

July 2024

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Recommended Citation

Jiang, X., Zhang, L., Rivero, D., & Torres, B. (2024). Meta-narrative review of gender portrayal in Disney movies for young children and its pedagogical implications. *Journal of Global Education and Research*, 8(2), 116-131. <https://www.doi.org/10.5038/2577-509X.8.2.1327>

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Abstract

Many of Disney movies have been criticized for perpetuating traditional gender stereotypes which constrain opportunities for children at large. Its recent characters have also incurred heated discussions on gender portrayal. Moreover, stereotypes of gender roles, developed early on, can exert an immediate impact on individuals' behaviors and utterances and a long-term impact on individuals' perceived options academically, professionally, personally, and socially. Recognizing the significance of this matter, this paper employed a meta-narrative review to collect and conceptually and empirically synthesize previous literature on the impact of Disney movies on young children's gender awareness. Through an academic database search, 49 articles were collected using combinations of the keywords *Disney character*, *Disney movie*, *young children*, *early childhood education*, *classroom practices*, and *gender*. Furthermore, this review, in the pedagogical implication section, highlights the authors' call for teachers to develop critical mindfulness of gender and shares hands-on activities for children to play with Disney characters in a reconstructive and agentic way.

Keywords

critical feminist lens, counter gender stereotypes, Disney characters, hands-on activities

Revisions

Submission date: May 5, 2023; 1st Revision: Aug. 22, 2023; 2nd Revision: Jan. 16, 2024; 3rd Revision: Apr. 18, 2024; Acceptance: May 24, 2024

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Meta-Narrative Review of Gender Portrayal in Disney Movies for Young Children and Its Pedagogical Implications

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Abstract

Many of Disney movies have been criticized for perpetuating traditional gender stereotypes which constrain opportunities for children at large. Its recent characters have also incurred heated discussions on gender portrayal. Moreover, stereotypes of gender roles, developed early on, can exert an immediate impact on individuals' behaviors and utterances and a long-term impact on individuals' perceived options academically, professionally, personally, and socially. Recognizing the significance of this matter, this paper employed a meta-narrative review to collect and conceptually and empirically synthesize previous literature on the impact of Disney movies on young children's gender awareness. Through an academic database search, 49 articles were collected using combinations of the keywords *Disney character*, *Disney movie*, *young children*, *early childhood education*, *classroom practices*, and *gender*. Furthermore, this review, in the pedagogical implication section, highlights the authors' call for teachers to develop critical mindfulness of gender and shares hands-on activities for children to play with Disney characters in a reconstructive and agentic way.

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Introduction

Children born in the 21st century are surrounded by televisions, computers, tablets, cellphones, and other technological devices, which are at times used to play movies for entertainment. Movies are not gender-neutral in essence and they carry powerful messages about gender norms. For instance, in favor of adhering to feminine standards, girls consciously prevent the exploration of other options in activities, career goals, and academics (Hughes, 2016), constraining their opportunities (Coyne et al., 2016). This gender conformity also affects boys, pressured to choose paths that affirm their masculinity. To counter gender stereotypes, educators and parents can use movies as educational resources. By integrating movies with active and hands-on pedagogical practices, children can engage with characters in a proactive and agentic way (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023).

Disney and Pixar Animation Studios, acquired by Disney in 2006, were chosen for their global influence across overarching themes and genres. These include classic animated movies such as Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and Cinderella; fantasy adventure such as Aladdin and Tangled; fairy

tale adaptations such as *Beauty and the Beast* and *Sleeping Beauty*; musicals such as *Frozen* and *The Lion King*, among others. Research has shown that these Disney movies carry strong gendered messages (Shawcroft et al., 2022) through *ideal* body type (Hine et al., 2018), the utterances of Disney characters (Fought & Eisenhauer, 2016), gender roles (Manaworapong & Bowen, 2022), and gestures and behaviors (Jung & Kim, 2020).

Furthermore, the influence of Disney movie characters has been studied conceptually and empirically, including children's psychological well-being and, more specifically, children's development of gender awareness (Azmi et al., 2016; Coyne et al., 2016; Golden & Jacoby, 2018). Moreover, a growing number of studies can be used as teaching samples that apply Disney characters to pedagogical practice to develop critical awareness of gender in children (Aina & Cameron, 2011; Hamilton & Dynes, 2023; Zhang, 2017). This paper adopted a meta-narrative review to answer the two research questions:

- How do gender portrayals in Disney movies impact the development of gender awareness in young children?
- What does the impact mean to early childhood teachers for their classroom activities?

By answering the two research questions, this meta-narrative review synthesizes the existing literature conceptually and empirically for a comprehensive understanding of how gender stereotypes persisting in Disney movies have impacted young children. Additionally, the current review explored the pedagogical implications by integrating Disney movies as a tool within classrooms to introduce inclusive values about gender and incorporate hands-on experiences. The keynotes of this paper highlight a call for developing critical mindfulness of gender and practical take-aways, as it empowers teachers to address gender issues through critical analysis and pedagogical implementations in educational contexts and beyond.

