural value out of the heroines. Initially Disney executives created brand rules around the Disney Princesses to retain some distinction between films—perhaps because home video re-releases and park attractions still favored richly drawn Disney film worlds as separate experiences. However, the constant convergence of Disney Princesses in video games and on merchandise shifted the Princesses from a brand of separate but intertextual girl characters to a world-bending universe of where characters inhabited the same spaces and collective femininity and consumer-oriented girl empowerment was often more important than any individual character.

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[62] Sarah Projansky, "Mass Magazine Cover Girls: Some Reflections on Postfeminist Girls and Postfeminism's Daughters," in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 45.

The Disney Princess brand rules originally stipulated that Princess characters could not look at each other, resulting in feminist critiques that Princesses are non-cooperative and anti-bonding.[63] Roy Disney, Walt Disney's nephew and one-time Disney CEO and board member, blushed at the idea of combining Princesses into a brand together, saying "it was inappropriate to portray and market characters like Cinderella and Snow White together when in the fairy tales they inhabited separate worlds and never knew each other."[64] This statement seemed to indicate ignorance on Roy's part of the 1990s Disney Princess Collection, but the decision nevertheless limited the Princess franchising efforts, and until very recently in 2018, played a role in how Princesses coexisted in texts and in parks. On Disney Princess merchandise past and present, the characters stare out toward the viewer-reader in tableaus—a frozen image that implies the coexistence of the characters, but focuses interaction on the person consuming the image, rather than allowing a voyeuristic look into a story world of Princesses.

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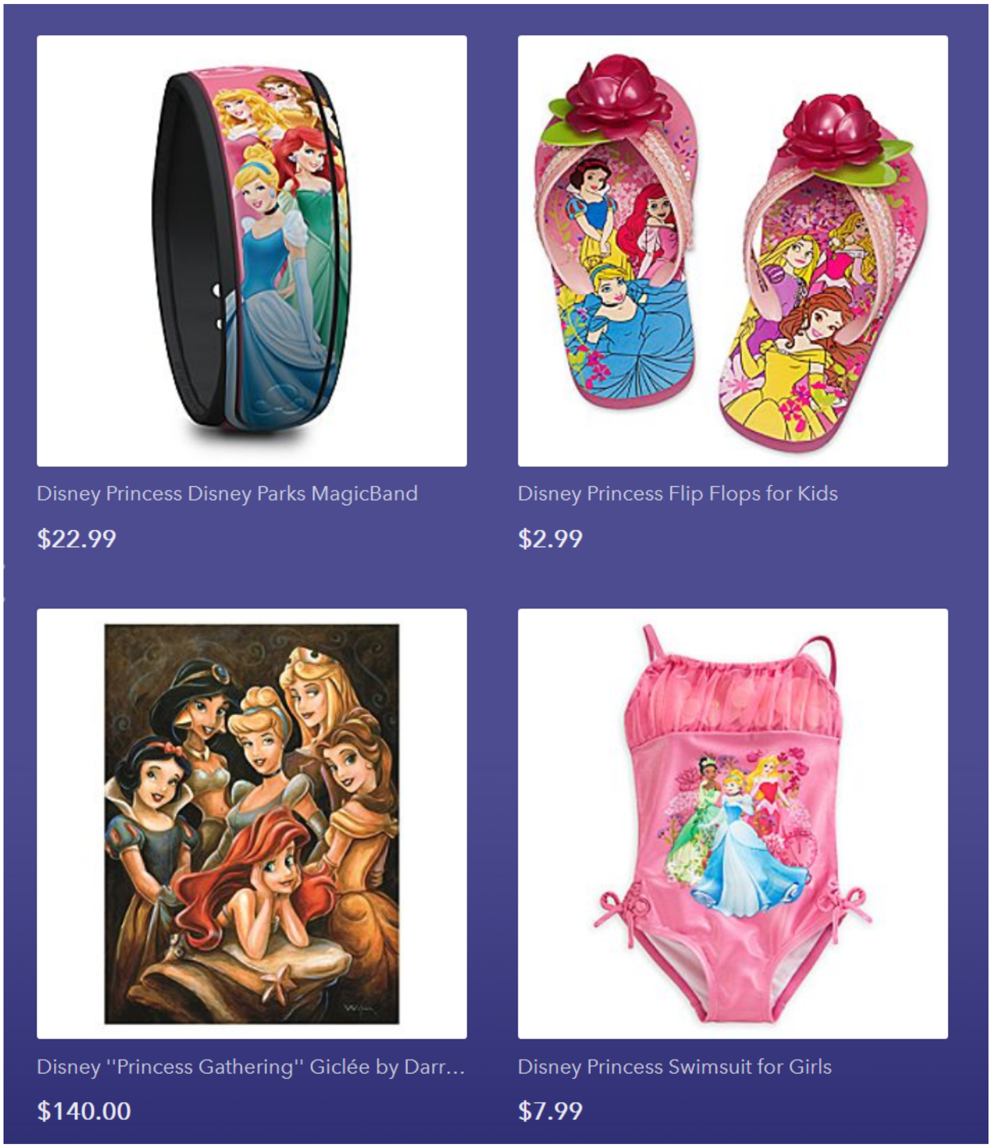
[63] Peggy Orenstein, *Cinderella Are My Daughter: Dispatches from the Frontline of the New Girlie Girl Culture* (New York: Harper Collins), 14.

[64] James Stewart, *Disney War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), 355.



Disney Princess Disney Parks MagicBand

$22.99

Disney Princess Flip Flops for Kids

$2.99

Disney "Princess Gathering" Giclée by Darr…

$140.00

Disney Princess Swimsuit for Girls

$7.99

Girls' Merchandise on the Disney Princess Website[65]

This is not uncommon imagery for franchised merchandise, which seeks to address the potential consumer. However, within Princess complication books and other texts where one may assume the Princesses live among one another—as characters in overlapping comic book universes—they are always separated into individual chapters. Readers visit one Princess world at a time without any intersections. This was the prevailing logic behind the Disney Princess intertexts that proliferated from 2000-2009, though the ideologies of girl power and femininity continued to tie the characters together.

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[65] "Disney Princess Shop," *Disney Princess*, accessed July 14, 2016, https://www.shopdisney.com/movies-shows/disney/disney-princess?efc=280559&cmp=OTL-Dcom&att=Dcom_FS_Princess_Home_Feed.

Princess Intertexts

Mattel had already started to produce princess dolls for Disney in the 1990s, and their partnership continued in a 1996 three-year licensing deal that encompassed all merchandise for feature films and television series.[66] However, in 2000, Disney both diversified its licensing options and solidified Mattel's dominance in the doll industry. They gave all new character and narrative toy licenses to competitor Hasbro, but kept classic characters and, importantly, the Disney Princess brand at Mattel. Thousands of pink-and-purple accessories, books, jewelry, CDs, and other merchandise lined the shelves of the Disney Store, Walmart, Toys R Us, and other retailers. Plastic musical books for children 18 months and up like "My First Princess" taught kids their alphabet using character names—J is for Jasmine and S is for Snow White.[67] Other compilation books and albums retold parts of the Princess feature films and expanded the Princess stories, focusing on prosocial and educational themes, including how to play nicely with friends, how to resolve conflicts, and how to self-manage emotions.[68] These kinds of products were focused on the 2-6-year-old market, and therefore put more emphasis on friendship and early elements of commercialized girls' culture—like dress-up, hair play, and friendship—

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[66] Howard Schneider, "Disney Characters to Mattel," *MediaWeek*, April 8, 1996, 3.

[67] "Disney Princess: My First Princess A to Z Storybook," *Amazon,* https://www.amazon.com/Disney-Princess-My-First-Storybook/dp/B00008PVZZ/ref=sr_1_7?ie=UTF8&qid=1505568092&sr=8-7&keywords=disney+princess+2004.

[68] *Disney Princess: Happily Ever After Stories* (White Plains: Disney Press, 2004).

though stories that retold film plots emphasized romance. They also importantly introduced young audiences to characters they may not have known previously, potentially jumpstarting the endless cycle of consumption[69] that could last the rest of their lives.

Products and experiences also aligned Princesses with girls themselves. As characters came in and out of the brand, Disney added park activities offering Princess-specific experiences for fans to become Princesses. For younger girls, the opening of Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique in 2007 offered a salon experience where girls are transformed into a Princess of their choosing.[70] The original salon menu reads, "Our Disney Diva speaks for herself, is a rising star and wants a look to match" or "Our Fairy-Tale Princess is a true Disney princess at heart" and finally, "Our Pop Princess loves being on stage and the center of attention."[71] Appeals to celebrity and fame typify girl power discourses, wherein star power becomes a new fantasy for girls,[72] but the tightly defined "menu" offered a range between a traditional girly girl, "the Fairy-Tale Princess," and the spunky "Disney Diva," appealing to different preferences and aversions of girls and their parents. These appeals reach beyond the 2-6-year-old market and into an older kids' market, perhaps 6-10. The Disney Princess album, *Disney Princess Sing-along Songs*, for example, included famous songs from Disney films, sometimes with characters ancillary to the brand that cropped up in the early 2000s. Volume 3 of this series brought in music from Disney's live action film *Ella Enchanted*. The song, "It's Not Just Make Believe," seeks to re-inscribe these slightly older girls into fairy tale nostalgia by combining several Disney princesses into larger ideologies of girlhood, with its focus on glamour and celebrity:

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[69] Andrew Wernick, *Promotional Cultures: Advertising, Ideology and Symbolic Expression* (London: Sage Publications, 1991): 94.

[70] "Disney Parks Moms Panel | Pretty as a Princess | Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique," YouTube video, 1:48, posted by "Disney Parks," March 5, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_n7ZDTH15A.

[71] Maryellen Fillo, "Disney Creates Princesses for a Day," *McClatchy-Tribune Business News*, March 11, 2007, 1.

[72] Mary Celeste Kearney, "Sparkle: Luminosity and Post-Girl Power Media" *Continuum* 29, no. 2 (2015): 263-273; Blue, *Girlhood and Disney Channel*.

> "I'm Cinderella at the ball
> I'm Alice growing 10 feet tall
> It's not just make believe
> It's really happening,
> I feel so good I gotta sing
> It's not just make believe
> I'm Ariel above the sea,
> I'm Beauty dancin' with the Beast
> It's not just make believe
> Here comes the prince's kiss
> I'm positive the slipper fits
> It's not just make believe
> It's not just make believe."[73]

This song from *Ella Enchanted* centers on the heightened emotions of early teen-hood or tween-hood, combining the fantasy of princess-dom with teen romance. Feeling like a princess in this case is getting positive romantic attention from a boy. Product releases like these show Disney and its partners creating a kind of brand coherence in reaction to or alongside discourses of girl power, femininity, and postfeminism.

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[73] "It's Not Just Make-Believe," *Disney Princess Wiki*, http://disneyprincess.wikia.com/wiki/It%27s_Not_Just_Make-Believe.

The Disney Princess brand may have pitched its products at younger girls and adults from 2000-2009, but Disney also repackaged the "Disney princess" image for tween, teen, and adult audiences with films like *The Princesses Diaries*, *Ella Enchanted*, and *Enchanted* using similar postfeminist and girl power principles that correlate with Disney themes of magic and imagination. These films center on romance, friendship, and female independence; specifically, the films make some updates that relate to values first advocated with some of the 1990s Princesses and addressed more aggressively with later Princesses. First, these films advocate for delaying marriage until after heroines attain self-knowledge—which could also translate to a "career first, marriage later" ideal of can-do girlhood. Second, they tend to downplay or try and resolve female competition in favor of a subtle female solidarity. Third, these films are critical of hyper-femininity and superficiality while promoting those very types of female consumerism. Sold as a lesson to "be true to yourself," consumption must be thoughtful and authentic, not performative. Again, this third value is highly contradictory and holds up the importance of bodily self-management.

These discourses that intensified in the 1990s persisted in the first decade of the 2000s and resonate today in terms of audiences' perceptions of the Princess brand. This reflects Douglas Holt's idea that brands are formed ideologically and must reinvent themselves again and again to remain relevant[74], but it also shows both how some discourses are recyclable in spite of critical reception. While the Disney Princess brand producers have continued to redefine the franchise, they also persist in reinforcing the girl-power rhetoric of the 1990s Disney Renaissance heroines, signifying how passing time allows Disney to bend the Disney Princess identities strategically without completely reinventing their brand.

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[74] Douglas Holt, *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2004); Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM*.

Franchised products of this era speak to girls' consumer cultures, both supporting the dominance girl-market commodities—dolls, beauty accessories, and fashion items—and speaking against those same feminine and postfeminist values of girls' cultures—focus on looks, female competition, and sexuality.

Kingdom Hearts

In the first decade of the franchise, Disney would license Princess characters to, and acquire, game production companies to create Disney-branded games, expanding recognition of the heroines as a group, but not obeying the Disney Princess brand image or rules. Games like *Epic Mickey*, *Kingdom Hearts*, and later *Disney Xfinity* all remix and combine Disney characters into overlapping worlds, but it is *Kingdom Hearts* that leveraged the Princesses as a female-centered group during the era of the franchise's initial building stage and mined the filmic narratives of Princess films to support their game mythology. This shows some of the unpredictability inherent in "sharing worlds"[75] through licensing of the franchise in different industries, as well as lesser-known thematic and spatial connections between Disney Princess texts. Away from the retail aisles and Princess park experiences, which are more distinctly centered on girl power and evolving femininities, the Princess characters became tools in a game space where intertextual forces contradicted some Disney Princess branding work while reinforcing the Disney Princesses' connection to a larger Disney network of franchises.

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[75] Johnson, *Media Franchising*.

Kingdom Hearts is one example of overlapping worlds. The game was first launched in 2002 by gaming company Square Enix. It mixed characters from *Final Fantasy,* Disney characters from films and franchises, and some original game characters together in a series of levels and worlds. Built and styled like a more fantastical and immersive version of Disney parks, the game provides passage to a series of filmic worlds defined by space: in this case, virtual space. The game is another place of world bending, where the player—through the primary player character Sora—travels with a small crew of Disney characters, Donald Duck and Goofy, and interacts with a multitude of Disney characters from distinct narratives. While this game style—where levels are part of a map system—is not new, it is uncanny how *Kingdom Hearts* plays off the park theme. For example, the *Kingdom Hearts* level "Traverse Town" (which exists in multiple game releases) is a nighttime world where many characters arrive after mysteriously vanishing from their initial story worlds: a town that mixes medieval stone buildings with neon lights, like the bricolage pastiche of Main Street in the Disney parks. Traverse Town sometimes hosts *The Sword in the Stone*'s (1963) Merlin, *Cinderella*'s (1950) fairy godmother, and *Pinocchio* (1940) characters Pinocchio and Geppetto (depending on the game release). Levels like "Beast's Castle" (from *Beauty and the Beast* in 1991) primarily deal with the film characters in that films' narrative world. Most characters in each world are unaware of the other worlds, thereby maintaining separate brand identity and fidelity to Disney story lines—again much like characters one might encounter in a Disney park. However, the player characters who travel through these worlds, as well as select Disney Princesses, disrupt film story lines with game plots, bending the worlds of Disney to privilege an intertextual, interconnected universe.

The Princesses coexistence in the game and their symbolic importance to game play show the intertextual significance of Princess characters as well as the limitations of female agency in game play. *Kingdom Hearts* is so named because the universe is balanced by hearts, the spiritual essence of beings and worlds. Several of the Disney Princess characters—Cinderella, Belle, Snow White, Jasmine, Aurora—as well as Disney's Alice (a Disney Princess when the first game was released in 2002) and *Kingdom Hearts* original character Kairi represent the Princesses of Heart, a group of pure-hearted girls and women. The Princesses are privileged as critical forces in the game's battle between good and evil, and central characters in a mostly Disney-based multiverse. However, the exultation of these women and their pure hearts is akin to the ideological holdover from pre-modern times that positions women as the morally superior, more delicate, and more spiritual gender. Such characteristics have long tied women to the private sphere and domesticity, limiting their participation in political and public life. These ideologies intensified in the Victorian era, after industrialization had pushed working-class and artesian middle-class woman out of a more direct relationship with commerce.[76] The "cult of true womanhood" urged women to safeguard the home as a sacred space away from the public market, keeping themselves and their children separate from the sullying influence of public life. The princesses in *Kingdom Hearts*, a game dominated by masculine characters, has little of the girl power ethos and instead holds these women up as good, pure, and goddess-like creatures. They are objectified as spiritual "collectibles" when they are kidnapped by Maleficent and when they are rescued by good characters. They do not take a direct role in game play and are relatively silent in cut scenes featuring the Princesses of Heart.

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[76] Michael B. Katz, *The Origins of Public Education: A Reassessment* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

In addition to this central narrative arch, *Kingdom Hearts* retells and intervenes into Disney film narratives, sometimes resulting in more regressive and upsetting treatments of female characters. In other game releases, game characters intervene more aggressively into in film story worlds. Game treatments use existing sequences from the films or add imagined sequences build and flesh out the game world.[77] A telling example is the treatment of *Beauty and the Beast* in *Kingdom Hearts II*. Sora, the player's character, intervenes into the film plot to continue the game's narrative *and* to critique Disney character relationships and behaviors.

In an early cut scene, Belle and the Beast share an uncomfortable exchange after game player/viewer learns that the Beast's rage and aggression is not a result of his curse—as was the case in the 1991 film—but is actually caused by the growing influence of dark forces in the *Kingdom Hearts* universe:

> Beast: Belle…I-I'm sorry—I…wasn't myself. I hope I haven't done anything to hurt you. Forgive me.
>
> Belle: I know you weren't yourself. You don't have to apologize. But I had hoped…that you might have changed a little bit.

This early moment initiates an unsettling dynamic akin to abusive domestic relationships that mirrors some criticisms of the 1991 film.

Upon the next visit to the castle, we come upon the ballroom scene from *Beauty and the Beast*. The Beast and Belle's dance is interrupted by an evil character who has come to steal the Beast's rose and kidnap Belle. After the evil character succeeds in stealing the rose, the Beast flies off the handle:

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[77] This explains the treatment of *The Little Mermaid* in *Kingdom Hearts* and of *Aladdin* in *Kingdom Hearts*, *Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories*, and other versions.

Belle: Please calm down.

Beast: Calm down?! You just had to have a party, didn't you? Don't you see what's happened?

Sora: Hey. What's with you?

Beast: The rose…my rose…

Sora, who literally steps in between the Beast and Belle, shielding Belle with his body, continues.

Sora: That's not fair, Beast. Don't take it out on Belle. It's not like she stole it.

Belle: I'm sorry.

Sora: You don't have to apologize.

Belle: But—

The Beast at first tells Belle to leave the castle, but they make their peace and stay together. The Beast is taken to task by Sora, but the repeated tense and physically threatening encounters between the Beast and Belle intensify existing discourses of abuse that resulted in response to the 1991 Disney film.[78] Belle's persistent hope that the Beast will change, despite evidence to the contrary, and the Beast's repeated threats, followed by contrition, also mirror cycles of abuse. Also, it is Sora—the games' protagonist—who steps in, as opposed to Belle standing up for herself.

The Princesses of Heart and other Disney Princess characters in the *Kingdom Hearts* indicate how franchising encourages world-bending. Disney and Square Enix put Princess characters in the same universe in service of the game story and in spite of the Princess brand rules. They also render the Princesses passive—in opposition with the determined and independent traits that made the Princesses girl-power icons. Instead, the game centers on Sora's heroism and action—likely because the game's imagined audience is adolescent and young adult men. As we'll see, the last phase of the franchise re-centers the Princess and revisits girls' cultures while simultaneously continuing to develop the idea of a shared universe that *Kingdom Hearts* promoted.

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[78] Laura Beres, "Beauty and the Beast: The Romanticization of Abuse in Popular Culture," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, no. 2 (1999): 191-207.

The Disney Princess Renaissance: 2009-present

Just after the release of *Tangled*, Disney executives claimed that Disney didn't have any musicals or fairy tales in their pipeline. President of Pixar Animation Studios and Disney Animation Studios Ed Catmull stated: "Films and genres do run a course….They may come back later because someone has a fresh take on it."[79] The *Los Angeles Times* reported this and other parts of their interview with Catmull as an indication that fairy tales, and specifically Princesses, would take a backseat to boy-centered hit franchises like Disney and Pixar's *Cars* or *Toy Story*. Only a day later, Catmull took to the Disney Facebook page:

> A headline in today's LA Times erroneously reported that the Disney fairy tale is a thing of the past, but I feel it is important to set the record straight that they are alive and well at Disney and continue this week with *Tangled*, a contemporary retelling of a much-loved story. We have a number of projects in development with new twists that audiences will be able to enjoy for many years to come.[80]

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[79] Dawn C. Chmielewski and Claudia Eller, "Disney Animators are Closing the Book on Fairytales," *Los Angeles Times*, November 21, 2010, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2010-nov-21-la-et-1121-tangled-20101121-story.html.

[80] Brendan Connelly, "No More Fairytales from Disney? Not So Fast…" *Bleeding Cool*, November 22, 2010, https://www.bleedingcool.com/2010/11/22/no-more-fairytales-from-disney-not-so-fast/.

The public back and forth between Catmull and the *Los Angeles Times* may seem like a blip on the radar looking back, but it also indicated a subtle distancing from a Disney Princess past as well as the sometimes unmanageable task of articulating Disney's balance between honoring and reproducing legacy narratives and moving in new directions to court more audience markets. Catmull's interview came off like a slip-up, or at least a strong statement that required some back pedalling. The Disney fairytale musical is alive and well today, but it is no longer the sole animated Disney feature film style that returned the company to prominence in the late 1980s and 1990s. This rhetorical distancing from the musical could also be seen as a distancing from the feminine, as many of Disney's feature films with male protagonists had moved away from musical numbers by the 2000s, while Disney Princesses films—with *Brave* (2012) as the only exception, are still musicals.

Ten years later, we see the Disney Princess franchise and the larger Disney girl-power brand bend worlds almost to their breaking point. In film, the induction of new Disney Princesses into the Disney Princess Royal Court between 2009 and 2012 repeats the girl-power themes of the Disney Renaissance, with subtle thematic changes to pacify past criticisms. In the parks, the official induction of Princesses into the franchise is solidified through coronation events. On TV and in films from 2013-2017, however, the idea of the "princess" moves away from the official Disney Princess franchise by creating heroines who seem like good brand fits for the franchise but are not added to the group because of the perceived economic and political pitfalls of doing so. In all of these spaces and moments, the worlds of the Disney Princess franchise continue to bend and overlap, culminating in the most recent appearances of Disney Princesses, and Disney heroines in *Ralph Breaks the Internet*, temporarily re-codifying Disney's girl-power branding to include all currently popular Disney girl characters. From 2009 until the start of 2019, Disney is Princess-reflexive, taking on changing girl cultures *and* speaking back to criticisms of its femininized brand—leveraging and trying out new character combinations in response to audience's intertextual machinations to create a less concrete and more affective princess ethos.

New Disney Princesses

2009 to 2012 saw a quick succession of female-centered films that added three new Princesses to the franchise. To promote new Princesses and encourage park vacations, Disney hosted splashy coronation events at Disney Parks—with the exception of Rapunzel's coronation, which took place at Buckingham Palace. There, fans got to see all the Princesses together and officially see the newest Princess character added to the brand. These new Princesses' personalities and narratives complicate and develop feminist histories of female subjugation. The films also contain clear, franchise-able narrative choices to develop the growing girl brand and repeat the financial success of the Disney Renaissance era characters.

The Princesses in Disney films starting with *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) hearken back to the spunky and self-sufficient teens of the 1980s and 1990s Princesses. As "daughters" of postfeminist and girl power popular culture, they explicitly wrestle with the expectations of postfeminist popular culture, such as management of the body and obsession with romance.[81] This reflexive lens gave Disney the opportunity to response to criticisms of the Disney Princess brand—namely from middle and upper-middle class critics and parents. *The Princess and the Frog* confronts and criticizes cultural femininity by embodying such ideals in the intentionally problematic but sympathetic character Charlotte, and that character's distance from protagonist Tiana. In *Tangled*, Rapunzel's confinement is a subtle critique of modern girlhood—and postfeminism. In *Brave*, the absence of a romantic partner, as well as Merida's relationship with her mother, re-centers female, familial relationships over romantic ones.

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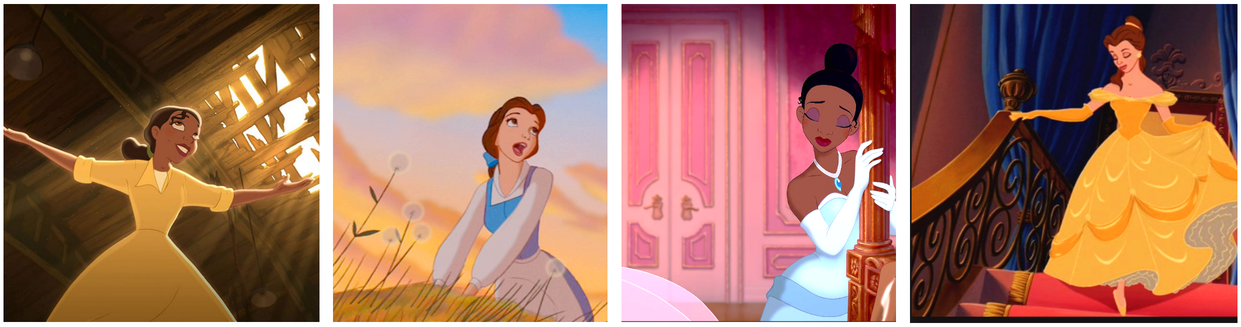
[81] Kearney, "Sparkle."

These characters are simultaneously made to be highly commodifiable, within their narrative and within franchising logics, with the most public outcry centering on Merida's sexy "makeover." The new Princesses are in many ways' indicative of industrial intertextuality in its third decade, considering narrative elements that would play well as consumer products and responding somewhat to the problematic identity politics that solidified around Disney's would-be princesses in the 1990s. At this point in time, young audience members of the Disney Renaissance may have had children of their own who would encounter these new characters in films alongside the prominent Disney Princess brand in retail.

Starting with the first black Princess in 2009, Disney indicated that they knew it was time for a fresh take on the Disney heroine: a role model for the 21st century. *The Princess and the Frog* most directly reflected upon the already significant discourse around "princess culture," explicitly setting itself against the hyper-feminine associations people had with Disney's heroines *and* the merchandise of the Disney Princess brand, while borrowing from the narrative elements that created the 1990s girl-power Princess. The film narrative itself is *not* a significant departure from earlier female-centered Disney films like *Beauty and the Beast*. In many ways, Tiana and Belle are parallels. Both are misfits in their local communities and aspire to better things, though Belle simply wants "more," and Tiana wants to open her own restaurant. They both diverge from their boy-crazy peers, though in Belle's case, her peers are a seldom-seen triad of blond village women jealous of the attention local hunk Gaston pays to Belle. In *The Princess and the Frog*, Tiana's peers are not competitors for male attention. They include a small group of men and women who want Tiana to go out on the town with them *and* a childhood friend, Charlotte, whose sole hope is to marry a prince. Belle and Tiana even dress similarly and wear their hair sensibly at the nape of their necks.



Belle and Tiana parallel each other in posture and attitude[82]

At best, the film puts a reflexive new spin on a formula that brought the company success during the Disney Renaissance. In Tiana's case, she is adamantly against wearing overly feminine and glamorous clothing; it is only after her dress is ruined at a party that she reluctantly changes into to blue gown that looks remarkably like Cinderella's dress: blue[83], A-line, and shimmering. Tiana's hair is pulled into a tight topknot, also like Cinderella, and Charlotte places a tiara on her head: out-Princess-ing even the classic Princesses. This would become one of her signature outfits later sold on her doll and as children's dress-up costumes. It is important not just that Tiana is the first black Princess, and thus signals a "new" era, but that she looks like a classic Disney Princess and extends consumable femininity to the retail market, inviting black girls and other girls of color more explicitly into Princess culture.

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[82] *The Princess and the Frog*, directed by Ron Clements and John Musker (2009; Burbank, California: Walt Disney Pictures); *Beauty and the Beast*, directed by Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise (1991; Burbank, California: Walt Disney Pictures).

[83] Die-hard Disney or Princess fans know that Cinderella's original dress is a silver gray. However, in the franchised toy and dress up lines, Cinderella's dress often appears blue, so this is the color many would associate with Cinderella.

To create further distance between Tiana and a formerly derided Princess brand reputation—that of a hyper-feminine, consumer-oriented girlhood—Disney created a representational "straw woman" in Charlotte La Bouff, a white, blond young woman with a penchant for pink. Practically drowning in petticoats in some scenes and always covered in feathers or jewels, Charlotte stands in as the epitome of an everyday "princess," the bratty, bold, and manipulative woman that many audience members and critics feared the Disney Princess brand had created.[84] Charlotte is entitled, unrealistic, and even becomes comically violent when demanding the attention of her over-indulgent father. She is also not-so-coincidentally obsessed with fairy tales and romance—warning against the kind of Disney Princess fandom that privileges naive romantic expectations. The film blames her father who has spoiled her from a young age, and hints that an antiquated southern belle culture has also shaped her personality. In a ball scene, Charlotte at one minute proclaims her adherence to etiquette and decorum and then immediately transitions to mopping up her armpit sweat with cocktail napkins. This adult Charlotte even contrasts with her younger self in early scenes. While little Charlotte is adorable, if obnoxious, as she stares wide-eyed and dreamily into space, she is almost monstrous as an adult who still holds to the idea that her prince will arrive and sweep her off her feet. The narrative implies that Charlotte has been sold a false narrative, showing child and adult viewers that girls' obsession with romance can twist their expectations into adulthood. The fact that Charlotte does not arrive at her convictions on her own is a very subtle critique of cultural femininity and a postfeminist culture that still focuses on bodily self-management and romance. The fact that viewers are invited to laugh at Charlotte's antics, though, makes her the object of criticism as well, and not only the culture that surrounds her.

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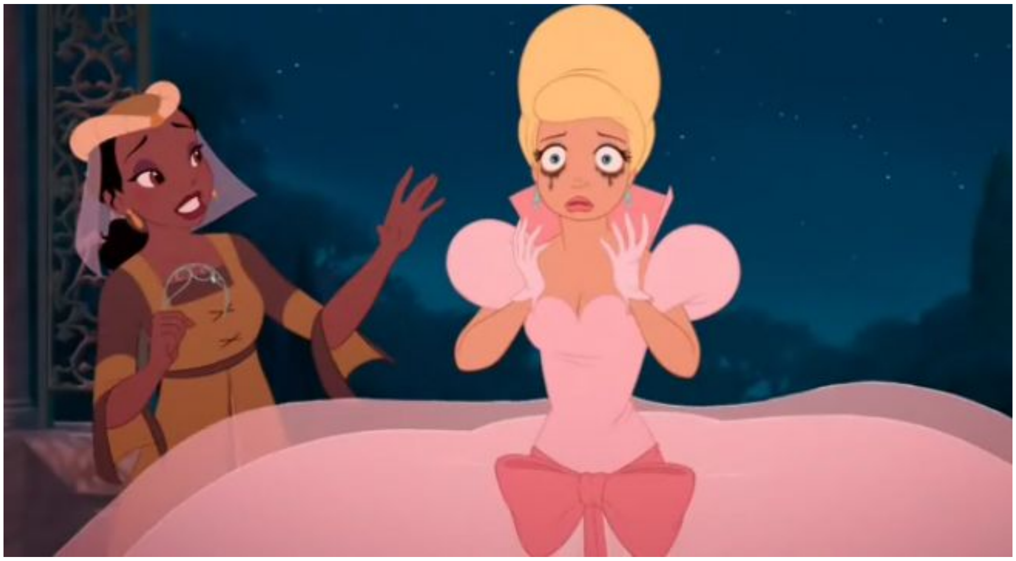
[84] Gary Strauss, "Princesses Rule the Hearts of Little Girls," *USA Today*, March 2, 2004, 1D.



Charlotte’s emotional breakdowns and over-the-top clothing choices juxtapose with Tiana’s level-headedness and muted costume[85]

The film exonerates Charlotte because she is ultimately harmless and because she tried to reunite Tiana and her prince, endangering her own chance to become a princess by marriage. At the close of the film, however, Charlotte is unchanged; she pushes other women out of the way to catch a bridal bouquet and hints that she'll wait for Prince Naveen's little brother, who is six years old, to come of age so she can marry him. She is unruly and potentially repugnant, but importantly, she is not the princess nor the role model in the film. Instead, she is the comedic figure. Some may even find her magnetic as an unruly woman who demands the spoils of female privilege in a patriarchal system but does not perform her expected gendered behaviors with any sincerity. Following Kathleen Rowe’s argument, the unruly woman is aware of the artifice of femininity and demands power and satisfaction within the framework of hegemony by explicitly non-feminine actions and empty hegemonic behaviors. Charlotte’s simultaneous armpit wiping and eye batting indicates her awareness of gender as performance and belies the emptiness of her belief in feminine passivity. While readings of Charlotte's character likely range from affection to outrage, Disney can use her as a foil to Tiana's subtle attributes of ambition and grace; that of the postfeminist and girl-power princess. Perhaps exploiting women and girls' frustration with societal expectations of their gender, Disney plays in this gray area, using the unruly woman as a feminist foil to the can-do girl, both of which are negotiated identities that mostly fit into hegemonic and heteronormative institutions, and ultimately service to enhance Disney's reputation as reflexive company that can poke fun at itself.

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[85] *The Princess and the Frog*, Clements and Musker.

Tangled (2010) returns to a traditional visual representation of the princess; Rapunzel is blond and petite and wears pink and purple. Her hair is highly commodifiable and visually pleasurable—70 feet long and shining, Rapunzel's hair makes her an ideal of postfeminist or even post-girl power girlhood because of its glamour and beauty.[86] However, this long hair is also the reason for Rapunzel's confinement in her tower. In the fairytale and its Disney adaptation, Rapunzel is kidnapped at birth from her parents and locked in a tower by an evil witch. In the Disney version, Rapunzel's tower is an apt metaphor for the narrowness of constructions of ideal girlhood; she is confined not only by the tower but by her feminine body, including her hair. However, she is not without personal resolve and self-sufficiency. Rapunzel has clearly learned a series of impressive skills with very little spatial experience—drawing, crafting, cooking, and gymnastics. Many viewers would likely look on appreciatively at the extensive mural Rapunzel has created and the way she uses her hair as a pulley system to create her art. However, Katie Kapurch argues that Rapunzel spends a great deal of time with "selfimprovement tasks" typical of postfeminist culture, including the managing her own body and especially her burdensome hair.[87] While magical and visually stunning, and sometimes incredibly useful, it's clear that the long bright golden hair is also her greatest burden. She is tired of the overwhelming task of self-perfection and self-management, as she indicates through song. Kapurch argues that *Tangled*, as well as *Brave*, sometimes follow postfeminist ideals while also recognizing its pressures and potential for dysfunction, as we see with the relationship between Rapunzel and her adoptive, abusive "mother."[88]

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[86] Kearney, "Sparkle."

We juxtapose Rapunzel's self-management with the controlling behavior of her Mother Gothel, the witch who stole her at birth to harness the rejuvenating power of her hair. She puts Rapunzel down, exposing her as an unsuccessful girl, at least according to the principles of cultural femininity and can-do girlhood. Calling her sloppy, immature, clumsy, naive, ditzy, and chubby—all physical and behavioral traits unbecoming and dangerous to girls, according to the Anita Harris's description of the at-risk girl, who is often lower class, slovenly, insecure, and in danger of failing as a girl—becoming pregnant, taking drugs, and not preparing for a middle-class future.[89] The audience knows better in Rapunzel's case, and these insults are clearly intended to control the teenager. While her confidence is clearly shattered, she sometimes doubts her mother's frightening images of the outside world. Despite the cruel and antagonistic behavior of Gothel, some may reserve sympathy for this woman consumed by maintaining her youthful appearance. Beauty expectations require women to stay youthful if they want to remain visible, and Gothel is clearly desperate enough to abuse her adopted daughter. As we'll see, sympathy becomes a prominent theme in Princess texts, and especially television as Disney targets parents and guardians with more complex and intriguing adult characters.

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[87] Katie Kapurch, "Something Else Besides a Daughter?: Maternal Melodrama Meets Postfeminist Girlhood in *Tangled* and *Brave*," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 40, no. 1 (January 2016): 47.

[88] Kapurch, "Something Else Besides a Daughter," 40.

[89] Harris, "The 'Can-Do' Girl."

Both Tiana and Rapunzel go on adventures that take them away from their families and end in romantic relationships with men, upholding the romantic ideals of the Disney narrative—as well as the dictates of postfeminist culture, that a woman is sexually agential, but ultimately wants to be in a long-term relationship with a man. These dynamics alter in the film narrative of *Brave* (2012), which centers female relationships as the driving force of the plot. In *Brave*, Merida rejects feminine behavior and prefers tomboyish physical activity. Taking after her father, she is an expert with her bow and arrow and riding her horse. This results in her frequently arguing with her mother, Elinor, who hopes to prepare Merida to rule and marry by practicing courtly behaviors. Elinor herself represents feminine characteristics associated with domesticity and indoor activity and is often frustrated by Merida's wildness. The courtship sequence in the film best exemplifies this mother-daughter tension. First and foremost, Merida is not invested in marriage or boys and her mother's urging that she find a mate causes familial strife. As Elinor prepares her daughter for this ritual, they struggle with Merida's dress and wimple (a tight head piece that completely covers the hair). One of Merida's untamed curls pops out of the front of the head piece and Elinor tucks it back in. Merida removes it again, and a tug of war ensues, though Merida has the last word, leaving the curl exposed. This physical confinement in some ways parallels Rapunzel's, especially in the representation of bright and beautiful hair[90], though her relationship with her mother is strained and not exploitative or cruel.

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[90] Kapurch, "Something Else Besides a Daughter?"; Caroline Ferris Leader, "Magical Manes and Untamable Tresses: (En)Coding Computer-Animated Hair for the Post-Feminist Disney

The very end of the courtship sequence sees Merida beating all her suitors in the tournament for her hand in marriage. Merida shoots for her "own hand," thus foiling her mother's efforts to confine her to a heteronormative lifecycle, and publicly stating her physical prowess over men.

Merida is wild and carefree, in contrast to her mother, who while sympathetic, is framed as serious and dour. Queen Elinor's behavior, while antiquated, is a tonal equivalent to second-wave feminism[91], in that her seriousness and dogmatic approach—more in line with the second-wave feminist movement—is confining for her daughter—who desires the individualized and self-determined approach of postfeminism and girl power. This is exemplified by the difference in their hair; while Elinor's hair is dark and pulled back in a braid, Merida's is loose, wild, and red, which both aligns her with the masculine side of her genetic pool—her father and brothers are also red-headed—and frames her, physically and metaphorically, as feminine and sexual.[92] Like the typical tomboy narrative, Elinor expects Merida to "grow out" of her behavior as she tucks her daughter's hair away before her potential courtship with another clan leader's son. The film's plot ultimately centers on the evolution of Merida and her mother's relationship and at the end, while Merida certainly learns to understand and listen to her mother, it is Elinor who rediscovers her own wild girlhood and gives Merida control over her romantic future.[93] For now, Merida and Elinor spend their time galloping around on horses, their hair undone.

Princess," *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 6 (2018): 1086-1101. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2017.1390688.

[91] Kapurch, "Something Else Besides a Daughter?"; Leader, "Magical Manes and Untamable Tresses."

[92] Leader, "Magical Manes and Untamable Tresses."

[93] Merida's marriage is put off indefinitely and she is given control over who she married. This makes her heterosexual future uncertain but impending.

Giving more screen time to adult female characters in these newer films is part of two strategic lines of thinking at Disney. First, the conglomerate begins to reformat Disney narratives to acknowledge and celebrate families within their texts, reducing the primacy of the wicked stepmothers, doing away with domineering fathers, and slowly de-centering romance with princes. Second, the addition of mothers to these Disney films welcomes parent-child engagement with the franchise more explicitly, acknowledging the intergenerationality of feminine cultures, as well as the tension caused by generational divides of feminism, a theme that Kapurch explores extensively. This move has potential financial implications as Disney seeks to move family members, individually and as a group, through connected Disney Princess worlds of consumption.

Merida's transition into retail and merchandising would not prove as smooth as Tiana and Rapunzel's though—in part because her features did not strictly conform to the Princess aesthetic—large, almond-shaped eyes, flowing straight hair, and small hour-glass figures. Outcry ensued after an image of "toy" Merida circulated around the Internet.[94] Unlike the film character whose full hips, small breasts, rounded eyes and wide face signaled her negotiation of the ideal feminine figure, her post-film image showed a more hourglass appearance, bigger made-up eyes, and an off-the-should dress that exposed her thin shoulders and some of her cleavage. While this treatment is like other Princesses, as I'll discuss in the following chapter, Disney was supposedly breaking from its model of the Disney Princess with Merida, and in this instance of viral digital culture, the company was caught breaking the promise the *Brave* film seemed to make to audiences—and indeed the promise Disney hinted at with all new heroines of the Disney Princess Renaissance—that these Princesses would be different.

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[94] Maria Elena Fernandez and Phil Helsel, "'Brave' Princess' Sexy Makeover Not Permanent, Disney Says," *Today*, May 16, 2013, https://www.today.com/popculture/brave-princess-sexy-makeover-not-permanent-disney-says-1C9952299.

A similar situation arose when Disney released screenshots for *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (2018), when audiences noted that Tiana's CGI iteration had lighter skin and reworked facial features that conformed to white beauty standards.[95] Disney re-animated the Princess before releasing the film. Moments like this betray the complicated and contradictory practice of franchising, that is, the management of character looks and representations across media platforms. In tandem with the rapid and amplified responses enabled by the Internet, such inconsistencies can be easily spotted, and just as easily "fixed" by a company that manages animated characters, not human actors.

