


YOUNG GIRLS' PERCEPTION OF BEAUTY IN DISNEY PRINCESS MOVIES



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ABSTRACT

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Disney princesses are an icon for young girls. Their admiration towards the princesses can be seen through their familiarity with the characters in each film. Disney animated films are always associated with beauty which leads to stereotyping. The protagonists in the movies are always associated with beauty and positive qualities while the antagonists possess all the negative traits. This study was conducted to examine how Malaysian young girls define beauty in Disney princess movies and to explore whether the definition of beauty influences the way they reflect on themselves as a beautiful being. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 participants aged 4 to 6 years old in a kindergarten in Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia. Analysis of the interview data reveals that the young girls define beauty in terms of physical appearance and positive traits. However, they do not consider beauty as the most important quality a person should have. They are also aware that the Disney princesses are just an animated character, hence their beauty cannot be translated into the real life. This paper concludes that the Disney movies, to some extent, have shaped the children's conceptualization of beauty, but the children are aware that they should not imitate the characters in their attempt to be a beautiful girl.

1. INTRODUCTION

Beauty is essential in human life. For that reason, society increases their awareness on the importance to care for their physical appearance. Beauty industry has become a multimillion dollar industry all around the world (Frith, 2014). In Malaysia, this scenario can be seen with the existence of many beauty products, and the founders of these beauty products have become millionaires in the country (see Rajendrah *et al.* (2017)).

It is undeniable that media plays vital role in creating a standard description and portrayal of beauty. Media often portray beauty by focusing on certain body-image and gender. Female models in advertisements as well as leading actors in the movies are stereotypically presented in specific physical features and most of the time they are stereotyped and sexualized (Collins, 2011). For this reason, it is important to identify how children entertainment shapes the perception of beauty among its viewers. The representation of beauty in children's entertainment in this study focuses on the Disney princess movies. Disney princess movies are well-known among young children. From *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) to *Moana* (2016) Disney princess movies possess similar elements - enchanted magical kingdom, graceful good-looking princesses, beautiful melodic songs and fantastic special effects

that have attracted the attention of young girls all around the world to adore and imitate the characteristics of princesses in the movies.

Disney princesses are popular among the children because the children especially young girls constantly and repeatedly watch the movies for entertainment (Dreier, 2007). This scenario would have significant effects on their personal growth and development. As suggested by Bandura (1989) Social Cognitive Theory, children's behaviour, cognition and judgment are highly influenced by their close observation of their role models which also include the characters that they watch in the media. In Disney princess movies, positive prosocial messages were presented in the movies (Padilla-Walker *et al.*, 2013). This also suggests that children who watch the movies may receive positive messages which they can apply in their life. Although Disney Princess movies are produced in the United States, the brand is a phenomenon in international children's media context. Majority of Disney's princess characters are depicted as beautiful white girl where the description of the characters is close to American culture. Lee (2009) states that this portrayal would create a misconception of ideal beauty among other girls from other upbringing, background and culture.

This study is conducted to identify how Malaysian young girls define beauty in Disney princess movies and whether their interpretation of beauty affects the way they reflect on themselves as being beautiful.

2. DISNEY PRINCESS MOVIES AND REPRESENTATION OF BEAUTY

Media are the tools for public to gain knowledge, information as well as entertainment. The impacts of media to the society varies in many different aspects. Moreover, rapid advances on the technology create new forms of communication channel that has changed the landscape of communication. Young children are easily influenced by the media especially when they watch it repeatedly (Wynn and Rosenfeld, 2003). Disney princess movies undeniably have huge influence in the life of young children. They play major role in the popular culture, and the characters in the Disney movies are easily recognizable. Lacroix (2004) states that Disney princess movies are phenomena that have high and powerful influence among young girls.

Disney started its first princess movie with Snow White and the Seven Dwarf in year 1937. Recently, Disney launched its latest Disney movie, Moana. Disney princess movies have their signature elements. The movies usually have nice soundtracks, the characters are accompanied by cute animals and the main theme is good versus bad. Apart from that, the movies also contain strong messages about the importance of family relationship. This theme is suitable for its target audience who are young children who most probably will instill the positive messages when they watch the movies repeatedly.