The significance of this paper, therefore, is two-fold: academically, this meta-narrative review converges and spotlights previous studies that consistently challenge gender norms in the context of applying Disney movies to young children (Jung & Kim, 2020; Manaworapong & Bowen, 2022); pedagogically, it offers a whole package to empower teachers to transform their mindset and classroom practices, to foster children in constructing the agency during their gender development. This review appeals to a larger audience, including teachers in early childhood education, parents, and scholars with a research interest in sex education, gender in education, as well as media and education. Furthermore, it adds to the ongoing discussion about using Disney media and other pop culture in pedagogy and curriculum.

Meta-Narrative Review

As one type of literature review, a meta-narrative review provides a “systematic way of collecting and synthesizing previous research” (Snyder, 2019, p. 333). Such a review highlights the “contrasting and complementary ways in which researchers have studied the same or a similar topic” (Wong et al., 2013, p. 1). This is the case in examining Disney movies which have been studied from diverse angles (Wong et al., 2013), including movie studies (López-Fuentes & Fernández-Fernández, 2021), early childhood education (Meland, 2020), sex education (Golden et al., 2018), literary studies (Meland, 2020; Saxby, 2022), and family studies (Coyne et al., 2016). To understand the gender portrayal in Disney movies, this paper employed a meta-narrative review through the six phases: planning, searching, mapping, appraisal, synthesis, and recommendation (Greenhalgh et al., 2005). The ultimate

output is to share pedagogical strategies for early childhood teachers to use Disney-themed classroom activities to reconstruct gender awareness in young children.

In the planning phase, the collaboration was initiated to ensure a critical and feminist understanding of the study among four professionals: a feminist applied linguistic educator who is also a parent of two Disney-connected children; a doctoral student specializing in early childhood education; an early childhood education graduate alumna; and a former Fulbright English teacher of young children. The collaborative authors shared a common interest in the research topic and envisioned their funds of knowledge and experiences as potential contributors. During the searching phase, the authors selected conceptual and empirical sources to encompass diverse understandings and perspectives with three generic criteria, suggested by Greenhalgh et al. (2005):

1. Is the paper part of a recognized research tradition, that is, does it draw critically and comprehensively upon an existing body of scientific knowledge and attempt to further that body of knowledge?
2. Does the paper make an original and scholarly contribution to research into the diffusion, dissemination, or implementation of innovations?
3. Has the paper subsequently been cited as a seminal contribution (conceptual, theoretical, methodological, or instrumental) by competent researchers in that tradition? (p. 421)

The conceptual literature clarified the core concepts: *Disney, movie, young children, early childhood education, classroom practices, and gender*. The empirical sources contributed to the main findings by examining the impact of the literature, including strengths and limitations. Throughout the weekly meetups in the mapping phase, the authors cross-inquired their literature thoroughly and structured agreed sources into themes by referring to the conceptual, theoretical, methodological, and instrumental dimensions (Greenhalgh et al., 2005). In the appraisal phase, the authors individually and collaboratively assessed the sources with respect to their literature review, methodology, results, and findings. This was accomplished by focusing on the validity and relevance of the research questions.

During the synthesis phase, the authors combined their knowledge with a critical and feminist lens. Their consensus on identifying common themes and formulating targeted, short questions, such as *Why Gender Portrayal?*, provided a roadmap to guide readers in critically viewing each piece of evidence through a feminist lens.

This study employed triangulation techniques to assess the synthesized findings, reducing subjectivity and enhancing validity. Implementing such techniques, this review prioritized “how each new data item fits with an emerging picture of the whole” (Wong et al., 2013, p. 10). For those studies with conflicting findings, a non-linear technique was utilized in data analysis to accommodate the diverse information obtained from the snowballing sources (Greenhalgh et al., 2005). By nesting them back into the appraisal phase and delving into further research, the authors either explained the discrepancies or acknowledged the evidence gaps. They refined the framework and content, to ensure its clarity and coherence.

Following the six phases outlined by Greenhalgh et al. (2005), a total of 49 publications were rigorously selected in this meta-narrative review, which ranged from 1987 to 2023. The landscape of the deliberated literature was mapped as below: Among the 31 empirical and 18 conceptual literature, 12 focused on the relationship between Disney movies and gender awareness within the field of early childhood education, and 5 papers showcased how to apply Disney characters to classrooms for young children. The empirical literature included 16 qualitative and 15 quantitative research studies.

Findings

This section is divided into seven subsections, each focusing on aspects of gender portrayal in Disney movies and its influence on young children. These sections act as *dots*, interconnected to form a cohesive *line* in addressing the first research question: *How do gender portrayals in Disney movies impact the development of gender awareness in young children?*

Why Gender Portrayal?