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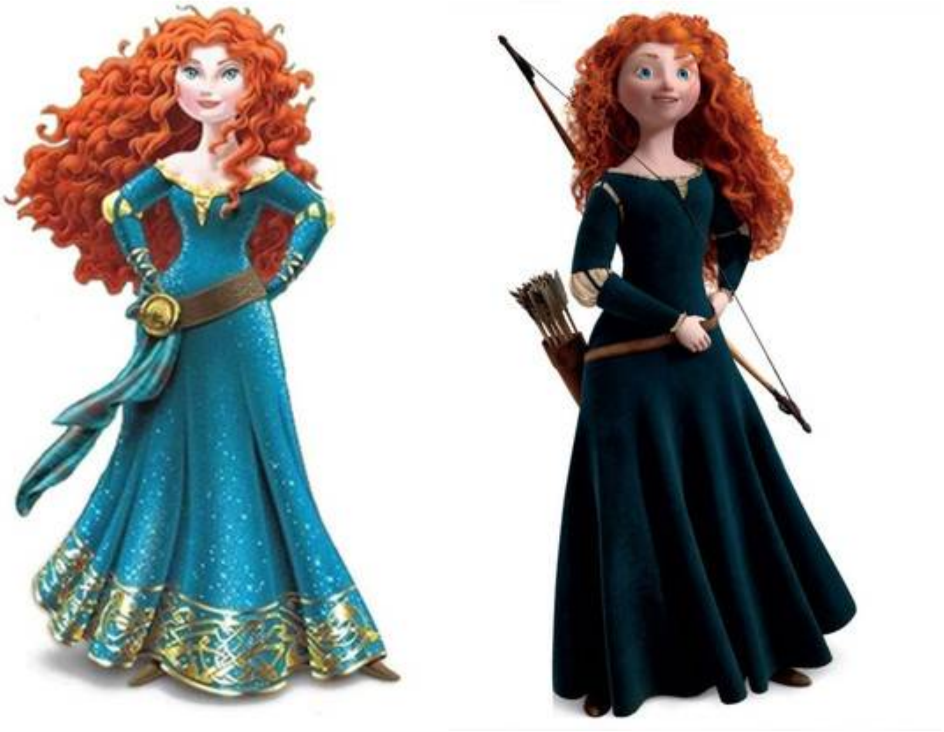
[95] Erich Schwartzel, "Disney Reanimates Portions of Upcoming Film After Criticism for Lightening Black Character's Skin," *The Wall Street Journal*, Sept. 20, 2018, https://www.wsj.com/articles/disney-reanimates-portions-of-upcoming-film-after-criticism-for-lightening-black-characters-skin-1537477977



Merida’s first appearance on social media celebrating her coronation (left) versus her look in the film (right).[96]

The Princesses of this era distance themselves from former Princesses by reflecting on the flaws of girl-power culture, including the persistent expectation for girls to conform to certain behaviors and beauty ideals and girls’ obsession with romantic love. However, Disney recycled key visual and behavioral tropes that proved successful during the Disney Animation Renaissance. In the truest sense of the word, the Disney Princess Renaissance characters are a revival and renewal of a 1990s girl-power heroine, updated slightly to answer the criticisms and nostalgia of new parents and old fans and to bring in new young fans.

Grown-Up Princesses

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[96] Fernandez and Jelsel, “‘Brave’ Princess’ Sexy Makeover,”

The 2013 children's book *Princesses on the Run* tells a revisionist tale of princesses becoming bored with their banal princess lives and taking on modern hobbies like yoga, cross-country running, and clothing design.[97] Princess icons Snow White, Cinderella, Rapunzel, and Sleeping Beauty make up the crew that accompany the book's Princess Antonia in her pursuit of a world outside princes and party dresses. The text is clearly intended to "wean" girls away from the Disney Princess ideal. The characters are recognizable as they stick closely to Disney character design—Sleeping Beauty wears a pale pink gown, Snow White sports her 1937 bob, and Rapunzel cuts her hair into a shorter style more sensible for the everyday world. They take on adult, entrepreneurial labor to free themselves from a life of passivity and dependence on men. The lesson seems to be to attain economic power over sexual power, but in no way deviates from postfeminist girl culture. The princesses in the book explore careers of the body—fashion and fitness, thereby extending their "girlness" into economic work that will fulfill them emotionally and economically. This thematic is consistent with feminine consumerism that extends from the young girl market to teens and adult women—who Disney begins to court more extensively in 2009 and after. Like *Princesses on the Run*, fitness and beauty are a few of the feminine consumption practices that are highly valued in postfeminist culture. As Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker observe[98], postfeminist texts often present femininity as "vitality," a way to transcend the social and economic pressure of adulthood. It is no wonder then, they argue, that makeovers are a popular trope of postfeminist texts. The growth of the Disney Princess brand specifically reaches out across ages in 2009 and after through park experiences and fashion, where the company continues practices from their brand-building era (2000-2009). Expanding a brand's appeal does not require the laborious and expensive task of making a movie. Instead, fitness and beauty are feminine mainstays that attract adult women as well as girls in overlapping postfeminist and girl power consumer culture.

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[97] Smiljana Coh, *Princesses on the Run* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2013).

[98] Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, introduction to *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, eds. Yvonne Tasker & Diane Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 9.

The Princess runs are one of the significant features at Disney parks that sell female solidarity and empowerment for adults. Starting in 2009, the Princess Half Marathon, 10k, and 5k walk/run offer runners an immersive all-day experience, encouraging participants to dress like Princesses for the run, stay at Disney Resorts, and participate in a weekend of activities.[99] At the parks, Disney can play off the escapist fantasy of such experiences that are apart from the "real world" of athletics, with scrutiny and machismo as elements of other competitions. The races are female-centered by design. Men can participate[100], but cannot run in the first two starting corrals[101], nor can they win awards independently.[102] Runners are 91% female[103] and thus provide an almost female-exclusive experience. Families are encouraged to run together and stay at the park, which turns the race into a strong profit generator for Disney. Female empowerment generally comes with a price tag, and Princess runs are no exception, with 5k runs costing $87 for registration and half marathons priced at $205 per registrant. That does not include staying over in the park, which starts at $161 per night for a standard room but leaps up to several hundred dollars per night and over $1,000 per night in some resorts.

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[99] "Run Disney History and Discontinued Race," *Fairytales and Fitness*, March 9, 2015, http://www.fairytalesandfitness.com/2015/03/run-disney-history-and-discontinued.html.

[100] Karla Bruning, "Why runDisney Races Are Such a Big Deal," *Shape,* https://www.shape.com/fitness/cardio/why-rundisney-races-are-such-big-deal.

[101] Race starting corrals are designated groupings of runners that help reduce congestion on the course. Elite runners with the stronger race records typically start in the first corral, with each successive corral signifying slower running times. At the Princess Run, men cannot join the first two corrals, regardless of their racing records.

[102] Men can only winner "coed" awards with a female running partner.

[103] Tiffany Yanetta, "Run Like a Princess, Or the Story of the Disney Marathon Machine," *Racked*, March 4, 2015, https://www.racked.com/2015/3/4/8143155/disney-princess-half-marathon.

Fashion and beauty also loom large at parks and in the everyday, though they can play off each other and encourage further investment, literally and metaphorically, in Disney. At Disney park resorts, children and adults can have a quasi-Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique experience in Character Couture, another salon service that is less "immersive"[104] than the Boutique. Focusing in on the "beauty" aspect of the industry that includes makeup and hair rather than dress-up options, Character Couture (started in 2018) is more thematic, incorporating character colors into a makeup look rather than imitating a character's appearance directly. Finally, Disney would also focus on fashion as an outlet for teen and adult Disney Princess fans, adding formal and casual fashions. These every-day and event-based fashions play off the individuality of Princess characters as well as the group. The "disneystyle" Instagram account calls to millennial women with fashion merchandise that often features groups of women dressed for a Disney park adventure, and always in different colors to signify different Princesses—for instance, a woman in a teal Jasmine t-shirt would be flanked by a friend in a purple Rapunzel t-shirt and another friend in a blue Tiana t-shirt. Again, by privileging youthfulness, beauty, and female solidarity, Disney Princess bends its messaging for older women and not just girls. It's easy to see this theme play across Princess films, merchandise, and in particular in its multiple television series in the last decade of the franchise's growth and expansion across spaces and ages.

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[104] "Behind the Scenes of Disney's Character Couture Makeovers for Adults," *Undercover Tourist*, June 5, 2018, https://www.undercovertourist.com/blog/disney-world-character-couture-package/.

The Princess Multiverse

As recent as 2015, TV made up 40 percent of net sales and more than 50 percent of Disney's operating income.[105] Charlie Nelson, former Vice President for marketing at Disney, claimed that, 'the one luxury that Disney has over literally everybody else is the Disney Channel, watched by 80 million households [in the United States], 24 hours a day."[106] Disney's forays into branded television extend the logic of world-bending by revising brand rules and to imply a "multiverse"—the idea popularized by science fiction and fantasy writing that parallel universes and multiple concurrent timelines may exist. This princess multiverse is a transmedia branded imagining of girl-power culture—that "all-girl" world that focuses on female relationships and leaves the door open for more worlds that Disney audiences can consume onscreen and in person.

In TV, we see the intergenerational work of the Princess franchise as well as generic and narrative extensions of existing Disney texts. These series enhance and add to the princess multiverse, (re)introduce Disney Princesses, and create girl-power messages in a critical postfeminist landscape. *Once Upon a Time* was the first intervention in which the Princess multiverse was explored and expanded. The series also created female-centered Disney worlds. The next series, *Sofia the First*, was targeted at preschoolers and set itself apart as a series that reintroduced its young consumers to the Disney Princess brand. Third and last, *Elena of Avalor* came from the same universe as Sofia and is therefore by extension attached to the greater Princess universe. While her world has not yet intersected with others the same way Sofia's has, she is part of a strategic effort to connect princess characters together and add more ethnic representation to the princess multiverse.

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[105] These numbers include ESPN and Disney Channel. See Alexandre Bohas, *The Political Economy of Disney*, 65.

[106] Bohas, *The Political Economy of Disney*, 65.

Once Upon a Time

All grown up and in the real world without clear happy endings, ABC's *Once Upon a Time* follows familiar Disney characters and other figures from folklore, fairy tales and literature. The series first aired in the fall of 2011 with strong ratings and intergenerational appeal.[107] While a cast of hundreds comes in and out of the fantastical melodrama, the conflict centers primarily on Disney Princess characters and their corresponding villainesses—in particular between Snow White, her evil queen stepmother, and Snow White's daughter Emma Swan.

A curse enacted by the evil queen—named Regina in the series—takes characters from their fantasy worlds, predominantly within the appropriately named Fairy Tale Land and especially in part of that land called the Enchanted Forest and drops them into the current moment in a small, fictional Maine town, Storybrooke. The serial show follows the enactment of the curse, but frequently travels back in time to characters' "origin stories." In addition, many more curses would occur to create new challenges and motivations for the community of fairy tale characters. Focusing primarily on relationships between characters—punctuated by fantastical elements that often heighten relationship tension—the show is primarily a melodrama, akin to a prime-time soap opera with "quality" technical treatments: dark lighting and somewhat violent, threatening content. The show bends Disney brands and texts, challenges the Princess ideology with grown-up girl-power content, and creates a Princess multiverse to expand its ethnic representation.

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[107] Josef Adalian, "*Once Upon a Time* is a Rare Hit with the Whole Family," *Vulture*, November 14, 2011, http://www.vulture.com/2011/11/once-upon-a-time-is-a-rare-hit-with-the-whole-family.html; Rick Kissel, "Crooners, Cliffhangers Boost ABC," *Variety* 313, no. 33 (November 2011): 1-44.

A more aggressive form of world bending, *Once Upon a Time* follows the influence of *Kingdom Hearts*' worlds and "heart"-centered mythology. *Once Upon a Time* collapses more worlds together; for instance, Fairy Tale Land encompasses every European Disney Princess film, Agrabah (the location of *Aladdin*), Arendelle (from *Frozen*), Camelot (of the King Arthur legends), and DunBroch (from *Brave*). This sort of shared universe will be familiar to comic book readers who know all too well the combined universes of DC and Marvel, the second of which was not so coincidentally acquired by Disney in 2009. Neverland and Wonderland, however, have their own worlds, defining them separately in their own film franchises, *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *Alice in Wonderland*, respectively. In fact, Wonderland was central to *Once Upon a Time*'s spin-off, *Once Upon a Time in Wonderland*. The series only lasted a season but explored a different part of the original story worlds.

Thematically, *Once Upon a Time* builds off *Kingdom Hearts*. Hearts play a significant role, though unlike in *Kingdom Hearts* where the stealing of a heart renders an individual one of the Heartless or Nobody's—soulless, insect-like beings—those with magic in *Once Upon A Time* pulls hearts out of other characters' chests, rendering the now heartless individual under the persuasion of the one who took their heart. This trope allows for interpersonal betrayal and manipulation—as the "evil twin" trick did historically for soap operas.

As a grown-up version of Disney's girl-oriented franchise, ABC makes several updates and changes to story lines and character traits. In general, the melodrama gives women most of the power and action, while men tend to work as secondary characters and sometimes fall short of princely heroism. For instance, in the pilot episode Snow White draws Prince Charming's sword and points it at the evil queen when she threatens the couple at their wedding, therefore taking action as the aggressor while Prince Charming stands by. In addition, the *Beauty and the Beast* narrative gets some revision in the 12th episode of the first season and later on. First, Belle explains her kidnapping by the Beast as an act of heroism of her part: "Heroism…sacrifice….There aren't a lot of opportunities for women in this land to show what they can do. To see the world. To be heroes." Rather than blame Belle's behavior in the 1991 film on Disney's narrative treatment, the *Once Upon a Time* retelling blames the patriarchal culture Belle inhabits within Fairy Tale Land—just as *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) saw Charlotte La Bouff as a product of a hyperfeminine culture.

Belle also shares a moment with the evil queen Regina that responds comically to the prevailing "Stockholm Syndrome" criticism of *Beauty and the Beast*. Regina states: "I would never suggest a young woman to kiss a man who held her captive. What kind of message is that?" Disney's tongue-and-cheek treatment of traditional Disney characters seeks to update and revamp the feminine brand for audiences disenchanted with the tales from their childhoods. The transplanted TV fairy tales become more nuanced, and good and evil blurs into dysfunctionality, and family tension, extending its postfeminist and girl power narratives into new territory while privileging historically feminine genres.

After six seasons, many of *Once Upon A Time*'s stars opted to leave at the end of their six-year contracts, including Ginnifer Goodwin (Snow White), Josh Dallas (Prince Charming), Emilie de Ravin (Belle), Jennifer Morrison (Emma Swan), and Jared S. Gilmore (Henry Mills). Rather than end the still-highly rated and beloved show after such an exodus, producers decided to both continue and "reboot" the series with new cast members. This decision complicated the princess multiverse by implying that doubles of each character, and perhaps even more in other iterations of the multiverse, existed in parallel worlds. For example, a new Fairy Tale Land replaced the older Fairy Tale Land. So as not to completely replace previous cast members—in turn begging comparison and potential ire from fans—the show refocused on different Princesses *and* recycled existing side characters with new cast members of color. Cinderella had been an infrequent guest star on the series in the first six seasons, but became the series star in Season Seven, and Latina. In addition, Princess Tiana, who had not yet appeared in the show became a major protagonist in Season 7. Such a shift continues Disney's courting of communities of color and could also have been part of an attempt to bring in new viewers instead of purely relying on former audiences to stick around for an unpredictable "reboot." Season 7 of the series, due to poor ratings, would mark the end of *Once Upon a Time*. Introducing a second universe and foregrounding characters of color seems to mirror Disney's past efforts wherein "classic" characters who benefited from long histories in mass consumer markets are white and new characters of color are created with less thought and consideration for audiences that the media industries have historically ignored.

Through world-bending, Disney-ABC's *Once Upon a Time* responds to a media landscape characterized by the convergence of story lines, as well as its own history of cross-promotion between its profitable sectors—film, TV, parks, and products. The series also extends audience reach through age and ethnicity, though not without issue. *Once Upon a Time*, though, is only one example in television of the Disney princess multiverse amplifying the company's girl-power image and blurring lines between sub-brands and narrative worlds.

Sofia the First *and* Elena of Avalor

These two princesses of Disney Junior have developed in tandem with three major strategies: encouraging Latinx audiences to engage with Disney Princesses, (re)introducing

Princess culture to young audiences, and expanding efforts to familiarize audiences with Disney brands in everyday domestic media. As we know from earlier in the chapter, these strategies build upon Walt Disney's concept of total merchandising and expand possible corporate synergies and world-bending in a convergence culture. Both narratives are cumulative[108] and aimed at preschoolers—with *Elena* potentially reaching into early school-age kids. They combine loosely serialized narratives about villains who seek to overthrow the princesses' royal families and episodic narratives detailing everyday issues young children face—conflicts with friends and siblings, learning emotional management and social behavior, and dealing with life's daily subtle inequities. Continuing to use the girl-power themes that pervade Disney Princess films and adult-oriented TV shows like *Once Upon a Time*, *Sofia* also re-introduced the Disney Princess brand young audiences and *Elena* solved some of the problems of Sofia's perplexing connection to Latinidad.

Sofia the First, the series, started in January of 2013 after its 2012 debut as a TV movie. The show privileges a highly feminine gender performance, in line with the Disney Princess merchandising side of the brand. Sofia's world is entirely girly—the title character wears a purple sparkly dress and her narrative is populated with horses, crowns, and small animal friends—, but it also maintains a feminist-influenced girl-power mission. In the Season One's first episode following the initial TV movie, Sofia takes on gender segregation in after-school activities, where the "princes" take part in a flying horse derby while the "princesses" indulge in more grounded, subdued feminine games. Of course, Sofia objects and in the end proves that princesses can do anything princes can. Much of the series, in fact, takes on sexism in a coded way, avoiding overt confrontation of sexist hierarchies and instead promoting female mentorship, empowerment, and girl power as a path to equality. It also solidifies an already-evident comparison: the word "princess" is synonymous with "girl." Sofia expands the age criteria and ethnic background of Disney P/princesses and thus offers another facet or version of idealized girlhood.

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[108] *Sofia the First* is a cumulative narrative, according to Jeffrey Sconce's definition. Some conflicts are only one episode long, while the larger conflict—Sofia's transition to royalty and the darker forces trying to tear her family's kingdom apart—are series long.

What makes *Sofia* unique is the appearance of Disney Princess characters during episodes, offering female mentorship to Sofia and her friends. In Season 2, Episode 12, Sofia, her step-sister Amber, and new-found friend Princess Jun save their fathers and brothers from a dangerous jaguar, proving again that girls/princesses can do anything. On their journey, the group encounters a barrier in the jungle and Sofia's amulet summons Mulan to help her. Mulan sings about her own film tale, and how her father and the men in China doubted her strength, drawing similarities between herself and Sofia. Telling the girls they "are stronger than (they) know," Mulan helps them realize personal strength through solidarity and friendship; by the end of their episode they have recovered the members of their families from danger. This optimistic girl-power world is not uncommon in kid-oriented texts, where a happy ending is the only natural ending for children to see, but it is also a significant continuation of Disney's brand-building goals for the franchise. These Princess synergies prompt audiences to move through the Disney Princess franchise with such intertextual cues in spite of different production contexts. Kyra Hunting and Jonathan Gray note this intertextuality on the Disney Junior cable network, indicating that "texts constantly feed back into one another and connect viewers to the sprawling corporate network that is Disney."[109] Certainly, the Disney Princess intertexts work together to lead consumers to new commodities and experiences so that consumers engage with/buy their way through the brand, making Disney money at as many access points as possible.

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[109] Kyra Hunting and Jonathan Gray, "Disney Junior: Imagining Industrial Intertextuality," in *From Networks to Netflix: A Guide to Changing Channels*, ed. Derek Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2018), 198.

In case the interconnection between Disney Princess narratives wasn't explicit enough when Princesses are called into Sofia's presence, she later discovers a secret library containing fairy tale books—a new way to expand the episodic offerings of the show and an indication of a larger universe of fantastical stories (Season 3, Episode 5, "The Secret Library"). Each book is a portal to the world that covers the book's pages. In different episodes, including the crossover episode that begins the *Elena of Avalor* series, Sofia can enter the books and access those worlds to solve whatever problem is in them. To access this library of book portals, Sofia passes through an underground waterway within her own family's castle. For reasons yet unexplained, the waterway contains large dioramas of Disney Princess filmic landscapes. Much like the boat rides as Disney theme parks, Sofia gapes at the passing scenes with interest, again rewarding Disney fans with familiar story worlds: Pocahontas's cliff top, Snow White's cottage in the woods, Rapunzel's lanterns, Cinderella's glass slipper, and more. Moments like these connect Sofia to the larger Disney princess multiverse, bending worlds to privilege the intertextuality of Disney Princess products and characters.

While the *Sofia* series worked to build a bridge between the Princess brand and Disney's broader princess ethos, the *Elena of Avalor* series emerges from within Sofia's world and from then on becomes its own, independent space. In a crossover TV special, "Elena and the Secret of Avalor," Sofia releases Princess Elena from her amulet and the *Elena* TV series was launched. Elena's series has not relied on the same tropes as Sofia's. She does not interact with Disney

Princesses on screen but has received significant fanfare for appearances at Disney parks.[110] Unlike the younger Sofia, who is eight years old, Elena is 16, a common age of Disney Princesses. But due to her televisual status, Elena is not a Princesses. Instead of a coronation—which would imply Elena was a part of the Disney Princess franchise—Elena received a royal greeting from Cinderella and Prince Charming.[111]

Elena continues the girl-power messaging of *Sofia*, but as an older character, Elena more explicitly pushes back on the romantic tropes often expected for teenage characters. *Elena* producers promised that Elena would not only become the ruler of her kingdom later in life, but also that she would not entertain any suitors.[112] Like Sofia, she is more concerned with her familial relationships and friendships. In her first TV episode, Elena tries to prove herself a strong queen, but by the end of the episode, settles for being a princess while she learns from her elders and matures as a ruler. The message she receives from friends and family is to not rush the process and take her time, much as one might tell the can-do girl to take her time becoming a woman and properly prepare for the responsibilities and challenges of womanhood.

In Season 2, Episode 2, Elena and a princess from a rival kingdom, Valentina, find themselves in a battle of one-upmanship despite their families' hopes they will make peace and sign a treaty. Valentina is girly, decked in pink-and-purple clothing, shimmering jewelry, and an equally bedazzled carriage. Her performance of glamor and femininity parallels her pride and rude behavior: both read as excessive and unnecessary. Elena is the bigger person and tries to behave politely and patiently, until an incident with magically revived dog statues and a runaway carriage enrages her. Valentina admits to being jealous of Elena's impressive reputation and that her behavior is due to the sometimes-overwhelming pressures of being a princess. Perhaps coded as the pressure of performing femininity, Elena does not have identical pressures, but understands Valentina's plight. At the end of the episode, Valentina's appearance does not change—after all, her consumable femininity, like Sofia's, is profitable for girls' dress-up culture and not something Disney casts off lightly—but we see her glamour as superficial and not essential to her true self. Elena's style of gender performance—tomboyish but effortlessly striking in a red dress—better represents the kind of girlhood the Disney P/princess promotes. Calling back to the action-oriented and sexy teen heroines of 1990s postfeminist media like Buffy in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) or *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996-2003), Elena is confident and self-sufficient, but also slender and cute—a more muted and age-appropriate precursor to sexiness—making her an ideal teen role model for much younger girls audiences.

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[110] "Meet Cinderella and Elena at Princess Fairytale Hall," *Walt Disney World*, accessed March 15, 2018, https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/entertainment/magic-kingdom/character-meet-elena-fairytale-hall/.

[111] "Princess Elena of Avalor Royal Induction Ceremony at Magic Kingdom, Walt Disney World," YouTube video, 14:02, posted by "Inside the Magic," August 11, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkgFzpHe5e4.

[112] Angela Williams, "10 Things You Should Know About Disney's Newest Princess, 'Elena of Avalor'," *ABC News*, July 20, 2016, http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/10-things-disneys-newest-princess-elena-avalor/story?id=40716449.

TV princesses, while not officially Disney Princesses, propel the brand and continue to bend worlds and connect back to the official Disney Princess franchise. Sofia and Elena are clearly descendants of the Disney Princess brand—*Sofia* and *Elena* merchandise even hangs next to or under the Disney Princess banner at stores. They are also a Latinx extension of the brand that privileges an ethnic group in the U.S. that have historically been marginalized. Likely due in part to growing Latinx population numbers[113], TV media engagement[114], global Latinx populations, and proximity of Latinx communities to Disney parks[115], Disney has pursued more Latina TV princess narratives. Sofia's mixed ethnicity was a controversy even before her 2012 TV movie. Reported as Latina by the show's producer, Disney quickly responded that the producer "misspoke" and that all Disney Junior characters "come from fantasy lands that may reflect elements of various cultures and ethnicities, but none are meant to specifically represent those real world [sic] cultures."[116] That would likely come as a surprise to producers of Disney Junior's *Doc McStuffins*, which features a young black girl, *Handy Manny*, starring a Latino character, and the future *Elena*, an explicitly Latina princess. Such responses are promotional and only partly true; certainly, producers and corporate entities use ethnic ambiguity to widen character appeal. Naming their heroine Sofia, and her darker-complexed mother Miranda from the mythical land Galdiz, implies that Disney invited a Latinx association. With the backlash against Sofia's appearance, which critics argued was whitewashed, Disney preferred to rest on the character's mixed-race identity[117], or ethnic ambiguity. Instead, Elena would become the only explicitly Latina princess, contradicting Disney's statement that no such specific ethnicities existed in Disney Junior's story worlds.

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[113] Greg Allen, "Media Outlets Adapt to Growing Hispanic Audience," *Morning Edition*, April 3, 2012, https://www.npr.org/2012/04/03/149845056/media-outlets-adapt-to-growing-hispanic-audience.

[114] Brian Moylan, "US Television Wakes Up to Growing Latino Audience with New Options," *The Guardian*, October 8, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2015/oct/08/latino-viewers-new-options-us-television-el-rey-fusion.

[115] Over half of the Hispanic population in the U.S. lives in California, Texas, and Florida, two of which are homes to the major U.S. Disney parks. See the 2010 Hispanic Population Census (Sharon R. Ennis, Merarys Rios-Vargas, and Nora G. Albert, "This Hispanic Population: 2010," *United States Census Bureau*, May 2011, https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-04.pdf).

[116] Laura Beck, "Disney's First Latina Princess Isn't Actually Latina," *Jezebel*, October 23, 2012, https://jezebel.com/disneys-first-latina-princess-isnt-actually-latina-5954017

Criticisms of Disney's ethnic and gendered representations of girls are as repetitive as the corporation's efforts to redefine the princess identity. A blogger quoted in CNN stated: "If Disney were truly to finally step out and directly cater to the Latino community that has been crying out for decades for a Latina princess to represent our girls….She would be as Latina as Tiana is black or as Pocahontas is Indian-American."[118] This is a surprising statement given the criticism of portrayals of Tiana and Pocahontas at the time of their films' releases, but perhaps understandable under the highly visual presence of Disney Princess merchandise, which privileges skin color over narrative content. A *Hollywood Reporter* story similarly complimented Elena as a positive role model in ways reminiscent of Mulan, Merida, or *Frozen*'s Elsa: "She ditches that helpless-without-a-man mentality so prevalent among princesses of the past. She wields a sword. She solves problems. She saves people."[119] Although the Disney Princess brand and its TV allies, Sofia and Elena, are incredibly popular, their cohesion is still loosely defined by girl-power culture, which still privileges the White, thin, beautiful, and confident girl. New TV princesses contradict the Disney Princess brand rules with franchised texts that bend Princess narrative worlds and attitudes, but also reinvigorate gendered and raced criticisms that have persisted from the 1990s until today. The story world revisions, cyclical girl-power representation, and audience critiques that define the Disney Princess brand show how major media franchises often thrive economically in contradictory circumstances. Rather than unifying the brand image and messaging of the Disney Princess, Disney continues to expand its princess ethos to loosely reflect a highly consumable and ambiguous girl-power culture.

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[117] Amy Amatangelo, "'Elena of Avalor': TV Review," *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 20, 2016, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/elena-avalor-tv-review-912793.

[118] Cindy Y. Rodriguez, "Backlash for Disney's First Latina Princess," *CNN*, October 22, 2012, https://www.cnn.com/2012/10/19/showbiz/disneys-first-latina-princess/index.html.

[119] Amy Amatangelo, "'Elena of Avalor: TV Review," *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 20, 2016, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/elena-avalor-tv-review-912793; Cindy Y. Rodriguez, "Backlash for Disney's First Latina Princess," *CNN*, October 22, 2012, https://www.cnn.com/2012/10/19/showbiz/disneys-first-latina-princess/index.html.

Princess-Power Culture

Since 2012's *Brave*, the Disney Princess brand hasn't seen a new recruit. This is despite the creation and reintroduction of princesses in various narratives—including Princess Leia from the acquired Lucasfilm franchise *Star Wars* and Princess Vanellope von Schweetz from *Wreck It Ralph*—and the creation of Princess-like heroines in new features films *Frozen* (2013) and *Moana* (2017). These characters, in addition to Disney's TV princesses, are not officially part of the Disney Princess franchise, but they are essential to the Disney girl-power culture ethos, as we'll see below and in Chapters 3 and 4. Regardless of their current strategies, current iterations of the Disney Princess franchise betray a persistent contradiction: capitalizing on a hyperfeminine brand while navigating shifting ideologies of gender that inspire fans young and old.

I'm Not a Princess

The 2010 announcement that the traditional Disney fairy tales were momentarily running dry was not simply an erroneous statement. Elsa and Anna, too popular to be folded into the Princess crew, officially stand alone as "Frozen" characters, not Princess characters—even though they are royalty. Moana, who was claimed as a Princess before the film release in some outlets[120], also hasn't been added to the brand.[121] Both films did well with girls and boys alike, indicating that perhaps Disney still fears that the feminine Princess logo would alienate many boy fans. In addition, the lack of new Princesses may be a response to the rise of popular feminism, which Sarah Banet-Weiser describes as the recent popular interest in and admiration for feminism—often visible in the feminist slogans and imagery that seem to promise future gender equity.[122] Certainly in the musical phenomenon *Frozen* (2013) and the less sensational but still high-grossing *Moana* (2017), Disney continued negotiating girl cultures and their discourses, including (post-)girl power and popular feminism. In *Frozen*, Elsa, one of two royal sister protagonists, does not have a romantic partner and focuses mostly on her own personal growth and her relationship with her sister Anna. Anne is equally devoted to her sister, but also provides the heterosexual romantic intrigue in the film. A less campy and excessive version of Charlotte La Bouff in *The Princess and the Frog*, Anna is too anxious for romance and ends up picking the wrong man first in a love-at-first-sight-gone-wrong subplot with Prince Hans. She eventually finds friendship, and later love, with a rural worker, Kristoff. Despite the romantic B-plot, it is sisterly love, not romantic love, that resolves the film's plot tension, responding to repeated critiques that Disney P/princesses rely on men to rescue them. As in the Disney Princess Renaissance films, these characters similarly carried the weight of Disney's rhetorical reflexivity in newer female-centered narratives.

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[120] NBC News, "Meet Moana: Disney Announces Its First Pacific Islander Princess," October 23, 2014, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/meet-moana-disney-announces-its-first-pacific-islander-princess-n231891.

[121] Claire Suddath, "The $500 Million Battle Over Disney's Princesses: How Hasbro Grabbed the Lucrative Disney Doll Business from Mattel," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, December 17, 2015.

[16] Setoodeh, "Disney's $4b 'Princess'."

[122] Banet-Weiser, *Empowered*.

In *Moana*, the title character never entertains a romance, nor does she represent the ideal feminine body—at least not one popularized in U.S. animated media. Moana is athletic and strong, without hour-glass curves or diminutive features—separating her visually from other heroines and Princesses. She is still "cute" like other postfeminist and girl power representations of girlhood, with large eyes and wearing a skirt and shirt with her belly exposed, but her physique and personality appeals directly to a popular feminist ties to body positivity and girl empowerment more generally.[123] In the film, Moana tells her traveling partner Maui that she is not a princess after he calls her one, distancing herself from a traditionally feminine identity—as well as possibly associated traits like boy-craziness and entitlement. Maui follows up by saying, "If you wear a dress and have an animal sidekick, you're a princess." In this sequence, Disney can once again simultaneously poke fun at their own formulaic and repetitive narratives while insisting that the princess identity has little to do with traditionally feminine behaviors aside from wearing a dress. Similar to Mooney's statement that the term "Disney Princess" is practically meaningless, Maui's statement seems to indicate that anyone, anywhere can be a princess. This belies the strategic gatekeeping around the Disney Princess brand and the wider, more ambiguous girl-power Disney princess ethos, which thrives on numerous, sometimes contradictory, franchised intertexts.

One major step toward building this "princess-power ethos," simply Disney's version of girl power embodied strategically in its princess characters, has been the inclusion of Disney Princesses and princesses in the same intertext. One example is the "Dream Big, Princess" campaign that mostly includes TV bumper ads on Disney Channel and Disney Junior and merchandise banners in toy aisles.[124] Videos from this campaign sometimes feature Elsa, Anna, Moana, Elena, and Sofia alongside official Princesses, privileging princess power over clear distinctions between multiple girl-targeted sub-brands. Cutting between scenes from the animated films and live-action shots of girls performing activities—including sports, dance, and scholarly pursuits—the "Dream Big, Princess" continues the can-do girl spirit of self-determination, academic success, and future professional opportunity. It advances the "fantasy promise" that if "girls work hard enough…they can achieve anything."[125] In emphasizing girl power rhetoric under the Dream Big, Princess banner, Disney commodifies popular feminism and revisits well-worn themes, offering the same excitement and hope postfeminist and girl-power culture have always promoted and never advocated for politically.

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[123] Banet-Weiser, *Empowered*.

In another example, Disney P/princesses appeared together in the 2018 film *Wreck It, Ralph 2: Ralph Breaks the Internet*. I use the combined "P/princess" liberally in this section to signify the film's clear reference to the Disney Princess brand—such as Disney Princess online quizzes—while acknowledging the fact that a few of the princess characters in the film are not Disney Princesses. This matters because Disney consistently uses the ambiguous term "princess" to encourage the intertextual linkages between Disney princesses and Princesses, connections that audiences have already made, while also distinguishing between them on store shelves and in film narratives to target multiple, and potentially divergent, audience markets.

The film story world is primarily a visual manifestation of the Internet, which as Disney constructs it, is essentially a colorful marketplace through which Internet user avatars travel to websites. The thinly-applied plot of the film centers on Ralph's journey to locate a discontinued video arcade part that will keep his friend Princess Vanellope von Schweetz's arcade game running. On this journey, Ralph navigates a commoditized Internet in which he falls prey to shady website ad sellers and briefly makes thousands of dollars as a YouTube star. In the middle of the film, Vanellope von Schweetz stumbles upon Disney's website, again represented spatially as part of the Internet city. This is yet another instance of Disney manifesting a Disney world similar to their theme parks. At the center of this experience are the Disney P/princesses. First, we see Internet user avatars crowded around in a town square to take an online quiz that determines which P/princess is most like them, relating to film audiences who may have taken the same or similar online quizzes. Moments later, Vanellope accidentally stumbles upon the Princesses while attempting to escape the Disney websites security guards, storm troopers who patrol the Disney website "backlot." This sort of world-bending between Star Wars and Disney Princesses is long-standing practice at Disney parks and in video games. To integrate these Disney worlds in film only intensifies such representational synergies and cross promotions.

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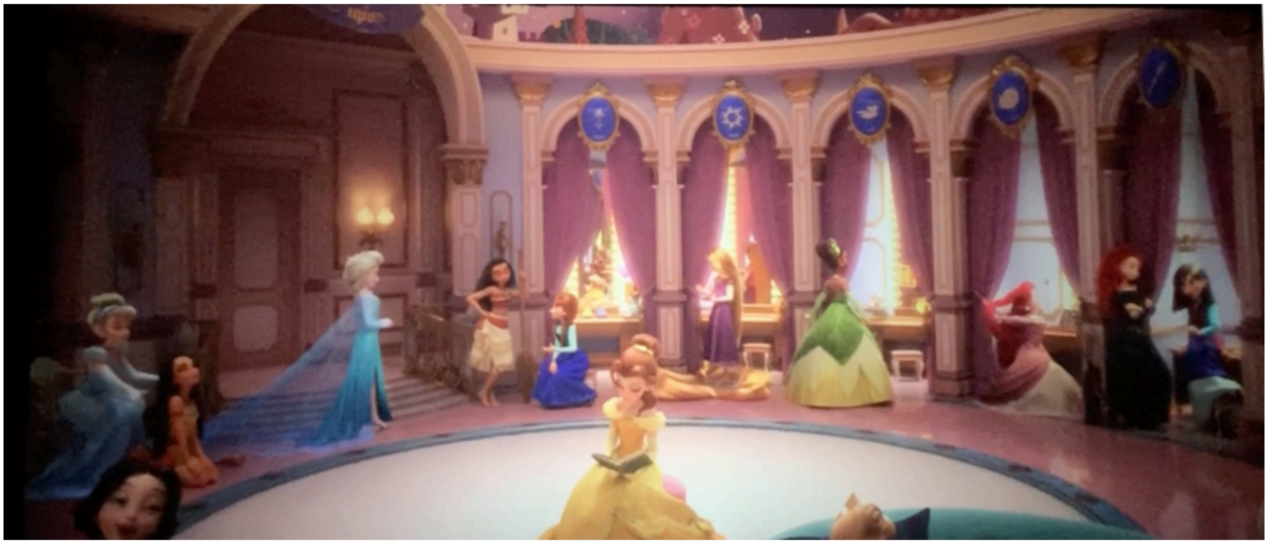
[124] The "Dream Big, Princess" videos seen on TV also circulate on YouTube.

[125] Projansky, *Spectacular Girls*, 5.

When Vanellope opens a hallway door, she comes upon ballroom full of P/princess characters, decorated similarly to Princess Fairy Tale hall at Disney World. While the P/princesses at first react defensively with physical aggression, subverting their passive feminine reputations, they soon warm up to Vanellope and offer her advice on how to maintain her friendship with Ralph and simultaneously come into her own as a growing princess. The scene offers yet another opportunity for producers to speak back to some of the criticisms of the Disney Princess brand and simultaneously poke fun at themselves. For example, Vanellope responds to the P/princesses' fairytales, which include kidnapping, poisoning, and curses, with concern: "Are you guys okay? Should I call the police?" But in the same breath, Princess Rapunzel asks Vanellope, "do people assume all your problems got solved because a big strong man showed up?" According to this scene, the P/princess storylines have a dark history, but the characters deserve credit for their pluck, ingenuity, and inner strength. In fact, they end up working together to save Ralph at the climax of the film, displaying their respective talents in the process.

Three different world-bending strategies are at play in this extended P/princess cameo encourage Disney's princess-power ethos. First, the P/princesses now converse with each other, contrary to the franchise's initial rule that because the characters' fairytale worlds are separate, they cannot interact. Second, the P/princess play a role as mentors to young girls, implicitly inviting young girls to see them as desirable role models, even for tomboys like Vanellope. Third, the scene reinforces the slippage between the franchise and other "princess-like" girls. For instance, *Frozen* characters Elsa and Anna have historically been carefully distant from the franchise. Despite their royal status, they have been marketed as characters existing in their film text and leveraged as a more gender-neutral brand and a profitable seasonal brand around Christmas. Moana has similarly sat apart from the Princesses on toy shelves. In *Wreck It Ralph 2*, though, all these heroines are "princesses," a rhetorically ambiguous term that helps Disney speak back to criticisms and open up more space for girl-centered franchises to connect to one another while potentially occupying separate revenue streams.



Vanellope von Schweetz meets the Disney Princesses, plus Elsa, Anna, and Moana.[126]

This last phase of the Disney Princess brand, 2009 to the present moment, is significant in its bending of separate Princess worlds and the reinvigoration of a princess-power ethos that includes new Disney Princesses and princesses in it. By utilizing transmedia storytelling and franchising logics, Disney invited ambiguity and contradiction as strategies to appeal to multiple audience groups and satisfy criticisms of the Disney Princess brand.

Conclusion

By turning its heroines into Disney Princesses, Disney took a distinct group of characters and unified them into a girl power-inspired brand that promised a multicultural construction of ideal girlhoods that audiences could see onscreen and buy on store shelves. In so doing, Disney also helped to crystallize the negative brand associations audiences had with both feminized media properties and representational limitations of Disney films featuring girl heroines. However, it is precisely these criticisms and differing audience opinions that encourage large media brands like the Disney Princess franchise to welcome contradiction and ambiguity. By bending narrative worlds and the Princesses' representation of girl cultures, the Walt Disney Company has continually revised and revived the Disney Princess brand. At first individual narratives connected primarily by their female protagonists, Disney princesses and heroines became a power intertextual icon in the 1990s when third-wave feminism focused in on media representation. Concurrently, Disney capitalized on what was a critical discourse by creating merchandise and home video content that bolstered the idea that Disney princesses fit within a smaller sub-brand of the larger Disney network of narratives.

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[126] *Ralph Breaks the Internet*, directed by Phil Johnston and Rich Moore (2017; Burbank, California: Walt Disney Pictures).

The creation of the brand in 2000 saw intensified production of Princess consumer products and appearances of Disney Princesses at events and in video games. Despite some initial brand rules, the multitude of franchised media intertexts bent the rules, and distinct narrative words, of the characters. Finally, the Disney Princess Renaissance (2009-present) is an era of Princess reflexivity. New Disney Princesses added some diversity to the brand image, but also largely recycled the girl-power values of the 1990s. The era also solidified Disney's practice of using reflexive rhetoric in Disney P/princess films and film appearances to appeal to critical audiences while defending their own production history.