The plots of the movies are quite similar from one another and are influential in many ways. From economical perspective, Disney is a conglomerate that contributes huge revenues in children's media. Not only Disney owns a TV channel, its merchandises, theme parks and campaigns have major contribution in the economic sector. From educational perspective, Disney movies are useful for English language learning, such as idioms and metaphors. Through its visual manifestation, the movies have positive effects on the learners (Khoshniyat and Dowlatabadi, 2014). From social perspective, Disney creates good impression and perception towards feminism. The revolution of the characteristic of the Disney princesses is significantly related with the revolution of gender role in the society. In early years, Snow White and Cinderella were portrayed with traditional female gender role such as graceful, hardworking and at the same time, committed to accomplish their house chores. In the early 90s, Disney created different types of princesses for example Fa Mulan in Mulan, Belle in Beauty and the Beast, and Ariel in the Little Mermaid were portrayed as being smart, outgoing and has strong-will. None of the princess characters during the era were portrayed doing major house chores. Recent Disney princess movies such as Tangled, Brave, Frozen and Moana represent female lead character or 'princesses' who are more independent, brave, determine and stubborn. Although the background setting does not represent modern culture and background, but the

characteristics and attitude of the princesses represents modern feminism concept of gender role among women in the society.

Disney princess movies had undergone a few changes, not only in the technology to create the animation, but also in the themes and messages they convey to the audience. *Azmi et al. (2016)* state that Disney has successfully produced modern princesses with modern characteristics that fit into the status quo where women are no longer portrayed as weak and powerless. In early years, most of Disney female characters were portrayed as Damsel in distress that waited to be rescued by their handsome young prince from the protagonist or villain in the movie. In the 90s, the Disney princess characters are portrayed as more independent, and were less portrayed in female gender stereotype role. Mulan for example is portrayed as a warrior who replaced her father in the army. Pocahontas, is another example of Disney princess character that has strong leadership criteria. New generation of Disney princess characters are portrayed to be bolder, adventurous and have strong will. Although the new generation of Disney's princess characters are supported by the male characters, these characters do not rely on the male characters to successfully achieve their mission in the movies. These are important messages that Disney conveyed in their movies.

3. METHODOLOGY

Ten children aged four years old to six years old from a kindergarten in Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia were selected to take part in this study. The children were purposively sampled as they are the fans of Disney Princess movies. Consent from their parents were obtained prior to the interview session.

There were two four-year old girls, four five-year old girls and four six-year old girls. The children were divided into five pairs. They were paired up according to their age so that they were more comfortable to express their thoughts and opinions. Each pair was asked to watch a short clip of the movies of the selected Disney princesses. Ten Disney princess characters were chosen for this study. The characters are Snow White (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs), Cinderella (Cinderella), Ariel (The Little Mermaid), Belle (Beauty and the Beast), Tiana (Princess and the Frog), Princess Merida (Brave), Rapunzel (Tangled), Princess Anna (Frozen), Queen Elsa (Frozen) and Moana (Moana). After watching each short clip, the children were given a printed poster of the Disney princesses. They are allowed to have the poster with them during the interview for their reference.

The interview took place in the kindergarten setting. The kindergarten authority provided a special room for the interview session. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The duration for each interview was about 60 minutes to 90 minutes.

The transcribed data were analysed using content analysis approach focusing on the verbal aspect. Non-verbal cues such as facial expression, intonation, voice projection and gestures of the participants while delivering the answer during the interview were not analysed in this research.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

There are two main themes to describe Malaysian young girls' perception towards beauty in Disney princess movies. The themes are i) the characters are beautiful because of their appearance, and ii) the characters are beautiful because of their positive traits.

4.1. Beauty that is Associated with Physical Appearance

Although there is an old saying stated that 'beauty lies in the eyes of the beholders' which indicates that beauty is subjective and the definition of beauty may differ from one person to another, but in this context, most of the participants said that the Disney princesses are beautiful because of the physical appearance. The participants perceive the appearance of the Disney princesses as the ideal definition of beauty. Among the common terms identified from the interview transcript to describe the physical beauty of the Disney princesses are slim/thin, huge

eyes, long hair, rosy/red lips, dress, and flawless skin. The descriptions given by the participants are significantly similar to Thompson *et al.* (1999) description of feminine beauty in the Western setting.

The frequency of each term is presented in the table below.

| Disney Princess Characters | Physical Appearance | | | | | |
|----------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|------|------|---------------|-------|
| | Slim Figure | Huge/Round Eyes | Hair | Lips | Flawless Skin | Dress |
| Snow White | 6 | - | 6 | 7 | 8 | 10 |
| Cinderella | 8 | - | 3 | 5 | 4 | 10 |
| Ariel | 6 | 9 | 10 | 4 | 7 | 6 |
| Belle | 8 | - | 5 | - | 4 | 9 |
| Tiana | 10 | 6 | 6 | - | 7 | 6 |
| Merida | - | 4 | - | - | - | 5 |
| Rapunzel | 10 | 10 | 10 | - | 10 | 10 |
| Anna | 10 | 10 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 6 |
| Elsa | 10 | 10 | 10 | 7 | 10 | 10 |
| Moana | - | 8 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 2 |

Below are some examples of the interview excerpts.