To understand the impact of gender as one of the most critical aspects of social identity, Eagly's (1987) social role theory proposed that gender beliefs and behaviors are shaped by diverse societal role expectations regarding sexuality, interaction, and observation from the environment. As long as individuals participate in societal settings, gender portrayal inevitably becomes a significant topic that represents social behaviors. Consequently, gender stereotypes emerge from societal division of labor and responsibilities, based on those gender differences (Eagly, 1987; 2013). Moreover, the representation of gender portrayal undergoes constant updates through interactions between individuals and their environment. According to Itmeizeh and Ma'ayeh (2017), the development of gender portrayal is iterative and contingent on the culture, as each society has its own perception on illustrating gender depictions. In other words, the cultural contexts shape the social roles individuals play and influence their beliefs and behaviors (Spinner et al., 2018). This, in turn, has the potential to reshape social dynamics, further contributing to the ongoing construction of gender portrayal.

Why Gender Portrayal of Young Children?

The emphasis on analyzing children's gender portrayal arises from the fact that the concept of gender portrayal is formulated from a young age (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023). Substantial studies have underscored gender's significant influence in child development. For instance, Halim et al. (2018) emphasized that children often develop their initial and most noticeable social identity with a focus on gender. Hamilton and Dynes (2023) showed a similar point that, in many societies, the first social identity children tend to form is gender. Furthermore, Zosuls et al. (2011) asserted that "children's choices of whom to imitate plays a key role in their gender development" (p. 827). Who children imitate depends on a variety of factors – from what media they consume, to where they live.

Gender awareness, stereotypes, and sexism developed at a young age could pressure children to adhere to societal norms and limit children's options in school subjects and academic performance, activities, sports, play, mate selection, and career paths (Aina & Cameron, 2011; Dynes, 2021; Hughes, 2016). Specifically, girls consciously prevent exploration of other options in activities, career aspirations, and academic performance (Hughes, 2016; Sherman & Zurbriggen, 2014), thus their opportunities are constrained (Coyne et al., 2016). This can also apply to boys who have to make certain choices to be seen as masculine. Stereotypical views of gender, once internalized, can impact self-esteem negatively and contribute to self-objectification tangibly (Aina & Cameron, 2011).

How Do Young Children Develop Gender Portrayal?

From a young age, children are profoundly influenced by their surroundings and usually learn about gender roles via what they hear and see (Meland, 2020). According to psychologist Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, children between the ages of three to six find themselves in the stage of "Initiative vs Guilt" (Erikson, 1993, p. 255). In this stage, children actively engage with the

world by taking initiative in play and learning. Through these experiences, children develop an understanding of their own boundaries, exploring how their actions influence the world around them and identifying the behaviors that lead to positive or negative results.

In the course of interacting with their surroundings, children, specifically between the ages of three to five, gradually develop a critical understanding of gender identity (Palmer, 2013). Notably, they begin to promptly formulate gender stereotypes by reinforcing their comprehension of gender identity in others as well as in themselves (Aina & Cameron, 2011). This developmental stage makes the early years a significant period for gender awareness. For this reason, it is important to be aware of the media children consume during this critical period. Children who see the same gender roles portrayed in media may interpret these behaviors as *normal and* may unite these ideas with interpretations of what is socially acceptable, thus altering their behavior (Bandura, 2001; England et al., 2011).

Subsequent to the preschool years, children aged five to eight continue to decode and make sense of gender norms and character roles, as observed and studied by Hamilton and Dynes (2023). Their research shares the same findings as Halim et al. (2018) in understanding gender awareness that “children’s stereotypes about girls are largely defined by appearance and clothing, whereas children’s stereotypes about boys are often defined by behavior (action or activity-based themes)” (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023, p. 489). From this insight, children aged from three to eight experience a pivotal understanding of gender formation.

Why Disney Characters?

Disney has become a household name and a branded bearer of influence in pop culture. Through the Disney Channel and all other forms of media owned by the international conglomerate (i.e., television, merchandise, theme parks, music, etc.), children are now exposed to and feel attracted to Disney’s message both inside and outside of the household (López-Fuentes, & Fernández-Fernández, 2021). Disney media, in conjunction with its branded products, creates messaging that reinforces the boundaries of appropriate behavior for a particular gender (Gardner, 2015; Holcomb et al., 2015).

Among all the characters, Disney Princess ranked number one for “best-selling licensed entertainment character merchandise” (Davis, 2019; Goudreau, 2012, para. 1). The Disney Princess brand “targets 3-year-old to 5-year-old girls as its primary market” (Wohlwend, 2012, p. 594). The widespread popularity of Disney Princesses, especially among preschool girls, offers the suggestion that surrounding peers likely encourage the viewing of princess films and reinforce playtime with princess toys (Coyne et al., 2016). Thus, the influence of parents and older peers may be an additional factor beyond modeling by which princess exposure influences a child’s gender development.

Why Disney Characters’ Gender Portrayal?