In its current moment, as of 2019, the Disney Princess future is not entirely clear. Their current tagline, "Dream Big, Princess" recycles the girl-power narrative that first inspired the brand. The boundaries between a Princess and princess seem to melt away onscreen, but still serve to distinguish children's goods on toy shelves. What is certain is that the Disney Princess franchise has always thrived in contradiction; it is the bending, and not the creation, of rich narrative worlds that allows the Princess not only to change and revise, but also to offer a potentially inviting message to multiple audience groups.

CHAPTER 2

DOLLED UP: DISNEY PRINCESSES AND FEMININITY

"The new Disney Princess Perfume Collection makes you feel as pretty as a princess," or so promised the 1995 advertisement for Mattel-made Disney dolls. As explained in the previous chapter, the Disney Princess brand parallels girl-power consumer cultures that privilege some heterogeneity around ethnicity and gender expression, but primarily in service of Disney's ongoing efforts to court girls and parents while defending themselves against critics. However, the trajectory of Disney Princess dolls takes the franchise into the most femininized—and highly profitable—sector of Disney's entertainment empire. This type of feminine consumption is both encouraged by multiple industries and devalued and derided by cultural critics and childhood experts. While femininity can be a site of negotiation, flexible performance, and empowerment for women and girls, industrial constructions of femininity are influential in producing binaries in the toy aisles, physically separating constructed boy and girl interests in distinct toy aisles and using explicitly gendered toy bodies.

The girly-girl reputation of the Disney Princess franchise is due in no small part to its connection with gendered retail practices influenced by Mattel's Barbie and parents' frustration with the stereotypically feminine consumer products that saturate the girls' consumer market.[127] Highly feminine consumption is suspect to middle-class consumers who perceive femininity as low-class[128] and dangerous to can-do girls and their upward mobility.[129] Disney's foray in merchandising intentionally capitalized on the rising popularity of media-based toys, which were and are a profitable means of extending story worlds into children's material cultures, immersing them into a toy experience that intensifies their connection with the brand and stimulates further purchases.

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[127] Parents frequently argue that the Disney Princesses are stereotypically feminine and overly sexualized, as I discuss in the next chapter.

As Avi Santo argues, the retail space shows how franchised merchandise becomes a struggle between "brand stories" and retail management.[130] Brand stories, he explains, "diffuse character qualities and overarching story messages and themes into an experiential, tactile encapsulation of childhood and parenting as filtered through industry imaginings of consumers and why they shop." Retail strategically sets up stores to according to perceived "consumer tastes and sensibilities" especially around age and gender. Disney may see Disney Princess dolls as an essential extension of their girl-centered stories into the girls' consumer market through products while Mattel, Hasbro, and Target might see the Princesses as a girls' "lifestyle brand," a brand built around the cultures, values, and tastes of a given consumer group. On the toy shelves, too, this struggle often calls out girls' toys as distinct from boys and marginalizes Princesses of color.

In this chapter, we see how conflicting industrial strategies—particularly Disney Princess branding and doll production and retail—undermine the concept of branding as a "distinction" and rather show how sameness characterizes retail marketing strategies. I first contextualize the Disney Princess doll story in its licensing history. The Disney Princess license was held by doll empire Mattel from 2000 to 2014. In 2014, after years of frustration with Mattel's conflicting devotion to Barbie and copycat princess dolls, Disney Hasbro moved their license to Hasbro, a manufacturer known for its management of boy-centered franchises. I then examine the precursors and significant influencers of the Disney Princess doll, including the classic fashion doll, Barbie, and the American Girl doll. Each of these explain constructed and lived feminine cultures surrounding dolls and how the Disney Princess dolls have repeated the themes and ideologies of girlhood associated with modern dolls. Finally, I look at how the politics of feminization and the ideological constraints of the entertainment industries—in terms of gender and race—shape the relatively homogenous landscape of dolls or doll-like Disney Princess consumer products. By investigating the dynamics of Disney Princess dolls through doll culture, media industry relationships, and the textual complexities of dolls themselves, we can see how flexible interpretations of femininity clash with the industrial practices that limit access to diverse toys by attempting to reaffirm whiteness and gender binaries that have long dominated doll production and retail.

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[128] Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993).

[129] Anita Harris, "The 'Can-Do' Girl Versus The 'At-Risk' Girl," in *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2003), 20.

[130] Avi Santo, "Retail Tales and Tribulations: Transmedia Brands, Consumer Products, and the Significance of Shop Talk," *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 58, no. 2 (Winter 2019): 117.

The Princess Doll's Industrial History: A Licensing Tale

Disney's long relationship with Mattel as a toy licensee started in 1955,[131] but even though the Mattel dolls are the most well-known Disney Princess dolls, Disney has licensed its heroines out to many doll manufacturers. Early on, Disney often ceded doll design to the licensee's house aesthetics. For example, early princess dolls were made in licensing deals to popular doll makers like Madame Alexander, Knickerbocker, Kehagias, and others who had their own unique doll "sculpts"—sculptures from which designers could create doll molds. Manufacturers would honor the essential qualities of the Disney character, including her hairstyle and costume but use an in-house sculpt design and costume adaptations.

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[131] Katy Merlock Jackson, "Synergistic Disney: New Directions for Mickey and Media in 1954-1955," in *Disneyland and Culture: Essays on the Park and their Influence*, eds. Katy Merlock Jackson and Mark I. West (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), 25.

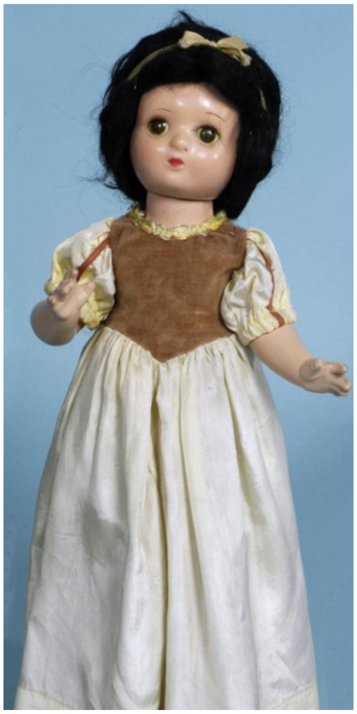

Figure 1a. 1937 Knickerbocker doll (Disney's Snow White).[132]

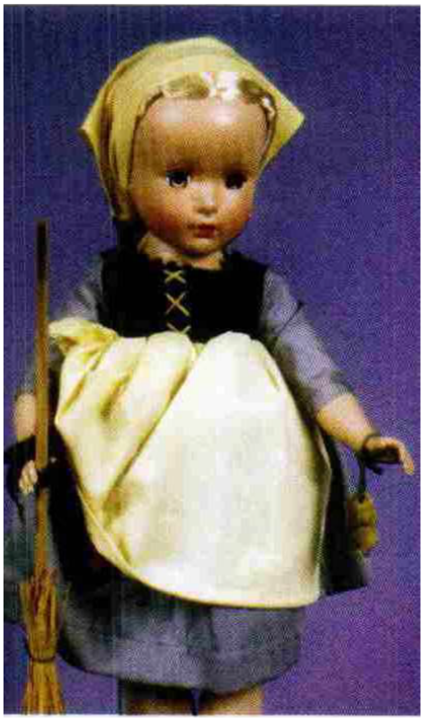

Figure 1b. 1959 Madame Alexander doll (Disney's Aurora from *Sleeping Beauty*)[133]

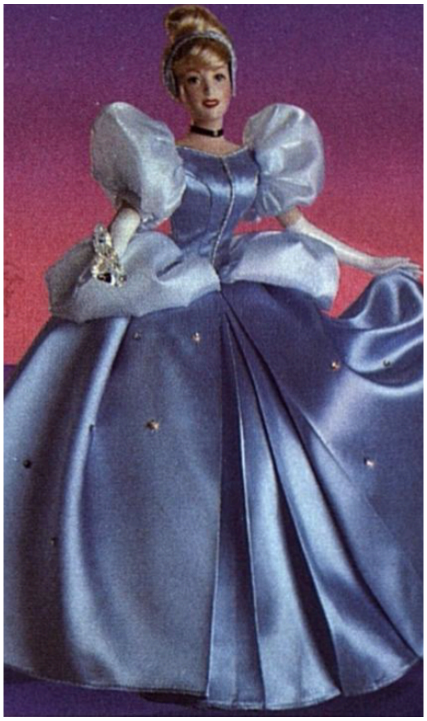

Figure 1c. 1992 Franklin Heirloom Dolls (Disney's Cinderella)[134]

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[132] Snow White Archive, "Knickerbocker Snow White Composition Dolls," *Filmic Light*, June 4, 2017, http://filmic-light.blogspot.com/2017/06/knickerbocker-snow-white-composition.html.

[133] David Hearn, "The Magic of Madame Alexander and Walt Disney," *Doll Reader*, November 2003, 39.

[134] "Walt Disney's Cinderella," Advertisement, *Chatelaine*, July 1992, 7.

Some manufacturers even reused popular sculpts for multiple dolls. For example, the 1959 rendition of Aurora (*Sleeping Beauty*) by Madame Alexander, in Figure 1b above, used the in-house Alexander sculpt originally made for a Nancy Drew character doll.[135] By promoting the second use of a proprietary sculpt, Madame Alexander contributed to its own reputation as a manufacturer of iconic and carefully-crafted designs and gave their fans an "behind-the-scenes" story about its production process. Sameness here represented fidelity to Madame Alexander's process and history and did not devalue a newer character doll as simply a copy of an older one. Later, however, balancing difference and sameness would affect Disney's brand management of its Mattel and Hasbro-created dolls.

The rise in licensed toys in the 1980s intensified an industrial symbiosis between media content creators and toy manufacturers—films and TV shows benefited from the promotional awareness and fees gained from licensed toys and toy manufacturers often saw boosts in profits when they could connect a toy with a popular show. Such was the case when Mattel signed on to produce Disney-branded infant and preschool toys in 1987. Mattel and Hasbro were and still are in an unofficial arms race as international toy producers and at the time Mattel and Disney struck their initial deal, Mattel had slipped into the second spot behind Hasbro.[136] The Mattel-Disney license expanded to theme park toys in 1991.[137] Disney film toys produced best-selling

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[135] Hearn, "The Magic of Madame Alexander," 39.

[136] Reuters, "Mattel Agrees to Make, Sell Toys with Disney Tag," *The Toronto Star*, October 14, 1987, C15.

[137] "Disney and Mattel Sign Strategic Alliance," *PR Newswire*, November 11, 1991.

Christmas toys in the 1990s[138], with few exceptions[139], benefiting Mattel profits. While it is less often mentioned in press releases and news articles, one of Disney's great advantages in signing with Mattel over the decades was the toy makers' incredible reach in global markets[140], not to mention its proven expertise in kids' toys with big sellers like Barbie and Hot Wheels. Their relationship flourished beyond a simple licensing relationship when Mattel began to sponsor Disney park rides like the classic "It's a Small World" ride and a Euro Disney ride, "Autotopia," a synergetic move for Mattel's Hot Wheels brand.

Mattel was not Disney's only licensee, however. Other companies courted and won licensing deals with the skyrocketing kids' media company. Hasbro vied for Disney licenses, especially boy-centered films like *Hercules* (1996)[141]. At the time, Hasbro did not win this bid, as Disney signed an exclusive licensing deal with Mattel in 1996, giving the toy company "first-look" rights to all its kid-focused film and TV releases.[142] Mattel tried and failed to acquire

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[138] Letitia Sweitzer, "Atlanta: Mattel Rides on Aladdin Wave," *Playthings*, March 1, 1993, 24; Kate Fitzgerald, "Disney Aids Mattel Surge in Two-Legged Toy Race," *Advertising Age*, September 28, 1994, 33.

[139] Linda Sandler and Robert McGough, "Mattel's Marriage to Disney Falters as Toys Based on "Hunchback" Get Little Play Time," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 16, 1996, C2.

[140] Pauline Toshihashi, "Mattel Plans Stroll Overseas for New Baby, Fisher-Price—Infant-Toy Market is Targeted for Growth, Taking Lessons from Disney Line," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 1, 1994, B4.

[141] Lisa Bannon, "Walt Disney Finalizes Licensing Deals with Rival Toy Makers Hasbro, Mattel," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 21, 2000, B16.

[142] Sandler and McGough, "Mattel's Marriage to Disney."

Hasbro that same year[143], which would certainly have affected the recent history of the Princess doll.

In 2000, the beginning of the Disney Princess franchise, Disney handed its new film and TV toy licenses to Hasbro, leaving the Princesses and other "classic" brands like Winnie the Pooh and Mickey Mouse with Mattel.[144] Andy Mooney, the new president of Disney consumer products worldwide and "founder" of the Disney Princess brand, said Disney split the business between the two toy companies to capitalize on Mattel's strengths in preschool toys and branded toys and Hasbro's strength in movie-based toys.[145] This marked a significant split from Mattel's exclusive deal, though financial analysis at the time indicated that the deal was favorable to Mattel and Hasbro, given that the former's business strategy was to focus on a few moneymakers whereas Hasbro often succeeded when pursuing risky new ventures.[146]

Disney also began to exact more branding standards over the Disney Princess line in 2003, taking control over design and campaigning of the Mattel-manufactured doll.[147] At this point and over the next decade, Mattel and Disney competed more directly for the girls' consumer market. Whereas Disney Princesses were marketed as traditional fantasy dolls, Barbie was a modern woman.[148] However, Barbie's popularity was falling in the wake of the Disney Princess craze and the incoming Bratz doll[149]—also founded in 2003—, so Mattel released more princess and fairytale-themed Barbie dolls to get in on the craze. Accompanying films, like *Barbie of Swan Lake* and *Barbie: Fairytopia*, were top-selling direct-to-video tie-ins that boosted toy sales.[150] These dolls didn't infringe on the copyright of the Disney heroines, but did put them into direct competition with Disney's branding of fairytale fantasy and glamor. Given the changing faces of Mattel-made Disney Princesses over different doll releases—which I explain below and illustrate in Figure 4—it was even possible to accidentally buy a Mattel Cinderella Barbie, mistaking it for a Mattel-made Disney Princess Cinderella doll. Mattel employees blamed their release of "Ever After High" dolls for taking the doll competition to the breaking point, as those dolls were in direct competition with Disney's *Descendants* TV movie and series that featured high-school aged daughters and sons of classic Disney characters. Some combination of these competitive blows precipitated Disney's move to Hasbro, the only other truly competitive toy house.

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[143] Sandler and McGough, "Mattel's Marriage to Disney."

[144] Bannon, "Walt Disney Finalizes Licensing."

[145] Bannon, "Walt Disney Finalizes Licensing."

[146] Jean Schneidnes, "Disney in Pact with Mattel, Hasbro," *Los Angeles Times*, September 21, 2000, http://articles.latimes.com/2000/sep/21/business/fi-24377.

[147] "Disney Puts Pooh, Power Rangers, Princess Under Wing with $500M," *BPI Publications*, January 27, 2003, 6.

Hasbro promised a new look and brand for the dolls, trading on the popularity of the "original" Disney animated film adaptations: "They look like Disney's animated characters come to life."[151] Disney and Hasbro tried to spin the new licensing deal as a re-branding. Both companies vocalized Disney's move away from the dolls' femininized reputation, which had become increasingly unpopular with middle-class parents[152]: "They plan to highlight the princesses' bravery and skills in future advertising, and to give the non-white princesses more shelf space."[153] Of course, Disney's had long profited from the feminine appearance of their dolls and the allure of sparkling dresses and accessories. Advertising rhetoric surrounding the Disney Princess dolls does not determine children's play practices, nor does it significantly change the retail strategies of selling gendered toys to girls and boys. Rather, this significance of Disney and Hasbro's rhetoric is change in "brand story," lip service to the same criticisms and cultural shifts that influenced the Disney Princess Renaissance (2009-present). As we'll see below, the Hasbro dolls are incredible similar to those of Mattel. It is sameness, and not difference, that makes the Disney Princess dolls profitable on retail shelves.

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[148] Lisa Orr, "Difference That is Actually Sameness Mass-Produced: Barbie Joins the Princess Convergence," *Jeunesse: Young People, Text Cultures* 1, no. 1 (2009): 9-10.

[149] Michael Barbaro, "*A Makeover of a Romance*," *The New York Times*, February 6, 2006, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/09/business/a-makeover-of-a-romance.html.

[150] Barbaro, "*A Makeover of a Romance*."

Fashionistas and Friends: "Foremothers" and Contemporaries of the Disney Princess Doll

Focused on self-adornment as well as doll play, Disney Princess products privilege the girl body as an object, whether in the form of a doll, as an image onscreen, or even as represented in dress-up clothes that a girl would wear. This is not to say that all girls obey a specific encoded Disney narrative in their play, but the products of Disney Princess franchise are clearly oriented toward a performance of femininity where body consciousness and self-surveillance retain great power over girls' identity building, while rejecting some traditionally feminine traits, like motherhood and passivity. The fashion doll is integral to historic feminine cultures, specifically those related to beauty culture. Because beauty cultures are tied to histories of female objectification and oppression, it is easy to pinpoint the negative connotations of the fashion doll: her frivolous and decorative appearance and her seemingly passive body bring to mind the expectations that women, like children, should be seen and not heard. However, the fashion doll is part of a history of negotiated femininities in periods where women's roles were narrowly defined, and decorative displays of femininity were both praiseworthy and suspect. As developed by Mattel, the fashion doll became a teenager navigating a highly material girl culture on her own terms. Pleasant Company introduced a doll in the 1980s that was seen as an anti-Barbie—defining girlhood around can-do girl and third-wave feminist tenets multiculturalism, academics, and social responsibility. However, these dolls required deep pockets to attain. The influence of femininity and feminism set the stage for the Disney Princess dolls and show how deeply connected some doll brands are in the retail space.

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[151] Claire Suddath, "The $500 Million Battle Over Disney's Princesses: How Hasbro Grabbed the Lucrative Disney Doll Business from Mattel," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, December 17, 2015, https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2015-disney-princess-hasbro/.

[152] This discourse around parents' taste is explored more thoroughly in the next chapter.

[153] Suddath, "The $500 Million Battle."

Feminine Girls' Consumer Market and Feminist Distrust

Feminism and femininity have long coexisted in contentious parallel to one another. Femininity as Judith Butler describes it is the performance of gender by women or female-identifying people. It is often juxtaposed with masculinity in a gender binary that imposes certain expectations on people to behave either as men or women and disciplines that behavior in relation to their bodies.[154] Femininity is not inherently tied to patriarchal control, many feminist scholars argue[155], but the historical construction of bodily distinction between men and women—

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[154] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990); de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Random House, 1953).

[155] Lesa Lockford, *Performing Femininity: Rewriting Gender Identity* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2004); Elana Levine, introduction to *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn: Feminized*

dresses, high heels, makeup, etc.—have inscribed the woman as beautiful object, valued for her "to-be-looked-at-ness."[156] In *The Female Eunuch*, Germain Greer compares a women's femininity to that of dolls, defining the ideal woman under patriarchal rule as a doll, "dressed, coiffed, painted,"[157]…"her virtue is assumed from her loveliness, and her passivity."[158]

In seeking gender equity and female empowerment, feminism has historically prized women's rejection a feminine gender performance. In doing so, feminism, Lesa Lockford argues, can become another "standard for female gender performance" that some feminists "feel compelled to enact in order to be taken seriously as feminists and as women."[159] While third-wave feminism and girl power have reintegrated feminine performance as a legitimate performance for girls and women, especially in light of queer gender expression and empowerment[160], femininity is suspect and often seen as a unfortunate side effect of the female experience. Recently, public radio journalists reflected on public criticism of feminine voices in radio journalism and podcasting. Historically, lower voices are constructed as having greater

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Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century, edited by Elana Levine (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

[156] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, issue 3 (Fall 1975): 6–18.

[157] Germain Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1970), 60, quoted in Lockford, *Performing Femininity*, 6.

[158] Greer, *The Female Eunuch,* 58, quoted in Lockford, *Performing Femininity*, 6.

[159] Lockford, *Performing Femininity*, 7.

[160] Elana Levine, introduction to *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century*, edited by Elana Levine (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 4.

authority.[161] Many women speakers lower their voices to command more authority, sometimes resulting in a "vocal fry," or a subtle scratching sound resulting from vocal cords rubbing together. While men and women alike make vocal fry sounds, women are more likely to be criticized for the sound.[162] Such disciplining of the feminine voice echoes disciplining of the female body.

In relation to girls' consumer cultures, Ellen Seiter argues that the increase in toys for a specifically girl market laid bare the blanket devaluation of feminized objects and also provided a special space for girls: "Little girls found themselves in a ghettoized culture that no self-respecting boy would take an interest is; but for once girls were not required to cross over, to take on an ambiguous identification with a group of male characters."**[163]** Within this space, Ellen Seiter argues that girls' identification with femininized toys, the *My Little Pony* franchise in her case study, is not necessarily about their obsession with femininity, but instead their interest in the few options that target them specifically. Mary Celeste Kearney also interrogates girls' consumer products, investigating "pinkified" mediamaking products for girls through "gender scripts," or the ways in which producers inscribe gender discourse into the production and design of goods.**[164]** Kearney claims that scholars should not simply devalue pinkified products or judge them superficially by color or icons; instead, the design and potential uses of consumer products and their connection to girls' cultures are crucial. These scholars work against the assumption that femininity is necessarily anti-feminist or disempowering. Elena Levine argues that feminine cultures should be an ongoing debate, especially in light of scholarship by scholars of color, transgender scholars, third-world feminists, and queer theorists that transform the way we understand the word "woman" and analyze femininity. Levine urges scholars to engage in the uncomfortable and ambivalent space postfeminist culture has brought us to by interrogating feminized popular culture "in ways that reject dismissive characterizations of these forms while still engaging critically with their limitations and pleasures."[165]

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[161] Peter Foley, "Keep an Eye on Vocal Fry–It's All About Power, Status and Gender," *The* Conversation, November 4, 2015, http://theconversation.com/keep-an-eye-on-vocal-fry-its-all-about-power-status-and-gender-45883

[162] Foley, "Keep an Eye on Vocal Fry"; "From Upspeak To Vocal Fry: Are We 'Policing' Young Women's Voices?," *NPR*, July 23, 2015, https://www.npr.org/2015/07/23/425608745/from-upspeak-to-vocal-fry-are-we-policing-young-womens-voices

[163] Seiter, *Sold Separately*, 158.

[164] Mary Celeste Kearney, "Pink Technology: Mediamaking Gear for Girls," *Camera Obscura* 25, no. 2 (2010): 1-39.

The Disney Princess dolls are a recent manifestation of this discomfort. Women are historically constructed as graceful and doll-like objects[166], marking them as passive and submissive. However, dolls are also part of the rise in girls' consumer markets and one space where girls and women negotiate peer cultures and public opinion with their own notions surrounding femininity.[167] Chapter 3 will investigate audience response to and consumption of the Disney Princess, bringing many of these negotiations to the forefront. In the following pages, those negotiations are theorized in relation to industry dynamics and textual readings.

Fashion Doll History and Negotiated Meanings

Historically, the fashion doll has communicated high-class standing and luxury, just as fashions worn on the human body perform such identities. As Nan Enstead explains, fashions perform class distinction, indicating with unnecessary frills, trims, and cuts that a women did not have to work outside the home and could spend time and money purely on her own decoration.[168] Fashion dolls were dressed as women of leisure, and even later, when Barbie became a working woman, her privilege was to dress as a professional women with incredible amounts leisure time.[169] Many fashion dolls before Barbie, including classic French fashion doll Bebe Jumeau, were not intended for play. Some were made of wood and others of porcelain, too delicate or unwieldy to be handled often. Fashion dolls wore contemporary trends and sat in shop windows as fashion advertising or were specially ordered and sent to wealthy family and royals as fashion-savvy collector's items or models from which to construct a couture design for its human owner.[170] As such, whether they sat on a shelf or in the shop window, fashion dolls were appreciated for their beauty and the detail of their design.

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[165] Levine, introduction to *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn*, 5.

[166] Lockford, *Performing Femininity*; de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

[167] Seiter, *Sold Separately*; Rand; Rogers; Kearney

However, Juliet Peers argues that the fashion doll could also represent "rebellious womanhood" or a kind of "new" woman who was not the "angel of the house"—the Victorian ideal of the perfect wife and mother—but instead a less domestic and passive woman who took pleasure in her supposedly frivolous interest in fashion.[171] In other words, a fashion doll represented a woman who had the financial means and inclination to spend money on selfbeautification, rather than focusing her efforts on children. In girls' cultures, "dollified" femininity historically marked girls' ascension to womanhood, vacillating between the fashion doll and the baby doll, the consuming woman and the mother. At certain points in history, and especially times of wars and nation-building[172], the baby doll was strategically produced to encourage girls to reproduce. The fashion doll, by contrast, was rebellious in the face of a heteronormative lifecycle, and represented the kind of postfeminist values of relative independence, glamor, and consuming power.

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[168] Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 27.

[169] Juliette Peers, *The Fashion Doll: From Bebe Jumeau to Barbie* (New York: Berg Publishers, 2004).

[170] Mary F. Rogers. *Barbie Culture* (London: Sage, 1999), 25; Max von Boehn, *Dolls and Puppets*, trans. Josephine Nicoll (Philadelphia: David McKay Company, 1932).

[171] Rogers, *Barbie Culture*, 67.

This self-indulgence and consumption translated into the 20th century mass consumer market where fashion dolls promoted makeup brands in the 1940s and 1950s like the Ayer doll and Miss Revlon dolls, again associating femininity with makeup and fashion.[173] Barbie exploded this trend, providing yet another period of rejecting the "mother" script and doubling down on consumerism.[174] Like earlier fashion dolls, Barbie wore contemporary fashions and represented a life of leisure. The 1960s franchised books and comics that promoted the Mattel dolls followed Barbie and her friends on teenage adventures where the modern heroine pursued multiple crushes.[175] While Barbie never had sex, she was sexually liberated and a challenge to proper teenage girls' desires.

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[172] Peers, *The Fashion Doll*, 102-105.

[173] Myra Yellin Outwater, *Advertising Dolls: The History of American Advertising Dolls from 1900-1990* (Atlgen: Schiffer Publishing Company, 1997), 92-93.

[174] Kline in Rogers, *Barbie Culture*, 26.

[175] Erica Rand, *Barbie's Queer Accessories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 47-51.

Barbie's obsession with new clothes, accessories, and men is reflective of the agential and problematic discourses of postfeminist culture[176], in that Barbie's power centers on her class and race privilege and the maintenance of her sexualized body. Mary Rogers also acknowledges the deep and lasting flaws in Barbie's appearance and the cultural pressures put of women and girls to conform to beauty standards, while offering a bleak reminder that Barbie is not the source of such discontents: "Barbie…is not really the problem if we are concerned about how girls and women get pressured to adopt constrictive, dehumanizing versions of femininity. She is but the tip of a huge cultural iceberg that seems to defy melting, though it does change superficial shape from one culture to another and from one era to another."[177]

Princess Barbie

This is familiar terrain for the discourse surrounding the Disney Princess and should come as no surprise given their parallels as feminine franchises and their connected industrial histories that rendered the Disney Princesses imitations of the iconic fashion doll. The Mattel Disney dolls revisited historical ideals of femininity and childhood melded with the postfeminist ethos of Barbie. Some pre- and post-brand doll releases both accentuated the hyperfeminine aesthetics popular in the girl consumer market and referenced classic fashion dolls associated with higher-class consumer groups and idealized notions of childhood. This is exemplified in early doll releases like Disney's Musical Princess Collection (1994), Disney's Perfume Princess Collection (1995), and Disney's Dancing Princess Collection (1997) where doll releases centered on a simple gimmick that made the Barbie-like fashion dolls more intriguing. Disney's Musical

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[176] Angela McRobbie, "Post-feminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime," in *Interrogating Post-Feminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, eds. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 27-39.

[177] Rogers, *Barbie Culture*, 34.

Princess featured a platform that played a song from the character's film when they stood on it. Disney's Perfume Princess Collection had perfume vials that girls and their dolls could put on. Finally, Disney's Dancing Princess Collection dolls could spin on a moving platform.

Dolls in these collections focused on a feminine performance and decoration by privileging music, dance, and perfume as preoccupations of girlhood. These talents reflect the 19th century "accomplishments" young women of middle and upper classes cultivated to become desirable brides, which often included singing, dancing, drawing, piano playing, poetry reciting, needlework, and other artistic and physically graceful activities.[178] Women were not encouraged to be too interested in intellectual pursuits, however—just interesting enough to intrigue a man in a similar class position. The feminine pastimes of the advertised dolls represented a nostalgic vision of girlhood and womanhood, which Miriam Forman-Brunell and Rebecca Hains argue is sometimes preferred by traditionalist parents who privilege the "fresh-faced princess to the in-your-face teen queen" that Barbie might represent.[179]

I would argue that the princess dolls potentially serve upper-middle class tastes as well by referencing the classic fairy tales Disney adapted. The dolls wear ballgowns and represent a bygone era, reflective of the long oral and written histories of the fairy tales themselves. In this way, they signify the nostalgia and innocence of childhood more readily than the modern fashions and sex appeal of Barbie. The girls in these Disney Princess Collection ads[180] also resembled Victorian womanhood in their white or pastel dresses and nightgowns frolicking through gardens and lounging in spacious bedrooms. Some Disney doll releases indulged in the hyperfeminine aesthetic that industry professionals used to exploit the potential desires of the girls' consumer market and make implicit appeals to middle-class parents who may have looked at Barbie dolls with some distaste.[181]

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[178] Kathryn Hughes, "Gender Roles in the 19th Century," *The British Library*, May 15, 2014, https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/gender-roles-in-the-19th-century#authorBlock1.

[179] Miriam Forman-Brunell and Rebecca Hains, introduction to *Princess Cultures: Mediating Girls' Imaginations and Identities*, eds. Miriam Forman-Brunell and Rebecca Hains (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), xii.

Contemporary to the growing pink aisle, toy producers like Playmobil sold products that enticed parents who could afford to boycott or at least offer more diverse offerings than the perceived garishness of pink and purple toys targeted at girls. The German figurine company and competitor to Mattel and other plastic toymakers, specialized in "'educational' and classic toys" deemed not only developmentally sound, but also tasteful.[182] At the pinnacle of their expression of high-class taste culture, the company sold in the late 1980s and early 1990s a $170 Victorian doll house with seven empty rooms that could be filled with $25 room kits and outdoor sets[183] that included the Victorian family, their servants, a horse-drawn carriage and more. While the sets were as plastic as the Disney princesses, Playmobil traded on the quality associated with

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[180] "Disney Perfume Princess Collection Ad (1995)," YouTube video, posted by "that90sguy," August 18, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cVyoFWNB4Eo; "Disney's Dancing Princess Dancing Collection Commercial (1997)," YouTube video, posted by "AndrewsMagicandMore," February 4, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ptxOiAdK0I; "Disney Musical Princess Collection Ad (1994)," YouTube video, posted by "that90sguy," August 15, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BVZ7Gnq3tCw.

[181] Seiter, *Sold Separately*, 157-158.

[182] Seiter, *Sold Separately*, 339.

[183] "Victorian Doll House Sales Set New Record for Christmas '91," *PR Newswire*, December 11, 1990.

German wooden toys[184] and used images of the late Victorian leisure class to produce a nostalgic ideal of luxury, a fantasy that only parents and some precocious children would value. Disney princess dolls played on the same fantasies of past-ness and luxury by showing fairytale characters decked in ball gowns and upper middle-class girls playing with them. However, their prices, pink branding, and Barbie-like appearance made them more accessible and recognizable in the mass market. Thus, Princess dolls were part of a growing landscape of girls' toys where ideologies of luxury, fantasy, childhood, and femininity were major components defining and distinguishing consumer tastes.

American Girl Power

Another significant player in the girls' consumer market was Pleasant Company's American Girl dolls, a kind of anti-Barbie doll[185]—ironic if only because Mattel acquired Pleasant Company in 1998. Starting in the 1986, and thus relatively concurrent with Disney's Renaissance film heroines and their dolls, American Girl dolls provided an educational alternative to Barbie-centric doll play. The American Girl dolls were fictional characters from well-recorded eras in U.S. history. Unlike the typically male-dominated history books, American Girl dolls told history from the perspective of nine-year-old heroines and marketed to girls of the same or similar age. American Girl doll's historical dolls packages contain a doll in an outfit and a work of historical fiction that told the doll/girl's story. These stories highlighted social and politics issues of the character's day, focusing on her identity as girl and sometimes girl of color, gender issues, immigration, slavery, class, and ethnicity[186] in their respective periods. The short books sold as serialized narratives, offering expanded stories for the dolls. Originally, these titles were standardized across the doll collection and represented both everyday challenges in contemporary children's lives—birthdays, holidays, family challenges, friendships, school—and historically based adventures that the young heroines took on to prove their bravery and kindness. Of course, each new book occurred in a new imaginary location and necessitated the purchase of more doll furniture, clothing, and accessories.

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[184] Dan Fleming, "Managing Monsters: Videogames and the 'Mediatization' of the Toy," in *The International Handbook of Children, Media and Culture*, eds. Dan Fleming, Sonia Livingstone, and Kirsten Drotner (Los Angeles: Sage Publishers, 2008).

[185] Emilie Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 47.

The photo below shows me with a new Addy Doll at Christmas in 1994. I wanted this doll because I was envious of my next-door neighbor's Addy, ignorant of the problematic history of black dolls marketed at white children. My mom later gifted me a holiday set and a school set. For me, and likely for other girls, the dolls served two distinct purposes. I loved reading the books and hearing about girls who stood up for themselves and their friends, who took on unbelievable challenges, and who were true to their identities. As Emilie Zaslow explains in her book on American Girl dolls, Pleasant Company sold its products as ways of "encourag[ing] young readers' self-confidence, curiosity, and dreams."[187] American Girl was a commoditized branch in the larger girl empowerment movement in the 1990s that sought to increase young girls' self-confidence and ability to thrive in a male-dominated work force.

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[186] Carolina Acosta-Alzuru and Peggy Kreshel, "I'm an American Girl…Whatever That Means: Girls Consuming Pleasant Company's American Girl Identity," *Journal of Communication* 52, no. 1 (2002): 157.

[187] Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll*, 27.

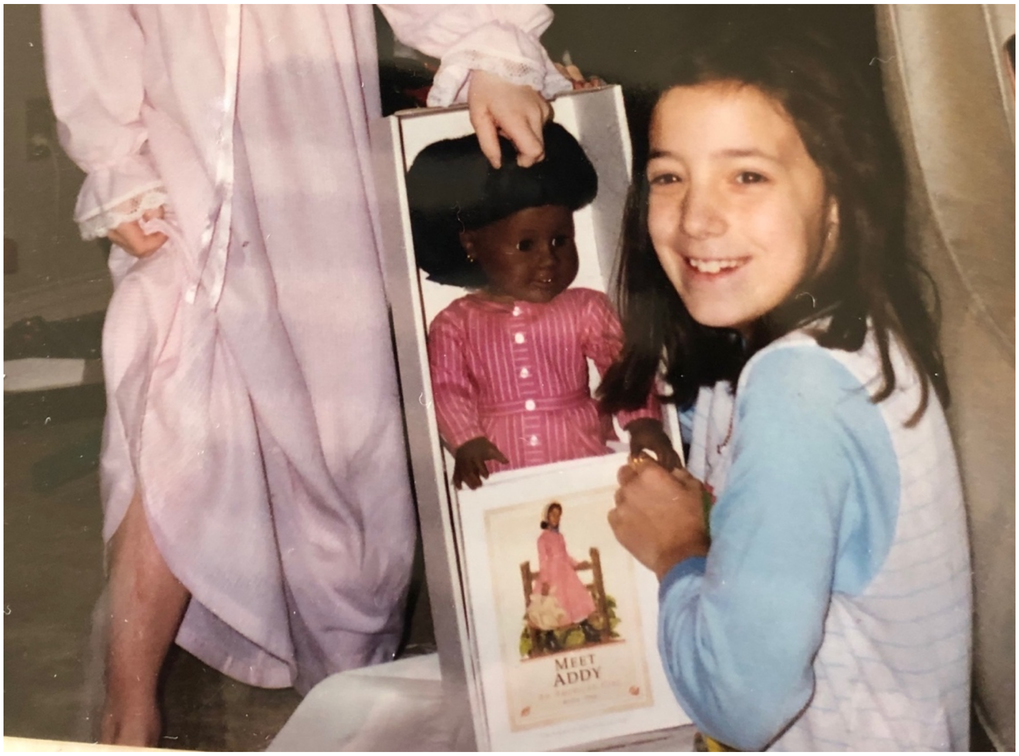

Figure 2. Me getting my Addy American Girl doll in 1994[188]

The doll's accessories and clothing, however, had a different appeal. I loved historical fashions so the meticulously constructed dresses, blouses, and jackets that my doll had mesmerized me. I would sometimes play with the school set, flipping through the historical replica of a nineteenth-century grammar book, but I preferred dressing the dolls in their outfits and brushing and braiding their hair.

Unlike Barbies, American Girl dolls are shaped like baby dolls or some iteration of the historic fashion doll—cherubic figures with plush cloth torsos and stocky limbs. This purposefully toddler-like frame helped the dolls stand out in contrast to Barbie. The characters on the front of the accompanying books, though resembled an idealized can-do girl, slender and active, posing mid-stride. It seems that Pleasant Company illustrated the book characters to look like a peer to the girl consumer while the doll itself resembled a cuter, more anatomically "innocent" figure to play with. American Girl dolls provided higher-cost, educational dolls for family with middle-class taste and upper-middle class budgets. Dolls cost $82 in 1994 and retail for $154 today. Unlike the 1960s Barbie books, too, American Girl doll books taught history in addition to validating the experiences of the modern girl. By encouraging this immersion into a historical world, these dolls were not simply femininized products, but supposedly less gendered educational tools.

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[188] Cathleen Leader, 1994.

In many ways, American Girl dolls seemed to be answering the call of feminism by selling non-sexualized dolls. However, the price of dolls and their accessories were and are prohibitive. In addition, the doll line remained Eurocentric for decades. It took until the fifth release for Pleasant Company to introduce a doll of color and many years after to provide enough selection to represent a diverse array of ethnic identities for girls of color. Recently, even, the Mattel-owned brand received blowback for discontinuing the only Asian girl doll from the historical doll collection.[189] As with other doll brands, American Girl doll was designed to court parents and children alike, combining educational stories with exquisitely-designed products that replicated the care and attention of Madame Alexander dolls. This kind of branded design imitated the same values as companies like Playmobil and helped to contextualize the rhetoric is subtle design changes that would characterize the many iterations of the Disney Princess doll.

The Retail Princess

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[189] NBC, "American Girl Discontinues Its Only Asian-American Doll," June 16, 2014, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/american-girl-discontinues-its-only-asian-american-doll-n132266.

As introduced in Chapter 1, the begin of the Disney Princess franchise marked an intensification of the already popular Mattel dolls. Sold in pink and purple boxes, Disney Princess dolls called to a presumably feminine girl market with dolls dressed as ballerinas[190], Princess royal castles to put the Mattel dolls in[191], and Princess horses and other animals to accompany the dolls. Its rhetoric, though, would try and spin each item as a girl-power narrative. The Disney Princess dolls, then, represent a combination of traditionally feminine fantasy—in terms of their glamorous clothing and romantic rhetoric—, postfeminist Barbie doll bodies, and girl-power rhetoric. Like the American Girl dolls, Disney's promotes friendship, confidence, and independence on its doll boxes, as well as traditionally feminine characteristics like grace, charm, and beauty, showing the "playful border crossings between girlishness and female empowerment" that characterize girl power.[192] A selection of 2011 Princess doll boxes—Cinderella (1950 film), Pocahontas (1995 film), Mulan (1998 film), and Tiana (2009 film)—read as follows:

> Cinderella has dreams of attending the royal ball. with a wave of her fairy godmother's wonderous wand, Cinderella's tattered dress is transformed into a shimmering blue ball gown. at the ball, prince charming is captivated by her grace and beauty, but she must flee before the stroke of midnight breaks the magical spell.

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[190] "Walmart Identifies Top Easter Trends: Customers Focusing on Price, Personalized Gifts and Fresh Meals this Easter," *PR Newswire*, April 4, 2012.

[191] "Kids Love Magic at Disney Store; Top 20 Magical Gift Ideas," *PR Newswire*, November 12, 2002.

[192] Emilie Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc.: Coming of Age in Girl Power Media Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 2-3.

> The beautiful daughter of a chieftain, Pocahontas loves adventure and excitement. she is a free-spirited young girl who knows every tree, waterfall, and creature in her forest home. Her curiosity and independence make her a strong girl whose passionate spirit touches and changes is all who know her.
>
> As beautiful as a blossom, Mulan is torn between protecting her family and becoming the gentle daughter she is supposed to be. With the help of her ancestors and a few friends, Mulan finds her true beauty within, making her family proud and becoming their greatest gift and honor.
>
> Tiana knows that her dreams will come true through hard work— not by wishing on a star (or kissing frogs). When she finds herself caught up in a magic filled adventure Tiana befriends a jazz playing alligator, a love sick firefly, and some other unexpected guests. As Tiana continues to work for her dreams, she learns to understand the difference between what she wants and what she really needs.[193]

Vacillating between feminine fantasy and post-girl power adventure, the Princesses represent popular themes of feminine consumer cultures—friendship, independence, confidence, adventure, and kindness. However, Disney does not re-brand the older stories, like Cinderella's, to fit into the girl-power messaging that comes more naturally to the Disney Renaissance characters and Disney Princess Renaissance characters. More recently in 2017, Hasbro released an ad for the Disney Princess Royal Shimmer Dolls that solidified the Princess girl-power image with titles before the featured Princesses[194]: “Unlock your potential” (Jasmine), “Aim true” (Merida), “Believe in yourself” (Tiana), “Light the way” (Rapunzel), “Defy expectation” (Mulan), and “Dive into adventure” (Pocahontas). Rather than reference their beauty or charm, these messages reflect the can-do girl spirit where physical beauty is implicit, but self-fulfillment and ambition are required. Though distinctly more fantastical and less overtly educational than the American Girl doll, and more ethereal and childlike than Barbie, the Princesses represent a group of girls from different times and places coming of age and facing adversity in order to their dreams.

