



Happily Ever After? A Content Analysis of Romantic Ideals in Disney Princess Films

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This study presents a quantitative content analysis of the romantic expressions portrayed in the 12 Disney princess movies. The films were analyzed for presence of romantic expressions (ideals and challenges) and the character reactions to those expressions. Results indicated that romantic expressions are prevalent in these films, with idealization of other as the most common ideal expressed. The transitional era of films (i.e., princess movies released between 1989 and 1998) contained roughly the same number of ideals as the other eras of classic (i.e., movies released before 1989) and modern (i.e., movies released after 1998) combined. Further, ideals were three times more common than challenges in classic films, whereas ideals and challenges were expressed equally in transitional and modern films. In general, across all three eras, challenges were most commonly met with punishing and negative reactions, whereas ideals were most often rewarded. Finally, there were no sex differences in terms of ideal expressions, but male characters were the dominant pursuers in 9 of the 11 films that featured a romantic relationship.

Keywords: Children; Content Analysis; Disney; Films; Ideals; Media; Movies; Romance

“You’re the one, the one I’ve been looking for” (Prince Eric in *The Little Mermaid*, 1989).

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Once upon a time, there lived a sea princess named Ariel. She had everything her heart could ever desire—friends, family, and a beautiful voice. One day she encountered a prince who lived ashore. They had not spoken, but she saw him and fell in love instantly. She wanted to be with him more than anything, so she sold her voice to walk on land. Unable to speak even a single word, she and her prince fell in love before the end of the third day, and they lived happily ever after. This may not be a realistic portrayal of romance, but when *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and other films that compose the Disney princess franchise draw in an annual average of over \$1.6 billion in retail sales in North America and over \$3 billion globally (Goudreau, 2012), it is evident that Disney could be playing a pivotal role in influencing its young child viewers and that stories like the aforementioned tale of Ariel are some of the first and most prevalent tales of love to which young children are being exposed. More recently, for example, *Frozen* (2013) became the highest-grossing animated film ever, pulling in over \$1 billion worldwide (Walker-Arnott, 2014). For years, Disney media was regarded as harmless children's programming. However, in recent years more research has indicated that media can influence the realms of social meaning through which young child viewers make sense of the world.

Since the release of the first Disney princess movie in 1937 up until the most recent release in 2013, research has shown that Disney is consistently a favorite movie choice among children and children at heart (Tonn, 2008). Perhaps one of the most obvious reasons these films have experienced such success revolves around the prevalence of romantic ideals coupled with a “happily ever after” message that is absorbed by impressionable young viewers. For quite some time, this particular form of children's media has been overlooked and grouped into a category of politics of innocence (Muller-Hartmann, 2007), implying that Disney films are a harmless variety of media with no worrisome effects on the young viewers who consume them. However, much research to date seems to imply otherwise (e.g., Bachen & Illouz, 1996; Junn, 1997; Martin & Kazyak, 2009; Muller-Hartmann, 2007; Padilla-Walker, Coyne, Fraser, & Stockdale, 2013; Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman, & Lund, 2003; Wiersma, 1999, 2000), in that Disney films do consist of messages that could be manipulative to children's perceptions of the world. Whereas the idea of an idealized romance seems happy and uplifting, the consequences of those portrayals on the psyche of young viewers may be problematic. Muller-Hartmann (2007) points out that the consumption of Disney products starts at a very young age, and the films provide the first moral teachings of the world. Tanner et al. (2003) specifically confirmed that, upon analysis of 26 Disney films, one predominant theme regarding love was that relationships are typically created by a “love at first sight” interaction. In fact, in 23 of the 26 films the researchers analyzed, “love at first sight” was a prevalent theme (Tanner et al., 2003).

According to a study by Bachen and Illouz (1996), 90% of young adult participants found that they “often or sometimes” encounter love stories in movies. Bachen and Illouz (1996) go on to suggest that romantic ideals are being learned in part by viewing films that contain them. Additional studies have concluded that adolescents turn toward media to learn about relationships and sex (e.g., Junn, 1997; Pardun, L'Engle, & Brown, 2005). Because adolescents are increasingly communicating less about sex and relationships with their parents, they are left with media as a source to

address these subjects (Junn, 1997). This gives franchises such as Disney a vital role in shaping social expectations within a generation.