Among the rich literature about Disney, gender portrayal has been studied from multiple perspectives. Tangibly portrayed through physical appearance, Disney Princesses are discussed the most through the literature as they represent only one ideal body type. Such a monolithic representation can impact children’s view of themselves and reinforce the notion that attractiveness is central to female identity (Coyne et al., 2016). Similarly, depictions of classic male characters in Disney movies are limited to either “Dashing Heroes,” “Handsome Princes,” or “Evil Villains” (Davis, 2013, p. v). This portrayal

confines both male and female characters to “traditional and restrictive” gender roles (Hine et al., 2018, section 1.7, para. 1).

Gender portrayal is also reflected in Disney characters’ utterances, and many of them seem to adhere to traditional gender norms. Fought and Eisenhauer (2016) analyzed gendered utterances in a chronicle series of Disney Princess movies, from Snow White (1937) to Frozen (2013). They found that male characters often speak more than, sometimes even twice as much as female characters. Besides the quantity of utterances, researchers also analyze the features of those utterances. Itmeizeh and Ma’ayeh (2017) found that in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937) and Brave (2012), male and female characters show a balanced “usage of female speech elements” (p. 37), such as tag questions, lexical hedges, and empty adjectives. However, the usage of female speech elements has become less common in male characters and more common in female characters in more recent movies, which may be an indication of increasing gender stereotyping language in Disney Princess movies over time (Itmeizeh & Ma’ayeh, 2017).

Additionally, more nuances and complexity were found when analyzing verbal utterances related to the gender expression of some international Disney characters. For example, Manaworapong and Bowen (2022) explored how gender, power, and gendered roles were depicted in two adaptations of Disney’s Mulan (1998 and 2020). The authors found in Mulan (2020) that “male-coded characters are portrayed as more ‘feminine’ through their talk” and vice versa (p. 1). Connecting their own findings with other relevant literature, the authors argue that the portrayal of gender in Mulan 2020 “has undergone subtle changes that may reflect the influence” from both American and Chinese stakeholders (p. 1).

Other researchers also studied the gestures and behaviors, as well as personality traits of recent characters. Jung and Kim (2020) analyzed the gestures, behaviors, and personality traits of characters in Mulan, Tangled, Moana, and Frozen 2, and found that female protagonists often exhibit stereotypical gestures and behaviors that align with traditional gender norms. Meanwhile, other studies show that the recent characters seem to have more complex personality traits mixed with both masculinity and femininity (England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018; Itmeizeh & Ma’ayeh, 2017). For instance, Elsa from Frozen is portrayed as a self-sufficient queen who leads her kingdom without needing to get married. Anna, Elsa’s younger sister, experiences a deceptive romantic encounter with Prince Hans, who claims to fall in love with Anna at the first sight and actually uses that so-called *love* to realize his conspiracy of ruling the kingdom. Anna finally finds her true love with Kristoff, a commoner, after days of working together.

Overall, it would seem that characters in the Disney Princesses, though still adhering to traditional stereotypes of femininity (Azmi et al., 2018), have reflected changes in American society regarding gender expectations (Azmi et al., 2016; England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018; Hughes, 2016; Itmeizeh & Ma’ayeh, 2017). The different eras of Disney Princess movies are said to exist by some “in relation to women’s movements” (Barber, 2015, p. 24; Garabedian, 2014; Hughes, 2016; Stover, 2013, p. 1).

Why the Impact of Disney’s Gender Portrayal on Children?

Gender messages, as a form of gender expressions, are strongly conveyed in Disney movies, gradually influencing children’s gender identity during the consumption of movies (Shawcroft et al., 2022). As

an interaction, children may identify with certain gender expressions depicted (Perry et al., 2019), contributing to the formation of their own gender identity and the continuous exploration of their internal sense of gender. Moreover, Disney's portrayal of diverse gender expressions in its characters provides children with a rich array of gender role models, from Mulan to Elsa. Disney movies can still have an impact on children by portraying a display of stereotypical views that youngsters may choose to copy and implement into their daily routines (Dynes, 2021), influencing their "gender schemas and scripts" (Hine et al., 2018, section 1.7, para. 1).

For instance, young girls who are exposed to these movies have a tendency to enjoy more stereotypical activities, seem to exert little effort in more challenging tasks, and often compare themselves to the unrealistic body standards set by Disney Princesses (Coyne et al., 2016; Dinella et al., 2014). Coyne et al. (2016) stated that for most girls, Disney Princess films are their first form of exposure to the ideal body, thereby forming the possibility of a multitude of self-esteem issues to arise early on in child development. Even so, the data collected by Coyne et al. (2016) showed that young girls, rather than boys, are far more likely to engage with Disney Princesses through the viewing of films, playtime with princess toys, and relating to the princesses. Repeated exposure to such standardized and sexualized imagery can lead to the internalization of objectifying messages and, as a result, girls may think of themselves in relation to their appearance rather than recognizing their abilities or emotions (Sherman & Zurbriggen, 2014).