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[193] "2011 Deluxe Sparkle Gown Disney Princess 12" Dolls. Product images from DisneyStore.com," posted by "drj1828," *Flickr*, Accessed May 13, 2019,

https://www.flickr.com/photos/68105287@N03/7778381750/in/photostream/.

This idea of a girl-power world obfuscates the limitations of the Disney Princess brand’s multicultural marketing. Doll lines anticipate girls picking at least one doll they want to be, but the brand’s adherence to whiteness has made some dolls of color less visible and others more “White.” As Toni Morrison, Ruth Frankenberg, and later Richard Dyer argue[195], whiteness in Western cultures is constructed as an ordinary, normative, familiar, and unbiased state of being—a non-raced existence—while other races are constructed in contrast with, and generally as inferior and dangerous opponents of, whiteness and white culture. Whiteness hides the historical and structural inequities that privilege white people over Othered people of color; historically, this has resulted in systems of thought that treated race as an essential, biological difference and in literary and media representations that used an “objective” white perspective to exoticize and demonize people of color. While more overt forms of racism are not popular in mainstream commercial media, racism is implicit in the multicultural marketing of toys precisely because multiculturalism tends to support a white-centered culture by promising a racially diverse utopia where all races have equal opportunities. As Lisa Lowe explains, “multiculturalism levels the important differences and contradictions among racial and ethnic minority groups…while simultaneously masking the existence of exclusions by recuperating dissent, conflict, and otherness through the promise of inclusion.”[196] Though speaking of Dora the Explorer, Bratz, and American Girl, Angharad Valdivia's argument that "mediated doll lines thrive on ethnic multiculturalism and ambiguity" could easily apply to the Disney Princess dolls.[197] Since multiculturalism often favors sameness (i.e., whiteness), Princesses of color are sometimes assimilated, and other times erased because of their unavoidable “difference.” In spite of revisions to the Disney Princess brand, the strategies of retail management and corporate brand management of the Disney Princess doll limit girls’ access to diverse consumer products, structuring girls’ play around traditionally feminine pursuits and marginalizing Princesses of color.

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[194] “Disney Princess Royal Shimmer Dolls Theater Commercial by Hasbro,” YouTube video, 2:24, posted by "MermaidZone," Mar 6, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmjRqovgKio

[195] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1997).

Racial Rainbow: The Limits of “Authenticity” and Fantasy

Themes of fantasy and imagination connect the characters’ storylines and typify girls’ consumer cultures—as discussed earlier in this chapter—but fantasy has an important material function for the Disney princess doll. Dolls are adorned in sparkling and feminine “fantasy attire,” by which I mean formal, jeweled or sparkly gowns that enhance their glamorous femininity. Most often, the dolls appear in some sort of formal A-line gown. This fantasy attire privileges highly feminine and luxury clothing as “special” and desirable, as with more formalized dress-up events like the prom or a wedding that Sharon Mazzarella calls rituals of “romance, fantasy, and fairy tales" common to feminine cultures.[198] It comes as no surprise, then, that Disney sells fashions for teen and adult buyers, gowns for special occasions like the Quinceañera, the prom, and weddings. Events like these signify their importance by focusing on beauty and attention to the feminine body. Not dissimilar to the rhetoric of the doll boxes above, a typical dress ad would liken the girl heroine to the dress:

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[196] Lisa Lowe, “Imagining Los Angeles in the Production of Multiculturalism,” in *Mapping Multiculturalism*, eds. Avery F. Gordon & Christopher Newfield (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 415.

[197] Angharad N. Valdivia, “Living in a Hybrid Material World: Girls, Ethnicity and Mediated Doll Products," *Girlhood Studies*, 2, no. 1 (Summer 2009): 74.

> Cinderella’s fairy tale comes alive with this classic Limited Edition ball gown style Disney wedding dress. The romantic sweetheart neckline and Swarovski crystal beading are sure to enchant.[199]
>
> Inspired by glamour and the excitement of jazz music this mermaid wedding dress reflects Tiana’s southern charm and beauty. The dropped waist gown features a demure off-the-shoulder neckline that has been adorned with 3-Dimensional flowers and draped pearl swags.[200]

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[198] Sharon R. Mazzarella, “The ‘Superbowl of all Dates’: Teenage Girl Magazines and the Commodification of the Perfect Prom,” in *Growing Up Girls: Popular Culture and the Construction of Identity*, Sharon R. Mazzarella and Norma Odom Pecora eds. (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 105.

[199] *Serenity Brides*, https://www.serenitybrides.com/product-category/bridal-gowns/disney-fairy-tale-weddings-by-alfred-angelo/page/4/.

[200] *Serenity Brides*.

> We love this stunning Disney Royal Ball Quinceañera Dress because the gown celebrates the beauty of the earth and the sky that Pocahontas treasured dearly.[201]
>
> We love this stunning Disney Royal Ball Quinceañera Dress because the gown captures Mulan's heroic spirit and valiant heart.[202]

The description of these gowns show how fashions become wearable identities, a mode of self-expression encouraged my media franchises.[203] It is this fantasy ideal that contributes to the whiteness of the brand as well. For instance, Pocahontas and Mulan-themed dresses are readily available in Quinceañera dresses—marketed exclusively at Latinas—while the Serenity Brides page of Disney Fairy Tale Weddings by Alfred Angelo—marketed at a "mass" audience—does not have any dresses influenced by either Princess of color. It is in a non-white space that these characters are featured, which speaks to what Yasmin Jiwani calls the "interchangeability of Others;" any Princess of color could stand in for each other, while white characters are often individual and distinct.[204]

Together, the characters form a vibrant color wheel in terms of dress and hair color, but the importance of fantasy clothing and character "authenticity" specifically, reinforce the centrality of whiteness as the girl ideal in the doll industry. The bodies of the Princesses are all variations of an hourglass figure, with minor differences in height and breast and hip size. While not all Princesses are white, the collection of characters reinforces the primacy of an idealized

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[201] *ABC Fashion*, https://www.abcfashion.net/collections/disney-royal-ball-quinceanera-dresses-by-impression-bridal/products/disney-royal-ball-quinceanera-dresses-pocahontas-style-41028

[202] *ABC Fashions*.

[203] Santo, "Retail Tales and Tribulations," 123.

[204] Yasmin Jiwani, "The Eurasian Female Hero(ine)," in *Contested Images: Women of Color in Popular Culture*, ed. Alma M. García (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2012), 274.

Western female body with long hair, fine facial features, a heart-shaped angelic face, and a slender figure. Rather than distinguishing each heroine by her individual character look, Disney and its licensees sell Princess dolls as a group differentiated by color, reflecting the kind of commercial multiculturalism that reduces difference to "a variety of colours, flavours, fabrics, and other interchangeable options."[205] Each Princess has primary and complementary color accents that both distinguish them from one another and create a colorful collection of characters. These colors are usually determined by the character's primary clothing in their film, or a more glamorous outfit the character wears in a single scene. In order of film release, Snow White is yellow with blue accents, Cinderella is blue, Aurora is pink, Ariel is green or pink or blue, Belle is yellow, Jasmine is teal or purple, Pocahontas is brown with teal accents, Mulan is pink or green and yellow, Tiana is blue or green, Rapunzel is purple, and Merida is green or blue. Aside from Pocahontas's look, the colors used to identify Princesses reflective vibrancy Disney's hyper real animation style as well as the ethereal appearance of a rainbow.

In comparing original animated faces and bodies of Disney Princess characters with their doll counterparts, it's abundantly clear how the influence of the Barbie doll or toy merchandising in general re-shapes these Disney characters. Transforming the Disney Princess characters into dolls seems to necessitate more stringent visual cohesion. Whereas the film characters illustrate historical trends in animation, the Disney Princess dolls adhere to similar-looking sculpts. Their faces shift overtime, but each doll release is governed by product designers who clearly look to connect the characters together using similar visual markers familiar to girl consumers of the Barbie doll.

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[205] Ann duCille, "Black Barbie and the Deep Play of Difference," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003), 340.

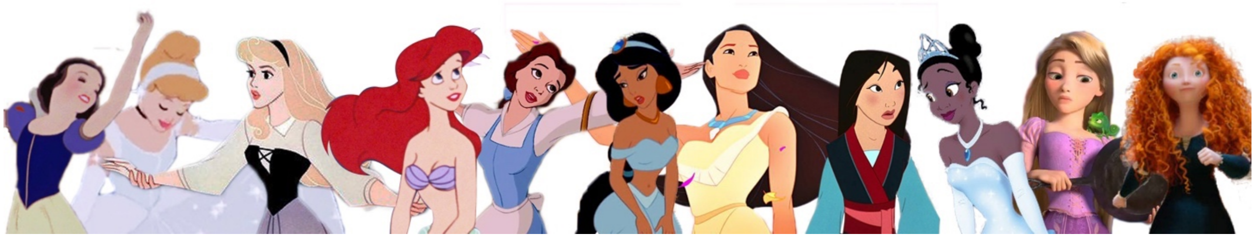

Figure 3. While all slender and otherwise conventionally attractive, the Disney Princesses' looks vary from film to film.[206]

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[206] This composite image was built by the author using the following internet images: "Snow White and the Seven Dwarves," Accessed June 3, 2019, https://animationscreencaps.com/snow-white-and-the-seven-dwarfs-1937/36/#box-1/125/snow-white-disneyscreencaps.com-6425.jpg?strip=all; Emanuele Lugli, "Tear That Dress Off: *Cinderella* (1950) and Disney's Critique of Postwar Fashion," *Bright Lights Film*, February 15, 2018, https://brightlightsfilm.com/tear-that-dress-off-cinderella-1950-and-disneys-critique-of-postwar-fashion/#.XP6AR5_QgUs; "Sleeping Beauty and Prince Philip Wedding Wallpaper," Paperlief, Accessed June 9, 2019, http://paperlief.com/sleeping-beauty/sleeping-beauty-and-prince-philip-wedding-wallpaper-4.html; Nicole Pomarico, "25 Reasons Why 'The Little Mermaid' Heroine Ariel Is The Best Disney Princess Ever," *Bustle*, November 17, 2014, https://www.bustle.com/articles/49446-25-reasons-why-the-little-mermaid-heroine-ariel-is-the-best-disney-princess-ever; Emma Lord, "This "Disney Princess Academy" Short Film Could Have Been Real, And I'm Going To Need A Moment Of Silence On Its Behalf — PHOTOS," *Bustle*, May 20, 2015, https://www.bustle.com/articles/84765-this-disney-princess-academy-short-film-could-have-been-real-and-im-going-to-need-a; "Aladdin (1992) - Princess Jasmine Costume & Hair Reference 01," posted by "Alan," *Flickr*, accessed May 26, 2019, https://www.flickr.com/photos/95643211@N05/11021379856; The Replica Of The Yellow Dress of Pocahontas in the Cartoon Pocahontas," posted by "Davulia," *Spotern*, accessed May 27, 2019, https://www.spotern.com/en/spot/movie/pocahontas/104858/la-replique-de-la-robe-jaune-de-pocahontas-dans-le-dessin-anime-pocahontas; Martin R. Schneider,

"It's A Visual Medium: Mulan (1998)," *Front Row Center*, February 18, 2015, http://frontrowcentral.com/2015/02/18/visual-medium-mulan/; Julie Washington, "Tiana a Wonderful Princess in 'The Princess and the Frog,' but Film Could Use More Pixie Dust," Cleveland.com, December 11, 2009, https://www.cleveland.com/movies/2009/12/tiana_a_wonderful_princess_in.html; "Tangled (2010) Trailer," (Photo still), posted by NLScinema, last modified September 28, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKPzjsl9gYA; *Brave*, directed by Mark Andrews and Brenda Chapman (Photo still) (2012; Burbank, California: Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios).

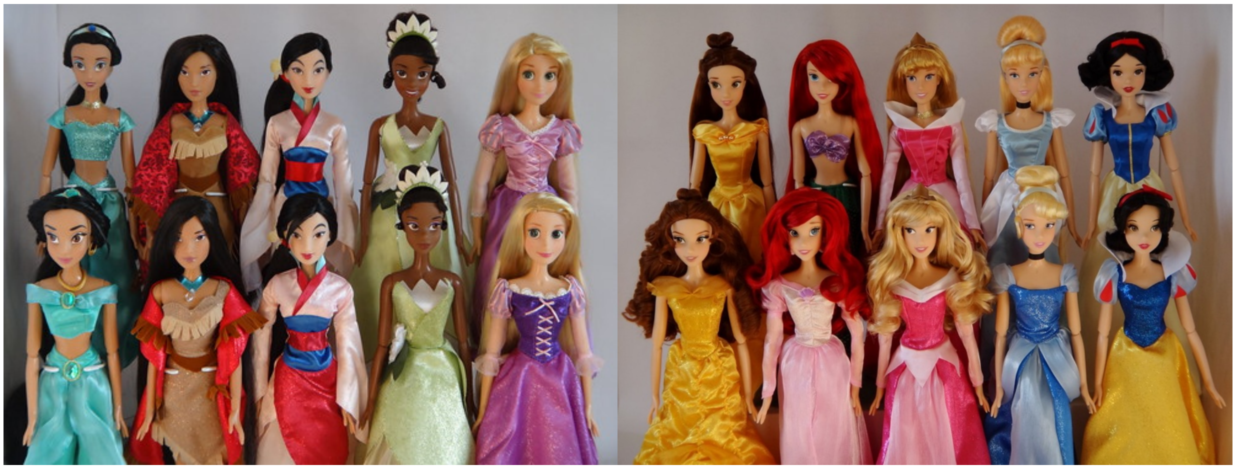

Figure 4. These Mattel-made Disney Princess dolls from 2011 and 2012 reflect the ways in which face shapes and features, as well as body shapes, become more uniform in doll construction.[207]

The dolls in Figure 4 illustrate how doll sculpts can change from year to year. What is more striking is the difference between the faces and shapes in Figure 3 and Figure 4. The characters become thinner and thicker, their breasts grow larger and smaller, and they all paint on a cat-eye eyeliner to look similar to one another. In these releases, Belle, Ariel, and Aurora (the Figure 4 dolls just right of center) look almost identical, especially in comparison to their original character drawings. The Princesses of color often retain facial markers of their ethnic background, likely in order to preserve a sense of racial authenticity, but this difference in comparison to the almost complete standardization of white faces also enhances their difference.

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[207] "Disney Princess 17" Dolls Compared Side By Side 2009-2012 Models," posted by "drj1828," Flickr, accessed June 1, 2019, https://www.flickr.com/photos/68105287@N03/7926312306.

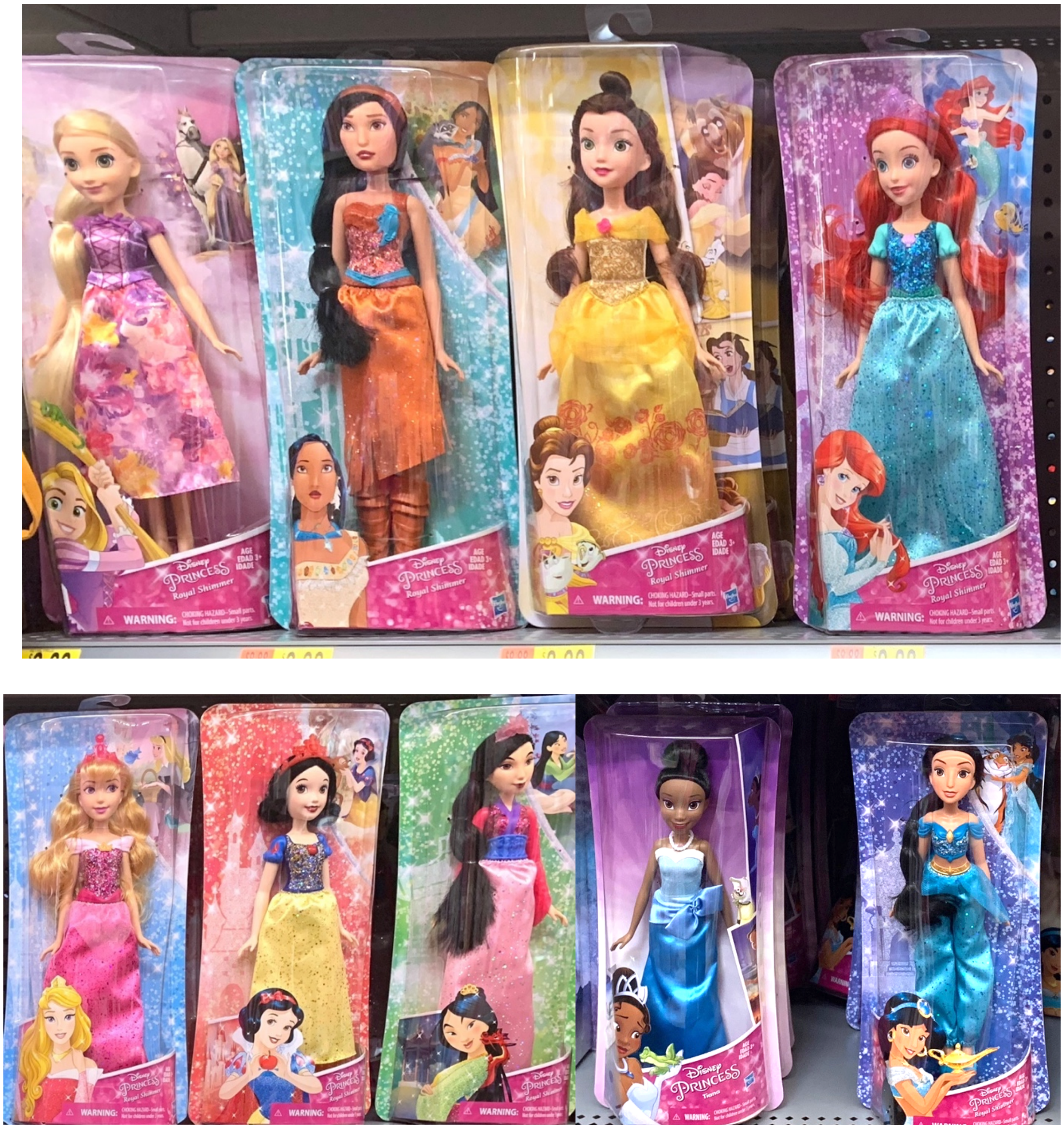

Figure 5. Pocahontas' facial features differ substantially from other dolls that have heart-shaped faces and lower-set eyes, making them look younger.[208]

The doll clothing separates them by ethnicity as well. For instance, Pocahontas's brown and tan minidress relegates her to the corners of Princess products, or completely erases her from products that feature three to five Princess characters on them. Originally created to supposedly represent Native American culture, Disney is likely reluctant to totally assimilate Pocahontas's dress to the rainbow tones of rest of the Princesses. Ironically this distinguishes the character as different and perhaps not belonging to the larger ethos of fantasy and femininity in the franchise. Hasbro has attempted to with tie her clothing is with other characters using embellishments on the skirts (Figure 3) and bodices (Figure 4), or adding a bronze glow to Pocahontas's dress (Figure 5). In special collections like Mattel's Disney Princess Designer Collection release Pocahontas appears in a formal gown like the other princesses but this is relatively uncommon in this vast number of doll releases since the franchise's inception.

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[208] Caroline Leader, Walmart photos, May 26, 2019; Caroline Leader, Target photos, May 29, 2018.

Similarly, Mulan's hanfu (traditional Chinese woman's clothing) calls out her Asian identity but also distinguishes her from the puffed sleeves and revealing necklines worn by other princesses. Because of the cute and sexy visual rhetoric of postfeminist culture popularized in toy culture by the Barbie doll Mulan is also substantially Othered from the Princesses and the franchise. As noted in the previous chapter, Disney seemed to have strategically produced their post-franchise films so that its newest process of color, Tiana, would align more clearly with the Princess look despite the anti-feminine reluctance of Tiana the film character. The Princesses of color's difference originally intended to distinguish them as authentic—as was noted in the previous chapter.

Unlike Tiana, Jasmine, Pocahontas, and Mulan's clothes put them on a spectrum of ethnic specificity, with Jasmine as the least ethnically specific—her teal bikini top and shalwar (loose pants) hardly reflect Arabic clothing and her racial ambiguity made her the "interchangeable" princess of color in the 1990s. Pocahontas and Mulan stand in contrast to the billowy, delicate, Western fantasy wear of the other, predominately white Princesses. By supposing that fantasy and imagination are "unmarked" by race, those characters who are ethnically specific stand outside the realm of fantasy and ethereal whiteness.

A Reinvestment in Transmedia Storytelling?

Hasbro's promise in 2014 that their dolls would more accurately reflect the film characters and move away from the Barbie-like feminine sameness of previous releases, they did not deliver. The newer Hasbro dolls feature larger heads, smaller chests, and smaller hips than some previous 10-inch Mattel dolls, creating a potentially more child-like look for the Disney Princess. If Barbie, and Mattel's Disney Princesses centered on a "beautiful and glamorous" appearance, the Hasbro dolls were and are "cute and glamorous," still trading of the same feminine tropes as before. In addition, Hasbro did not deliver substantially on their claims they would feature more characters of color.[209] Instead, they have leveraged the previous practice of collection releases to pair princesses a color with white legacy princesses that might be better known and more popular with girl consumers and their parents who grew up on earlier Princesses. This is especially notable in the recent release of *Ralph Breaks the Internet* Princess dolls dressed in contemporary leisurewear, which I describe below.

If anything, Hasbro has tried to shift the Disney Princess reputation as a Barbie-like doll through promotional stunts that reinforce their fairytale narratives over their "princess culture" identity tied to consumer products. This reinforces the perceive hierarchies between "original" film texts and devalued licensed media like toys.[210] By connecting dolls back to their films, they become valuable extensions of creative works of cinema, not Barbie dolls. As Leslie Ferraro, President of Disney Consumer Products, said in 2016:

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[209] Suddath, "The $500 Million Battle."

[210] Derek Johnson, "Figuring Identity," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 17, no. 4 (July 2014): 307-325.

> Disney Princess characters have been cherished for generations. Their incredible stories and unique qualities, whether it's Merida's bravery, Tiana's determination, or Rapunzel's courage have always resonated with people all over the world….Toys play a key role in extending these stories and sparking kids' imaginations, and this photo series celebrates the importance of play, creativity and great storytelling.[211]

While this rhetoric may help win over middle-class parents and distance the Disney Princess Renaissance characters from the brand's stigmatized feminine reputation, the dolls on the toy shelf are largely playing the same game they have for decades.

One release has brought the multiculturalism of Disney P/princess marketing to its pinnacle: the *Ralph Breaks the Internet* rendering of the Princesses and princess-like characters in contemporary leisurewear. These dolls perform empowerment and equal opportunity through the consumption of comfortable modern clothing and femininized snacks—like frozen coffee drinks and popcorn. They are dressed similarly to one another—but coded in their identifying colors—with little attention to ethnic difference or individuality. Nevertheless, the dolls are sold in strategic two packs where every Princess of color is paired with a popular white Princess, ensuring some kind of forced inclusion of supposedly "unpopular" dolls. Displayed in the "pink aisle," Disney Princess products attempt to structure girls' consumption around anticipated girls' play cultures and reinforce the commodified multiculturalism that reinforces the centrality of whiteness and feminine fantasy to the exclusion of Princesses of Color who can't play the same game. Walking into Target and Walmart—one in a middle-class suburb of Toledo, Ohio, and another in a Walmart located in a small working-class city, I noticed key themes that reinforce the commodified girls' consumer market and the particular branding choices of Disney.

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[211] Corinne Andersson, "Disney Princess Moments Recreated with Dolls; Disney to Announce New Disney Princess on GMA Feb 19th," *insidethemagic.com*, February 15, 2016, https://insidethemagic.net/2016/02/disney-princess-moments-recreated-with-dolls-disney-to-announce-new-disney-princess-on-gma-feb-19th/

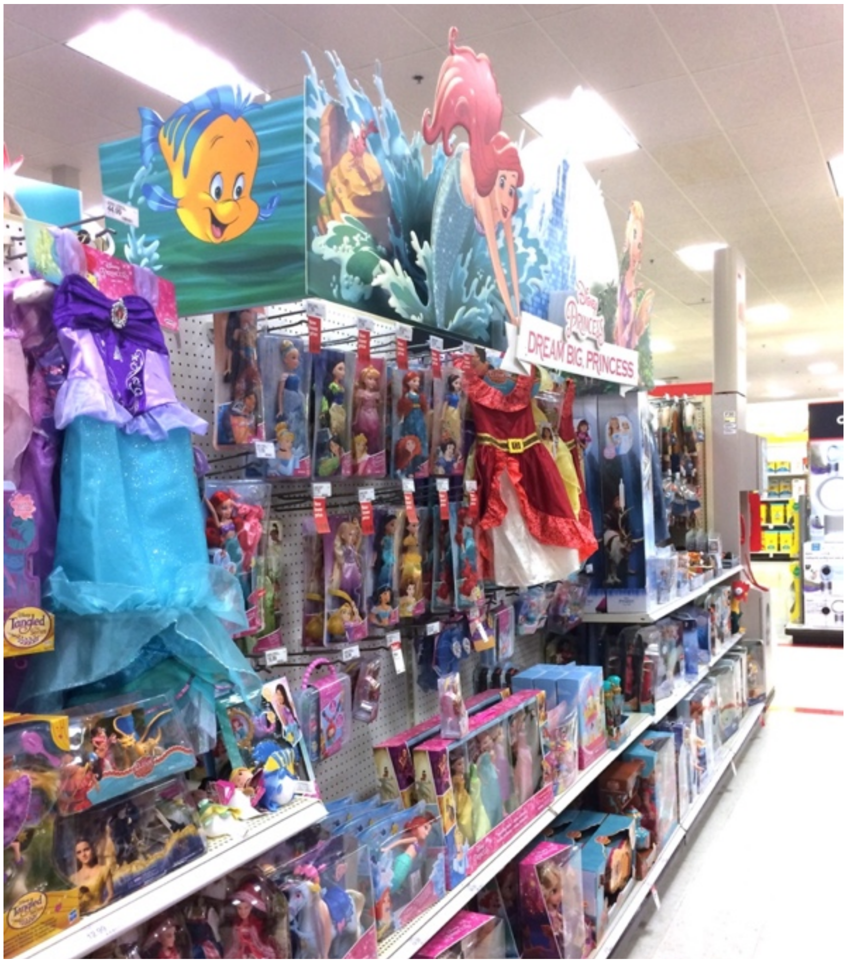

Figure 6[212]

At Target, the Disney Princess section sat under a banner with the current campaign tag line for the franchise: "Dream Big, Princess." Disney Princess products overlapped with *Frozen* and *Elena of Avalor* dolls and toys, signifying the overlapping consumer markets and the blurred boundaries between these characters. Baby-like dolls usually sat on the lowest shelves, accessible to a toddler's reach while older dolls and dresses hung higher. At Walmart, more licensed toys brands shared the same aisle, with "boy" aisles and "girl" aisles separated. The Disney Princess section was similar to Target without the banner. Both stores illustrated the dominance of white Princess characters and the prevalence of postfeminist toys like dress-up sets and jewelry-making kits, as well as generic kids' toys with a Princess twist like the pink cash register (Figure 7e).

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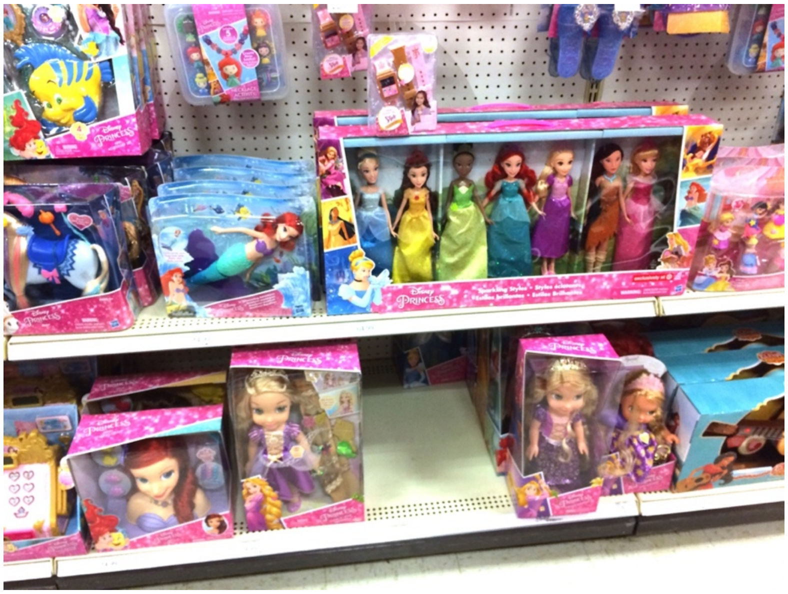
[212] Leader, Target photos.

Disney Princess toys frequently feature a smaller selection of Disney Princesses either to encourage the purchase of multiple variations of a single toy or to reduce manufacturing labor by presenting the Princess brand without all 11 characters. As illustrated in Figures 7 b, c, and d, this generally means that toys will include six princesses with one or two Princesses of color, most often Jasmine or Mulan. Toys with fewer than six characters, usually two or three, will sometimes leave out any non-white character (Figure 7e). Toys that feature only one princess—aside from the 10-inch Barbie-like dolls, almost exclusively feature white Princesses. In my trips to the stores, Ariel, Rapunzel, and Belle (one red hair, one blond, and one brunette) featured most prominently.

On retails shelves in a suburban and rural market, the Disney Princess relies on classic retail management techniques for the girls' toy market, and less on the marketing rhetoric of Disney and Hasbro that pepper press releases and online chatter. Rather than an all-girl world, retail choices reflect the white world where Princesses of color exist on the margins.



7a

7b

7c

Disney Princess
Includes 5
Create New Looks!
NECKLACE ACTIVITY

7d

Hand Held Play Scanner!
Disney Princess
Royal Boutique Cash Register
WARNING: CHOKING HAZARD

7e

Magical Movers
Disney Princess
WARNING:
Hasbro

7f

Figure 7[213]

A Princess Among Men: The LEGO Mini-Doll

The Disney Princess doll releases and lineups on toy shelves reveal the brand's marginalization of characters of color. In reproductions of Princesses as LEGO mini-dolls, by comparison, we see how masculine toy products differentiate and limit their products by gender. Historically LEGO princess characters and other female minifigures were identical in shape to male minifigures, expressing their feminine gender through "hairpieces, reddened lips, or other specialized face and torso printing."[214] A 1979 LEGO princess minifigure had the same shape as male mini-figures with drawn-on necklaces and a wig-like hairpiece.[215] Later 1990s and early 2000s LEGO princesses would include the outlines of smaller waists, low necklines, and cleavage.[216] By at least 2007, some princess minifigures no longer had two separate legs and instead had a solid skirt shape that represented the bottom of their dresses and legs.[217] These visual and structural changes to female minifigures always signaled their difference, but over time, they also became more and more physically femininized.

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[213] Leader, Walmart photos; Leader, Target photos.

[214] Johnson, "Figuring Identity," 313.

[215] *Brickset*, "cas076: Classic - Knights Tournament Princess with Necklace," https://brickset.com/minifigs/cas076/classic-knights-tournament-princess-with-necklace

[216] *Brickset*, "cas034: Knights' Kingdom I - Princess Storm, Female Knight," https://brickset.com/minifigs/cas034/knights-kingdom-i-princess-storm-female-knight; *Brickset*, "pi165: Pirate Princess," https://brickset.com/minifigs/pi165/pirate-princess

[217] *Brickset*, https://brickset.com/minifigs/year-2007?query=princess; *Brickset*, https://brickset.com/minifigs/year-2010?query=princess; *Brickset*, "cas515: Princess, Bright Light Yellow Hair," https://brickset.com/minifigs/cas515/princess-bright-light-yellow-hair

In 2012, LEGO created a line of what it called LEGO Friends "mini-dolls," which aside from their claw-like hands that hold onto LEGO accessories, look like a completely different toy than the classic LEGO minifigure. As Derek Johnson argues, the mini-doll "significantly signaled LEGO's market interest in girls, the need for a different kind of human figure solidified assumptions about the minifigure as a 'boys' toy'."[218] Aside from a pre-existing Princess Ariel LEGO minifigure, the Disney Princess LEGOs are mini-dolls, sold in sets, with and without their prince counterparts, and accessories that match their narratives. The LEGO Friend sub-brand of LEGO has been profitable, but highly criticized for its stereotypical representation of girls.[219] While such discourse reflects, again, the devaluation of femininized toys by middle-class tastes, what is notable is the setup of Friends from minifigures in the Target toy aisle.

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[218] Johnson, "Figuring Identity," 313.

[219] Gry Høngsmark Knudsen and Erika Kuever, "The Peril of Pink Bricks: Gender Ideology and Lego Friends." In *Consumer Culture Theory*, edited by Anastasia E. Thyroff, Jeff B. Murray, and Russell W. Belk, (Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2015), 171–188.

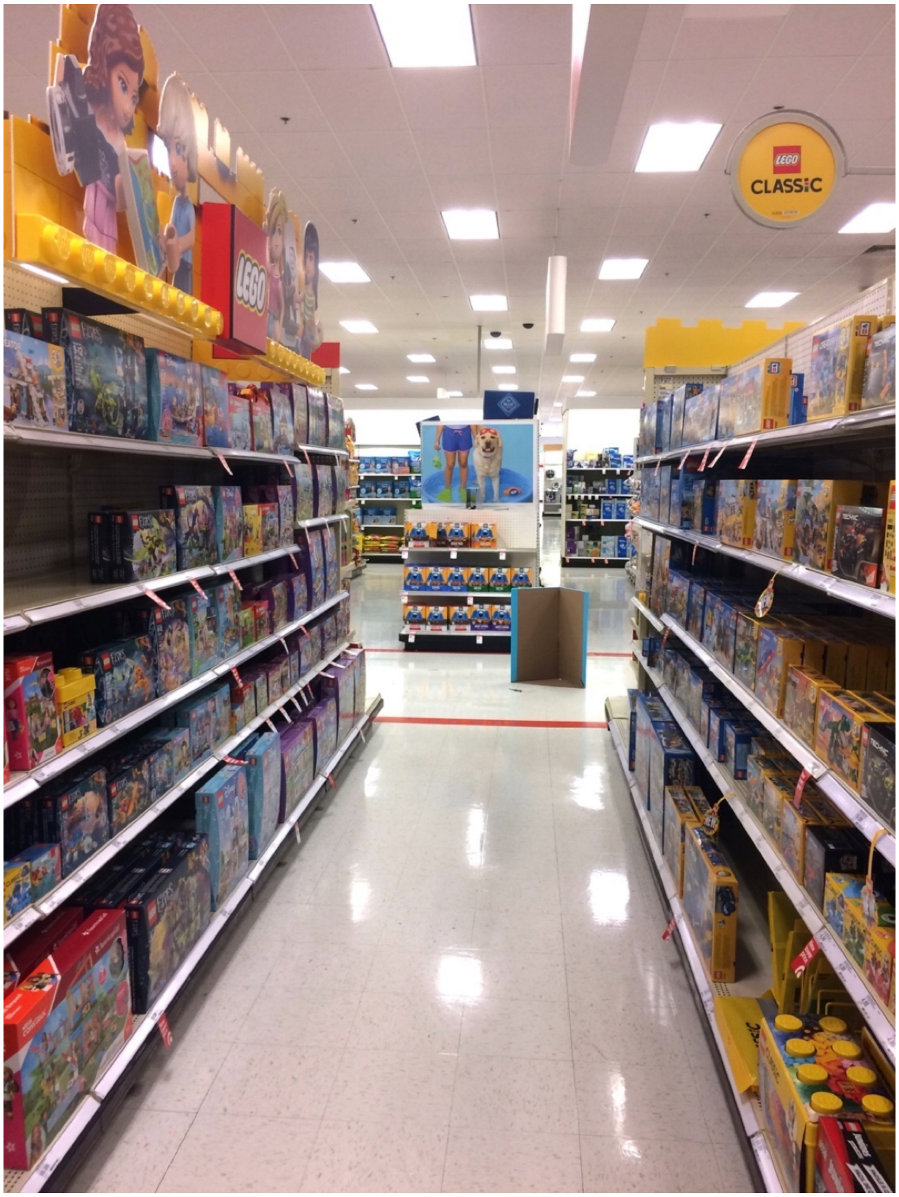

Figure 8[220]

The right side of the aisle shows “LEGO Classic” where the minifigures reside in boxes coded “boy,” red, royal blue, and yellow. The Friend side of the aisle, which also included some Duplo sets for toddlers, includes more purple, teal, pink, and green boxes—a rainbow rather than only red, blue, and yellow. Kids of varying genders can more easily come across toys targeting boys and girls, which could be a two-part stategy for LEGO: keeping the whole family in the LEGO aisle and offering a gender fluid space that could encourage more purchases. The overwhelming Disney Princess presence on the Friends side of the aisle illustrates the brand's influence in the girl-power franchised toy business, but it also makes clear the gender binary in toy production and retailing. Rather than ignoring girls' toys, LEGO called their feminine toys out as different and special.

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[220] Leader, Target photos.

Conclusion

The branding of the Disney Princess doll requires the evolution and revival of girl-power stories and feminine fantasy that make the Princess an appealing icon for girls and parents. It is in retail management of Disney Princess dolls, though, where sameness and repetition dominate, in spite of rhetorical overtures that the Disney Princess brand has changed its tune under Hasbro. The doll industry has long favored sameness over distinction, with the interconnected production of Barbie and Mattel's P/princess dolls, the related girl-power rhetoric of Barbie, American Girl, and Disney Princess, and the sometimes blurred difference between Mattel princesses and Disney Princesses—the last of which was the only time in this tale that sameness resulted in a negative business overcome, when Disney moved its license from Mattel to Hasbro.

The most notable difference in the Disney Princess doll story results from the whiteness of the franchised dolls and how Princesses of color, particularly Pocahontas and Mulan, are often marginalized on toy shelves. Gender as well, only becomes coded difference when Princess mini-dolls become a major brand within LEGO's girl-oriented sub-brand, LEGO Friends. Thus, Disney Princess dolls are a rich platform to explore how industrial production and retailing reproduce gendered and raced limitations based on constructed consumer tastes, and how the production of sameness influences marketing practices and business decisions. As Dan Fleming argues in his work on toys, objects work as interrelational texts, structured by cultural meaning but also productive of new meanings and interpretations by children who play with them.[221] This chapter has explored those structural forces enacted on dolls while in the next, we will see how children and adults produce new meanings, and reproduce well-word discourses around girl power, feminized toys, and the Disney Princess.

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[221] Dan Fleming, *Powerplay: Toys as Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).

CHAPTER 3

PLAYING PRINCESSES: FAMILY CONSUMER CULTURES AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE DISNEY PRINCESS

He's lying face up on the floor in a pink gown in a mood. He's tired of following classroom rules and getting scolded for his behaviors: yelling, pushing, and jumping on the small couch. His friend, wearing a sparkling red tutu, comes over and urges him to stand up. The others are going to the ball, and he's invited. He reluctantly rises and engages in their game. For the next month, he wears that pink princess dress, but only at school. The one his mom bought doesn't interest him. For this child, the classroom is where princess identity has personal value. The princess dress is social capital—an invitation to play with the other kids in class. As Sonia Livingstone (2002) argues, "the central place which media occupy in children's lives should be sought not in the nature of media themselves…but in the contexts of daily life into which they have been introduced."[1] As a dominant icon in young children's social environments, The Disney Princess reflects this primarily contextual role.

Similarly, parenting is a deeply contextual practice, in spite of discourses used by governments and marketers that put pressure on individual parents to live up to mythological ideals of parenting,[2] or a set of "more or less formalized rules and codes of conduct that have emerged over recent years which…define expectations about how a parent should raise their child."[3] Yet, such discourses prevail in the self-conscious consumption of the Disney Princess franchise by middle-class parents whose economic privileges and discursive communities put them in direct contact with such rules and codes and make the consumption of the girly franchise a deeply ambivalent practice.

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[1] Sonia Livingstone, *Young People and New Media* (London: Sage Publications, 2002): 77-78.

[2] Sue Nichols, Helen Nixon, & Jennifer Roswell, "The 'Good' Parent in Relation to Early Childhood Literacy: Symbolic Terrain and Lived Practice," *Literacy* 43, no. 2 (July 2009): 65-74; Freya Geinger, Michel Vandenbroeck, and Griet Roets, "Parenting as a Performance: Parents as Consumers And (De)Constructors Of Mythic Parenting and Childhood Ideals," *Childhood* 21, no. 4 (2013): 488-501; Charlotte Faircloth and Marjorie Murray, "Parenting: Kinship, Expertise, and Anxiety," *Journal of Family Issues* 36, no. 9 (2014): 1115-1129.

This chapter refocuses on the reception of the Disney Princess, parsing how discourse and play contribute to families' negotiations of Disney Princess consumption. The research participants in this study are predominately middle and upper-middle-class families from various regions of the United States. My study does not presume to speak for all families but builds on compelling data about middle-class family consumption. Within the context of children's lives at school and at home with the family, the idea and ideals of "princess" and "Disney Princesses" are complex and varied, as previous chapters have explored in industry practices and public discourse. I see these negotiations through themes that will persist throughout this chapter.

The first is the influence of public discourse and industry strategy on families' perceptions of the Disney Princess brand: how parents frame their anxieties over gender and commercialism and how children perceive and negotiate the boundaries of the word "princess." Second, families perform some level of expertise when consuming Disney Princesses. Parents draw on parenting discourses to determine their responsibility to rear their children "correctly" and to provide the best possible experience for their kids, often questioning the influence of highly gendered texts on their children's behavior. Children primarily perform expertise as cultural capital, displaying their knowledge of Disney Princesses. Third, parenting discourses, which encourage parents to overdetermine their children's behaviors and focus on tangible

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[3] Charlotte Faircloth, Ellie Lee, Jan Macvarish, and Jennie Bristow, *Parenting Culture Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 9-10, quoted in Charlotte Faircloth & Marjorie Murray, "Parenting: Kinship, Expertise, and Anxiety," *Journal of Family Issues* 36, no. 9 (2014): 1116.