I like all of them, because they are so pretty. They are thin, ermmm, big eyes and they always smile. Anna is pretty, Elsa is pretty too. I like Elsa dress. I have Elsa dress. Mama buy for me.

(Qaseh)

Rapunzel is beautiful. Her hair is long and pretty. And this one, like, erm, Ariel, is beautiful too. Because, because... ermm... she has beautiful hair and big eyes.

(Fara)

Because they are pretty, because they have nice hair, and umm... they are thin, and they are ummm... they are cute eyes. They also is fair.

(Aishah)

Yes I think they are pretty. So pretty. Because of their looks... I like this (pointing the body). Yes, they are thin.

(Ruhil)

Basically, all the princess characters have similar features. They are slim, they have big eyes with different eye colours, their hair is neatly tied and they wear proper and beautiful dresses. Although the participants mentioned that all these features are attractive and beautiful, but none of them mention the detailed and specific features, such brown eyes or red hair.

However, there are three characters in the movies that are less mentioned by the participants as beautiful. These characters are Moana, Princess Merida and Tiana. Thus, the researchers asked about the participants' perception towards these three characters. Below are their responses.

Erm... I think, they, hmm... ya, maybe they are beautiful. I don't know. Moana has nice smile.

(Aishah)

Merida hair so messy. She is not beautiful. Moana also has messy hair. But... moana is... I think she's beautiful. Im not sure.

(Ain)

Tiana dress is pretty. But... ermm... I don't know... she don't (doesn't) look like Cinderella and Anna and Elsa. Moana and Princess Merida also don't look like Anna and Elsa.

(Ruhil)

The participants are not sure when they were asked whether these three characters are beautiful. This is because these three princesses or characters' physical features are different from the other Disney princesses' physical features. These movies are also less popular in Malaysia compared to Tangled and Frozen, which are the global phenomena. However, with the creation of these characters (Moana, Tiana and Princess Merida) indicate that Disney took an initiative to display different types of physical beauty with these three characters. Tiana represents an African-American character while Moana was created based on an ethnic in Maui. Princess Merida on the other hand has boyish characteristic. The creation of these three Disney princesses by Disney proves that Disney attempts to show the diversity not only in cultural perspectives but also in the representation of beauty. Disney suggests that beauty does not only represented by slender body and neat hair, but it comes in many different features and beauty diverse from one nation to the other. Although Disney came out with this strong message, the finding suggests that some young girls have already had a strong perception in the mind on how beauty is define based on the earlier Disney movies they watch.

4.2. Beauty that is Associated with Positive Traits

Each princess character in Disney princesses movies represents positive traits. For instance, Belle in Beauty and the Best represent intelligence, because she is a bookworm and her love for books is clearly displayed in the movie. Ariel from the Little Mermaid represents curiosity, and she always venture in new surrounding to gain new experience and to learn something she cannot learn in her own world and setting. Tiana from the Frog Prince tells the audience to always dream big and one should not give up their hope in difficult times.

Each movie has strong messages that the directors want to convey to the public. Adults may perceive these messages better than young children. Through this research, we identified that young children aged 6 years old are able to understand the strong characteristic represented by the Disney princesses, while children aged 4 years old mentioned few characteristics of these princesses.

The positive traits mentioned by the participants are presented in the Table below.

| Name of Disney Princess | Positive Traits | | | | | | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------|-------------|-------------|----------|--------|--------|-------------|----------|
| | Brave | Adventurous | Hardworking | Friendly | Loving | Caring | Intelligent | Reliable |
| Snow White | - | - | 9 | 7 | 9 | 9 | - | 1 |
| Cinderella | - | - | 8 | 9 | 9 | 6 | 1 | - |
| Ariel | 4 | 7 | - | 7 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 3 |
| Belle | 5 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 7 | 6 | 4 |
| Tiana | 3 | 5 | 8 | 2 | 3 | - | 2 | 2 |
| Merida | 9 | 8 | - | - | 4 | 4 | 3 | - |
| Rapunzel | 6 | 7 | 9 | 6 | 2 | 3 | 7 | 3 |
| Anna | 10 | 9 | - | 10 | 10 | 10 | 7 | 5 |
| Elsa | 2 | 3 | - | - | - | 6 | 5 | - |
| Moana | 10 | 10 | 3 | 7 | 8 | 7 | 10 | 10 |

All participants mentioned Moana to be brave, adventurous, friendly, loving, caring, intelligent and reliable. Three participants said Moana is hardworking. Of all characters, Moana is the characters who have the most positive traits. These positive traits may inspire the young girls who watch and adore her, as shown in the excerpts below.

Yes I like Moana. Because she ask Maui (the male character in the movie) to return Tefiti's heart. Moana fight with coconut monster and she is very brave.