In one study, undergraduate students were found to have a preference toward idealized soul mate relationships and “mind-reading” in relationships (Holmes, 2007). A similar study found that undergraduate students idealized soul mate love if they were actively looking to learn about romance from film (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). Both studies demonstrated that films portray a good number of idealized romance messages. There is a propensity and desire for audiences to absorb and reflect these same ideals, especially if they are actively looking to learn about romance. This is dependent on the perception of romance within the film, and whether the romance in the film is rewarded or punished will shape whether the audience gains a realistic view on romance or an idealized view. Assessing the theme of idealized romance in Disney princess films will point research in the direction of the true influence of the media on adolescents. If the next generation of youth is to potentially be increasingly more understanding and realistic about romance, it is, then, of the utmost importance to investigate what media is portraying to our youth and whether portrayals of romance are becoming more realistic in the 21st century with the introduction of more modern princess storylines. This study hopes to explore whether the romantic ideals expressed in Disney princess films have remained constant from 1937 until today or whether Disney has made any measurable attempts to shift the unrealistic content of its stories and imbue them instead with new, perhaps more realistic perspectives on love and romance and the challenges that come along with them.

Disney Princess Films

For the purpose of this study, Disney princess movies released before the 1980s will be referred to as “classic,” Disney princess movies released between 1989 and 1998 will be referred to as “transitional,” and Disney princess movies released thereafter will be referred to as “modern.” Based on previous research from Whelan (2012), Disney princess narratives can be broken down in this way because of the predominant characteristics and traits that princesses in each era tend to perpetuate, especially as they relate to both romance and to their male counterparts. Whelan (2012) states that classic and progressive (hereafter referred to as transitional) princesses are classified as rigidly bound to roles of dutifulness, self-sacrifice, and subservience to males. Princesses such as Snow White, Aurora, and Cinderella are characterized as overtly passive, obedient, and quiet—entirely opposite of male leads (Whelan, 2012). In later years, princesses like Mulan, Pocahontas, and Belle begin to show signs of independence and strength as they slowly break the boundaries that once defined traditional gender roles of females in the 20th century. Finally, with the introduction of films like *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Tangled* (2010), *Brave* (2012), and *Frozen* (2013), princess characters seem to be breaking free from these roles entirely and are no longer defining themselves in relation to and contingent on finding a male. Analysis will then be conducted to determine whether the rate of ideals across the three eras of Disney princesses changes or shifts over time. If a degree of difference is found, understanding the changing trend in Disney princess movies

toward more modern perspectives can have several implications for future generations' perspectives on love and romance as learned through the media.

According to England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek (2011), a Disney princess movie is conceptually defined as a film featuring a central female character who is or becomes a princess and a male character who is romantically involved with or linked to the princess. Disney films are notorious for their fairy tale-like qualities, especially in regard to romantic relationships and the happily-ever-after quotient that goes along with them. Researchers have analyzed themes that Disney movies portray and what kinds of messages they send to viewers. One common theme suggests that the goal of Disney heroines is ultimately love and marriage (Downey, 1996). Downey (1996) argues that Disney fairy tales ideologically saturate their audiences with archetypal myths, symbols, and values derived directly from an American cultural context. Many Disney films begin with the lead female as single and by the end of the film she is married or attached to one male, which is not always true for the male leads. The current study includes all 12 Disney princess films created since 1937 excluding sequels (classic, transitional, and modern): *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Mulan* (1998), *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Tangled* (2010), *Brave* (2012), and *Frozen* (2013).

Romantic Ideals

Perceptions and stereotypes about idealized romance, love, sex, and relationships are found in popular media and begin to be absorbed by viewers at a very young age. These perceptions can mold and shape expectations in media consumers over time to reflect how they believe two people should interact in real life when they first meet. Young people, in particular, are vulnerable to the influence of images and stereotypes perpetuated in the media, which has prompted a need for extensive research on the implications of media and romantic relationships on young viewers. Since the late 1930s, romantic films have been a popular film genre because they provide a sense of escape from reality. Romantic relationships are idealized, perfected, and portrayed so that everything has a way of working out in the end. Hence, reliance on romantic films for applicable knowledge in everyday life, coupled with the fact that these romantic films portray an idealized—rather than realistic—concept of romance, makes it important to study just what kinds of messages are being watched by viewers.

There are multiple ways that scholars have approached the study of the romantic ideal. According to one conceptualization, romantic ideals refer to the types of traits that exemplify what constitutes the perfect partner and relationship (e.g., Markey & Markey, 2007). According to this approach, there is no a priori group of adjectives that is always considered ideal by researchers or participants. Rather, the definition of a romantically ideal partner or relationship is unique to each individual. We do not use this definition for this study because the lack of a common group of adjectives that is always considered ideal means that the appropriate level of rigor for a quantitative content analysis would be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

Another definition of the romantic ideal includes a list of unrealistic or dysfunctional expectations about relationships that are more about the operational nature of the relationship (e.g., mindreading is expected) rather than idealistic beliefs about love (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982). This conceptualization is most commonly used by interpersonal scholars who are investigating partners' communicative patterns within existing relationships. It does not work well with Disney films because the movies feature courtships rather than preexisting romantic relationships.