"outcomes" in childrearing, conflict with the ambiguity of play, where children's consumption of texts and concurrent play practices challenge fixed meanings and outcomes. This tension can intensify parents' anxious or celebratory reactions to children's play behaviors. All these themes show how Disney Princess consumption reveals middle-class anxieties around gender where parents seek to understand, discipline, and curate their children's development, while children integrate Disney Princesses into their own peer cultures and share culture with adults through play, expertise, and ownership over Princess texts.

I first uncover parent's ambivalent feelings about Disney Princesses. Middle-class parental anxiety is partly determined by the perceived educational value of Disney Princesses and from a suspicion of feminine consumer products. I then ask children to help define the word "princess," noting the ways in which children negotiate the slippery boundaries of the term, especially in light of Disney's Princess world-bending. Finally, I explore how families and children play with Disney Princesses, which exposes the relationship between Disney's "anticipated identities"[4] and audience use, as well as the ambiguity surrounding children's meaning making during play. Using interviewing methodologies, I argue that middle-class parents' self-conscious management of their families' Disney Princess consumption relies on same discourses of girl power that Disney uses. Thus, while very young children perceive the Princess in part as mediated access to knowledge and social status amongst their peers, parents frame their children's consumption within the same public discourses and criticisms that have long shaped the Disney Princess brand.

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[4] Karen E. Wohlend, "Damsels in Discourse: Girls Consuming and Producing Identity Texts Through Disney Princess Play," *Reading Research Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (2009): 57-83.

A Spectrum of Feeling: Disney Princesses

My analysis of parents' negotiation of Disney Princess consumption centers on their attitudinal responses to questions about whether they liked or disliked Disney Princesses, how their children interacted with Disney Princess texts and what other media texts they enjoyed or avoided as parents and adult audiences. I used open-ended interviewing, but also repeated several major questions in every interview in order to both allow space for parents to tell stories or prompt new questions and create continuity between each interview. Their responses and questions of me coincided with academic investigation into parenting discourses, and the idea that cultures of parenting put an incredible burden on parents to raise successful and thriving children.[5] Scholars in sociology, public policy, and cultural studies have remarked upon the progression of parenting cultures, which has evolved to include greater parenting duties and intensified public scrutiny of parents[6] and therefore an environment in which parents are increasingly anxious or paranoid about their children's development. While some question the ubiquity of this phenomenon, especially as such anxiety seems most common to middle-class parents[7], while others posit that the Internet has helped to intensify and spread feelings of anxiety and guilt amongst parents reflecting on their own parenting skills and their influence, positive and negative, on their children.[8]

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[5] Faircloth and Murray, "Parenting," 2014; Geinger et al, "Parenting as a Performance."

[6] Faircloth and Murray, "Parenting," 2014.

[7] Faircloth and Murray, "Parenting," 2014.

[8] Nancy Ukai Russell, "Babywearing in the Age of the Internet," *Journal of Family Issues* 36, no. 9 (2014): 1130-1153.

Media consumption is just one part of this parenting discussion, but in many ways follows similar parenting logics as other everyday battles like sugar and toys where parents, and especially mothers, battle their children's consumption of real or imagined bad objects—sugar, TV, mean girl behavior, makeup, violence, etc. Parents are also under intense pressure to raise children who are, as Sue Nichols, Helen Nixon, and Jennifer Roswell argue, "happy now and successful later."[9] This phrasing is key, since parents constantly trying to assess which pleasures for their children will empower them and which will potentially harm or risk their children's futures.

In their forthcoming book, Sonia Livingstone and Alicia Bloom-Ross propose that parental anxiety has intensified in a digital era, or when "the risks and opportunities of new technologies and media are offered up long before the previous ones have been worked out."[10] In other words, with information proliferating on the Internet at break-neck speeds and new apps and devices popping up, the "good parent" model of the person who gives their child every possible educational and social advantage while protecting their child from harm only grows more impossible. The growth of the "good parent" discourse combined with the digital media landscape intensifies parents' pressure to raise "successful" children. Parents I spoke with saw Princesses as part of the landscape of entertainment and learning that they managed with and for their children, along with iPad apps, YouTube, Netflix, and more. Disney Princesses are not inherently part of the digital landscape, but they are part of an enduring discourse and fear around gendered media that only escalate with other media-related concerns parents deal with today.

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[9] Nichols et al, "The 'Good Parent," 73.

[10] Sonia Livingstone and Alicia Blum-Ross (forthcoming), *Parenting for a Digital Future: How Hopes and Fears About Technology Shape Our Children's Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Children's gender also determines or at least influences the nature of parents' anxiety. For boys these fears center on violence and for girls, gender and sexuality. While parents I interviewed tended not to speak about sexuality explicitly, some did object to the sexualization of Disney Princess characters. More often, parents' concerns about their daughters' consumption of Disney Princess media centered on the same issues raised in the early girl-power era: self-esteem, economic independence, and bodily self-management. Anita Harris suggests that girl-power culture demonizes traditional femininity because the latter seems to indicate a girl's inability to self-actualize and become successful in a masculine world.[11] Thus, girls' obsession with dress-up, makeup, and other performances of traditional femininity are equated with failure. It was clear in my interviews that parents feared that feminine display and engagement with feminine texts endangered their daughters' futures. At the same time, they cited recent Disney Princesses as examples of female empowerment and a move away from traditional forms of cultural femininity,[12] showing how persuasive the rhetoric of Disney's marketing machinery is in easing parents minds enough to consumer innumerable Disney Princess franchised intertexts.

A portion of each interview was devoted to understanding families' relationship to the Disney Princess as a toy, media object, and cultural icon. When asked how they felt about

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[11] Anita Harris, "The 'Can-do' Girl Versus the 'At-risk' Girl," in *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-first Century* (London: Routledge, 2003), 20.

[12] Interview with "Helen," anonymous mother, June 30, 2016; Interview with "Chelsea," anonymous mother, July 5, 2016; Interview with "Katie," anonymous mother, May 13, 2016; Interview with "Molly," anonymous mother, July 12, 2016; Interview with "Andrew and Rose," anonymous father and mother, July 14, 2016; Interview with "Josie," anonymous mother, August 5, 2016; Interview with "Megan," anonymous mother, August 12, 2016; Interview with "Ellen," anonymous mother, May 16, 2017.

Disney Princesses or what they felt was the value of these characters, parents were of many minds. The analyses below show a wide range of responses, which I break into four categories: nonspecific dislike, ambivalence/acquiescence, acceptance, and active support. These categories fall on a spectrum of feeling and action. Some parents were more concerned about media's effects on their children, and others were more interested in their children's meaning-making abilities that break from preferred readings of texts. Then many fell somewhere in the middle. Parents did not always fall neatly into the four categories below. However, those categories accurately represent the range of responses in this study. Most parents were perplexed by their children's love of the Disney Princess, which likely prompted their interest in participating in the study. Most parents were also somewhat ambivalent, even if they allowed their children access to Disney Princess movies, toys, and dress-up clothes.

Though parents' reflections indicated a nuanced approach to the Disney Princess as an icon and plaything, they gestured toward their own sense of social scrutiny by peers as it relates to Disney Princesses. Two moms summed it up best:

> I know people who are so into Disney. They know everything about Disney. They're like obsessed with Disney, Disney Princesses, Disney this…They have their favorite Princess and pens and they…it's like a little club. And then I know people who are like, "Hiss. Boo. I hate Disney. I hate everything about it because [of [its gender stereotypes. And if you're truly a feminist, you can't possibly support the Princess thing." And "they're trying but they're not going far enough with things like Jasmine or…Tiana…It feels like there's a real dichotomy of 'you're either with us or against us'."[13]

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[13] Interview with "Helen."

> My sister is so annoyed at Disney. She is very much “This isn't good for girls,” but she doesn't have a kid and she basically still thinks of it as the old Disney. I don't think she's really realized they kind of changed their tune, which I think is very recent, this new tune of theirs. She really feels like we shouldn't be teaching this whole princess-y thing. [14]

In general, it was difficult to escape what one mom called the “ambient cultural noise” of Disney Princess debates.[15] While parents often saw me as an “expert” and this may have intensified their performance of anxiety, they also at times treated me as a peer parent and offered candid concerns and pleasures. Their responses showed how parenting discourses combined with a legacy of anxiety around girls’ consumption encourage middle-class parents to manage their own parenting choices according to the public discourse and criticisms surrounding the Disney Princesses.

Passive Dislike

In asking moms and dads about how they perceive Disney Princesses, many disliked the franchise because of antiqued representations of girlhood and womanhood. “Passive dislike” describes parents who expressed distrust and disappointment with Disney Princesses on political and/or social grounds. They did not want their children to rely on those characters as role models. All these parents, though, allowed their children to watch Disney Princess films and play with Disney Princess merchandise, whether gifts or family-bought items. When I asked moms and dads why they didn’t like Disney Princesses, they would give these kinds of answers:

> “Just cuz, some idea of feminism, and being independent, and not counting on other people, and being saved. They’re waiting around for someone to come and give them a

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[14] Interview with “Ellen.”

[15] Interview with “Katie.”

> kiss or rescue them. And I would like [my daughter] to have the idea that she can do it herself…I guess the newer stuff; they do try to make the heroines more, I don’t know. I haven’t seen any of the new stuff.”[16]
>
> “Well, you know, all the basic stuff: the gender stuff, putting on high heels, and you know.”[17]
>
> “Like how they… it's all about physical appearances. The man always rescuing the woman. All the themes. It's not my favorite, but I allowed it. But now that she's passed it, I'm happy.”[18]
>
> “Could something be more perfectly mutually gendered and hyper-commercialized?”[19]
>
> “I don't think I want to teach my children to strive for marriage. I think marriage is great, but it's just not the main thing.”[20]
>
> “I think I would maybe adjust the appearance a little bit. Adjust their body style, so it looks like a typical human being. Not so skinny. Maybe not in dresses all the time. I feel like sometimes they make them seem a little floozy even though they're strong.”[21]

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[16] Interview with “Helen.”

[17] Interview with “Chelsea.”

[18] Interview with “Molly,” anonymous mother, July 12, 2016.

[19] Interview with “Andrew and Rose.”

[20] Interview with “Beth,” anonymous mother, May 30, 2017.

[21] Interview with “Kim,” an anonymous mother, June 8, 2017.

Parents were mostly concerned with the same themes that pervade public discourse and writing on Princess culture[22]—and cultural expectations of women aligned with traditional femininity: focus on heterosexual romance and marriage, maintenance of physical beauty, and a tendency toward passivity. Regardless of changes in character types and representations over time, this image of the Disney Princess—the reigning brand in the pink aisle—has significant influence over people's perceptions of it. As we saw in Chapters 1 and 2, the extended periods of time in which Disney Princess built the franchise around girls' toys in pink boxes and lined up characters influenced public criticism of the brand. To these parents, the Disney Princesses are pretty, beauty-obsessed girls who want nothing more than a wealthy husband. These traits both threaten any contemporary idea of gender equity and feminism *and* render femininity dangerous for girls to express. As we see above, many parents' responses to the Disney Princess brand reflected a superficial but understandable response to franchised texts and a betray a deep fear around girls' gender performance.

Ambivalence and Acceptance

Ambivalence

Even those parents who objected to the Disney Princess on principle often gave in to the social pressure of the brand—whether that came in the form of gifts from family members or pressure from their children. For many reasons, including their children's interests, social lives, and a sense of the value of popular culture knowledge, parents who disliked or had serious misgivings about Disney Princesses still allowed their children to engage with the brand:

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[22] Rebecca Hains, *The Princess Problem: Guiding Our Girls through the Princess-Obsessed Years* (Naperville: Sourcebooks, 2014)*;* Peggy Orenstein, *Cinderella Are My Daughter: Dispatches from the Frontline of the New Girlie Girl Culture* (New York: Harper Collins).

> I don't mind *Sofia the First*. She really likes it. I feel like *Sofia the First* really tries to do a strong, female role but sometimes, there's weird stuff that [is] sometimes lost in it, like sometimes she talks about…she needs to look her best. Cuz [sic] I think they talked about that in one of the shows, or, she's naturally a girlie girl. So, I guess there's no way around that. Just like Princesses in general really embrace that. It doesn't bother me all that much to where I would stop her from watching it.[23]

Helen's response signals ambivalence along the same lines as her earlier statement—where she had strong objections to the brand's anti-feminist themes, but she is also a mom who embraces her daughter's interests and wants her to be able to socialize with peers:

> I do sort of like her to have the cultural references, like, before she didn't know who Mickey Mouse was or Winnie the Pooh. And I think there's [sic] certain times where you know…it's good to know some things. So, I think it serves a purpose to have some reference, so she can engage with her peers.[24]

While Helen was a mom who curated and planned her children's home lives creatively—including building elaborate crafting time and artistic exploration—she did see how popular culture icons could help her daughter socialize and become more knowledgeable about the culture, even if, or maybe because, it is popular culture.

Another mom, Kristin, expressed ambivalence over Disney Princesses as well, resisting the value of appearance and other surface interests:

> Pink is her favorite color. I say that because the Princesses are very pink and purple. And again, I don't love that about it, but she naturally gravitates toward it and if she could

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[23] Interview with "Helen."

[24] Interview with "Helen."

> wear nail polish and makeup already, she would, and that's just what she's interested in. I don't know if that's what she sees or if that's what she likes. It's very very feminine and plays up some of those stereotypes, and so I don't love that.[25]

Her objection to Princesses relates to a fear and concern many parents had—lack of control. What parents inevitably realized was that outside forces—friends, school, grandparents, and media—would shape their children's interests and belief systems. Kristin acknowledged that she wasn't sure whether her daughter's "girly girl" personality was innate or learned but knew that she as a mother could not decide her daughter's interests. However, Kristin did see recent Princess characters as a move in the right direction: "I like the more recent stories because it shows stronger personalities and the princesses going on adventures or saving [sic] other people. When I was younger, it was them being saved. Now the princesses are doing the saving."[26]

Kristin's reaction to changing representations reflects more of a "feeling" about princesses than reality—or a series of nuanced changes that occurred incrementally over time and never centered on "saving." The theme of rescue, of a man saving a woman, came up frequently in interviews and represented a broader desire to evolve past female objectification and passivity in media and everyday culture. The spunk and ingenuity of Princesses from 1987 and on combined with their physical appearances and performance of femininity vacillated from feminist to postfeminist, with nods to girl power in between. Even before this era, magical guardians and friends are the primary rescuers in Princess films and princes are put in the way of valiant deeds. In *Snow White*, the prince pops in for a love song early in the narrative and again at the very end to kiss Snow White awake. Hardly a rescue, the two-dimensional lovers are no match for delightful wickedness of the evil step-mother and the brave deeds of the seven dwarves. The closest thing to a man rescuing a woman comes in *Sleeping Beauty*, where the fairy godmothers magically guide Prince Philip's sword to slay a dragon before performing a life-saving kiss on Princess Aurora. Decades later, Pocahontas saves John Smith from her father, Moana saves her village, and Mulan saves all of China. These plot points, of course, do not adequately reflect the many ways that gender performances, subplots, and character relationships diminish and compromise Disney's heroines. Instead, they point to the fact that a significant number of interviewed parents drew from public perception of Disney Princess culture, and not recent experience with Disney Princess intertexts, in crafting this "rescue" narrative.

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[25] Interview with "Kristin" and "Sophie," an anonymous mother and daughter, July 7, 2017.

[26] Interview with "Kristin" and "Sophie."

If I were to redirect their criticisms, validating the words of some of my interviewees, Disney's presentation of romance as the solution for growing pains, female discontent, and self-discovery might be the root of their concerns—even then, Disney did not invent the romantic happily ever after. But parents were concerned that their daughter would not learn to be self-sufficient if they bought into the "rescue" narrative. Peggy Orenstein, author of *Cinderella Are My Daughter: Dispatches from the Frontline of the New Girlie Girl Culture*, bemoans the grotesquerie of grown-up young women who believe this myth.[27] Even Disney has parodied the idea with Charlotte La Bouff in *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). Such criticisms address fears over gender inequality, discipline adult women for not conforming to proper, middle-class performances of gender, and reproduce parents' anxieties around raising girls.

Interviewed parents' ambivalent feelings toward Princesses on the grounds of gender issues were very often influenced by a public discourse that uses Disney Princesses as a litmus test—if not a "bad object"—in representational politics. Like their predecessor and now

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[27] Orenstein, *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*.

competition, Barbie, Disney Princesses are implicit indications that girls' consumer culture is limited. While companies like Mattel and Hasbro frequently play off traditions of retail that value market segmentation by gender, they have also had to answer to criticism from parents and popular press writers regarding the segregation and gender essentialism of the "pink aisle." Mattel's long record of altering Barbie's race and body type, often with much criticism, speaks to a more significant cultural issue—that gender equity hasn't been realized and that commercial interventions into toys will never satisfy a yearning for actual change. This was an undercurrent in ambivalent responses from parents.

Some ambivalent parents' responses were implicitly about gender, as with parents who wanted their children to have realistic role models. These mostly included issues of fantasy. Parents expressed a desire for their children to understand the real-world careers and were at times concerned that their children needed "real" role models who were not princesses. *Doc McStuffins* was frequently cited as an alternative, which of course keeps families in the Disney universe:

> I would let her watch it, but I'd pick something else, like *Doc McStuffins*. Because she's a female doctor. That seems more practical and more real-world.[28]
>
> I like things where she'll learn more. Doc McStuffins she can [purposefully dreamily] aspire to be a doctor. Just more of the cartoons that are somehow educational.[29]

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[28] Interview with "Helen."

[29] Interview with "Molly."

> We didn't talk about "Doc McStuffins," but I like that. She's a doctor or a veterinarian. Sometimes I wish they had more 'This is what they're passionate about' or 'This is what they do for a living' rather than just being a princess.[30]

Being a Princess is not a career for the masses and is more often associated with an unhealthy preoccupation in young girls and adult women engaged with feminine cultures like fashion and romantic media texts. Parents seemed very concerned that the kind of gendered fantasy of Disney Princesses was potentially dangerous, while many parents encouraged fantasy texts like *Harry Potter.* Another mother, Violet, thought real-world role models might be better or more interesting. She also thought the genre of Disney movies were too "adult":

> They're getting their stories told because they are princesses whereas there's a lot of people who do wonderful things like Amelia Earhart and they should have their stories told, too, but they are more complicated…It's like a romance novel or a mystery. They're fun I guess – romance novels, mysteries, and princess stories, but there's so much more out there and I think romance novels are good for older people and mysteries are good for older people.[31]

Violet had stated that she felt Disney Princesses were too old for her daughters (two and a half and five). She wanted them to stick with educational media for as long as possible before exploring what she saw as pure entertainment. Violet never explicitly said that the adult content referred to sexuality, but many parents did object to the sexual appearance and implied sexual nature of romantic relationships in Disney Princess movies. Violet couched her concerns in pedagogical language, reinforcing her choices within rhetorics of parenting where educational content serves as development for the children and is always assumed to have a positive influence.

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[30] Interview with "Jane," an anonymous mother, June 1, 2017.

[31] Interview with "Violet," an anonymous mother, June 1, 2017.

Gender loomed large in parents' ambivalent responses, and qualms about fantasy and romance implicitly referenced gender as well. None of these parents, including Violet, indicated that they had banned any contact with Princesses; most let hteir children play with Disney Princess toys and watch their films, but they attempted to mitigate their own fears in raising well-adapted girls by diversifying their children's media diets, hoping that moderation would mitigate the influence of the Disney Princess franchised intertexts in their children's lives.

Acceptance

Parents who "accepted" the Princess identity either took a laissez-faire approach to media culture exposure or had "given up" on fighting the Princess craze and tried to build a case for its potential value to their children. Both types of responses privileged their children's joy and agency, following the "happy now and successful later" model of parenting culture.[32] Mom Sandra is a mother of four girls, who at the time of her interview spanned ages 5 to 10. Her simultaneous mix of deft and precise household management and lightheartedness resulted in an environment where her daughters had room to explore within a highly structured world. Sandra's reaction to princess-dom and princess play seemed easygoing: "Whatever makes you feel awesome about the day, just do it. Whether that's dressing up as a princess or digging in the dirt. Whatever makes you feel like you're living your day to its fullest."[33] Sandra, in particular, valued her children's multi-gendered interests. She was happy with her kids expressing themselves and exploring their interests as a part of learning and trying different things. In her house, media use was highly restricted in comparison to other families: “We have a firm set of screen time rules, and they have a list of things that they need to accomplish or engage in or do before they can gain access to media of their choosing.” Sandra’s list was exhaustive and active, including things like playing with siblings, making music, reading a book, and doing math exercises. Each item had a minimum time requirement—usually 20 minutes—and could easily take up more than a day’s activities. Sandra admitted this was intentional and that sometimes she would let her daughters watch a show while she was making dinner, regardless of whether they’d completed their lists. And if they completed the tasks, she reasoned that they’d had a fulfilling day. With this structured list in place, Sandra indicated that her children had a lot of freedom in choosing the media they would watch. For her, Disney Princesses were just tiny parts of her children’s lives, and she believed her children were media literate and politically literate enough to understand the pitfalls of Princesses on their own.

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[32] Nichols et al, "The 'Good Parent," 73.

[33] Interview with "Sandra," an anonymous mother, July 7, 2016.

For many parents like Sandra, the quantity of media consumption was more important than quality, so Disney Princesses were acceptable in moderation when they served a particular function. Among the many fears in parenting discourses, “screen time” is a dominant way doctors suggest parents try to mitigate the accessibility and lure of media and manage the development of their children. With parents I spoke with, kids’ media provided necessary distraction and motivation during the day-to-day operations of family life, but it was also a temptation—like sugar and “bad” toys—to be avoided. One dad, Joseph, followed recommendations of parenting magazines and blogs by restricting screen time. He explained, though, that Princesses had a pragmatic role in his parenting too:

> She likes Elsa from *Frozen*. One thing about *Frozen* is Princess Anna and Elsa have their hair braided. So of course, “Oh, would you like your hair to be braided?” “If you want,

> we can braid your hair" because if we go to swimming we [sic] don't tie her hair so the hair goes all in her face so we'll reference those princesses and how they do their hair and we can braid it "while you watch the 'Let It Go' song."[34]

Joseph's parenting trick shows how parents use children's desire to consume Disney Princess media to get children to perform everyday tasks, and pay less attention to gendered social development.

Other parents' acceptance looked more like a surrender to a force greater than them. One mother, Kristin, told me when explaining her daughter's obsession with Disney Princesses: "I thought I would have a lot more control. I thought it would be a lot more nurture [sic]. But [my daughter] came out being a girly girl." Kristin herself presented as very feminine with perfectly applied makeup and styled hair during an early-morning FaceTime interview. However, her parenting instinct may still have been to avoid overtly feminine toys and texts.

For Molly, giving in was about letting her daughter enjoy herself, but she did so with reservations:

> You know, I'd rather her watch movies where the female character isn't the weaker sex or has to dress a certain way or wear her makeup. I'd rather her not be into that. But, it's pretty hard…like if there's a little girl that's so into that, it's pretty hard to fight. I don't think it's worth the fight…. I'm not going to sit her down and explain to a two-year-old the evils behind all of that. It's not my battle to fight. As she gets older, we'll work with…we'll talk about all those same issues.[35]

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[34] Interview with "Joseph," an anonymous father, July 22, 2016.

[35] Interview with "Molly."

In Molly's case, the prevalence of the Disney Princess franchise and the joy it brought her daughter was not worth resisting. Molly expressed distaste for some of the gender stereotypes Princesses present but was much more concerned with violence than gender stereotyping. Of course, these grand societal concerns are interconnected—sexual violence and domestic violence, for example—but Molly was upset at the time by the ongoing terror attacks and mass shootings of 2016 and gender stereotyping felt like a lesser evil to her at that moment.

For Jane, keeping the Disney Princess away from her children would make it into a forbidden and exciting object, as she noted was the case for her friends' child. She was not particularly interested in or excited about Disney Princesses, but her daughters were very invested, and Jane didn't try to diminish their interest. She sought out other texts, like a Disney Princess-influenced princess book called, *Princesses on the Run,* where a troupe of princesses leave their castle-bound lives and start businesses. She also promoted "classic" characters like Madeline and Amelia Bedelia.

> I feel like the Princess thing is sort of a – if I could go back to when [my older daughter] was born – I probably would've been one of those parents that says, 'I'm not going to expose my kids to that at all.' It felt sort of inevitable after a while, especially since we had two girls. I have friends with young girls, and they have been trying really hard not to let them. I feel like that makes them get even more into it. I don't know. I don't have multiple examples of that. I'm just thinking of one four-year-old girl. If the girls come over here, any sort of dress-up dress – something that her parents won't buy her – she just lights up, and it's like 'This is what I've been waiting for my whole life!'[36]

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[36] Interview with "Jane."

While Jane tried to steer her daughters toward what she thought were more empowering feminine characters, she clearly saw Princesses resistance as a kind of depravation—where children's joy worked in direct opposition to parental taste. Therefore, she privileged the joy she saw in her own daughters and reveled in the bliss the neighbor child experienced.

Mom Franny also saw princesses as an inevitable part of childhood. Perhaps in part because her daughters weren't interested in Princesses, she was very relaxed about their influence:

> I think they're fine as long as they... I mean I don't want to idolize, "I'm a woman, and I need a man to..." that sort of thing. But I think that's one reason that I like Moana so much. It's a strong individual who goes out and does what she wants to do for herself and her village. But I don't think they're bad. I'm not one of those people who says I'm not going to let my daughter watch Cinderella. It's part of being a kid watching those things.[37]

As a family, Franny and her family consumed Disney movies and had lots of Princess toys that their cousins sent them. However, the kids didn't play much with those toys or dress up as Princesses. The Princesses were just one group of texts they were familiar with and existed alongside other toys and media.

Finally, some parents had accepted the Disney Princesses because of meeting the characters at Disney World or Disneyland. Two parents remarked on their daughters' experiences. Mom Chelsea had a Princess-obsessed daughter, but she did not like Disney Princesses. She disliked the saturation of Disney products in the kids' toy market, the accumulation of cheap and flimsy consumer products, and the gender politics of Princesses.

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[37] Interview with "Franny," anonymous mother, June 8, 2017.

However, she couldn’t help but fall in love with a memory of visiting Disney World with her daughter:

> When she was 4, we went to Disney World just for like the day… It was off-season, so the lines weren’t bad, and she wanted to meet the Princesses. So, we went in the tent and she started hopping up and down and like I’ve never ever…and like the woman in front of me started crying because she was so excited. And when we went around the corner, it was the Princess she wanted….And she was there, and she got her picture taken with her and like I was so happy for her. I was genuinely happy for her. Cuz she was so, like…Imagine thinking this is real. She thought it was real. And that was crazy. That was so nice.[38]

Dad Liam was not as averse to Princesses in comparison to Chelsea, but he did say he and his wife hoped to avoid princess culture—"We were like, ‘Aaaaaaa! Never princesses!’” Despite this, he also valued the role Princess characters play in his daughter’s life, especially when they visited Disney parks:

> We’ve visited Disney and she’s met the Princesses and all of that stuff. […] It’s hard for grownups to remember what magical experiences the characters are. Because when you think about Disney World and Disneyland, you think about the rides. But for little kids it’s about meeting the characters. And so, that experience and seeing that joy, it’s priceless. It’s the most beautiful thing to see…When we’ve visited Disneyworld, one of her favorite things is to talk to the Princesses…She’ll talk to them about her life and

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[38] Interview with “Chelsea.”

> things that have nothing to do with Princesses. […] Most of the people who play these parts are very kind and so they'll humor her, which is ultimately what you want.[39]

Liam's response is not just about the experience his daughter had with Princesses. It is also a reminder that the public discourse around Princesses—their bad influence as overtly feminine and sexualized characters who wait for a man—creates guilt and shame for parents who then must actively negotiate the presence of Princesses in their children's lives. Even parents who did not object to Disney Princesses—and I suspect Liam's initial distaste for Princesses was superficial—played the part of the worried parent because of the social scrutiny parents face. Regardless, most parents felt that Disney Princesses were unavoidable, and their children's fandom was mostly out of their control. Many tried to put aside their misgivings or constructed potentially positive influences Princesses played in their children's lives.

Active Support

Parents who liked Disney Princesses came from multiple political perspectives. Most felt that play was an imaginative and empowering act and saw Princess play within that framework, whether they believed their children were following or challenging traditional feminine performances. They also saw Princesses as a way of preserving innocence and imagination, whether that meant Disney Princesses offered freedom from gender dichotomies and created imaginative play opportunities beyond real-world inequities or whether femininity was a valued form of expression. The latter thought was a rare sentiment in my interviews. Only two moms prized femininity as an unequivocally positive trait. Their perspectives would likely be perceived as more conservative, but this was not the case for both. These parents had a series of rationales for supporting femininity.

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[39] Interview with "Chelsea"; Interview with "Liam," anonymous father, June 27, 2016.

Girl power and empowerment

Some parents used girl power rhetoric, feeling their daughters could explore and be empowered by grabbing at different gender representations and exploring their identity as individuals:

> Liam: But at this age, what's really interesting is when [my daughter] plays with her princesses, she's not thinking about heteronormative gender. The Princesses are a super team of best friends who go on amazing adventures...She's not limited to the script that the movies have. Instead, these are people that she knows and relates to and their adventures can be anything.[40]
>
> Karen: She doesn't play the Sleeping Beauty or "come and rescue me." She's like "I'm Elsa and I'm going to freeze you." […] So that's the kind of princess phase we go through. Not the like waiting for a prince to save her. She has no interest in that and doesn't even talk about it…She has every *Frozen* costume made and although we have other Princess dresses that we got from the Disney Store…and they like to wear those, and they play, but they don't really play princesses. They just like to put the dresses on and shoot each other with water guns. So, the princess things never really caught on in our house except for *Frozen*. They have the movies, but they never really seem to…they like *Maleficent*, the new one that came out with Angelina Jolie. They were obsessed with that movie. And now they want to be Maleficent for Halloween.. [41]

Both parents saw Princess play as potentially empowering. For Liam in the first quote, Princesses could present friendship rather than romance. Interestingly, this has been part of Disney's changing strategies in the Princess brand since 2009. What Liam observed is common to children's play and reflected in the interviewee responses and the classroom observation I conducted. Children will use toys and characters in their own storylines and according to their own cultural values. If friendships are central in a child's life, they may use that as a play plot. Disney's investment in privileging friends and family over romance may reflect the culture of children, but it also caters to parents' concerns that their daughters may overemphasize romance and male protectors in their lives.

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[40] Interview with "Liam."

[41] Interview with "Karen," anonymous mother, August 30, 2016.

Karen's quote combines themes of girl power and postfeminism. Girls in dresses with water guns mixes playful masculine violence with cute, sexy feminine dress. In both parents' accounts, Princesses are tools in their daughters' toolbox—something picked up and used to according to the persons needs and wants. It is important to these parents, though, that such play moves outside the boundaries of traditional femininity. Their belief in their children's agency is not misdirected, but their emphasis on it speaks to parental anxieties—that their children's play must work against femininity to be agential and empowering.

Similarly, some parents saw the new Disney Princesses as potential role models for children's social development:

> I want my girls to be independent. I think that is a big thing for me. Independent and think for themselves. Like I said at the beginning, she is a follower and we've had those conversations about thinking for yourself. I think that's a definite negative for them. And Moana is very strong and independent. Elsa is kind of stubborn.[42]

Many parents supported the kinds of changes that had recently taken place in the Disney Princess brand. They frequently mentioned Elsa and Moana, but also sometimes Merida of *Brave* and occasionally Mulan.

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[42] Interview with "Anna," anonymous mother, June 8, 2017.

Girls just wanna have fun: entertainment and innocence

Some parents were supportive of Disney Princesses, dismissing or minimizing the importance of gender inequities in their children's' lives. These parents would pay some lip service to gender stereotypes as a social problem, or knowledge of the fact that it is considered a social problem but seemed either more ambivalent about such claims or more dismissive public discourses in the private space. These parents often pointed to physical beauty and girls' expression of beauty and confidence as positive. Some wanted a space where children could play in a space of absolute innocence where concerns and worry did not exist:

> Megan: I think as a female, you always kind of want your daughter to want to dress up and feel pretty in pretty dresses and things like that. I think the nice thing is that the Princesses nowadays is… [sic] they're showing them to be a little more strong [sic], both in physical strength and emotional strength. And I think that's really healthy. Not that it's ever really concerned me, but the one thing obviously about raising a girl or a woman is that you want them to be strong as well as feel pretty and all those things—want to dress up and paint their nails and things like that, but you also want them to realize that they're a strong person and that thing. So that's what I'm enjoying about the Princesses now, is that they can still dress up, twirl around and say, "I'm pretty" and stuff, but they can say, "Oh, look at Merida. She's shooting bows and arrows" so it's kind of a "you can do anything you want to do" kind of thing.[43]

A different kind of girl power, Megan valued choice or variety as empowerment. Femininity and masculinity were not problematic to her, but she anticipated judgment for her response and knew that current public debate favored some concern over gender. This is not the same as a re-writing of narratives, but instead having different kinds of narratives to choose from. Megan acknowledged that newer Disney Princesses embody strength—both of character and body. However, she said that this wasn't a serious concern for her. She wanted her daughter to feel pretty, and so much the better that kids also see girls' other strengths.

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[43] Interview with "Megan."

A couple of moms were more dismissive of and frustrated with recent discourses around Disney films dealing with sexual politics, whether geared toward gender or sexuality:

> Amy: I can see people's points when they have issues with them. I know the whole thing with *Frozen* was the whole true love thing like her sister was her actual true love rather her going after a guy to do it. I don't know. I get it, but they're also kids' movies and they don't have the comprehension to understand a lot of that stuff necessarily. So, for them to pick up on the fact that Belle is being held captive by the beast doesn't really register in them and to be honest, I think it's a little bit of a stretch – the Stockholm Syndrome kind of thing.… I mean, it's entertainment and that's really where I draw the line. I see what we do on a day-to-day basis and it influences our kids more than the movies we watch, especially at that age. Entertainment. That's really it. (Pause) I hope.[44]
>
> Ashley: I absolutely love that they came out with Princess Sofia. I love it because when the world is expecting people to grow up faster and faster and faster, they get exposed to things that I view are more advanced for their age. I love I [sic] provide an opportunity for my kids to just be innocent kids and just enjoy princess life... I feel like everything is getting drug into the politics of stuff and whether your views are one way or another, I feel like if Disney can remain more neutral…And again, I hope there's a happy medium

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[44] Interview with "Amy and Kevin," anonymous mother and father, May 27, 2017.

> so whether you feel super liberal or super conservative, you can just sit down for a family movie and enjoy as a family.[45]

Both moms were frustrated with what they perceived was an overreaction to the ideologies behind Disney films. They wanted their children to be free of these bigger conversations and from analyzing films at a young age. Both moms lived outside progressive cities but held more conservative views surrounding gender. Innocence was a common theme in conversations with parents, but political resistance was more pronounced in these responses. Amy thought children didn't understand these themes anyway while Ashley wanted to keep her kids from growing up faster.

Many parents, regardless of their political views, saw Disney as a company that made quality products. While some were more irritated with Disney's overt commercialism and consumption-motivated tactics or antiquated gender representations, they still saw Disney as worthwhile family entertainment. This seemed to in part influence parents' spectrum of feeling about the Disney Princesses. Many were resistant because of Disney's past and present efforts to sell a certain image of girlhood to children while others thought these media texts offered a space for kids to explore or take refuge. This kind of nuance is also relevant not just in parents' perceptions of the brand, but also in how children and families take up the Princess as a focus of play.

Boy Power?: gender-bending empowerment for boys

Parents I spoke with typically encouraged their sons' exploration of Princess culture as defying gender dichotomies:

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[45] Interview with "Ashley," anonymous mother, May 30, 2017.

> We were at Target picking out Band-Aids for him and there was Paw Patrol and there were these Princesses and he goes, "Momma, that's Ariel!" And I said, "Yeah, that is Ariel!" And He said, "I want Ariel Band-Aids." And I said, "Absolutely! You can have Ariel Band-Aids." So, there's a recognition […] of these characters and why one appeals to them over the other. He picked the Ariel Band-Aids over the Paw Patrol and I was like, "Good for you."[46]

> And on the other hand, with my son, it's nice for him to see that as well…He can look and see that women are just as strong as men are and I think that will be…that's a good lesson for all children to have. He likes the Princesses too. He actually likes to dress up and do all that. I think it's fun. It's just fun as a woman [laughs] to dress your kids up. [47]

Most parents who commented on their son's interest in Princesses were moms, with one exception. Parents were invested in generating respect for women and girls and did so through encouraging their sons' interesting in feminine dress-up and accessories. According to them, boys were most invested in Elsa, which coincided with my interviews with young kids. Elsa's superpowers were a strong draw for boys—though dressing like Elsa and singing like Elsa were also essential playtime activities.

Parents Aida and Jacob described how their son's love of Elsa manifested: "And he did dress like a Disney Princess for Halloween last year. He dressed as Elsa. She's a queen. I just have to point out, she's a queen [laughs]. *Frozen* played really big in his toddler years. There's still some remnants of that. He holds onto that a little bit."[48] When asked whether Elsa dress-up came with any performance, Aida said: “Oh god, yeah. When he gets into character, we can't even address him as anything [else]…He liked freezing things and shooting the ice out of his hands and things like that. The powers. The superhero aspect of it, almost. He would go into his room and I would have to sit on the other side of the door and be Anna.”[49]

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[46] Interview with "Abra," anonymous mother, August 14, 2016.

[47] Interview with "Megan."

[48] Interview with "Jacob and Aida," anonymous father and mother, July 13, 2016.

One mom explained her son’s love and familiarity with various Disney Princesses, as well as Disney Junior princess characters:

> Disney Junior has a new princess show, *Elena of Avalor*. So he wants to watch that all the time right now because it’s new and he hasn’t seen it as much so that’s what he likes right now….So there’s a sword-fighting scene that she does in one of the trailers, and now it’s his mission to figure out which episode that’s going to be on, so he can see her do that…. They watched Pocahontas. They’ve watched Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty […]. They…they know them. You know the Tinker Bell movies that they’ve done? [My son] could tell you the plot of every single one of them…. They will watch a “girl” show just as readily as they watch a “boy” show. […] That does not bother them at all” (28)

This mom’s response offered a few important points about gender and the Disney Princesses. First, like Elsa, Elena is adventurous, physical, and active in her storyline. These are not exclusively male traits but are historically masculine ones in media narratives. This shift toward active female roles may be inviting boys into female-led Disney narratives. In addition, this mom indicated that her sons were well-versed in Disney Princess films and unashamed of that interest. She did, however, indicate that she was worried about what kind of media was available once they “aged out” of Disney Junior and whether shows would became more separated by gender. She also noted that her son did not have any interest in superheroes until he heard about Batman from friends as kindergarten. It is true that children's peer cultures become incredibly influential in children's lives, much to the frustration of some parents. This, in addition to the devaluing of feminine cultures in general, can divide children into gendered groups, and from one another.

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[49] Interview with “Jacob and Aida.”

Even for boys who weren't very interested in Princesses, some parents were happy when their sons showed any interest in girls' toys and properties. Abra stated:

> I think in this society we're so quick to assign girls should watch this show and boys should watch this show and some that cross over. In our house, it's whatever he wants, we're not necessarily not showing him Princess movies. And at the same time if it's something that came up and he'd watch it we have absolutely no problem with it. We're trying not to do too many assigned gender differences, but it still happens. If he was interested in watching the Princess stuff—and he's watched a couple of episodes of *Sofia the First* and has had no interest—so I find that interesting as well.[50]

Many mothers fostered their sons' interest in girl-led narratives. Some reported that this didn't work or ended quickly. Mothers mentioned the Tinker Bell movies as narratives boys enjoyed but aged out of.[51] Boys' interest in princesses and Disney Princesses shows how middle-class parents perceive meaning-making during play. Much like the parents who praised their daughters for speaking against traditional gender scripts when consuming Disney Princess texts, they see boys' consumption of Disney Princesses as similarly defying gender norms. This follows a middle-class ideal of parenting children reflexively[52] where parents use their culture knowledge to teach children to challenge social norms that may limit them in adulthood. While gender equity is not always at the forefront of parents’ minds, it is one topic currently occupying the anxious minds of many.

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[50] Interview with "Abra."

[51] Interview with "Rebecca," anonymous mother, August 2, 2016.

[52] Val Gillies, "Raising the 'Meritocracy:' Parenting and the Individualization of Social Class," *Sociology* 39, no. 5 (2005): 835-853.

Parents who supports Disney Princesses had various reasons for doing so. Some believed Princesses might be an empowering experience for girls and boys because they saw children challenging gender norms—though boys were allowed to engage in dress-up without suspicion while often girls’ dress-up play was carefully negotiated in parents’ responses. Others thought play and entertainment were intrinsically empowering and fun and didn’t want to attach political meaning to gendered play. Regardless of their place of the spectrum of feeling, parents’ responses revealed their knowledge of public discourse surrounding Princesses and their learned responsibility to react to public opinion as parents having to defend countless child-rearing choices to themselves and others. Despite making these choices, parents were mostly ambivalent about consuming Disney Princess texts, reflective of anxieties around raising girls and reacting to the public discourses surrounding the franchise.

Kids’ Play: Sharing Culture

Children's play with Disney Princess both amplifies and assuages parents fears about the brand’s influence over their children's gender performance and identity. Parents who expressed ambivalence about the brand tend to be suspicious of children’s play practices. Parents who actively supported the brand saw the imaginative possibilities in children’ play. Both perspectives reflect prevailing rhetorics of play that Brian Sutton-Smith explores in his book *The Ambiguity of Play*.[53] Sutton-Smith reveals in this book and in his later reflection on his own career[54] that the practices and outcomes of play frequently defy fixed meanings. Therefore, parenting discourses that ask parents to focus on play outcomes are antithetical to the sometimes-opaque meanings of children's play.