Similarly, Golden and Jacoby (2018) found that girls viewed beauty as "one of the princesses' most dominant and important traits" as evidenced by interviews and observations of their play; Girls perceived a princess's beauty as central to her value, perpetuating traditional stereotypes of femininity (p. 309). The self-objectification resulting from attempts to emulate such characters can leave girls feeling that they have nothing more to offer than their physical appearance. Golden and Jacoby (2018) concluded that "a narrow set of gendered roles and behaviors" can result in "depression, anxiety, and disordered eating attitudes and symptoms" (p. 310). Furthermore, girls placed increased importance on clothing or accessories when they were playing princess, leading them to believe that "material possessions" were an integral aspect of being feminine (Golden & Jacoby, 2018, p. 309). This is also supported by Azmi et al. (2018), who suggested that children believe they are princesses when dressed the part. Even body movements were restricted: the participants in the study displayed "unique princess body movements" that "reinforced their 'girly girl' roles" to assume a particular role which prevented them from "assuming more satisfying positions" (Golden & Jacoby, 2018, pp. 309-310). Finally, this study found that girls who participated in princess play tended to exclude boys, treating them unequally and making a clear distinction between genders in the classroom (Golden & Jacoby, 2018).

While boys are less likely to engage with Disney Princess, Coyne et al. (2016) stated that boys can learn gender stereotypes from watching female heroines in other media. However, it was found that boys who frequently watched Disney Princess films may instead choose to identify with the male characters (i.e., the princes) who are known to exhibit certain feminine traits but focus primarily on their more masculine features (i.e., bravery and strength) (Coyne, et al., 2016; England et al., 2011). Additionally, further research, such as González et al. (2020) and Dynes (2021), shared a common trend in many Disney movies: The male leads tend to be taller, larger, and more muscular than their female counterparts, including Hercules, Tarzan, Maui, and other male characters. As a result, the constant exposure to these hyper-masculine features and traits may foster negative body standards for young boys and contribute to gender stereotypes (Dynes, 2021; González et al., 2020).

What Is the Long-Term Impact of Disney’s Gender Portrayal on Children?

The effects of Disney’s gender portrayal vary between girls and boys over the long term. In a longitudinal study examining future relationships and the impact of Disney Princesses, it was found that 79.6% of participants (aged 19 to 28) acknowledged their relationships were influenced by media (Berglas et al., 2014). Specifically, Zhang (2017) found that women who interacted with Disney Princess culture in their youth were more likely to experience dissatisfaction in their relationships. Similarly, Dinella (2013) found that adult women, who identified with the title of *princess*, were inclined to adhere to feminine stereotypes such as decreased desire to work, traditional views on household labor, and heightened focus on physical appearance. These findings reflect the lasting impact of internalizing traditional female stereotypes propagated by the Disney Princess franchise on adult women.

Along with the portrayal of women as objects of beauty with no power comes the opposite: women who have agency are often depicted as *ugly* and *evil* villains (Zhang, 2017). Such contrastive images reflect that “most gender-linked behavior is heavily socially sanctioned so children learn quickly that other-gender behavior may be punished by peers or parents” (Coyne et al., 2014, p. 418).

On the other hand, boys are less likely to be influenced by princess movies, which focus on the female protagonist as a model of traditionally feminine behavior, in the same way that girls are less likely to be influenced by superhero media, which tends to glorify male-stereotypical behavior (Coyne et al., 2014). It can be inferred that whom children choose to imitate depends on the type of media they consume. The majority of this media sends messages that perpetuate stereotypical behaviors of the genders, which leads to more gendered play among young girls and boys (Coyne et al., 2014).

Review of the Findings Through a Critical Feminist Lens

As a meta-narrative review entails, this study also involves “an interpretative configuring of ideas and the aggregation of data” (Gough, 2013, p. 2). The authors’ intake from the reviewed literature was filtered through a critical feminist lens. Such a lens carries Butler’s (2005) notion that gender, as one important aspect of identity, is performative. This notion embeds critical feminism in the sense that gender awareness empowers young children’s critical agency to perform their gender. The notion also acknowledges the term gender is fluid, dynamic, and contextualized.

To address the second research question: *What does the impact mean to early childhood teachers for their classroom activities?* this section encompasses two layers of responses. First, it instigates a collective call for early childhood teachers to deconstruct stereotypes with children to promote positive gender development in childhood. Secondly, it presents an array of eight classroom activities for early childhood teachers to implement at their own discretion.

Call for Developing Critical Mindfulness of Gender

Butler’s (2005) idea of gender as performative indicates that gender can be nurtured, which amplifies the significance of pedagogical considerations in what to use, and how to guide young children to fully embrace the concept to know themselves and others better. Those considerations are rooted in the mindsets of teachers; hence their critical mindfulness of gender is the key. The considerations, in turn, would help come to fruition of young children’s agentic development about who they are, who they can be, and what they can do. It also contributes to children’s holistic development of emotional

intelligence and mindfulness (Saxby, 2022). Their mindfulness includes how they see themselves, embrace differences, confront outdated and misogynistic gender stereotypes, and make their agentic executions (Saxby, 2022).