(Ruhil)

Mama said I can be like Moana. She is not scared of the sea, she is not scared of monster and also Maui. She love(s) her family, her papa and her mama and her 'nenek' (grandmother).

(Adila)

Apart from Moana, the participants also gave positive feedback about Anna, a Disney princess from Frozen, as shown in the excerpts below.

Anna is funny. She always makes jokes. She is friendly and she love her sister, Elsa. When I fight with adik (little sister), ibu (mother) said I must be nice to adik (little sister) like Elsa and Anna.

(Izrin)

I like Anna very much...because she likes to laugh. I think she is very strong because she go to the North Mountain to find Elsa. She scold Marshmello (an ice monster that Elsa created). She is very brave.

(Qaseh)

The participants adore the beauty of Disney princesses and with the exposure by the media which is also supported by the family members, has increased their admiration towards the characters. Not only the participants think that the characters are amazing, but they also would like to be associated with the princesses whenever they can, such as in birthday celebration, school stationaries, water bottles, toys, and also while having a role play with their friends.

Ibu Qaseh buy kek Frozen masa birthday Qaseh...sebab Qaseh nak la. (My mother bought Frozen's birthday cake for my birthday...because I request for it.)

(Qaseh)

Haritu mama beli baju Elsa yang warna blue tu untuk saya. (Mama buy me a blue dress like Elsa).

(Aishah)

The participants also felt they are already a princess when they dress as the Disney princesses. This indicates that the children reflect themselves as being a princess when they are in the princesses' costume and dress like one. The participants were also asked about ideal beauty. Question such as 'What is your interpretation of beauty?' was asked. Surprisingly, although the children stated that physical look is classified as ideal beauty, at that young age, they are also aware that beauty also comes from within, that means a person needs to have a good attitude and behavior.

Beauty is you must look pretty and clean. We must brush our teeth, comb and shampoo our hair. And we must be nice too. Mama cakap kalau tak brush teeth nanti jadi macam big crab (Mama said if I do not brush my teeth, I become like a big crab – the big crab refers to Tamatoa in Moana movie).

(Aishah)

My teacher said everybody is beautiful and handsome. But most important we must be a nice person...we must help other people, we must help ibu (mother) at home, and do our homework...solat (pray), mengaji (recite Quran).

(Izrin)

Cantik tu semua cantik. Saya pun cantik. Ibu saya cantik. (Everybody is beautiful. I am beautiful, and my mother is beautiful too.

(Adila)

Tak tahulah. Cantik macam saya ke?... Kena pakai baju bersih-bersih dan rajin mandi. Kena tolong orang jugak. Macam tu la cantik. (I don't know (what ideal beauty is). Is it like me? (we) need to wear clean clothes, and always take our bath. We also need to help others.)

(Qaseh)

Pakai baju raya cantik. Ni baju raya saya. (Beauty is when I wear my festive new clothes like this one.)

(Ruhil)

Mama always say I'm pretty. I think everybody is beautiful...be good, and be nice to others, help others, always finish our food.

(Fara)

Although the children have described the physical beauty of the princesses in earlier, none of the answer about ideal beauty are connected with the princesses' beauty. This shows that although the young girls adore Disney princesses and their beauty, but this adoration does not reflect their perception on beauty. This probably due to the realization that the characters are illustrations and animated thus they should not compare real-life beauty with the animation. On top of that, the findings also suggest the young children's surrounding also plays important role in shaping their perception. Answers such as "mother said...", 'teacher told...' and 'Allah (the creator) forbids' are common answers in this section. It suggests that although the young children watch the movies repeatedly, they are not influenced with the standard of beauty represented in the movies and media.

5. CONTRIBUTION

This study contributes in the existing literature of children and entertainment, particularly on Disney princess movies. It can be understood that despite their awe towards Disney princesses' characters, the children understand that beauty is not the most important quality in life as positive traits are also matters.

6. CONCLUSION

Disney princess movies are part of children's entertainment and the movies influence their hobby and preferences when buying goods. Young children especially girls admire the beauty of animated Disney princess characters in the movies. Although the children are aware that the beauty represented in the movies are unrealistic, they idolize these characters and sometimes they would want to be associated with the characters in terms of buying the merchandise of their favourite characters. After all, it is in human nature that we are attracted to beautiful things. However, their preference and admiration of the princesses physical look does not influence their judgement and perception of beauty in real life. Children also see the value and good deeds that are portrayed by the princesses as beauty. Thus, this paper concludes that young children see beauty not only in the physical appearance, but also in the positive traits of the Disney princesses. On top of that, this paper also includes that the children are aware that the characters are animated and should not be compared with real-life setting.

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