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[53] Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

Karen Wohlend's initial premise in her three articles on Princesses and play is that media texts serve as *identity texts*[55], meaning that children's personal and social experiences inform how they productively consume media icons. Wohlend's claims build on reception theory in media studies, specifically Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model where texts are produced with certain meanings in mind and audiences interpret those texts based on their own perspectives and experiences. David Morley and Charlotte Brunsdon studied audience reception of the BBC's *Nationwide* program to better understand how the ideologies of a program intended for the entire British public might be interpreted differently by people of varying socioeconomic backgrounds.[56] Perhaps unsurprisingly, Morley's analysis[57] showed that people's background deeply influenced people's reception of the program, though some amount of variance existed within groups.

Despite parents' concerns that Disney Princesses might be teaching their daughters the wrong values, it is more likely that children's experiences at home and at school and their own perceptions of themselves play the larger role and Princesses become one of the prevalent media icons children use to share culture.[58] This does not mean that Disney producers' encoding, or what Wohlend calls *anticipated identities*, do not play a role. Patriarchal and misogynistic ideologies pervade cultural texts, including Disney Princesses. However, my interviews with children show them using Princesses as a way of performing expertise and knowledge and build social connections.

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[54] Brian Sutton-Smith, "Play Theory: A Personal Journey and New Thoughts," *American Journal of Play*, 1, no. 1 (Summer 2008): 80-123.

[55] Wohlend, "Damsels in Discourse."

[56] Charlotte Brunsdon and David Morley, *Everyday Television: 'Nationwide'* (London: British Film Institute, 1978).

[57] David Morley, *The* Nationwide *Audience: Structure and Decoding* (London: British Film Institute, 1980).

Taking Sutton-Smith's terminology, the following observations and conversations with children and parents are just a "preliminary inquiry" and not a "final resolution" about how children consume Disney Princesses. I used multimodal methods of interviewing—such as drawing, observation, speaking, looking at pictures, and acting—because my interviewees ranged age 2 to 10.[59] What is clear below is that children share culture in their consumption of Disney Princesses. The variability and flexibility in their reception of these characters is reflective of an audience group learning how to share culture: what messages behaviors, and performances elicit affirming responses from themselves, their peers and adults in their lives.

The Princess I.D. Game: "Is This a Princess?"

Disney's reconfiguration of Disney's Princess characters during and after the 1990s Renaissance has been influenced by third-wave feminist discourses and calls for racial and gender diversity. As a result, the lineup of characters in the brand shows both visual nuances in gender performance and significant racial fissures. As discussed in the previous chapter, some Princesses are often decked in formal gowns and tiaras, others—frequently Princesses of color—

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[58] Livingstone, *Young People and New Media*; Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993); Wohlend, "Damsels in Discourse"; David Buckingham, "Selling Childhood? Children and Consumer Culture," *Journal of Children and Media* 1, no. 1 (2007): 15-24.

[59] Jóhanna Einarsdóttir, "Research with Children: Methodological and Ethical Challenges," *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 15, no. 2 (June 2007): 197-211.

are dressed less opulently. Many studies of Disney Princesses presented in the introduction speak eloquently to the identity politics of the characters and what that says about the centrality of whiteness and feminine expectations in American and Western cultures. To better understand possible discrepancies between the visual production of segregation by Disney and discourses of anxiety around parental curation of children's playthings and the reception of such playthings by children, I asked children which characters fit in their definition of "princess" and which did not. By doing this I hoped to understand how children themselves conceive the princess as the character identity and where such definitions align with and challenge public discourse.

I asked 26 children between the ages of 3 and 9 to decide whether images on cards I displayed to them were princesses or not. I did not ask kids to specify whether the princesses on the cards were Disney Princesses though many would offer this information. The reason I did not ask about Disney Princesses was due to the fact that many younger children are still encountering these characters and not all of them have a great awareness of the franchise's rationale and breadth—much like their adult counterparts.

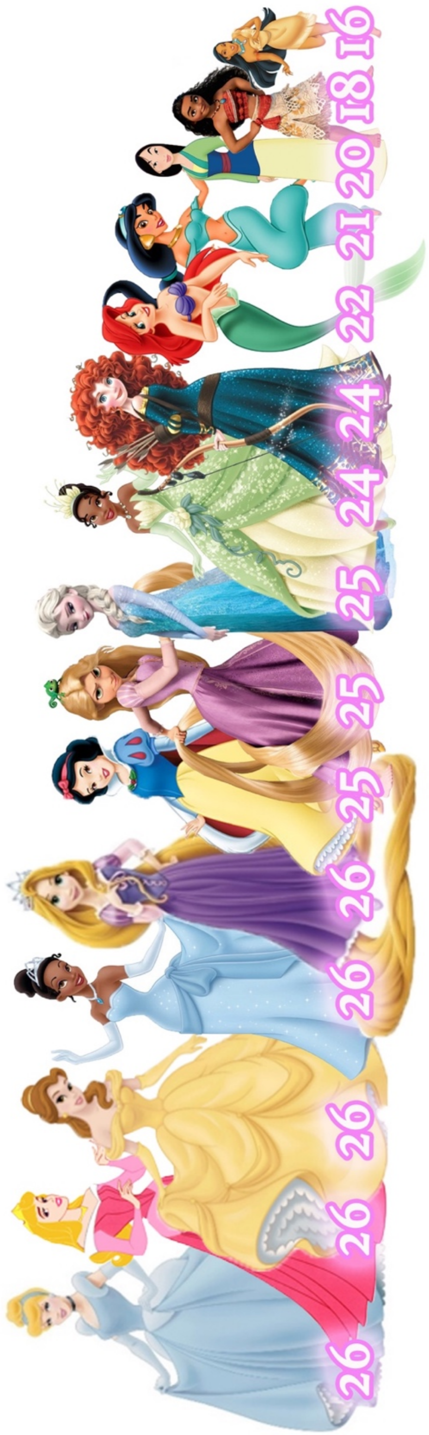
I included all of the Disney Princesses, Elsa of *Frozen*, two pictures of Latina preschool TV character Dora the Explorer—one where Dora wears a flowery skirt and one where she wears her classic shorts and T-shirt exploring outfit, a Medieval-styled drawing of a white woman in a long gown with long, blond hair, a photo of a white Bratz doll in a mini skirt, and a drawing of the popular character Pinkalicious in a tutu, fairy wings, crown, and carrying a wand. The characters who were not Disney Princesses are similarly popular in the preschool age group. I included Moana and Elsa because, at the time, neither were officially Disney Princesses, but some may associate them with the Princess franchise.

The reasoning behind this method was two-fold. On the one hand, I wanted to determine how important feminine dress was in identifying princesses, which would in some cases correlate with the ethnicity of Disney Princesses. Second, I wanted to assess whether children's knowledge of media characters and franchises correlated with Disney's loose definition of "princess" in the current P/princess ethos where characters like Elsa and Moana are treated as peers of the Disney Princesses.

The study only excluded children by age; children ages 10 and older were not included both because children at these ages have generally moved away from performing Disney Princess fandom publicly. The children interviewed with cards were mostly girls (19 of 26). Of those girls, most were white, with one African American girl and three Asian American girls. 11 children were students at a university preschool center and the rest were children in family interviews. All interviewees and parents opted into the study on their own and more intentional outreach would need to be conducted to diversify the gender, race, and class representation of the study.

As expected, some results followed similar logic to choices the Walt Disney Company has made in branding the Disney Princess. However, children also strayed or built their own reasoning in defining the term "princess." In the larger sample, some children were not familiar with Disney Princesses, only the idea of a princess. Others were outright fans of the franchise and enjoyed performing their expertise. Older children, whether fans or not, often recalled details from film narratives, while younger children would often use visual cues or their knowledge of Disney Princesses by appearance to identify characters.

Children typically referenced dresses, crowns, veils, and other accessories as characteristics of a princess. However, these distinctions did not always bear out when children identified princesses. For example, Snow White was generally identified as a princess even though the picture I used did not have a crown or veil.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The Princess I.D. Rankings[60]

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[60] I created this infographic using available online images from the following sources: "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937)," Animation Screencaps, accessed September 25, 2016,

Every child in the study identified Cinderella, Belle, Aurora, Rapunzel with a crown, and Tiana in her blue dress as princesses. Snow White, Rapunzel without her crown, Elsa, Tiana in her green dress, and Merida were also overwhelmingly identified as princesses, all falling within the range of 24 to 25 "yeses" to the question. Some children noted the absence of a crown as reasons for not identifying some of these characters as princesses, while other children could not explain their "no" choice.

A more significant drop started at Ariel and Jasmine, whose anatomy and dress (respectively) threw off children who were less knowledgeable about Disney Princesses. Because Ariel is a mermaid and Jasmine wears shalwar (loose, billowy pants traditional to contemporary and ancient Muslim and Arabic cultures), some children felt they were not princesses—because,

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https://animationscreencaps.com/snow-white-and-the-seven-dwarfs-1937/36/#box-1/118/snow-white-disneyscreencaps.com-6418.jpg?strip=all; "Mix In A Fix: Little Mix Star Jade Thirlwall in Talks to Play Princess Jasmine in Guy Ritchie's Live-action Aladdin Movie," *The Sun*, May 22, 2017, accessed September 25, 2016, https://www.thesun.co.uk/tvandshowbiz/3609855/little-mix-star-jade-thirwall-aladdin-shortlist/; "Walt Disney, Jr.," The Disney Wiki, accessed September 25, 2016, https://disney.fandom.com/wiki/User:Walt_Disney%2C_Jr; Lexi Nisita, "The Disturbing Anatomy Of A Disney Princess," *Refinery29*, June 5, 2013, https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2013/06/47976/disney-princess-drawing-anatomy; "Pocahontas/Galley," The Disney Wiki, accessed September 25, 2016, https://disney.fandom.com/wiki/Pocahontas_%28character%29/Gallery; "Belle," The Disney Wiki, accessed September 25, 2016, https://disney.fandom.com/wiki/Belle; "Fa Mulan," The Disney Wiki, accessed September 25, 2016, https://disney.fandom.com/wiki/Fa_Mulan; "Tiana/Gallery," The Disney Wiki, accessed September 25, 2016, https://disney.fandom.com/wiki/Tiana/Gallery; "Disney Princess," The Disney Wiki, accessed September 25, 2016, https://disney.fandom.com/wiki/Disney_Princess; "Disney Heroines," The Disney Wiki, accessed September 25, 2016, https://disney.fandom.com/wiki/Category:Heroines; "Krystal3012," The Disney Wiki, accessed September 25, 2016, https://disney.fandom.com/wiki/User:Krystal3012; "Princess Merida/Gallery," The Disney Wiki, accessed September 25, 2016, https://disney.fandom.com/wiki/Princess_Merida/Gallery; PixieHollowGirl5, The Disney Wiki, accessed September 25, 2016, https://disney.fandom.com/wiki/User:PixieHollowGirl5; "Moana Waialiki," The Disney Wiki, accessed November 15, 2016, https://disney.fandom.com/wiki/Moana_Waialiki.

as most children responded—princesses wear dresses and skirts. At this level, though, children used their experiences more explicitly to make their choices:

Interviewer: And why, Cait, is [Ariel] not a princess?

Cait (age 4): Because it's a mermaid.

Interviewer: Because it's a mermaid. Sure.

Alice (age 6): I say it's 'yes' because Eric is a prince and she gets married to him[61].

The two sisters above, Cait and Alice, exemplify the different sources of knowledge children drew from in interviews. Alice retained the plot of *The Little Mermaid* while her sister Cait looked to visual markers to identify princesses: dresses and crowns.

After these groupings, the table shows a steady decline by 1-2 points: Mulan received 20 votes, Moana received 18, and Pocahontas received 16. Mulan received many yes votes from kids who thought her dress counted as important princess criteria. Others said no without reasoning. In looking at individual responses, kids who could name multiple Disney Princesses didn't recognize Mulan as a Princess or princess.

Moana came next. Many children had recently seen *Moana* and some struggled to decide if her status as a Disney character and a heroine made her a princess, or if her clothes and assertions in the narrative meant she was not a princess. I did get a few children saying, "That's a Moana" regardless of whether that was a yes or no vote identifying Moana as a princess. Some of this can be chalked up to the recency of *Moana* and thus, children treated her as an original character with no secondary identity beyond her film. Notably, two sets of sisters from two different interviews could not figure out whether Moana fit the bill of princess. One pair, age eight and five noted that Moana herself said she was not a princess in the movie, but these sisters disagreed on whether this was a ruse on the character's part or a fact of the narrative. Some would call Moana a princess simply because it seemed to them that all Disney heroines were. Others recognized and referred to the moment in the film Moana where the titular character claims that she is not a princess. Others still recognized Moana as singular and unique in the Disney category and not necessarily a princess.

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[61] Interview with "Jane," "Alice," and "Cait," anonymous mother and daughters, June 1, 2017.

Maddie (8): She says she's not a princess

Interviewer: Is this a princess?

Maddie (8): Yes. She is, but she says she isn't.

Gwen (5): That's Moana!

Interviewer: It's Moana! Why do you think she says she isn't?

Gwen (5): Because she doesn't want to marry and she's hiding in the village.[62]

Another family wasn't sure if just being a girl made you a princess or if you had to be married to royalty.

Mom: How come Moana isn't a princess?

Cait (4): Because her dad doesn't marry her.

Mom: Oh (laughs). Her dad doesn't make her get married. Do you think princesses have to get married to be princesses?

Alice (6): No.

Interviewer: And why do you think this was a princess?

Alice (6): Because in my Disney book mostly all the girls in there are princesses.[63]

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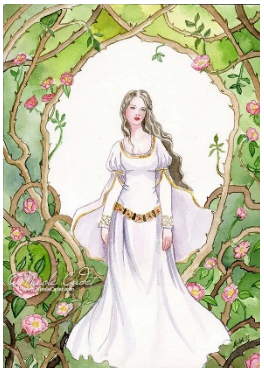
[62] Interview with "Ashley," "Maddie," and "Gwen," anonymous mother and daughters, May 30, 2017.

[63] Interview with "Jane," "Alice," and "Cait."

Children used their expertise as audiences and tackled the same issues adults, and scholars studying Disney Princesses, still deal with. Is Moana a Princess if she says she isn't, but then appears in *Wreck It Ralph* as a Princess? In terms of the film narratives, we may put Moana in a similar category as Pocahontas. They are both girls/young women in positions of relative power in their communities. They are both chief's daughters. Pocahontas, however, was retroactively added to the princess franchise when it was first created in the year 2000 and stores have not featured her prominently on merchandise. Most kids cited her clothing as reason for excluding Pocahontas from the princess term. Some children who identified Pocahontas as a princess knew the franchise very well and therefore had seen Pocahontas as a Disney Princess. It's likely that Mulan and Pocahontas's fewer votes are also due to relative absence from retail shelves.

However, since the number of "yes" votes for Pocahontas and Mulan are similar to Moana's, we could conclude that Disney's attempts at "authenticity" when it comes to many non-white characters—and in particular in what would historically by constructed as "exotic" characters to Western eyes—excludes Pocahontas and Mulan from the princess group. By contrast, most kids would identify Jasmine and Tiana as princesses, the two other princesses of color. Some of this is due to recognition of the characters by children who would either have recently watched these films or would see these characters in stores along with other Disney princesses, but some of it is likely due to the glamorized depictions of these characters, decked in formal costuming and wearing tiaras and head pieces. A combination of non-Western, non-royal costuming, racial identity, and scarcity in the retail market may help to explain why Mulan and Pocahontas did not get as many positive identifications. For Moana, children actively negotiated the film text to try and ascertain Moana's identity.

At virtually the same level as Pocahontas was a rendering of Sleeping Beauty, which many kids said was not a princess, but some said was. This was an outlier because it was a drawing of a woman with more realistic, if slender, proportions and likely threw kids off because she was not a cartoon. Future studies should either stay with the animated medium or include more images of non-cartoon characters so that children have more opportunities to include or exclude drawings. Some kids would call her a "woman" or "just a lady" rather than a princess. Many, though, stuck to the dress and hair rationale and decided she was a princess. One child even said she was a princess, but not a *Disney* Princess.



A rendering of Briar Rose (a version of Sleeping Beauty) by Nicole Cadet[64]

Characters who were more likely *not* to be identified as princesses included book character Pinkalicious, a white Bratz doll, and TV franchise star Dora in two manifestations—one of the original Dora in her shorts and T-shirt and the other was a more feminine Dora in a flowery tunic and leggings. Many children knew these characters and knew they were not princesses. Even kids who did not know them often said they were not princesses. With

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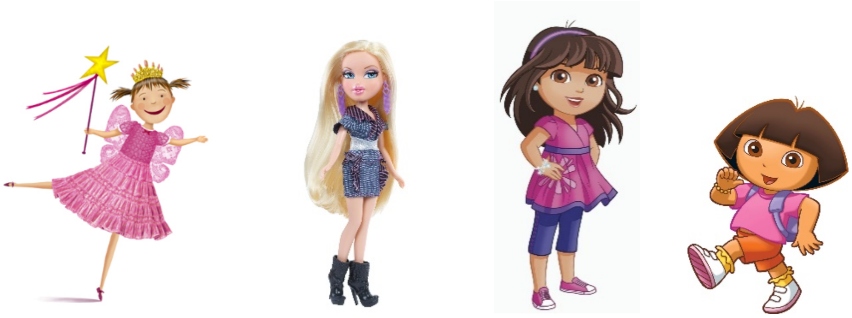
[64] Nicole Cadet, "Briar Rose," Accessed October 10, 2016, https://www.artstation.com/artwork/4eL21.

Pinkalicious, some kids identified her as a fairy because of her wings. However, a few kids said Pinkalicious was a princess because she wore a crown and dress.

Most children were familiar with Dora and did not call either picture of her a princess. However, Dora with the flowery shirt got 4 votes and Dora in the T-shirt and shorts got 2. The two children who voted "yes" on both Dora's assumed all girls were princesses.



Popular girls' and children's characters, from left: Pinkalicious[65], a Bratz doll[66], Dora the Explorer[67], and Dora the Explorer.[68]

Children's identification of princesses showed their experience with branded characters—Disney Princesses, Dora the Explorer, and Bratz dolls—as well as the influence of visual gendering in determining whether a character was a princess of not. Some trends above potentially show how Disney has tailored the brand toward children's cultural knowledge since

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[65] Nina Joy Godlewksi, "'Pinkalicious' Series Headed to WGBH Television," *Boston* Globe, August 18, 2014, https://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2014/08/18/pinkalicious-series-headed-wgbh-television/AMjgDHn8wlv8tLmN7zQaxH/story.html.

[66] "Top Toys by Age Group," Parenting, accessed September 25, 2016, https://www.parenting.com/shop/top-toys/by-age-a1525457538.html.

[67] "Dora Márquez," Nickipedia, accessed October 14, 2016, https://nickelodeon.fandom.com/wiki/Dora_Márquez.

[68] "Dora Marquez.jpg," Dora the Explorer Wiki, accessed September 25, 2016, https://dora.fandom.com/wiki/File:Dora_Marquez.jpg.

2000. It's clear from the results above that clothes—especially formal or "dress-up" clothes are important in identifying princesses. While children mentioned crowns and veils, those seem less significant than ball gowns and sparkly dresses. Hyperfeminine dress and presentation seemed more intuitively "princess-y" to kids as they added together identifying features. For example, Mulan wears a dress, but the color and cut of the dress is relatively understated, and her hair is sleek and close to her body. She did not receive as many "yes" votes as Ariel and Jasmine, who do not even wear dresses. Nevertheless, many children called her a princess. But with characters like Pocahontas and the Bratz doll, long flowing hair was generally not enough to be considered a princess.

Children also exposed the same criticisms of the Disney Princess franchise in their overall ranking of characters that dominate public discourse. It is tempting to see race as significant to children's princess identification, but it is perhaps more accurate to say that, as I argued in Chapter 2 and children confirmed, the production of Princesses of color by Disney limits the extent to which audiences, including children, identify them as princesses. In the case of Tiana in *The Princess and the Frog*, the production team, and likely larger toy and consumer divisions of the company, made clear sartorial choices that would recommend Tiana as a princess. Her gown in the earlier part of the film is a more sparkly and bluer version of Cinderella's 1950 ball gown. These gowns are virtually identical in some promotional photos and dress-up clothes, though Cinderella's original gown in the film is a sparkling silver or grey. Nevertheless, Disney builds a clear line from Cinderella to Tiana in terms of the gown color and shape, in addition to their matching opera-length gloves. Tiana even wears a tiara in her film to confirm the royal association. This also explains the strong princess identification of Elsa, who is part of the P/princess ethos but not a Disney Princess. Her sartorial glamor and royal status made her a princess to many kids.

In general, the princess I.D. game tells us that the princess identity reinforces the production choices and critical reception of Disney Princesses. While appearance was important for identification (dresses, crowns, long hair, sparkles, etc.), kids' choices did not always align with these characteristics. Children's knowledge of characters was also a strong indicator of their choices. Those familiar with Disney Princesses, Dora the Explorer, and Pinkalicious were more confident in their identification of princesses. Interestingly, some kids working out the rationale behind the Disney Princess franchise revealed some skepticism of the franchise's logic. For instance, why is a mermaid a princess? Why is Pocahontas a princess? Many kids would know the characters because they'd seen them on merchandise or in branded books, but the lack of recognition surrounding Pocahontas and Mulan speaks to their limited availability and visibility in stores. Children's negotiation of Disney Princesses signals their expertise attained through cultural knowledge, but also their individual meaning-making skills. When children changed their minds or went against their original organizing principles to identify a certain character as a Princess, I could see how flexible their identifications were at this stage of life. While frustrating, this is indicative of play's ambiguity and how children's meaning-making can be difficult to decipher. It was only the patterns of choice among 26 children that reveals some consensus around what a princess means to kids.

Social Play

Another theme prevalent in the princess ID game was children's desire to get answers right. I assured them that in this game there weren't right answers. This would often help, but children were intent on showing their expertise *and* gaining my approval because social relationships and status influence how kids consume Disney Princesses. The characters are popular tools that helps children share culture and connect with peers and adults.

For some children, Princesses were one social tool to help gain acceptance. In a year-long (9-month school year) study in a preschool classroom, I encountered 2 and 3-year-olds of varying social and cognitive abilities. Some children's social and verbal abilities astounded me—a non-educator with substantive experience working with the age group as a caregiver. The experience offered a window into a thriving peer culture that I took part in—albeit conspicuously. From within the study I participated, we as the researchers performed a liminal identity. We were told to address the children at their physical level, to invite them to participate in drawing activities, to invite ourselves into playtime, and to avoid taking on a leadership role. This confused kids at first; they did not always understand or accept us as large children because they knew better. However, they would sometimes allow me to play and be a quasi-peer. I knew I was "in" when a fellow student excluded me from a game the same way she did another younger peer in the room. It was humbling to realize I could still feel rejection from a three-year old, despite knowing she'd likely change her mind in a few minutes.

It was here that I encountered a boy's adoption of the princess identity, not definitively as a gender-queer identity but as a social tool. This kid was initially a bit of a misfit in the class. Bigger than the other kids, prone to greater mood swings and emotional sensitivity, he would sometimes accidentally bump into kids or push them. He would have tantrums and struggle to follow the room rules—like not running or climbing. In a room of 2 and 3-year-olds, he was on the younger end and struggled to keep up with many of the kids.

A few months into the study, this boy started to play with a group of girls who often played together. It wasn't clear if teachers asked the girls to include him in playtime or if they did this on their own. Everyone in the group would put on a favorite princess clothing item—a tutu, flowing skirt, or dress—and role play off and on for the morning hours—sometimes attending balls and other times going on shopping errands. The boy chose a pink gown and opera-length white gloves as his daily costume. He would declare that he was a princess and would play along with the game his group was playing. Often, he would not take off his costume until it was time to play outside. Princess play for him did not come with a physical posture, like the lifted chin or queenly air that Aida and Jacob's son did, and some of his female peers adopted. He would dance with other kids and twirl like the girls. Sometimes they all sang together. One of the teachers told me his mom got him a princess dress for home—in solidarity with what she thought might be a greater desire to explore femininity. However, apparently, he showed no interest in that dress and only played princess at school.

This example represents an important role of icons like the Disney Princess. The Princess can be a tool children use to access social acceptance, status, and expertise—the way children might use a set of crayons to talk about their knowledge of colors, their favorite color(s), or as a way to join others in an activity. The Princess can be rich content for gender expression, whether stereotypical or rule-bending. But it can also be a means to an end and context plays a key role in children's relationships to icons and objects. This child's attachment to princesses could not be fully understood through my observation, but his performance of princess clearly provided him with status in a desired social circle at school. It is also important to note that while many of the parents and children I interviewed were amenable to non-binary gender expressions, Wohlend reminds us that "boys playing princesses represents a transgressive blurring of expected gender roles that can evoke vehement opposition from peers."[69] I did not see boys disciplining each other's performances in my observations or interviews, but two boys I interviewed were resistant to even discuss princesses one-on-one with me. One was incredibly nervous and wouldn't answer my questions about what a princess looks like or does. When I asked about whether he'd seen princesses before he stated that there was a princess blanket in class that another student brought in. He did not want to be associated even with the idea of a princess. I did get him to play the Princess card game, albeit with a concerned expression frozen on his face. The boys could have only been intimidated by the interview itself, but Wohlend's study reminds us that boys from a very young age can fear any association with femininity because of how it may affect their social status.

The roles of dress-up

Children used Disney Princesses flexibly in playtime, sometimes drawing from Disney film texts and other times using Disney Princess characters and costumes to play a different game. As mentioned earlier, children donned their self-identified "princess dresses" to signal to each other that it was time to play. Most often the dresses didn't play an important role in the game children played. Parents similarly recalled their daughters mixing Princess clothes with other games.

> Kristin: She definitely plays dress-up. We have a lot of dress-up clothes. So it ranges from…
>
> Sophie: Anna, Elsa…I do not like the Anna costume!

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[69] Karen Wohlend, 'Are You Guys Girls?': Boys, Identity Texts, and Disney Princess Play," *Journal of early Childhood Literacy*, 12, no. 1 (2011): 9.

> Kristin: You like the Elsa costume. And when you put them on, what do you do…A lot of times you'll put on the costumes, but you don't really play Princess necessary. Last time you were dressed up in costumes with a friend and you owned a store.…It isn't acting out the story most of the time.[70]

In this and earlier examples, Princess play is about dressing up as a signal for playtime and not strictly as an "identity text" the way that Karen Wohlend describes Princess play. Children put on dresses to instigate play with other or to transport themselves to a playful mental space.

Ambiguity meets anxiety: feminized play

Many girls and boys used Disney Princesses in a manner *anticipated* in part by Disney and traditions of girls' feminine play. Dress-up, singing, and dancing were common choices for kids, both girls and boys. Dress-up is sometimes a practice that involves playing the Princess character and other times simply a costume without a Princess narrative:

> She probably has about four Princess dresses. And she dresses as Cinderella the most. And she dressed her little brother as Cinderella at some point, so they were matching […] but he's into it. It depends on her mood and if a friend comes over, they'll dress as Princesses. And the most interesting thing to see is her adopt the mannerisms. When she dresses like a Princess, she'll behave like a Princess. She'll treat you…I don't know how to explain it. Her walk will become different. She'll behave as that character…. Interacting with the media that way I don't think is a necessarily bad thing. If anything, it just extends the media.[71]

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[70] Interview with "Kristin" and "Sophie."

[71] Interview with "Liam."

We see both a case of a child completely transforming herself into Cinderella, like Aida and Jacob’s son did as Elsa, and a situation where the child simply dresses up and moves on with whatever game is available. This kind of role playing and remixing of games and characters is common to kids. With adult fans of media characters, we may call this remixing or textual poaching,[72] but with kids, it is taken for granted as sometime children do instinctively, but perhaps it should still be seen as a complex set of negotiated meanings like the ones adult fans perform.

Such play is not always positive for parents, who, as explored above, deem certain play that girls use as problematic or troubling. Many girls I interviewed echoed the important role of beauty and self-maintenance associated with Disney Princesses—and really many girls’ toy lines. When I asked one preschooler what the princess in her drawing was doing, she said that princesses hold their dresses up because they want to look pretty.[73] Others would say they wanted to be their favorite Princess because “she’s so pretty.”[74] Others valued different characteristics. One girl talking about Belle said she admired the character’s strength: “I like that she’s so brave…she standed [sic] up for her beast and her father. She got caught by the beast, but he’s not really a beast. He’s a king. He got turned into a beast….And her turned him back to the king”.[75] I could not verify how recently this girl had seen *Beauty and the Beast*, but Belle’s perseverance and love for her friends and family clearly had an impact. Many scholars and nonacademic critics[76] would flag this reaction as dangerous for women—and I can't prove in this instance if they would be right or wrong about this child. Was it Belle's compulsion to fix damaged men that she loved, or simply her determination to save the day? One mom in particular was troubled with how her daughter played Princess:

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[72] Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

[73] Interview with “Del,” an anonymous preschool-aged girl, November 1, 2016.

[74] Interview with “Abigail,” an anonymous preschool-aged girl, November 6, 2016.

[75] Interview with “Del.”

> A few weeks ago…my three kids and I were sitting in our bedroom and she was playing Sleeping Beauty where she would prick her finger on the corner of our furniture and fall asleep and then my son had to kiss her to wake her up. She did this scene like three hundred times over and over for like a half hour. It was super cute, but clearly that's the important part of the movie for her. She pricked her finger on a spinning wheel and then a prince came and kissed her to wake her up. She didn't see anything else. She hasn't acted out other parts where Ariel is trying to defeat Ursula or something.[77]

Was her daughter really identifying with the passivity of the sleeping Princess? What is so difficult about unpacking the Princess and its many meanings is in part that children's play is at times impenetrable—we cannot access the layers of meaning nor the significance of different instances of children's play either because the child is too young to articulate their experience or because they are not aware themselves of the meaning of their play and are not old enough to make up a reason. This mother saw in her daughter's play a fixed, undesirable interpretation of Princess culture. However, children's play does not conform to parents' understandable anxieties. Children play games of life and death and process challenging scenes by mimicking them. This is why I take a cautious approach to understanding children's meaning-making in consuming the Disney Princess. It is clear that the Princess is a potent source of gendered play and performance, but it is impossible to know how much children value such performances and what ideologies they will adopt in the future. While the content of Disney Princess play is unclear, context does provide answers. The Disney Princesses are valuable social tools, and kids use them to attain social status, build relationships, and share culture.

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[76] Emily Landau, "Heroine Chic: The Problem with Feminist Fairy Tales," *Toronto Life*, December 22, 2014, https://torontolife.com/culture/heroine-chic-the-heart-of-robin-hood/; Caitlin Corsetti, "7 Horrible Things You Learned from *Beauty and the Beast*," *Gurl.com,* December 16, 2013, http://www.gurl.com/2013/12/16/bad-lessons-disney-beauty-and-the-beast/#3; Allison Craven, "Beauty and the Belles," *The European Journal of Women's Studies* 9, no. 2 (2002): 123-142.

[77] Interview with "Kim" and her "Delia," an anonymous mother and daughter, June 8, 2017.

Conclusion

The discursive power of the Disney Princess is evident in my interviews with middle-class parents, where their anxieties around the femininity of the brand and the abstract promises of a girl-power culture influence their own consumption of the characters. Kids I interviewed were certainly conscious of the visual representations of gender difference that make the Disney Princess a girl brand, but their use of both the Princess characters and the princess identity reach beyond gender play. Children use the P/princess as a social tool to make friends, play games, and share culture, but that does not necessarily allay parent's fears.

Many parents of girls worried about the effect of gendered narratives on their daughters and encouraged gender non-conforming behavior; parents of boys also celebrated gender non-conforming play, but this, in contrast, relieved them of anxieties around femininity. Children, who were not always aware of such discourses, expressed interest in princesses for a variety of reasons: beauty, dresses, bravery, and magic.

What was clear in the interviews was how significant discourse and context are to the interpretive possibilities and practices of the Disney Princess consumption in middle-class families. The incompatibility between parental anxiety and the ambiguity of children's play also prompted parents to negotiate the meanings of the Disney Princess in their children's lives. Some worried that children's play was limited by Princess texts while other believed their children were capable of playing Princess on their own terms. Sutton-Smith sees this dichotomy in discourse of children's play, where children are either seen as passive, carrying over "behavior from the world of toys to the world of everyday life" or as "sophisticated enough to ignore what doesn't fit everyday life, but nevertheless to apply the positive principles of socialization learned in play to everyday reality."[78] In all likelihood, Princess play does not fit into either of these neat boxes. This flexibility, however, does not stop Disney and other corporations from trying to bridge the world of parents and children by appealing to both generations and across gender lines. As we'll see in the next and final chapter, the Disney Princess is just one of many Disney sub-brands being strategically positioned for future generations.

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[78] Brian Sutton-Smith, *Toys as Culture* (New York: Gardner Press, 1986), 5.

CHAPTER 4

PRINCESSES, JEDIS, MUPPETS, AND SUPERHEROES: THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF DISNEY FRANCHISES

In one of my family interviews, a mom and dad reflected on their experience of Disney films, especially as parents: "*Wreck It Ralph* has all of those nostalgic villains which they [children] don't understand, but you see Wario or whatever and you're like, 'That's from the Nintendo back in the day!'"[389] These parents noted that moments in supposed kids' films that were not for their children and rather privileged the parents' nostalgia. I asked these parents what some of their favorite childhood films were. The mom said hers was *The Little Mermaid*, while the dad loved *The Lion King*: "We actually watched that a couple days ago." Another mom explained that she and her sister had bought the *Moana* DVD because "we felt like *Moana* was going to be…[for them what]… *The Little Mermaid*…[was]…for us. When we grew up, everyone had it. It was just part of your childhood. It was ingrained….*Frozen* and *Moana* are going to be the ones they remember as an adult [sic].'"[390] It's not uncommon for people to see media texts as part of their own histories and want to establish that same connection to meaningful media for their children. What Disney and other media companies are currently doing is leveraging that behavior into commodifiable entertainment experiences by pitching content simultaneously at parents and their children.

First, I will investigate the term "family" as a marketing practice and brand structure that parallels the consuming family audience such brands target. Second, I will explore how Disney has acquired transgenerational franchises—Lucasfilm, Marvel Entertainment, and the Muppets—

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[389] Interview with "Amy and Kevin," anonymous mother and father, May 27, 2017.

[390] Interview with "Ashley," anonymous mother, May 30, 2017.

to leverage older fans' nostalgia and encourage those fans to pass these media texts onto their children. Third, I explore how the strategies that have characterized the Disney Princess brand influence Disney's family-focused marketing strategies.

By adding acquired franchises Star Wars, Marvel Comics, and the Muppets, Disney has strategically "bought" new audiences. Today, the Disney Princess is a kind of sister brand to the more masculine franchises, representing the most influential feminine franchise in the company's lineup of properties. Situated next to these other franchises, we can see how Disney uses transgenerational franchises as insurance against market change. The structure and content of its interdependent brands use family consumption practices, the cultural transference of media taste, and changing familial dynamics tied to gender to its advantage so that audiences will not leave the wonderful worlds of consumption.

Branding for Families

Academic discourses on brand equity brings "family" into this discussion in two ways. One is in the structure of brands. Second is the way that families impact brand equity, or how familial relations and socialization around consumption affect the worth of brands. These are two preoccupations of advertising scholarship that I am bringing into the realm of branding in media studies by privileging an ideologically influenced consumer culture that frames Disney's strategies with branded franchises. So, rather than a guide or toolset for advertising professionals, I use this literature on brand equity to inform the proven commercial and cultural implications of brands.

Brand Equity and Family Brands

David Aaker refers to brand equity as "a set of assets such as name awareness, loyal customers, perceived quality, and association...that are linked to the brand...and add (or subtract) value to the product or service being offered." [391] In essence, brand equity encompasses the material and immaterial value of a brand, which can change over time. For Disney, its actual holdings, its partnerships, and its historical meaning to American culture make up the bulk of the company's brand equity. Reflecting on Chapter 1, the many controversies the company was involved in—such as its racial and gendered representations—affect its historical corporate reputation, and thus, its brand equity. Assets and brand architecture are also integral to brand equity since as a conglomerate Disney manages numerous sub-brands.

Advertising and marketing scholars will often refer to this grouping of brands as *family brands*.[392] Disney is the parent brand in this case, while the sub-brands (Disney Princess, Disney Channel, ESPN, Disneyland, Hollywood Records, Marvel Studios, etc.) are child brands, or sub-brands. What is distinctive about just this small representation of Disney's child brands is that some carry the "Disney" trademark, and some do not. This is partly because Disney has historically acquired pre-existing brands, like ESPN, but they also intentionally create brands without much mention of the Disney name, as with Hollywood Records or the Pirates of the Caribbean franchise, so that those child brands have some reputational autonomy from the larger Disney brand.

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[391] David A. Aaker, *Managing Brand Equity: Capitalizing on the Value of a Brand Name* (New York: The Free Press, 1991): 4.

[392] Family and corporate brands can have similar roles, and in Keller's work, they are usually mentioned simultaneously. Technically a family brand works at the product or division level while a corporate brand is reflective of the parent organization. With Disney, these two can work simultaneously in terms of Disney's reputation. Often the company name will automatically register as the corporation's work in film animation.

David Aaker and Erich Joachimsthaler talk about family brands as two approaches with more domestic language: a *branded house* versus a *house of brands*.[393] The former indicates a family brand where every brand extension is clearly stamped by the parent company name. Disney would fall into this category if every sub-brand was clearly identified as Disneyland, Disney Princess, and Disney Channel are. The house of brands model indicates a more hidden or subtle association between parent brand and child brands. Aaker and Joachimsthaler argue that these companies lack clear synergy and association but are advantageous in the sense that they may operate semi-independently to serve their intended market. In a house of brands, "compromises do not have to be made in the positioning of a given brand to accommodate its use in other product-market contexts"[394]. This dynamic seemed to influence the start of the Pirates franchise, since Disney's reputation as family friendly and safe (and thus feminine) may not have attracted audiences to a PG-13 film franchise seeking masculine-identifying audiences. Promotional materials, such as posters, only named Disney in small print. This is because family brands can be powerfully associative, and consumers often associate an individual brand, a film franchise in this case, with the reputation of the overall family brand.[395] However, its more recent acquisitions have shifted Disney's reputation as a "family-friendly,"—and thus made for children and parents—to a "family" brand that has something to offer anyone. This shift at times obscures the conservative choices the company makes and the contradictory messaging that allows audience of multiple backgrounds and politics to choose the content and messaging that fits within their worldview and ignore the rest. For example, a mom in the previous chapter said she was frustrated when the live-action Disney films got “political”—speaking to the promotional marketing around *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) and references to Stockholm Syndrome—but she loved the messages in *Sofia the First*. Disney’s wide world of franchises and their contradictory messaging allow the company to slide through controversy relatively unscathed.

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[393] David A Aaker and Erich Joachimsthaler, "The Brand Relationship Spectrum: The Key to the Brand Architecture Challenges," *California Management Review* 41, No. 4 (Summer 2000): 8-23.

[394] Aaker and Joachimsthaler, "The Brand Relationship Spectrum," 11.

[395] Joseph Fry, "Family Branding."

Consuming Families

Franchises like the Disney Princess rely on family consumer cultures—the ways that children’s desires overlap with parent’s desires and concerns about their children’s consumption. Daniel Cook has solidified and expanded notions of social consumption between middle-class parents and children, and most specifically in his exploration of the development of the clothing industry, in particular around department stores.[396] In the early 20th century, retailers were already looking to grow profits by creating clothing specifically for different age groups and by placing children’s departments strategically close to women’s departments so that so mothers would be incentivized to buy more. Ellen Seiter speaks to the ways in which Toys R Us served as a middle-class family consumer experience, both in the sense that transportation to and from the store requires a car potentially filled with members of the family, and in the ways merchandise is stocked on shelves to appeal to parents and children separately *and* together. Family consumption is informed by love, taste, economic necessity, and more. Families engage with media both together and separately, as I discovered in interviews with parents, and therefore have room to explore their own preferences within a family system.

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[396] Daniel Thomas Cook, *The Commodification of Childhood: The Children’s Clothing Industry and the Rise of the Child Consumer* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

What is essential about family consumption in this chapter is how consumption behaviors and taste cultures inform the strategies media industries use to court families and retain them as loyal consumers. In the introduction and Chapter 3 I have already shown parenting discourses create anxiety among parents who then feel they must shield children from potentially negative effects of media content. But families also perform and pass on consumption practices that have become part of their family's identity. These range from consumption behaviors to specific texts. One mom explained why she let her children binge TV on the weekends: "Anyway, what we start with is, on Saturday and Sunday, we have unlimited media. And that comes from my childhood where you get up and watch as many cartoons as you can. You eat your cereal in front of the fucking TV! That's Saturday, man! And I really like to sleep."[397] Other parents I spoke with were excited to share media texts like the *Harry Potter* series, *Star Wars*, or Disney Princess texts because they had enjoyed them when they were younger and were excited to see the same kind of enjoyment in their children—though such attempts were not always successful.[398]

Because parents and children share their tastes and consumption preferences with each other, family life can affect brand preferences and loyalties in addition to, or in connection with, broader values, norms, and attitudes.[399] Not only do children rely on their parent's purchasing histories as a reference point when they go out on their own and make their own consumer choices[400], but parents also engender consumer preferences for certain cultural activities and consumer habits based on educational and cultural enrichment[401], family history[402], or other preferences and behaviors centered on a family's habitus.[403] Habitus refers to the manifestation of internalized class, experience, and taste, so people behave and consume according to their habitus.[404] In examining various Disney franchise intertexts, it is clear producers imagine social consumption framed by families' habitus. Bourdieu describes the transference of taste and habitus as class-based, and that certainly follows when we consider how families talk about in-home education and cultural enrichment of children. In popular media tastes, however, gender, race, and sexuality become important as expressions of value and belonging.