Connected with Disney movies, this intake aims to promote a critical concept of gender for young children by providing pedagogical approaches to reconstruct Disney movies mindfully. Given that young children are in the high-context of Disney movies, “teachers can take advantage of this initial motivation to work on key educational areas” (López-Fuentes & Fernández-Fernández, 2021, p. 2), such as developing gender portrayal and awareness. Indeed, teachers, or those in teacher roles, can help “deconstruct stereotypes with children to promote positive gender development in childhood” (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023, p. 482) and to “counter gender stereotypical expectations” (Hentges & Case, 2013, p. 319). Dynes (2021) suggested that rather than being fearful of the potential negative influences portrayed within Disney movies, teachers should become involved and emphasize “the importance of monitoring and challenging traditional norms by exploring the negative impact of gender stereotypes with young children” (p. 10), as teachable moments with guiding questions such as “What if...?” and “Why...?”

Such awareness, though highly fundamental, is not always present in teachers. Meland (2020) found that the participating teachers did not reinforce “analytical and critical views on gender stereotypes” (p. 918) through discussions and reflections, both of which intend to “give the children a more open-minded perspective about how girls and boys are portrayed” (p. 918). Meland (2020) concluded this empirical study at a European institution by advocating that it is essential for teachers to hone their critical and reconstructive mindset and play their part in helping children understand the significance of gender roles and gender expression as social rather than biological constructs. Therefore, as an integral component of the early childhood curriculum, the critical and agentic discussions of gender stereotypes within the storylines of fairy tales, including Disney movies, must be incorporated into lesson plans and classroom conversations (Meland, 2020).

Moreover, Meland (2020) emphasized the need for teachers to make a clear distinction of the roles girls and boys play within fairy tales versus reality; this ensures proper gender education. Echoing the benefits of integrating fairy tales into the curriculum, Saxby (2022) highlighted that including fairy tales offers an opportunity to positively impact students by fostering the development of their emotional intelligence and introducing the basic concepts of social justice, including gender equity. Saxby (2022) called for “critical gender work” (p. 228) by encouraging students to challenge “stereotypical gender representations” (p. 228) through active discussion about the “historical and socio-cultural context of these traditional stories” (p. 228) in the contemporary classroom. The focus of Meland (2020) and Saxby (2022) on fairy tales is applicable to the current paper, as many fairy tales are depicted in Disney movies. Both articles called for teachers to use pedagogical strategies to develop children’s critical agency of gender awareness. Consequently, the primary controversy surrounding the integration of Disney fairy tales into the curriculum lies in the teachers’ frontier role in critically examining gender representations. Upon reflecting on the agentic discussions with Disney stories through reconstructive questions and classroom conversations, the positive impact on children’s development of understanding gender is ensured.

Pedagogical Implication for Practices and Interventions

Beyond the awareness call by the aforementioned scholars, teachers can further assist young children in exploring the concept of gender. Meland (2020) put forward an analogy distinguishing between *doing gender* versus *being a gender*: Doing gender is viewing gender as performable, while being a gender implies that gender is constant and fixed (Meland, 2020). From a young age, children are constantly influenced by their surroundings and develop their knowledge of gender via societal conditioning, which offers teachers activities to guide children to embrace their understanding of gender as performative and dynamic (Meland, 2020). By incorporating these practices, this review empowers teachers to effectively address and navigate gender-related issues within educational settings.

Color Code

Princesses are not necessarily in pink or purple; they can be in blue or green, and the opposite can be true for princes or other male lead characters. To overcome the color norm of gender and free the mindset of matching colors with genders, teachers can allow children to watch cartoons that do not abide by color norms by searching for such characters before introducing them to a child. Afterward, teachers can use apps or video games to guide children in virtually choosing and changing the colors of cartoon characters. Teachers can also guide children through play with flashcards or puzzles that present clothes and accessories in traditional shape, but in non-gender-conforming colors for children to replace the original ones with. Additionally, teachers can choose coloring books for children and encourage them to color freely, which will avoid the reinforcement of a stereotypical concept of gender. The recommended activities above are completed with conversations about color code, with starting questions about physical appearance (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023), such as *Does it have to be [color A]? Can [color B] also work here?* Through such, cartoon humans, gendered animals, and plant figures can be featured with a rich array of their authentic and imaginable colors.

Story Retelling

To challenge the gender norms of utterances and behaviors, teachers can guide children to retell scenes of a story by switching characters' names. For instance, teachers can ask children to switch Belle with the Beast when rereading or retelling the story. They can supplement this by further prompting children to create their own stories, particularly those that challenge existing gender stereotypes. For example, a child may tell a story about a strong female warrior rescuing a prince from a tower. If the child is too young to invent a story, the teacher can come up with an anti-stereotypical narrative like the one provided, or reference bold and adventurous female characters such as Moana, Merida, and Mulan, who “go on adventures” (Hamilton and Dynes, 2023, p. 495). This can empower girls to especially feel that they have agency without automatically being a villain in the story (Zhang, 2017).