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[397] Interview with "Chelsea," anonymous mom, July 5, 2016.

[398] Several parents mentioned that they couldn't get their children to watch *Sesame Street*. Because the show was so central to their memories of their own childhoods, they were often disappointed by this failed attempt at passing on their tastes.

[399] Terry L. Childers and Akshay R. Rao, "The Influences of Families and Peer-based Reference Groups on Consumer Choice," *Journal of Consumer Choice* 19 (September 1992): 199; Tom F.M. ter Bogt, Marc J.M.L. Delsing, Maarten van Zalk, Peter G. Christenson, and Wim H.J. Meeus, "Intergenerational Continuity of Taste: Parental and Adolescent Music Preferences,"

Parents may already deem a family brand valuable by virtue of their experience and feel they can recommend texts based on that experience. I noted this with families who had experience with PBS programming and Disney Junior programming. For example, one mom

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Social Forces 90 (September 2011): 298; Gerbert Kraaykamp, "Parents, Personality, and Media Preferences," *Communications* 26 (2001): 15-37.

[400] Elisabeth S. Moore, William L. Wilkie, and Richard J. Lutz, "Passing the Torch: Intergenerational Influences as a Source of Brand Equity," *Journal of Marketing* 66 (April 2002): 18.

[401] Sophia Rainbird and Jennifer Roswell, "'Literacy Nooks': Geosemiotics and Domains of Literacy in Home Spaces," *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy* 11, no. 2 (2011): 214-231.

[402] Aaron Reeves, "'Music's a Family Thing': Cultural Socialisation and Parental Transference," *Cultural Sociology 9* (2015): 493-514.

[403] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

[404] Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

trusted *Sofia the First* as a part of a greater Disney brand that would be safe and appropriate for the youngest of her children and would introduce her children to Disney's universe of narratives that *she* had enjoyed as a child.[405] The strategies that Disney employs to court multiple members of a middle-class, heteronormative family rely on intergenerational and transgenerational themes that allow the family to share texts with one another. On a structural level, this sharing could theoretically all occur within the larger family brand, Disney, where the corporate head of household could reap the financial rewards of family consumption.

Growing the Disney Family

Disney's 21st century corporate strategy has been one punctuated by the acquisition of legacy franchises, including the Marvel Comics universe, Lucasfilm and its Star Wars universe, and less profitably, the late Jim Henson's Muppets franchise, previously part of Jim Henson Company's holdings. These partnerships show Disney's attempts to build a more robust set of child brands that draw on adult fan nostalgia, appeal to multiple family members at the same time, and encourage families to sustain and pass on fandoms. I argue that Disney and its partners have developed these franchises to build transgenerational appeals in addition to intergenerational appeals: not to simply target different age groups, but to extend the relevance of each franchise across generations.

Intergenerationality and transgenerationality are not defined consistently across scholarly disciplines. Often intergenerationality is used to describe both ideas, but the difference between the two illustrates not only the intertextual importance of legacy brands but also various industry and audience practices that contribute to brand equity, or a brand's value, and longevity. Intergenerational franchising, I argue, refers to concurrent appeals to multiple audience ages, whether within the same intertext or across multiple branded intertexts. Most Disney products, for example, work across age boundaries, especially feature films where families attend and where jokes, themes, and lessons in the films work at different maturity levels, pleasing parents, children, young adults, etc. This is an intentional strategy that we have seen Disney utilize for decades. If audiences were introduced to the world of the Disney Princess franchise solely through *Sofia the First* or through the Princess dolls, the franchise would be less attractive for many older viewers and fans, which is why an intergenerational intertext like a Disney film or a more adult but still intergenerational show like *Once Upon a Time* works to bring multiple age groups into the franchise simultaneously. One of the clearest examples of intergenerational franchising in the Disney theme parks, which privileges the leisure time of the nuclear family by including attractions for younger and older audiences—parades, character meet-and-greets, fireworks, rides of varying intensity, gift shops, restaurants, bars, and resorts.

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[405] Interview with "Ashley," anonymous mother, May 30, 2017.

Transgenerational franchising, I argue, refers the strategic extension of franchises into future generations. Transgenerational franchising often seeks to pull in a new, younger target audience through an existing, usually older audience of a previous generation. Frequently these strategies rely on nostalgia for childhood fandoms that adult fans want to pass onto their own children, as Derek Johnson explored in terms of the longevity of franchises like Transformers.[406] This was the case in the story above where two adult sisters bought a *Moana* DVD because of their nostalgia for *The Little Mermaid*. Completely different films premised on girl-power culture, *Moana* likely reminded them of happy shared memories, and they believed Moana would be as important to their children as Ariel was to them when they were young. As such, it is important for new Princess texts to repeat some of the narrative conventions as the Princesses of the Disney Renaissance, as was discussed in Chapter 1. This kind of repetition is vital to ignite the nostalgia of parents. Transgenerational franchising can also mean transforming texts to appeal to new audiences. This often means leveraging the transmedia tendencies of franchising to capture audiences where they are as well as *when* they are. For instance, *Sofia the First* is a televisual iteration of P/princess culture that introduces characters from earlier films to preschoolers. Some parents told me that their kids didn't know any Disney Princesses other than Sofia—of course Sofia is not a Princess, but a princess character connected to the Disney P/princess ethos. This is because she was at the time the only princess on Disney Junior particularly intended for preschoolers. Finally, *Once Upon a Time* is a live-action television show that bends and combines previous filmic worlds in a more adult setting, reviving Princess and Disney nostalgia in a melodrama that reminds teen and adult fans of the Disney Princesses and may sustain their fandom long enough to pass it on.

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[406] Derek Johnson, *Media Franchising Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 188-192.

Finally, in some instances transgenerational franchising requires updates and changes to texts that make a branded property more relevant for a new age, whether in reaction to shifting ideologies and cultural norms or because of the changing age of their target audience. For many of the parents I interviewed who were not Disney fans as children, new characters like Merida, Tiana, Elsa, and Moana were refreshing, and felt like a departure from Princess culture as they perceived it, like the mom who felt Moana—again not a Princess but part of the girl-power Disney P/princess universe—showed the kind of confidence and determination she had not seen before with Princesses.

A successful transgenerational franchise means producers do not necessarily have to invent new franchises, nor do they have to constantly create original storylines. Because of the "transhistorical" construction and reality of children's lives[407], toys and products can be recycled or renewed in the hope to capitalize on new young consumers. This is where intergenerationality and transgenerationality sometimes meet. Disney products with connected sub-brands are intergenerational, narrowcasted to separate audiences—*Sofia the First*, *The Descendants*, and *Once Upon a Time*—or targeted at multiple ages at once—all the Princess feature films, *Maleficent*, and *Once Upon a Time*. At the same time, a Disney Princess fan might age from *Sofia the First*, to *Elena of Avalor* and many "original" Princess films, to *The Descendants* and *Maleficent* and perhaps the live-action retellings of *Cinderella* and *Beauty and the Beast*, and finally to *Once Upon a Time*[408] and park visits during the Princess Half-Marathon. Outside of what we think of as media, girls and women can also progress from Disney Princess dress-up clothes to Disney Princess Quinceañera and prom dresses, and to Disney Princess wedding dresses. This makes the Disney Princess intergenerational in the sense that the franchise accommodates multiple age groups concurrently, but also the brands are transgenerational in that they are "resistant" to audiences aging out of them. Disney's constellation of narrowcasted toys, shows, films, and experiences works within franchises and across them to keep audiences in the sub-brands of the Disney parent brand.

Acquiring Transgenerational Properties

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[407] Heather Hendershot, *Nickelodeon Nation: The History, Politics, and Economics of America's Only TV Channel for Kids* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

[408] *Once Upon a Time*, like *The Descendants*, pushes beyond the Princess franchise and even outside Disney texts, such as *The Wizard of Oz,* which has a complex history with Disney films and parks. See https://www.indiewire.com/2013/03/not-in-kansas-anymore-the-long-history-of-disney-and-the-wizard-of-oz-249057/ and https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr-esq/wizard-of-oz-disney-warner-bros-289305

Marvel Entertainment, Lucasfilm, and Jim Henson's Muppets were all acquired in the first two decades of the 21st century—and the first two were under Bob Iger's reign as Disney CEO. However, licensing partnerships and park attractions with all three started in the 1980s and 1990s, during Michael Eisner's time at Disney, and therefore indicate the longitudinal strategy at Disney to use family-oriented popular culture franchises in its worlds of consumption. This strategy works in the other direction as well, as we will see in Marvel's move to become a more dominant force in the 1990s. Each of these franchises has a different history, but all have decades of fan communities who potentially have children and grandchildren today, creating a new population of potential future fans and revenue generators for Disney franchises.

Origin stories

These three franchises "origin stories" articulate a connected world of media industries with frequent licensing partnerships and co-productions. Even before their acquisitions, Jim Henson Company, Lucasfilm, Marvel Comics, and Disney were part of a transmedia Hollywood system where potential synergies between the companies results in licensing agreements and other cross-promotional opportunities. In order of acquisition, the Muppets was the first franchise purchased by Disney in 2004 and perhaps the first notable example of Disney revitalizing or rebooting a twentieth-century intergenerational franchise. The Muppets acquisition was a long-time goal of Michael Eisner and part of a tenuous partnership between Disney and Jim Henson Company racked with legal disputes and tense partnerships between the two mismatched companies.[409] Jim Henson's Muppet franchise started in earnest with *The Muppet Show* (1976-1981), after Henson had risen in television as the go-to puppeteer for broadcast television[410]; he and his few associates (Jane Henson, Frank Oz, and Don Salin) had built a series of "Muppets" (marionette puppets) for public television's *Sesame Street* (1969-), many of which were later featured on *The Muppet Show*. *The Muppet Show* had mass appeal, mimicking earlier network television's variety show format with a dose of behind-the-scenes comedic conflict. While the show was filled with sexual innuendo and satirical and subversive jokes for adults, it was marketed to a family audience, and the subsequent films in the late 1970s and 1980s were rated G for a general audience. Like *Sesame Street*, though pitched differently, *The Muppet Show* was often co-viewed by parents and children.[411] By the late 1980s, the Muppet characters were international cultural icons, spilling over into films, 2D animated television (*The Muppet Babies*), and merchandise.

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[409] Caroline Leader, "The Lovers and Dreams Go Corporate: Re-authoring Jim Henson's Muppets under Disney" (MA Thesis: The University of Texas at Austin, 2011).

Star Wars, a film series, book series, and subsequent TV movies, toys, games, and more, started in a similar period, even crossing over with a Mark Hamill/Star Wars-themed episode of *The Muppet Show* in 1980. The Star Wars franchise started with the 1977 release of *Star Wars: A New Hope* and its accompanying 1976 book, *Star Wars: From the Adventures of Luke Skywalker*. Both were headed up by George Lucas, though the book was ghost written by Alan Dean Foster. The film was PG-rated, allowing for multiple age groups to attend at theaters. A *New York Times* review in 1977 implied its appeal to a wide swath of Americans, including young people: "It's…the movie that's going to entertain a lot of contemporary folk who have a soft spot for the virtually ritualized manners of comic-book adventure….'Star Wars' is good enough to convince the most skeptical 8-year-old sci-fi buff, who is the toughest critic." Condescension aside, this early review indicates the appeal of the franchise to fans of multiple ages. Like its comics and film influences[412], *Star Wars*' folkloric, mythical galaxy offered a wealth of opportunity for fan authors to add to the planets, societies, and locations the original film and book had built. Serving an engaged fan community, Lucasfilm encouraged a company-regulated set of texts called the "Expanded Universe," a series of tales made up primarily of books and comics woven together loosely with the rule that new works could not contradict stories in previously recorded works, thereby maintaining a coherent history of the Star Wars universe. The first series of Star Wars comics were published by no other than now-Disney-owned Marvel Comics.

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[410] Leader, "The Lovers and Dreamers Go Corporate."

[411] *Sesame Street* was created as a preschool and early school program focused on fundamental educational concepts and cultural literacy while *The Muppets* was a primetime network show deemed appropriate for all TV audiences.

Started in 1939 under Timely Publications, Marvel Comics made early partnerships in television and film by licensing characters to these other media industry sectors[413]. They licensed characters from Lucasfilm's Star Wars for a comic book series, the initial run lasting from 1977 through 1986, which according to Jim Shooter, Marvel's editor-in-chief from 1978 through 1987, kept Marvel going during a challenging period[414]. Despite the popularity of many of its well-known characters and industry partnerships, the company filed for bankruptcy in 1996, citing too many poor investments, failed film development, and a suffering comic book industry. In 1998, now merged with parent company Toy Biz, Marvel directed new partnerships under CEO Avi Arad that would build transmedia partnerships in Hollywood. As Derek Johnson has argued, the centrality of box office wins and serialized narratives buoyed Marvel's multi-media revenue, which were sustained in gaming, merchandising, and elsewhere[415]. Marvel's strategy to build a cinematic universe is not new under Disney, as Johnson argues; it capitalized on strategies of a convergent age of media, both in terms of production and consumption[416]. Marvel would also try and build on Disney's brand and franchising strategies in its hiring of Ken Lewis in 1996, former director of participant marketing at Disney. David Schreff, also recently poached from the NBA, stated: "We have to reinvent Marvel for a new generation of kids and young adults who have many other competing interests and entertainment options…We have to take our properties and make them relevant in all forms of media[417]." As seen in these origin stories, transmedia franchising and industry partnerships create the possibility of generational fandoms and legacy brands. Lucasfilm, Marvel Entertainment, and the Jim Henson Company would also partner with Disney long before being acquired, furthering exploring transmedia and transgenerational audience experiences.

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[412] *Flash Gordon* and *The Hidden Fortress*. See Benjamin J. Robertson, "'It's Just Us Now': Nostalgia and Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens" *Science Fiction Film & Television* 9, no. 3 (2016): 480-481 and Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson, introduction to *A Companion to Media Authorship*, ed. Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 1-22, respectively.

[413] Tyson Wils, "Marvel and the Storytelling Industry: Characters in an Age of Media Convergence," *Screen Education*, 86 (2017): 72-81.

[414] Graeme McMillan, "'Star Wars' in Comic Books: A Brief History," *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 10, 2015, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/star-wars-comic-books-a-762374.

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[415] Derek Johnson, "Cinematic Destiny: Marvel Studios and the Trade Stories of Industrial Convergence," *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 1-24.

[416] Johnson, "Cinematic Destiny."

[417] Jeff Jensen, "Marvel Hire Signals Revamp in Marketing," *Advertising Age*, November 11, 1996, 8.

Dealings with Disney: the Eisner era

All three franchises would struck deals with Disney during the Eisner-era revitalization at Walt Disney Corporation. Exploiting licensing deals and growing both media production and park experiences, Disney found ample opportunity to form such partnerships. Lucasfilm was an essential profit generator at Disneyland, starting with a 1985 agreement to build a *Star Wars*-inspired ride in the Hollywood Studios part of the park.[418] The Star Tours ride opened in 1987 after a $30 million-dollar investment into its production. A *Variety* publication covering the grand opening quoted George Lucas as "an avowed Disney fan[419]," an early example of how Disney uses transgenerationality: legitimating its stewardship of other brands and revival of its own brands through the confirmed fandom of fictional characters and industry creators. The company would continue this strategy with Disney Princesses, Jim Henson's Muppets, and with Marvel, as I'll explore later in this chapter. Disney and Lucasfilm continued this partnership with "Star Wars Weekends" at Disney World that coincided with promotion of Lucasfilm's second trilogy of films[420]. It was at the time one of the largest Star Wars fan events in the world.

Jim Henson Company and Walt Disney Company also co-produced a park attraction: the 3D interactive film Disney's Hollywood Studios in Disneyworld called "Kermit the Frog presents MuppetVision 3-D." It may come as no surprise that Disney began partnerships with both Jim Henson Company and Lucasfilm in the parks where new and exciting media content drive park development and continuing sales.[421] These companies' partnerships would lay the groundwork for future cooperation and co-optation, expanding the company's family brands.

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[418] "Disney Theme Parks Plan to Use Attraction Based on 'Star Wars,'" *The Wall Street Journal*, February 7, 1985, 6.

[419] Jane Galbraith, "New 'Star Tour' at Disneyland is Product of Lucas, Imagineers," *Variety*, January 21, 1987, 226.

[420] "More 'Star Wars' Fun to Enter Disney's Galaxy with Two More Weekends Added to Disney-MGM Studios Event: Most Weeks Ever for the Sci-Fi Fan-Fest," *PR Newswire*, June 8, 2005.

Upon Henson's death in 1990, some obituaries reported that Henson had sold the Muppets to Walt Disney Company, but apparently Henson had not made such a decision, or at least had not quite put pen to paper, because when Disney started to manufacturing merchandise for their park attraction, Henson's family sued Disney for overstepping their licensing deal.[422] After this contentious battle, Disney continued to partner with the waning Jim Henson Pictures, distributing their 1990s films through Buena Vista Home Entertainment (the home video arm of Disney). The Muppets after Henson was fast becoming a nostalgic brand as it couldn't churn out major successes in its 1990s run of films and TV shows. Eisner's Disney tried twice to buy the Muppet characters, only succeeding in 2004 after a failed German conglomerate, EM.TV, which has purchased the Muppets in 2002, went bankrupt and the Muppets went up for sale again.

Marvel primarily worked with Disney's competitors during the Eisner years and until Disney's acquisition of the company in 2009, including Warner Brothers, 20th Century Fox, and Columbia Pictures—a subsidiary of Sony Corporation. Marvel did deal with Disney directly in at least one case, creating a comics series in 1995 for Disney's television show, *Gargoyles* 1994-1997. This instance is not significant in and of itself, but in context of the overlapping licensing deals and other partnerships between Disney and Lucasfilm, Jim Henson's Muppets, and Marvel Comics, it demonstrates frequent interactions and contractual relationships between Disney and other content creators. Looking back from a 2019 perspective, we can see how Disney converted long-time relationships into part of its empire-building strategy, focusing on transgenerational franchises that could build its own family brand, in terms of brand structure, cultural significance, and customer reach.

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[421] Janet Wasko. *Understanding Disney* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 160.

[422] Leader, "The Lovers and Dreamers Go Corporate," 39.

Reboots and revivals

After its purchase of the Muppets in 2004, Disney attempted several synergistic projects with the characters, including a *Wizard of Oz* remake, based on the L. Frank Baum books Disney owns the rights to, and a successful viral video of Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody"—also part of a Disney-owned Queen music catalogue. The 2011 film *The Muppets* was the culmination of Disney's attempt to reinject Muppets into the U.S. market after a rapid decline in the 1990s. I have argued previously[423] that this 2011 film relied on 1980s pop culture tropes and old Hollywood lore both to extract the Muppets from Jim Henson's authorial legacy and to revive the characters for parents who remember the Muppets from their youth and these erstwhile fans' children. However, the film and its sequel, *Muppets Most Wanted* (2014), made disappointing box office profits.[424] In 2016, Disney attempted to bring the Muppets back to primetime with ABC's *The Muppets*, but it was cancelled after the first season. Reportedly, the series will start again on Disney's OTT service. Finally, Disney rebooted *Muppet Babies*, which originally ran from 1984 to 1991 on CBS. The 2018 CGI reboot plays on Disney Channel and Disney Junior where ratings are less significant to a series' success. On Disney's TV turf, the company can reach younger audiences as part of a transgenerational strategy to start new Muppet fans from a young age.

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[423] Leader, "The Lovers and Dreamers Go Corporate."

[424] Dorothy Pomerantz, "Why Even Small Franchises, Like The Muppets, Matter," *Forbes.com*, March 21, 2014, https://www.forbes.com/sites/dorothypomerantz/2014/03/21/why-even-small-franchises-like-the-muppets-matter/#5365ee4763ea

Unlike the Muppets, the Star Wars franchise (acquired with all of Lucasfilm in 2012) and Marvel Entertainment (acquired in 2009) had and have active fandoms, despite historic ebbs and flows. Both franchises, led by Lucasfilm and distributors like Paramount, Sony, 20th Century Fox, and others, had already created multiple films in the 1990s and early 2000s, combining their universes with well-worn fantasy adventure genre films that could appeal to audiences both familiar and unfamiliar with their story worlds. Both production/publishing houses have always had intergenerational appeal, which before televisual narrowcasting, or in the vein of the studio blockbuster, simply meant mass appeal. Their films, which typically carry a PG or PG-13 rating, allowed for a significant age range for box office audiences. Disney's acquisition of these companies reflected long-time partnerships and competition with both: a consolidation of power that would bring dominant franchises within a single kingdom's walls.

Disney acquired Marvel in 2009 amidst the latter's successful run of Iron Man films. Under Disney, the new Marvel Studios continued to build the "Marvel Cinematic Universe" by re-introducing characters who made up the comic book team, The Avengers, and developing other historic characters through film releases. Disney-Marvel's extensive foray into developing Netflix series, though, as well as into network television, characterizes the Marvel Universe today—less a cinematic universe than a visual media universe. By harnessing the potential of multiple media platforms, Disney has narrowcasted and multicasted, all of these franchises simultaneously on different channels and platforms, spaces and places.

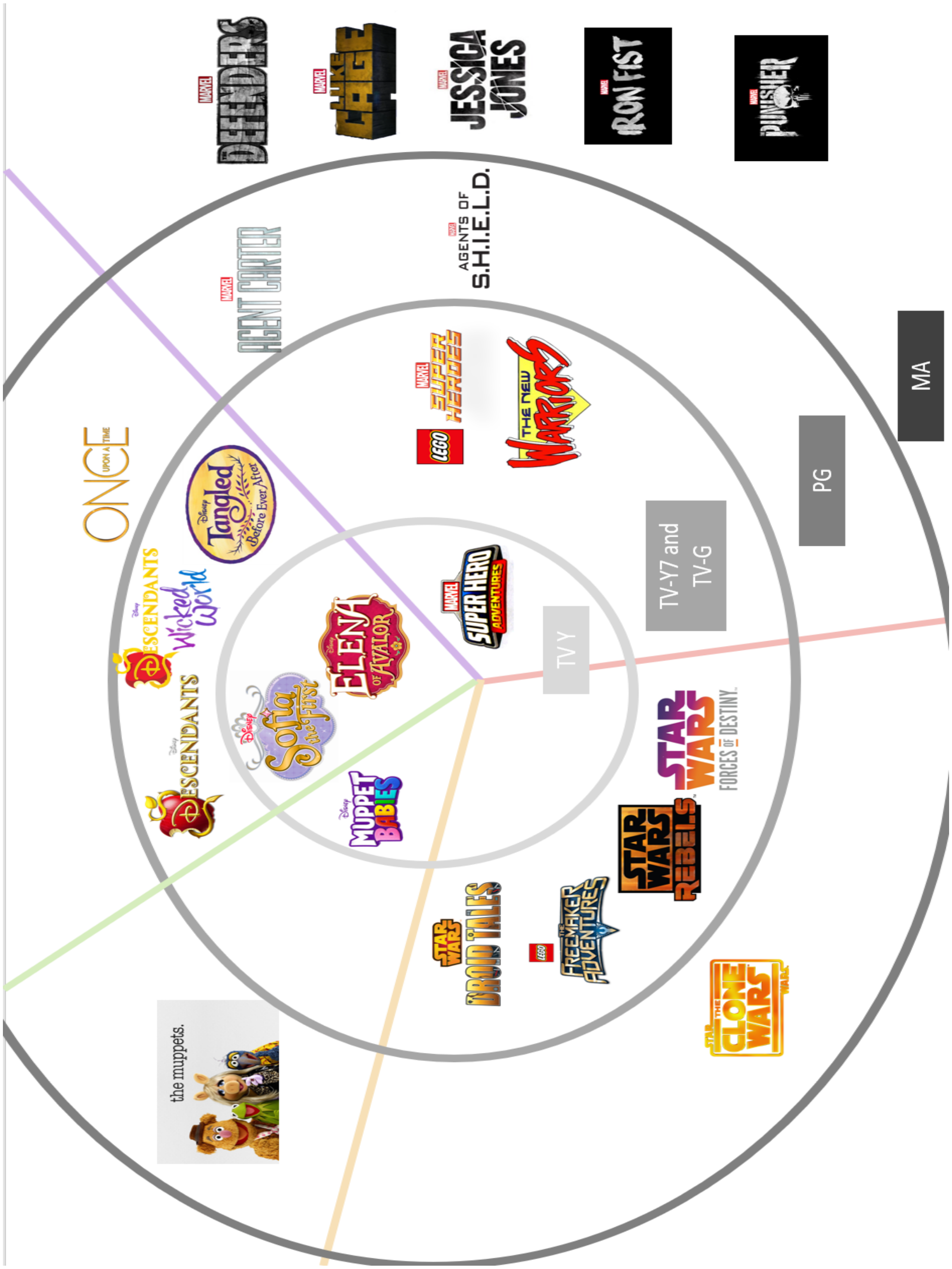
Commodifying Family Taste: Strategies in Practice

As noted above, Disney's Muppets have not performed well as the box office or on primetime TV. However, by rebooting *Muppet Babies*, the company moves from creating intergenerational content like *The Muppets* (2011), the film, and *The Muppets* (2016), the TV show, both of which intended to cash in on older fans' nostalgia and bring in younger audiences, and instead can use a preschool show, *Muppet Babies,* to target a very young audience who may move on to older Muppets media later. Legacy brands such as these work on viewers' past memories and loyalties and depend both on fans transferring such loyalties on to their children and children stumbling upon legacy brands adapted as kids' TV shows. One strategy we can see that builds on the idea of legacy and cultural transference includes strategic programming in film and television. Disney's move to a more transgenerational strategy relies not solely mass appeal of their properties, but also targets segments of their audience through "age-appropriate" appeals, familiarizing audiences with well-known characters that will follow them through their childhoods and adulthoods, hopefully rebuilding older franchises that young people would not have encountered otherwise.

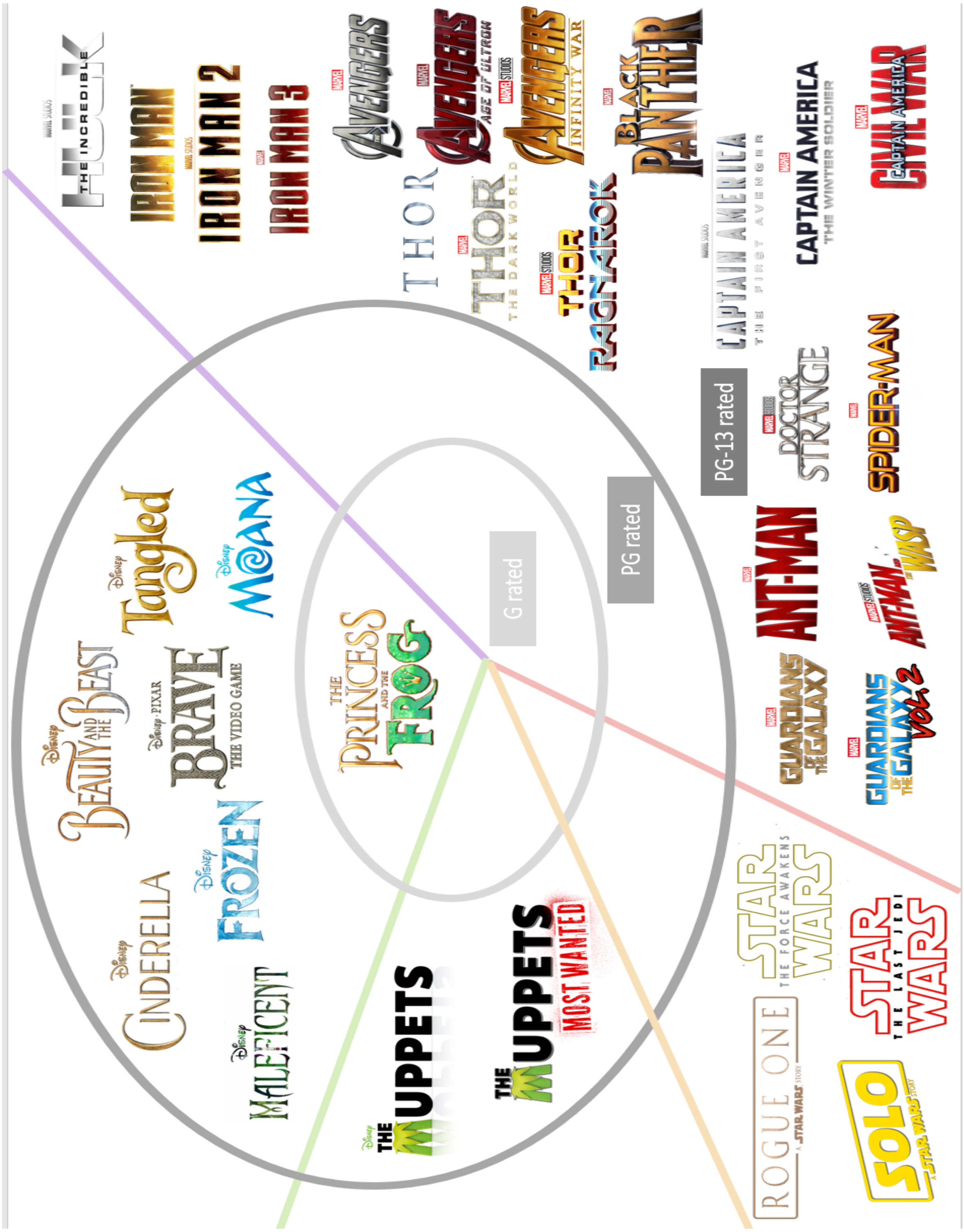
Family Programming: A Web of Narrowcasting and Family Appeals

In the infographics below, film ratings often favor intergenerational audiences while TV programs tend to narrowcast. Disney Marvel and Star Wars films frequently hold a PG-13 rating, making such movies readily accessible to adolescents and adults as well as much younger audiences who can stream or download movies from home. These films include some violence and sexuality, but this content is more sensational than graphic—for instance, explosions and tight-fitting costumes. Netflix's Marvel series on Netflix and television, however, hold TV-MA ratings geared toward older teenagers and adults and include graphic violence—blood and mutilation—and nudity. These ratings, of course, are even less restrictive than the rather porous gatekeeping at movie theaters as children of almost all ages can access their television and adult channels and platforms. The current televisual landscape (cable television and OTT services) privileges both family co-viewing and viewing alone, imitating digital media consumption practices for families. Interviewed families reported watching together equally if slightly less than they reported individual viewing or age-based viewing (kids and adults watching separately). In looking at the synopses and ratings of Disney's television shows across multiple channels and platforms, we can see franchises reach from preschool to adulthood, deferring to pre-existing channel brands and generic traditions of television.

In looking at the graphics below, we see how the Disney Princess is a franchise screwed more toward young, female audiences and family audiences, while the other franchises scale slowly upward and into more adult and masculinized content. However, the more recent strategies used in Disney-owned films and TV shows indicate the predominance of the Disney Princess approach to branding—using contradictory messaging rather than a unified brand story to sell to multiple audiences. Particularly with Star Wars, the same girl-power messaging that propels audience interest in the Disney Princess seems to empower more female Star Wars fans to engage with the new content while the company does nothing to erase the predominately masculine world the franchise is known for.


TV Y
TV-Y7 and TV-G
PG
MA
Defenders
Luke Cage
Jessica Jones
Iron Fist
Punisher
Agent Carter
Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.
Once Upon a Time
Lego Marvel Super Heroes
The New Warriors
Tangled Before Ever After
Descendants Wicked World
Descendants
Elena of Avalor
Sofia the First
Marvel Super Hero Adventures
Muppet Babies
Star Wars Forces of Destiny
Star Wars Rebels
Lego The Freemaker Adventures
Star Wars Droid Tales
Star Wars The Clone Wars
the muppets.

Televisual Family of Programming


G rated
PG rated
PG-13 rated
The Princess and the Frog
Beauty and the Beast
Tangled
Moana
Brave The Video Game
Cinderella
Frozen
Maleficent
The Muppets
The Muppets Most Wanted
The Incredible Hulk
Iron Man
Iron Man 2
Iron Man 3
Avengers
Avengers Age of Ultron
Avengers Infinity War
Black Panther
Thor
Thor The Dark World
Thor Ragnarok
Captain America The First Avenger
Captain America The Winter Soldier
Captain America Civil War
Doctor Strange
Spider-Man
Ant-Man
Ant-Man and the Wasp
Guardians of the Galaxy
Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2
Star Wars The Force Awakens
Star Wars The Last Jedi
Rogue One A Star Wars Story
Solo A Star Wars Story

Disney's Cinematic Family of Programming

Family-Friendly: Strategic Themes of Transgenerational Franchising

Disney's focus on transgenerationality connects to its initial and continued strategy to adapt folktales. Some stories that resulted in feature films, like *Beauty and the Beast* and *Mulan*[425], are ancient oral tales that were adapted into written ones. With *Beauty and the Beast* specifically, the initial written text by Madame Gabrielle de Villeneuve was more a raunchy melodrama and hardly suitable for little kids.[426] A growing literature market in the 19th century, combined with increasing sentimentalization of childhood, would contribute to Madame Le Prince de Beaumont's *Beauty and the Beast*, a commercially viable morality tale with a Christ-like Beauty character.[427] Under Disney's production, along with its other feature films, the lead character's story refocuses on romance, popular to traditions of 20th century filmmaking. Such shifts and alterations are part of the cultural logic of intertextuality—that relationship between texts that is most vitally dependent on audience and reception. Disney's more recent uptake of franchises uses the logics of adaptation and intertextuality with transmedia texts to intensify the sharing of texts amongst family and across generations. Transmedia storytelling, according to Henry Jenkins, describes how media narratives move across platforms through fan production and industry adaptation. Franchises are *strategically* moved and adapted across time and space in order to continue a brand's legacy and expand and evolve its target audience, as we saw in the mapping of Disney film and TV programming above.

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[425] Lan Dong, *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 2011).

[426] Betsey Hearne, *Beauty and the Beast: Visions and Revisions of an Old Tale* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).

[427] Hearne, *Beauty and the Beast*.

The Disney Princess has served its Disney family brand as a profitable and culturally meaningful franchise. However, as we began to see in Chapter 1, the brand's tension with evolving gender politics coincides with the acquisition and revival of other profitable, boy-centered franchises. The strategies and phenomena I'll explore below center on nostalgia, familial love, and father-daughter relationships. These do not represent the full range of family themes Disney has used historically, but instead show a selection of transgenerational themes and strategies used by the Disney Princess franchise and leveraged at this particular moment to commodify popular feminist sentiment while still retaining more conservative values.

Remakes and Nostalgia

A *New York Times* article released alongside the initial exhibition of the 1991 *Beauty and the Beast* identified Disney's nostalgic strategy:

> The baby-boom generation has a clean little secret: it grew up watching animated films and remembers them with great, if covert, affection. That secret has been the basis for two of the rare, unmitigatedly upbeat film events in recent years: 'Little Mermaid,' which in 1989 marked the Walt Disney Company's first open attempt to court parents along with their children, and now 'Beauty and the Beast,' in which this strategy has been taken even further.[428]

Journalist Janet Maslin goes on to detail Disney's careful promotion, exhibition, and retailing around *Beauty and the Beast*'s release to play on children's excitement and parents' nostalgia for Disney's past era of animation. This use of parent nostalgia combined with appeals to young viewers through reboots or remakes has continued as an intergenerational and transgenerational set of strategies at Disney.

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[428] Maslin, "Target: Boomers," 2:1.

The live-action remakes of Disney Princess films are the one of the more obvious ways in which Disney dredges up sentiment for its animated adaptations in recent years. Viewers will attend these exhibitions to revisit the story, see how Disney animation "comes to life," and seek out differences in the narrative that the Disney promotional machine will preview for them, not always counting on memory or active fandom to energize audiences. Disney's use of enhanced and hyperreal color palette connects live-action films to the feel of the earlier animated adaptation. Production sets and costumes could also potentially excite fans' memories of the earlier films.

Marvel's Cinematic Universe relies on this kind of fan nostalgia to make money off its box office hits. Evident in the sheer number of films and TV series in the infographic above, Marvel's legacy content is vast and barely tapped by Disney's recent releases. In addition, Derek Johnson argues that through cliffhangers and hints in Marvel's film releases, Marvel—and later Disney—could frame "individual films as mere episodes in a larger, cohesive work."[429] Fans can anticipate the next release, similar to the way in which audience anticipate the next Disney Princess live-action film.

Disney princess TV series frame nostalgia and fandom differently. For instance, the *Sofia* series privileges fandom by making the character *Sofia* a kind of fan of the older Princesses. We could not call this textbook nostalgia, since the primary audience for the show are preschoolers. However, parents may guide their kids to the show because of their own nostalgia, as noted at the start of the chapter. When Princess characters visit Sofia within the narrative, as I explored in Chapter 1, Sofia recognizes them, much as a young Disney Princess super fan may know every

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[429] Johnson, "Cinematic Destiny," 6.

Princess they meet at a Disney park. Since *Sofia* audiences are typically very young, 2-5 years of age, they may not know all the Disney Princess characters.[430] This framing of Sofia as a fan lets audiences in on a potentially undiscovered culture; young girls and boys alike could see Sofia's reaction as evidence that such a fan culture exists, encouraging them to introduce themselves to Disney Princess fandom that their peers—real and imaginary—seem to understand.

This kind of strategy is similarly used in the film *The Muppets* and in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. Disney's *The Muppets* stars Jason Segel as Gary and a puppet named Walter (voiced by Peter Linz) as his brother. The two characters are Muppet super fans. They own merchandize and connect to each other by rehearsing old Muppets scenes and watching *The Muppet Show* together. This performance of fandom indicates the social and identity-forming significance of media consumption. The brothers' bond is deeply interwoven with their own memories associated with the Muppets. Not only is this performance significance within the film text. Disney also emphasized Jason Segal's own Muppets fandom to lend credibility to the film, inferring the Segel's fandom would inform his role as producer and star of a Muppets film reboot. In a series of textual, intertextual, and extratextual references, *The Muppets* as a revival for the brand relies on layers of Muppets nostalgia to reinvigorate grown fans and encourage the enthusiasm of new fans.

As the first film to reboot the Star Wars franchise, *The Force Awakens* lends itself to transgenerational strategies, and in particular to nostalgia for the original three-film franchise (1978-1983). The nostalgia in the film centers on clever reveals of iconic objects and the positioning of characters as fans of the Star Wars mythology, much like the Disney Princesses and Muppets. For example, early in the film, the legendary space freighter the Millennium Falcon, a ship originally piloted by Han Solo, comes into the film in a quick and humorous action sequence. Protagonists Rey and Finn, the young “girl” and renegade Stormtrooper, respectively, attempt to escape while being pursued by Storm Troopers from the First Order, the new name for remaining Empire forces. As they run, Finn points to a ship off screen, saying to Rey, “What about that one over there?” Rey dismisses him: “That one's garbage.” As they continue to run toward a different ship it explodes from an air strike above. Rey remarks, “ The garbage will do,” and the pair veer off to the right. In a quick cut, the camera pans left, and the Millennium Falcon comes into view. Even for casual viewers of the earliest run of Star Wars films, the Millennium Falcon is a recognizable icon. Even more so, many fans would recall that the Millennium Falcon was always derided as a slow and outdated ship, but with Han Solo's expert piloting and custom updates, this ship becomes central to most battle sequences in the franchise’s early history. This humorous moment recalls fond memories of the object through new, naive characters who are not as experienced as the viewers.

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[430] While popular discourses present young girls as Disney Princess obsessed, families I interviewed reported inconsistencies in their children's adoption of Princess culture, based on their personalities or access. Many children would encounter *Sofia the First* before other Princesses. Many would recognize a printed tableau of Princesses but would not know individual character names or stories.

The Force Awakens is also another venue for Disney's now frequent positioning of primary characters as fans of the legacy characters they encounter. Rey gasps upon mention of Luke Skywalker and stops in her tracks when she first meets Han Solo:

Rey: “This is the Millennium Falcon? You’re Han Solo?”

Han: “I used to be.”

Finn: “Han Solo the Rebellion General?”

Rey: “No, the smuggler.”

Finn: “I thought he was a war hero.”

This exchange refers to Solo's status as a loner, mercenary, and reluctant hero in the early Star Wars films. The younger characters, Finn and Rey, remember different aspects of his history and both admire him. Where they lack the full story, even casual adult fans will remember Solo's heroic acts in the first Star Wars trilogy.

What makes nostalgia so successful is that is relies on casual fandom or "mainstream" affection for these storylines. The kind of distant longing or hazy memory of days gone by privileges the industries' ability to remake and revise texts without enraging avid fans—or rather, while enraging many fans but still maintaining a broad audience of viewers. The revival or evolution of franchises like the Muppets, Star Wars, and even Disney Princesses are not pitched at fans who feel collective ownership over the Star Wars universe. However, if this type of fan is faced with no reboots at all or reboots under Disney, they may well put aside their objections and engage with Disney's world of consumption anyway. Will Brooker comments on this in reference to Star Wars: "To Lucasfilm, Ltd., *Star Wars* is not a cult text or a folk myth but an ongoing business, a series of trademarks and properties that need to be protected; their main relationship is not with the type of dedicated fan…but with mainstream moviegoers and their children,"[431]

Similarly, Kristen Thompson says about the *Lord of the Rings* film series that director Peter Jackson wanted the films to appeal to people who'd read the books, "ten years ago, not ten months ago."[432] Both Brooker and Thompson point out the way mainstream moviegoers and forgetful/forgiving fans better serve the interests of franchises at the corporate level and hint at the impulse for Lucasfilm and Disney to exploit the transgenerational possibilities of franchises like *Star Wars* through such fans. With nostalgia and the other themes I'll explore below, Disney plans to bring in some older fans and generate enthusiasm among young and new fans as well.

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[431] Will Brooker, *Using the Force: Creativity, Community and* Star Wars *Fans* (New York: Continuum, 2002): xvi.

[432] Kristen Thompson, *The Frodo Franchise:* The Lord of the Rings *and Modern Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 68.