Role Play

In addition to reconstructing the text via story retelling, teachers can ask boys to speak and act as the female characters in the story and vice versa. For instance, boys can portray Princess Ariel and girls can take on the role of Prince Eric, where “children must frequently inhibit real-world desires and rules as they take on the rules associated with an imaginary situation” (Veraksa et al., 2021, p. 1568).

Young children strategically play in and out of these gender-rich texts and develop their mindfulness of diversity and multiplicity (Wohlwend, 2011; 2012). By reconstructing characters' behaviors and individual traits through such symbolic play, teachers can help counter gender stereotypes (Hentges & Case, 2013; Veraksa et al., 2021), including how to dress the characters (Azmi et al., 2018) and how to move the body of characters and pose (Golden & Jacoby, 2018). This approach can also contribute to boys' understanding and acceptance of the roles traditionally associated with princesses, fostering connections with associated qualities that would not typically occur due to a lack of identification with female protagonists (Coyne et al., 2014; Veraksa et al., 2021). Such an approach can be particularly effective for boys, who may be more inclined to "adopt the prosocial behaviors portrayed by Disney Princesses" (Coyne et al., 2016, p. 1922) with active mediation. Through mingling the physical features and behaviors of characters, children of all genders may collaborate and play together equally in the classroom (Golden & Jacoby, 2018).

Total Physical Response

Associated with role play, teachers may also choose certain action verbs to guide children in play and promote the concept that the actions can be done by all children, rather than being reserved for a particular gender. For instance, student A can sleep still and student B, regardless of gender, can rescue them. Teachers can encourage cross-gender activities and play to positively reinforce the gender awareness of all children (Aina & Cameron, 2011). This approach can help girls break free from restrictive "princess body movements" (Golden & Jacoby, 2018, pp. 309-310) that reinforce traditional femininity and "assume more satisfying positions" (pp. 309-310). It promotes an environment where all children can develop their agentic decisions and execute non-gender-conforming actions. To counter stereotypes about gendered behaviors, this guided physical activity provides *mind-body-mind* opportunities for children to play with and reflect on Disney characters in a proactive and reconstructive way (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023).

Circle Time

Teachers can also have regular circle time with children to share individual feelings. In these meetings, teachers and children would share their moments of strength and vulnerability in different scenarios to present both traditional and non-traditional role models (Aina & Cameron, 2011). They would also connect with Disney movies to reconstruct the characters and give children opportunities to discuss what they think and feel about the media they are consuming and the characters they are watching. Such conversations "encourage and engage in critical consumption of Disney movies (particularly older titles) in order to challenge more traditional gender stereotypes and messages, and to promote a healthy dialogue with children around gender" (Hine et al., 2018, section 3.6, para. 2). Articulating thoughts and feelings as well as rationale behind in a circle would further develop children's mindfulness towards themselves and others.

See, Think, Talk

Teachers can play with stereotyped toys in non-traditional ways and engage children to play creatively. The teachers may observe the children as they play and encourage them to think about and talk about how they play and why. Such discussions would support children in developing their understanding about gender (Aina & Cameron, 2011). This approach can be applied to various behaviors. For example, if a young girl reprimands a boy for wanting to play princess, an open

discussion could help the girl understand why she feels that way, while the teacher could reassure both children that there is nothing wrong with that kind of play. Vice versa, if a girl would like to play a masculine or adventurous role, teachers could intervene and challenge gendered assumptions such as “a female Spiderman would not be successful in ‘saving people’” or “a female Wreck-it-Ralph would be ‘polite’ but ‘not as strong’” (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023, p. 495). These interventions promote gender inclusivity in play, reducing gender divisions (Golden & Jacoby, 2018) and scaffolding a more gender-equitable environment (Kostas, 2021).

See, Think, Wonder

See, Think, Wonder is a thinking routine practiced in classrooms that strongly encourages students to make insightful observations and critical interpretations. It consists of three prompts: “What do you see?”, “What do you think about that?”, and “What does it make you wonder?” (Project Zero, 2022, p. 1). Educators may employ this routine to stimulate students’ critical thinking by guiding them through the process of questioning “why something looks the way it does or is the way it is” (Project Zero, 2022, p. 1). To accurately apply this pedagogical practice within classrooms, it is imperative for educators to incorporate the process at the beginning of a new module in order to encourage and motivate students’ interest. Moreover, educators can facilitate discussions around relevant objects, such as Disney characters, to the unit topic being taught, to encourage students’ application of their own ideas and observations.

To exemplify this pedagogical routine, this paper borrows a real-life scenario in Hamilton and Dynes’s (2023) research. In the empirical study, educators presented several Disney movies featuring a variety of characters and instructed students to describe exactly what they *see*, not what they *think* they see. Students were then given the opportunity to observe and analyze their findings. Results highlighted that boys predominantly paid attention to qualities regarding physical strength, humor, and bravery, while girls placed most of their focus on the physical attributes of characters (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023).