"Sisters Over Misters": Familial Love

The Disney Princess franchise, like other franchises under Disney, refocuses on familial love, and in particular, its primacy over romantic love. Popular and academic discourses around girls' cultures and texts often condemn the "happily ever after" romance that limited girls' and women's aspirations to romantic ones. This idea that a husband is the ultimate happy ending is coded into girls' cultures; like family culture, it is the sentimental myth to the very real historical precarity of women's lives. However, Disney has more conservative audiences who might not enjoy overt representations of feminist women—thus, while Disney implicitly promises female empowerment through strong female characters, the company sidesteps the potentially radical idea that their girl characters will not marry princess—and may be queer—by turning from romantic love to familial love.

Disney has de-emphasized the romantic plot in its Princess films, or at least offered a romantic and non-romantic path for female characters. In *Brave* (2012), the princess is prince-less, though the possibility of marriage looms beyond the film's end. In *Frozen* (2013), Princess Anna's romance with Kristof is positioned as a "B" romance in comparison to a truer and deeper sisterly love between herself and Elsa, the platonic "A" couple. *Moana* (2017) has no romantic plot to speak of, but rather, the heroine's thoughts are of her grandmother and the future of her family and tribe.

Some of these recent narratives challenge the primacy of romance by redefining the spell-breaking power of "true love's kiss" that Disney historically privileges. Most of the pre-Disney folktales rarely featured the kiss as a means for breaking a spell. In the Snow White tale, for instance, love's true kiss came into existence with Disney's adaptation.[433] Previously, Snow White's sleeping spell was broken when the poison apple piece was violently dislodged from her throat: in one version, she fell out of her coffin and in another, the prince shook it out in frustration. While Disney did not invent idealized, romantic ending to films, it certainly introduced the "true love's kiss" trope in its adaptations.

In recent years, *Once Upon a Time* and *Maleficent* emphasize that love for one's family, and in two cases between parent and child, become the most important kind of love. This still idealizes the family, and mothers in particular, but Disney's current definition of "true love" may more palatable to feminists, progressives, and many parents who want to delay the sexual and romantic lives of their children, and to conservative parents who want to preserve the innocence of their children by avoiding potentially sexual content. It is also potentially more robust as a long-term theme for family-friendly and child-friendly films, which speaks to the company's efforts to extend the relevance of their texts into future generations.

In both *Once Upon a Time* and *Maleficent*, a mother's kiss is what breaks the spell for their cursed children. *Once Upon a Time* does reuses the trope for romantic couples, including a barely featured lesbian pair late in the six-season series, and again in the reboot/last season of the show. Perhaps caving to fan pressure, the series couples Dorothy of *The Wizard of Oz* and Little Red Riding Hood. After their kiss, the characters almost immediately disappear from the narrative, showing Disney's fear of exploring queer relationships in shows too closely connected to its legacy characters like the Disney Princesses. We see another lesbian pairing in the last season of the show between two daughters of villains. The couple are more prominent in the season, but with falling ratings and pressure to wrap up the series, this action on the part of Disney feels like a "too little too late" effort.

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[433] Christine Shojaei Kawan, "A Brief Literary History of *Snow White*," *Fabula: Journal of Folktale Studies* 49, no. 3-4: 325-342.

In *Maleficent*, the eponymous evil fairy is a maternal figure to Princess Aurora. The film follows some of the plot of the Perrault tale and 1959 Disney film, but creates a strong backstory for Maleficent that contextualizes, if not legitimates, her curse on Princess Aurora. Rather than being resolute in her malice, Maleficent quickly becomes a maternal figure, especially in the wake of Aurora's mother's death. Maleficent and Aurora meet a year before the curse will be set into motion and Aurora begins to call Maleficent her "fairy godmother." Maleficent fails to stop the curse, however, and Aurora falls into a deep sleep after pricking her finger on a spinning wheel. Prince Philip, Aurora's future romantic partner, fails to wake Aurora with a kiss. Instead, a kiss on the forehead from Maleficent, her mother figure, does break the spell. While Prince Philip is present at the end of the movie, Aurora's ascendance to the throne of both her kingdom and Maleficent's provides the happy ending. Thus, it is family and female relationships that propel the narrative and provide closure, not the presence of a prince.

Outside the Princess franchise and its related intertexts, the newer Star Wars films also privilege familial relationships by sidelining romance. Neither *The Force Awakens* nor *The Last Jedi* prioritize romantic plots; in *The Force Awakens*, we see a brief resolution between estranged parents Princess Leia and Han Solo and in *The Last Jedi* Rose unexpectedly declares her love for Finn after a battle, but the audience does not get confirmation of Finn's feelings and the plot quickly moves on. Instead, the mentorships and comradery between an older generation—Princess Leia, Han Solo, and Luke Skywalker—and the younger one—Finn and Rey in particular—dominate the more emotional scenes. In the case of the Disney Princess and

Star Wars, Disney's efforts to privilege family over romance reacts to both feminist criticism of the company's focus on romance for all female characters *and* privileges the family unit as the most important bond in people's lives.

While romance was never a central concern in the Muppets franchise, *The Muppets* (2011) emphasizes the importance of balancing romantic and familial love. From the beginning of the film, brothers Gary and Walter let their Muppets fandom run their lives, sidelining Gary's 10-year relationship with his girlfriend Mary. Mary, though, supports both brothers and the Muppet at the climax of the film. Gary proposes to Mary in the end, but the mutual, platonic respect and love between Gary, Walter, and Mary—gained through the personal growth of each character—wins the day.

While most Marvel films still contain romantic storylines, family ties have become equally, if not more, important character relationships to explore. In *Black Panther* (2018) for instance, the protagonist T'Challa's relationship with his mother and sister are given as much screen time and his respectful and muted romance with reconciled lover Nakia. *The Hollywood Reporter* author Ciara Wardlow noted this shift in Marvel films as well: "As Marvel has not chosen to entirely divest from the idea of love interests, the switch to a focus on family ties led the franchise into an unfortunate era of peripheral and awkward romances, from Steve Rogers and Sharon Carter (Emily VanCamp) to Stephen Strange (Benedict Cumberbatch) and Christine Palmer (Rachel McAdams) in Doctor Strange."[434] For a comics universe where character romances are well-known, some fans may be disappointed in seeing love affairs tempered in favor of family relationships. As with the Disney P/princess media where familial love both privileges female empowerment and childhood innocence, the centering of familial relationships in Star Wars, the Muppets, and Marvel films feels like a way to both avoid objectifying female characters and make the content both more "family-friendly" by muting sexual tension. Again, this strategy is particularly cunning as it plays on often incompatible political views by using themes that can be decoded differently—not to unify such audiences but to keep many different kinds of customers attached to Disney content.

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[434] Ciara Wardlow, "The State of Marvel Romance After 'Ant-Man and the Wasp'," *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 11, 2018, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/ant-man-wasp-sad-state-marvel-romance-1125845.

May the Force Be with Her: Gendered Taste-making Between Generations

Disney's current strategies encourage transgenerational fandoms, and especially the transmission of cultural fandoms from father to daughter. This strategy can be linked to two important historical phenomena: the idea that masculine fandoms are more appealing to girls than feminine ones are two boys and that the relationship between a father and daughter can be a mutually empowering one. These ideas overlap in that girls are asked to adopt historically masculine fandoms and fathers are encouraged to invite daughters into a legacy of media texts that have historically excluded or diminished women's roles, but also nurture and participate in feminine fandoms. The Disney strategy holds to the idea that girl consumers—for it largely ignores queer boys and transgender kids—can enjoy both things girly and tomboyish. This is the girl consumer's version of "having it all" in the postfeminist and girl-power sense: indulging in princess culture and wielding a lightsaber with Dad. Similar to the ways in which Disney encourages mothers to pass their Princess fandoms to daughters, dads are invited to share their love of Star Wars and Marvel with daughters, imagining that sharing these with their sons is inevitable and thus not important to promote. We can see this trend within texts, intertextually, and in paratexts around Star Wars in particular. This strategy for Disney reflects a larger movement of family-oriented media content and parent-child activities that commodify the emotional narrative of fathers and daughters breaking down gender expectations by selling products and experiences.[435]

For instance, “Beer and Braids” is a salon event where fathers learn to braid their daughter's hair, confirming the idea that while father are increasingly more involved in their children’s live, they are not socialized to perform beauty-related care work. Ostensibly started in Denver,[436] the dad with the best braiding skills, judged in the form of the fashion show where girls show off their hairstyles, goes home with a six pack of beer. Other salons have taken up this idea, but where dads and daughters “grab a beer” and juice, respectively, before the braiding begins.[437] This kind of local “edu-tainment” experience is of course designed to get dads into the salon environment, either to book future appointments for themselves or their kids. The idea capitalizes, though, on a father’s desire to spend quality time with his daughter. In another example, parenting blog Red Tricycle mixes and matches ideas for father-daughter time with hyper-feminine and historically masculine activities: “Have ‘the talk.’ Because it’s never too early to teach your daughter the incontrovertible fact that the Marvel Comic Universe is vastly superior to the DC Comic Universe, Wonder Woman notwithstanding”...“Get a mani-pedi together. While your daughter’s nails likely are in pretty good shape, your cuticles probably could use some attention, too.[438]" The post plays on girl-power culture—first by noting the superiority of a female superhero but also by treating bodily maintenance as a fun treat, not the constant work and money that women put into aspiring to narrow beauty standards.

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[435] Hannah Hamad, *Postfeminism and Paternity in Contemporary U.S. Film* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014); Caroline F. Leader, “Dadvertising: Representations of Fatherhood in Procter & Gamble’s Tide Commercials,” *Communication, Culture, & Critique* 12, no. 1 (March 2019), p. 72-89.

[436] Genevieve Shaw Brown, “Denver Salon Offers 'Beer and Braids' Date Night for Dads and Daughters,” *ABC News*, July 8, 2015, https://abcnews.go.com/Lifestyle/denver-salon-offers-beer-braids-date-night-dads/story?id=32300331.

[437] “Beer and Braids,” Hybrid Salon, accessed June 3, 2016, https://hybridsalon.net/2016/03/01/beer-and-braids/.

In what Estella Tincknell calls the "playmate to nurturer" transition, fathers' roles in the home have changed, largely in reaction to women's increased public presence.[439] As a result, they have more direct influence over children's consumption and tastes. In my article on Proctor and Gamble Tide ads, I explore how the father-daughter relationship creates a sense of optimism for a future of (domestic) equity, where the daughter is free from domestic labor, and the father happily replaces a presumed but invisible mother as domestic caretaker.[440] Similarly in the case of Disney, father-daughter bonding implies equality and progressivism on the part of the father, where a dad's indulgence of his daughter gives her power over him and the dad holds power as a role model who paves the way for his child.

The father and daughter, however, do not arrive on equal footing to this gender-bending party. Women's long history of dependence and infantilization still lurks within Western and U.S. cultural consciousness, especially in how women's consumption and tastes are ridiculed. This affects heterosexual girls and boys, queer boys, and transgender children who perform femininity or delight in feminine texts. Historically, feminized consumption has been often limited to self-decoration and domestic decoration.[441] Girls toys are historically more frequently associated with baking and dressing up, while boys' toys vary more widely and include more outdoor adventure. As I mentioned previously, the Disney Princess occupies a fascinating place as a franchise that presumably follows traditional feminine aesthetic norms—most obviously through the physical presentation of Princess bodies as images on merchandise and as dolls—, and therefore fails to accrue cultural capital in a patriarchal, masculine culture as well as a feminist culture—the two of which presuppose to be at odds, but which come together in considering the Disney Princess. Mothers' distress over creating weak-minded and passive daughters overlaps with fathers' distaste for the feminine in general. So, while girls may be encouraged to invest in such feminine texts by friends or by their own volition, the Princesses are simultaneously repugnant to many adults and boys—and girls—because of their feminized status. This was clear in my interviews with families where older daughters often disavowed Disney Princesses as an undesirable object they self-identified against.

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[438] Kipp Jarecke-Cheng, "31 Activities Perfect for Fathers & Daughters," *Red Tricycle*, last modified June 7, 2019, http://redtri.com/father-daughter-activities/.

[439] Estella Tincknell, Mediating the Family: Gender, Culture and Representation (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), 55.

[440] Leader, "Dadvertising."

[441] Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993.

In the Disney Princess arena, Disney's strategy for wide-release films has been to de-emphasize the femininity of these texts. The controversial interview conducted by the *Los Angeles Times* in 2009 indicated a possible turn away from the antiquated "fairytale" and its feminine connotations in favor of new franchises that, unsurprisingly, leaned more toward masculine tastes, including work from recently acquired Marvel Entertainment. Such efforts can be seen as part of a push to ameliorate Disney's "boy problem," the company's historic difficulties in attracting adolescent boys at the same rate as their female peers. For even younger audiences, *Tangled* and *Brave* sought to bring boys in with comedic male characters, fewer girly girls, and gender-neutral titles. Similarly, *Frozen* had Olaf and Kristof, goofy male characters to counter the femininity of Anna, and less so, Elsa. Finally, *Moana* had co-protagonist Maui, the self-involved and comical male demi-god.

Working on the other side of the perceived gender spectrum, non-Princess films, and particularly male-led narratives, have also made room for girl fans. *Wreck It Ralph* follows an adult male character and his friend who disavows her princess title, opting for the title of President Vanellope, as soon as she re-captures her throne. However, the most intriguing space of clearly transgenerational work is in the *Star Wars* franchise, a masculine-centered franchise whose only major heroine was Princess Leia, where newer films and shows re-center female characters and create father-daughter legacies in for future fandoms.

The recent Star Wars films follow the most iconic characters in a linear timeline that include with Lucasfilm's two film series trilogies—make explicit efforts to center female characters within a masculinist legacy of heroes in the Star Wars universe. Both films add women in leadership roles on the evil (Empire) side—Gwendoline Christie as Captain Phasma, commander of the Storm Troopers—and on the good (Rebel) side—Laura Dern as Vice Admiral Holdo, Lupita Nyong'o as pirate and Rebel ally Maz Kanata, and Carrie Fisher returning as Princess/General Leia Organa. Carrie Fisher's Leia serves to bridge a historical titular gender divide, transitioning audiences from the pre-Disney franchise. In a short sequence, Han Solo and Leia argue and the droid C3PO mutters "Princesses!", associating Leia's stubborn and fiery spirit as a distinctly princess-like trait. This would certain coincide with the 1980s to 2000s brand of Disney Princesses. However, such attributes are not enough to make Leia a legitimate leader. She takes on the mantle "General Organa" in *The Force Awakens* to legitimate her leadership of male and female fighters in the Resistance. In so doing, Leia elevates a feminine and derided term but still uses a masculine one to justify her leadership role, just Disney both defends its legacy Disney Princess characters while rhetorically distancing the Disney Princess Renaissance characters from the brand's feminine reputation.

The films also add younger women, including Rose Tico (played by Kelly Marie Tran) and Rey (played by Daisy Ridley). Both represent female ascension in a masculine world, but Rey is positioned more centrally as the next Jedi, taking over from Luke Skywalker, Jedi master and subject of the previous Jedi resurgence in *Return of the Jedi* (1983). In *The Force Awakens* and *The Last Jedi* respectively, Rey is first the pilot protégé to Han Solo and later the Jedi apprentice to Luke Skywalker. Thus, the films follow a traditional postfeminist strategy in the media industries of putting women at the center of the story but flanking them with male peers and mentors. John Boyega as Finn, Oscar Isaac as Poe, Adam Driver as Kylo Ren, Harrison Ford briefly reprising his role as Han Solo, and Mark Hamill as Luke Skywalker take up central roles and ample screen time with and without Daisy Ridely's Rey. Punctuating the singularity of a female lead, Disney encountered a publicity scandal when they failed to a Rey action figure on toy shelves where most feature male characters were available, showing the ignorant and traditionalist gender binary in retail that maintains the "invisibility of female fans of the franchise," Susanne Scott argues.[442]

Alongside these film texts is the YouTube, then Disney XD, series *Star Wars: Forces of Destiny*, which follows female characters as they relive and expand Star Wars storylines, focusing on female friendship and mentorship. In many ways, *Forces of Destiny* fulfills a similar function as *Sofia the First*, (re)introducing young female audiences to the franchise, though *Forces* is pitched to a school-age crowd and relies on viewers having more knowledge of the franchise. It gives female fans, and perhaps male fans as well, an everyday experience with Star Wars outside of the films, continuing engagement outside box office and home video exhibition.

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[442] Suzanne Scott, "#Wheresrey?: Toys, Spoilers, and the Gender Politics of Franchise Paratext," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* (2017): 142.

This female-focused series made up of two-to-three minute episodes is an incredibly small investment that could pay off substantially for Disney, getting girls invested in Star Wars.

Finally, paratextual promotion for the Disney parks heavily encourages female fandom, as well as father-daughter fandom, of *Star Wars*. As is clear in the photos below, young girls are welcomed into the *Star Wars* fold. They are also welcome to engage with Disney Princesses. Promotion of Disney Princesses is a multicultural girl experience, as seen below, where moms and Disney Princesses serve at the mentors introducing or encouraging Disney Princess fandom to a younger generation. This works in stark contrast with queer and heterosexual boy fandom of Princesses, which was made evident in my interviews and is easily uncovered in popular discourse around male fandom of Elsa in particular.[443] Disneyland Paris even turned a mom and her son away from the famous "Princess for a Day" experience, sparking a PR nightmare and resulting in Disney retroactively opening the salon doors wide for any child.[444] Disney does not promote mothers passing Disney Princess fandom on to their male-presenting or transgender children. They do, however, explicitly entreat fathers to engage their daughters in *Star Wars*, joining the larger universe of boy-centered Disney franchises. This, of course, reminds us of the core brand of the Disney Princess, that of the can-do girl who succeeds in a male-dominated world. In the case of Star Wars, father figures play important roles in girls' success because male role models are seen by Disney as the transgenerational key to accessing girl audiences.

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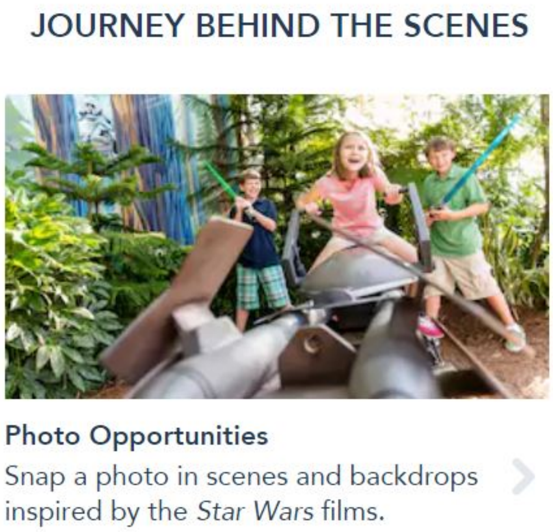
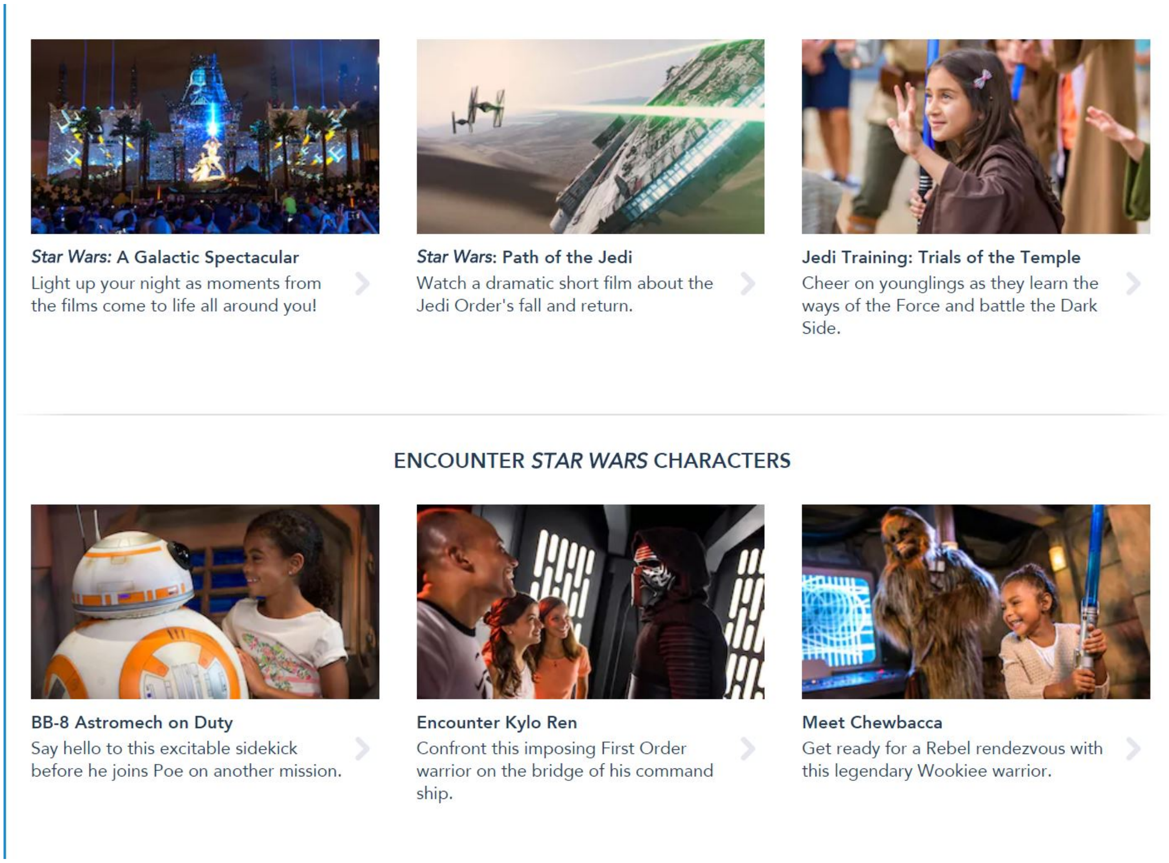
[443] Sean Griffin, "Brozens: Straight Male Subjectivity and Disney's "Frozen"" (paper presented at Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Atlanta, March 2016).

[444] Daniella Silva, "Disneyland Paris Apologizes for Banning Little Boy from 'Princess for a Day' Experience," *NBC News*, August 30, 2017.



JOURNEY BEHIND THE SCENES

Photo Opportunities
Snap a photo in scenes and backdrops inspired by the *Star Wars* films.



***Star Wars:* A Galactic Spectacular**
Light up your night as moments from the films come to life all around you!

***Star Wars*: Path of the Jedi**
Watch a dramatic short film about the Jedi Order's fall and return.

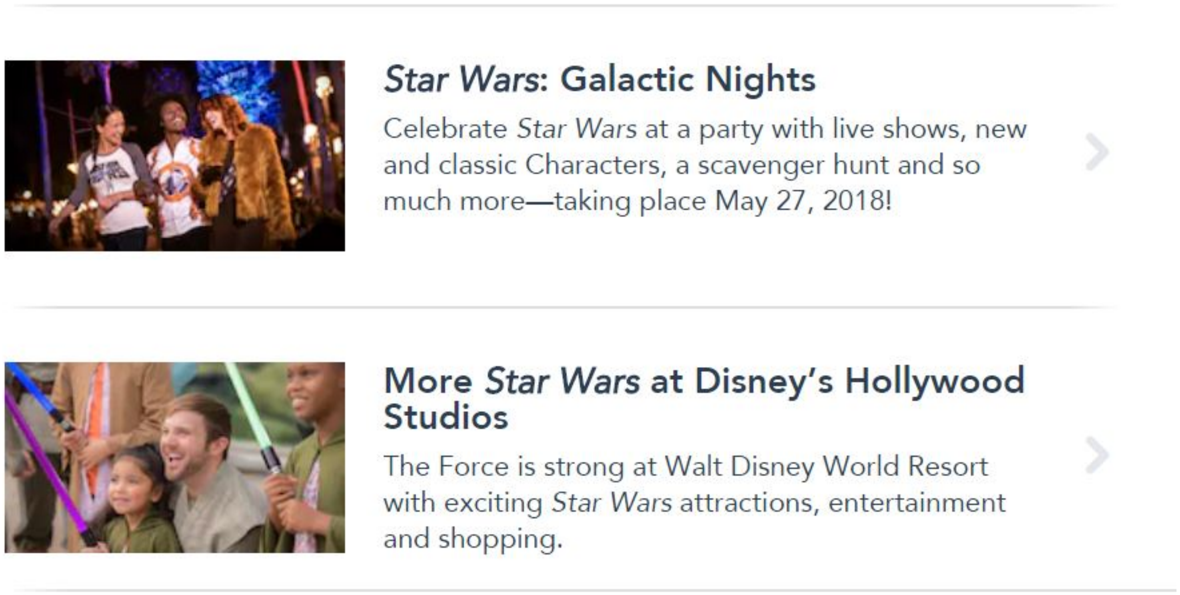
Jedi Training: Trials of the Temple
Cheer on younglings as they learn the ways of the Force and battle the Dark Side.

ENCOUNTER *STAR WARS* CHARACTERS

BB-8 Astromech on Duty
Say hello to this excitable sidekick before he joins Poe on another mission.

Encounter Kylo Ren
Confront this imposing First Order warrior on the bridge of his command ship.

Meet Chewbacca
Get ready for a Rebel rendezvous with this legendary Wookiee warrior.



***Star Wars*: Galactic Nights**

Celebrate *Star Wars* at a party with live shows, new and classic Characters, a scavenger hunt and so much more—taking place May 27, 2018!

More *Star Wars* at Disney's Hollywood Studios

The Force is strong at Walt Disney World Resort with exciting *Star Wars* attractions, entertainment and shopping.

Girls are front and center on Star Wars Disney World park promotions[445]

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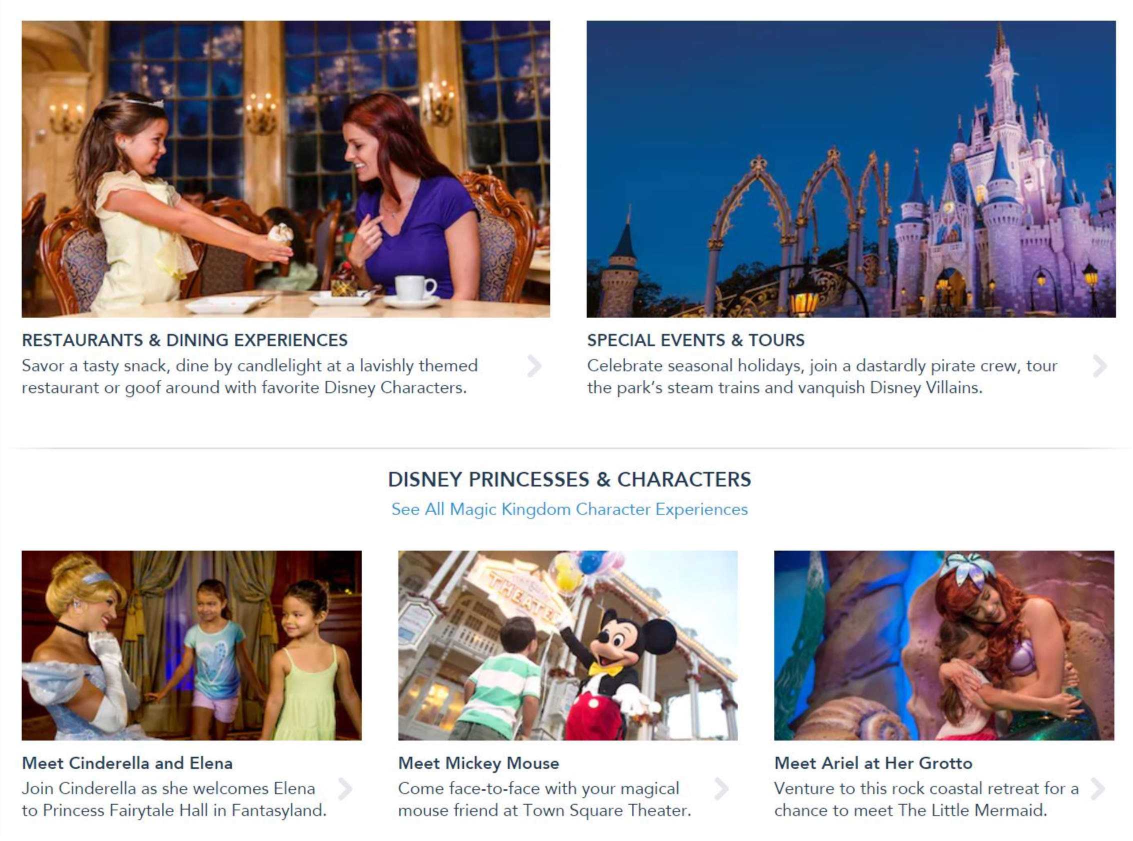
[445] "Star Wars Photo Opportunities," *Walt Disney World*, accessed February 18, 2016, https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/attractions/hollywood-studios/star-wars-photo-opportunities/.



RESTAURANTS & DINING EXPERIENCES

Savor a tasty snack, dine by candlelight at a lavishly themed restaurant or goof around with favorite Disney Characters.

SPECIAL EVENTS & TOURS

Celebrate seasonal holidays, join a dastardly pirate crew, tour the park's steam trains and vanquish Disney Villains.

DISNEY PRINCESSES & CHARACTERS

See All Magic Kingdom Character Experiences

Meet Cinderella and Elena

Join Cinderella as she welcomes Elena to Princess Fairytale Hall in Fantasyland.

Meet Mickey Mouse

Come face-to-face with your magical mouse friend at Town Square Theater.

Meet Ariel at Her Grotto

Venture to this rock coastal retreat for a chance to meet The Little Mermaid.

Girls are also the only explicit audience in Disney Princess promotions[446]

Conclusion

This chapter considers the meaning of family media beyond "family-friendly" content, and instead explores family as a consumer group, as a corporate structure, and as a unit of meaning explored thematically by media companies like Disney. The idea of family is necessarily intertwined with the production, circulation, and consumption of social and cultural meanings of these media texts. Disney's corporate "family" and transgenerational franchising exploits the consumption practices of families to ensure the economic strength of its properties into the future.

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[446] "Disney Princesses at Walt Disney World Resort," *Walt Disney World*, accessed February 18, 2016, https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/entertainment/princesses/.

Despite creating new content over the several decades, the company has recently concentrated on reviving and acquiring legacy brands in order to expand their audience. First, by breaking larger intertextual franchises into narrowcasted programming, they appeal to fans of different ages separately, introducing and re-introducing characters to different target markets. Second, they use transgenerational franchising strategies in media content—such as nostalgia, familial love, and father-daughter relationships. In line with the same criticism the Disney Princess franchise has received, Disney exploits popular feminist sentiment and the reality of an engaged female Star Wars fandom by making women more central in that franchise's intertexts. The expansion of Disney worlds has not significantly changed the company's core practice popularized in the cultural environment that produced the Disney Princess brand—producing contradictory messaging that appeals to different audiences and keeps them invested economically in Disney's worlds of consumption.

CONCLUSION

My colleague exclaimed with glee that she and the preschoolers in our study drew a "Princess Smasher," capturing princesses in tiny compartments and hammering them violently to death. On the one hand, I understood my colleague's excitement. She wanted to act against a patriarchal conception of femininity that princesses represented for her. She enjoyed engaging in play violence and hoping the kids would also resist the confines of a gender binary. But I was also disturbed by her enthusiasm, not for the violence of it, but because it was directed at femininity, not at patriarchy. It seemed like a misdirection that so frequently reinforces misogyny: the assumption that femininity is a direct result of patriarchy and a set of behaviors that women are responsible for rejecting, rather than a gender expression used historically to oppress women, empower them, and create gender-queer performances outside a gender binary.

Most critical, academic discussion of the Disney Princess has reflected a myopic understanding of these characters for this reason: that femininity and feminism are treated as opposite ends of a representational spectrum and the Disney Princess franchise is often judged using this scale. Putting qualitative limits around feminine culture objects—such as the binary assessments of Disney Princesses as feminist or anti-feminist—precludes deep study of the cultural institutions that form these characters, the audience negotiations that occur in the consumption of feminine media objects, and the complex industrial strategies and practices conspire to create economically successful—and therefore culturally meaningful--brand.

The Disney Princess is a franchise juggernaut, an exemplar of the ideologies surrounding girls' consumer cultures, and a cultural discourse that exposes both frustration with gender inequity and a distrust of children's and women's tastes. The chapters above have shown that Disney continues to profit on the Princesses and P/princess culture with contradictory brand messaging that responds to cultural critics while continuing to (re)produce feminine fantasies. Rather than a unified world or brand story, I argue the Disney Princess brand embraces the paradoxes of girl-power culture, and that this allows the company extend the franchise to appeal to the values of different consumer groups, the conventions of different industry sectors, and the cultural trends of different eras.

Chapter 1 illustrates that such contradictions are integral to the creation of the Disney Princess brand. Rather than the terms "world-building" or "worldmaking," which imply that a world or set of franchised worlds continues to grow and expand from a fixed Princess narrative ontology, I use "world-bending" to privilege the chaos, contradiction, and limitations that shape and alter a franchise over time. Because of the ideologically powerful discourse around the Disney Princess, world-bending characterizes its formation and evolution. The power of third-wave feminist discourse in the 1990s continues to influence Disney's rhetoric around Disney P/princess narratives and press content, but the equally important pull of hyperfeminine consumer cultures defines the brand's appeal as well. As such, Disney's management of the franchise is not only the result of productive tensions between different industry players and media platforms—it is the ideologically fraught discourse around gender and girlhood.

Chapter 2 explores one of these contradictions and ideological limitations, the production of Disney Princess dolls. I see the Disney Princess doll as an embodiment of the contested ground of girls' consumer products, where a hyperfeminine doll does not necessarily shape or distort the mind of its owner. Rather, doll history shows that femininity is potentially imaginative and empowering: a gendered performance that is not always defined by patriarchy. However, the production and retailing of dolls is another story. The dolls are produced to look similar, from their sparkling gowns to their flowing hair, yet the inclusion of ethnically distinct costumes for characters like Pocahontas and Mulan ironically marginalizes them—they are seldom seen on toy shelves. Thus, difference is only evident in the separation of racially “different” Princesses and the separation of girl toys from boy toys, as is the case with the distinction between the LEGO mini-figure and the LEGO mini-doll. Such limitations do not necessarily determine a child’s use of doll, but rather sets up a cultural expectation of gender and racial difference that will lead some consumers to the “correct” toy aisle and leave other consumers with few options.

Chapter 3 shows how industrial and public discourse influences Disney Princess consumption, as well as how children’s play extends beyond these discourses. In interviewing middle-class families, I saw parents reacting to both Disney Princess criticisms and negotiating parenting discourses to self-consciously defend and define their own curation of their children’s consumption. Children, on the other hand, were clearly define the princess as a highly feminine icon with clear visual characteristics, and yet P/princess play was not defined by these gendered traits. Thus, discourse and social context were both integral to Disney Princess consumption.

Finally, Chapter 4 explores how the Disney Princess influences and plays a key role in Disney’s “family branding” strategies—including transgenerational franchising—designed to protect the company against brand irrelevance in the future and limit the number of new narratives needed to make Disney money. As such, the company acquired already transgenerational franchises and began intensifying its transgenerational marketing strategies to win over multiple members of the heteronormative family. The Disney Princess exemplifies transgenerational themes like nostalgia, familial love, and father-daughter relationships, the last of which ties the Disney Princess and Star Wars universes to girl-power rhetoric and potentially draws in additional female fans. Such emotionally rich and empowerment-oriented strategies are designed to exploit cultural practices of family consumption where families often share and pass down their consumption tastes. By leveraging this culture, Disney hopes that consumers will continue literally buying into their multitude of family brands for years to come.

This work contributes to investigations of franchising and media branding. First, gender is integral to industrial strategies and discourses surrounding many franchises because of the explicit gendering of consumer products and cultures. As we've seen with Disney Princesses, girl power and postfeminism are not just limited to girls' cultural spaces—they are ideologies that narrativize how successful girls and women should interact with the world around them, including consumption, career, and self-management in a capitalistic and masculinist system. Thus, these gendered ideologies and cultures interact with industry strategy and production.

I also contribute to scholarship on franchising by exploring the phenomenon of world-bending and contextualizing franchising within family branding. World-bending attends to the influence of discourse and reception in co-constructing brands with industry. Sarah Banet-Weiser and Derek Johnson have explored the coproduction of brands[1] and the importance of identity and community in constructing franchising value[2], but I extend this idea to gendered stigma and the devaluation of branded characters. While the Disney Princesses continue to be profitable, their reputation among parents and critics is shaky at best and Disney's efforts to re-brand the characters often fail to change hearts and minds, and instead exists in a negotiated space where some parents consume these characters under pressure from their children, others because of their nostalgia for the characters, and still others because they hold more traditional views of gender expression.

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[1] Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 8.

[2] Derek Johnson, *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 26.

This is only part of what constitutes world-bending, the idea that franchises do not simply expand story worlds or share story worlds between production contexts; franchising necessitates bending story worlds to accommodate a changing cultural and industrial landscape. With the Disney Princess, world-bending was required to develop and launch the franchise. These diverse female characters—some of whom were not princesses—became an iconic brand motivated by the rise of the girl consumer market. World-bending is also illustrated by the transmedia nature of the brand. For example, the doll industry's historical focus on feminine fantasy and "pink aisle" politics conflicts with the supposed re-branding of Disney Princesses as feminist, or at least resistant to traditional femininity. This connects to the third facet of world-bending, which is the re-branding and reconfiguration of character relationships and story worlds over time. The distinct fairytale worlds of the Princess characters have collapsed into one world (*Ralph Breaks the Internet*) or a series of interconnected worlds (*Sofia the First*) that encourage audiences to move from one text to another, or between Disney's "worlds of consumption."

I also built a more discursive understanding of how franchised text circulate and produce cultural meaning as a constant interaction between audiences and industry. It was my goal to involve children in this discussion. However, my work has only begun to explore the significance of femininity, family, and franchising to these branded characters. I have used critical discourse analysis through the analysis of texts and interview data, but I would like to extend that analysis to interviewing industry workers, a process I've only just started and will apply to future work. I also believe there is room to explore other "worlds of consumption," like theme parks and sports arenas where Disney has promoted its franchises in connection with professional sports leagues.

In addition, because my recruitment methods included a combination of flyers in public spaces like libraries and community centers and snowballing from interviewed mothers, I did not have the opportunity to interview many fathers or sons or queer parents and children. I wish to better understand fathers' perceptions of Princesses to ascertain whether their level of scrutiny and concern over gendered texts parallels that of mothers. Interviewing queer children and adults would offer perspectives from audiences who sometimes must negotiate gendered texts on different terms because of a lack of strong representation in kids' media.

Finally, I hope this dissertation motivates other scholars to integrate gender into their exploration of franchised texts and, in particular, to masculinized franchises. It is not just feminine franchises that are gendered. I have shown how gender affects the production and reception of franchises. This certainly contributes to determinations of value and potential exclusionary production practices of many franchises and branded texts we encounter. What I have accomplished here is centering a girls' media franchise in a broader discursive context—both scholarly and popular—that tends to ignore or malign girls' experiences and the influence of feminine cultures over industry practice.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Methodology

Family interviews

With families—parents and kids—I used qualitative, open-ended interviewing. Interviews with families were designed to position Disney Princesses within family media practices—to recognize the value of these characters within and beyond young girl's cultures. Interviews of parents consisted of open-ended questions. While I used a consistent set of questions that mostly pertained to media use and preference, I followed participants' lead in subjects that mattered most to the family surrounding media. My interview questions first identified families' viewing habits, their preferences, and their dislikes or anxieties around children's media. This sometimes helped to contextualize parents' like, dislike, or ambivalence around Disney Princesses. With children present for many of these interviews, I was able to observe and note family dynamics, where cohesion amongst parents and children existed and where they departed on certain likes and dislikes. Parents and children were also helpful in building a more complete list of preferred media content and viewing methods since both groups would likely come from a slightly different perspective. This allowed for richer explorations of a family's habitus and brought up issues I as the interviewer may not have previously considered. In a couple of cases, participants' responses would generate a new interview question for future interviews with other families. Children were present during the second phase of family interviews and contributed to open-ended questions responses. These responses counted in the quantitative and qualitative data of family interviews.

Child interview methodology

Interviews of children consisted of drawing sessions, Princess I.D. card questions, and open-ended questions about media preference and princess knowledge. Some interviews were conducted as part of family interviews while others took place in the Preschool Lab on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Children in these preschool interviews are most often children of university staff and faculty. Their backgrounds span multiple countries and languages, but all students who were interviewed spoke English fluently.

The primary goal of children's interviews was to construct children's' definitions of "princess" and how this icon fit into their daily lives. It would also give me a sense of children's knowledge of the franchise and its narratives.

Appendix B: Population Recruitment

My interviews for families and parents were conducted in two phases. The first round of interviews was conducted by phone and in person and spanned families' media tastes and methods of use. These interviews were of parents only and children could not be recorded. During these interviews, I added questions about Disney Princesses, if they had not already come up, and asked parents their feelings about the franchise, including their own experiences with the characters as children. The second round of interviews were mostly in-person and compromised of interviews with parents and children. Families in this round knew the interview would focus on Disney Princesses and so many families participated because of their interest in or skepticism of the brand. Interviews were generally an hour in length, with some shorter and some longer. Families were recruited with no reference to race, gender, or class and I made efforts to place ads in locations that would potentially draw in families of multiple backgrounds. Almost all families were middle class, with some lower and some upper middle. Only two families would be considered living at or below the poverty line. Some families lived in urban or semi-urban locations, some lived in suburbs, and others still lived in more rural locations with access to cities nearby.

Appendix C: Study Limitations

Despite recruitment efforts, I only talked with a few fathers. I also was not able to recruit LBGTQ parents or gender-queer children, which I believe would have added a richer story of the Disney Princess. I would like to conduct future study on families that do not have hetero-normative family structures to try and get solid data from these populations.

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