After this observation phase, educators posed follow-up questions similar to the following – “What else is going on here?” or “What do you see that makes you say that?” (Project Zero, 2022, p. 1) to encourage critical analysis and discussion. This routine is practiced in an effort to steer students away from unsupported claims and towards validated evidence to explain their thought processes.

Draw and Talk

Dynes (2021) used the “draw and talk” method to elicit insights from young participants by encouraging them to draw and engage in conversations about Disney characters. Hamilton and Dynes (2023) used a participatory visual methodology within their research described as “a ‘draw and talk’ exercise and an image-values line activity” (p. 482) to collect data. This image-values line activity is also applicable for early childhood educators as a practical pedagogical tool for the classroom. The purpose of this open task and the application of the creative participatory method is for students to have free range to draw any character however they may view them, allowing for children to voice their opinions and be heard as well as understood.

Through the following excerpt from Hamilton and Dynes’s (2023) study, the *draw and talk* approach was used as a pedagogical tool to emphasize the importance of utilizing critical analysis as a way to

research how specific concepts may be presented within children's everyday discussions and media, while offering educators specific recommendations for future interventions. Hamilton and Dynes (2023) found that children have a tendency to draw through a gendered lens which, in turn, guides them to make stereotypical choices in deciding the clothing, colors, and appearances of their drawn figures. For example, Girl 1 expressed frustration about her favorite princess, Rapunzel, because "the witch cut off her beautiful long blonde hair. She looked better when she had long magical hair and I was really sad when it was cut off as it turns brown and short" (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023, p. 491). Much in the same regard, when asked if she would draw eyelashes on Pascal, Rapunzel's pet chameleon, just as she did with the princess, Girl 1 laughed and replied, "No, because he's a boy. Boys can't have long eyelashes" (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023, p. 491). In contrast, the same study found that hair and eyelashes were missing from all boys' artwork, and they primarily focused on big muscles or bodies in relation to physical strength (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023).

In summary, the pedagogical implications mentioned above, derived from the author's funds of knowledge and the existing literature, can be conducted separately or mixed for a more extended activity routine. Teachers can contextualize these ideas and practices in their own class setting, to meet their students' needs and align with their curriculum. These activities intend to challenge the existing gender stereotypes in favor of a more critical and feminist view of children's media, which the authors hope will promote a more well-rounded gender expression among young children as their own agents. This ultimately may broaden children's choices in the future from romantic relationships to career paths.

Conclusion

The authors have applied a meta-narrative review of the existing literature to establish why and how to incorporate Disney movies into classroom activities for young children to develop agentic gender awareness. Given their global influence and popular accessibility, the manuscript solely focuses on Disney movies as a media, highlighting key factors that may inspire future researchers in their conquest to explore more media outlets. The presented literature and pedagogical practices may also empower teachers to equip traditional curricula with media outlets of students' interest as a classroom tool. Guided by key questions and a commitment to reflexivity, the review has produced a nuanced synthesis and critical interpretation of the literature. To reflect the ideological importance of this topic in pedagogical practice, the authors have proposed activities of intervening in children's gender understanding, which stems from the tendency of existing media to promote traditional gender stereotypes overtly or covertly. Many of these proposed activities employ creativity and imagination, both of which can promote critical, inclusive, and at the same time, independent, *out-of-the-box* thinking in the next generation.

While the proposed approaches above do not serve as a comprehensive reference or a cure-all, they pave the way for the emergence of more innovative pedagogical methods. Considering the limited pedagogical strategies found in the existing literature, the authors assert that the current paper is a major contribution to the field of early childhood educational practices. Moreover, this paper addresses the needs of a wide audience, including early childhood educators, parents, and scholars with research interests spanning various subfields of education.

Furthermore, the sense-making focus of this meta-narrative review welcomes empirical data on the implementation of the proposed approaches in practice. The transparent and systematic process in

this review offers a replicable framework for future research in this field. It prompts further empirical inquiry, including but not limited to, teachers' perceived effectiveness of these pedagogical strategies and children's agentic responses through interactions with teachers. This ongoing research agenda, seen as a collective effort, would substantially advance the tapestry of theory, practice, and research for early childhood education on this crucial topic.

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Acknowledgments

We thank Ms. June Keke Bravo (Florida International University) for her suggestions and comments. We thank the anonymous JGER reviewers for their generous and constructive suggestions.

All authors made a substantial contribution to this manuscript. Dr. Xuan Jiang wrote the first draft, framed the scope of the research, identified the lens to review, and provided most pedagogical activities. Linlin Zhang led by adding the methodology section to this manuscript, incorporating more early childhood theories, and addressing the first round of reviewers’ comments. Diana Rivero led by curating updated literature, adding more pedagogical activities, rearranging the organization, and checking the overall word choices. Brittany Torres added more connecting sentences and several recent literatures to the second draft, both of which helped articulate the research ideas more well-rounded and smoothly transitioned. Dr. Xuan Jiang, Linlin Zhang, and Diana Rivero worked with JGER reviewers and editors in revising multiple drafts of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.