A third conceptualization of the romantic ideal is a set of beliefs about the perfect love (e.g., Bell, 1975; Sprecher & Metts, 1989). This definition consists of four main themes: love can overlook flaws, love can seek out that one perfect mate, love can happen instantaneously, and love can overcome all obstacles. This conceptualization is purely romantic and fits well with courtship themes. In addition, it lends itself well to a content analysis because of the clear, mutually exclusive categories. Furthermore, previous research has established a notable precedent. In their content analysis of romantic ideals found in romantic comedy films, Hefner and Wilson (2013) used this conceptualization to build their codebook and find their results. The conceptualization works well because there is a scale that was designed by Sprecher and Metts (1989) to test individuals' endorsement of these beliefs. Thus, using this conceptualization for our purposes makes sense because (a) it fits courtship themes well; (b) it lends itself well to a quantitative content analysis because of the clear, mutually exclusive categories; (c) it follows the model set forth by previous scholars who have also content-analyzed romantic ideals in movies; and (d) it sets the groundwork for future effects studies to test the influence of Disney princess films on the endorsement of romantic beliefs among viewers.

Theoretical Approaches to the Current Study

Rationale

The role that Disney plays in shaping individual identities and controlling fields of social meaning through which children negotiate the world is far too complex to be simply set aside as a form of reactionary politics. If educators and other cultural workers are to include the culture of children as an important site of contestation and struggle, then it becomes imperative to analyze how Disney's animated films influence the way America's cultural landscape is imagined (Giroux, 1996, p. 96).

The Walt Disney Company is Hollywood's third biggest movie producer (Reel Run-down, 2014) and is worth over \$90 billion (Carillo, Crumley, Thieringer, & Harrison, 2012). Disney princesses dominate children's media, with more than 22 Disney princess movies produced in the last century including original movies and sequels. Classic Disney films have been widely criticized in previous research (e.g., Giroux, 1996; Martin & Kazyak, 2009; Muller-Hartmann, 2007; Wiersma, 1999) for having overtly traditional and stereotypical themes about love. A common theme in classic Disney films suggests that "happily ever after" should be one's ultimate pursuit, and that can only be done through the acquisition of a romantic partner and true love's kiss. Although fantastical and perfect, this could mislead viewers by providing them with a false, idealized

perception of romance. An idealized perception of romantic relationships could lead to a diminished sense of self-worth, coupled with the belief that if one is not in a perfect relationship, one cannot be happy.

In the 20th century, most Disney princesses were primarily categorized as being passive, unusually patient, extraordinarily obedient, industrious, and quiet; a woman needed to be all of these things or else she could never become a heroine (Whelan, 2012). This generation of classic Disney princesses has imposed a traditional princess narrative that instilled in viewers a framework for the position of girls and women in American society at the time (Whelan, 2012), which has come under scrutiny in research and pop culture for leaving girls with a very limited choice when it comes to practical role models.

In 2001, the Disney princess line became an actual advertising campaign meant to reinvigorate the popularity of Disney princesses to the newer generations (England et al., 2011). According to England et al. (2011), Disney and its princess phenomenon are a powerful influence on product consumerism. Because the phenomenon focuses strictly on princess narratives, it has led to a new “girlhood” that is predominantly defined by gender and the consumption of gender-related messages and products. This reinstatement of the Disney princess popularity has created a franchise that today includes more than 25,000 total products and an increase in marketing sales from \$300 million in 2001 to \$4 billion by 2008 (England et al., 2011). Along with reintroducing the classic Disney princesses, this marketing initiative has attempted to introduce a “new” brand of 21st-century Disney princesses, or as researcher Whelan (2012) calls it, the “progressive princess narrative” (p. 29). Disney has attempted to solidify this concept by introducing princesses Tiana, Merida, Rapunzel and, most recently, Elsa.

With all this in mind, why does it matter whether Disney films purport romantic ideals? According to Hefner and Wilson (2013), it is important to consider the high level of relationship failures as a common reality outside of the media, despite media’s propensity for portraying idealized romance. Displays of romantic idealism directed toward younger viewers could have a positive or debilitating effect on how they approach romance in the future, and could be related to the relational failure society is currently experiencing. Previous research has analyzed the idealistic content of classic princess narratives, but little has been done to analyze the films that children are being exposed to in the 21st century. A more realistic shift in content could affect future relational successes or failures in the lives of viewers. The current study is a content analysis aimed at analyzing the distinction among the three categories of classic, transitional, and modern Disney films to measure whether a shift in romantic ideal portrayals exists. It is important to understand whether these new films are actually progressive or just reiterating traditional romantic ideals in more dynamic ways.

Based on previous research and criticism of the Disney franchise, messages in Disney princess movies generally portray stereotypical gender roles (Tonn, 2008; Wiersma, 1999, 2000) and provide an unrealistic concept of instantaneous love (England et al., 2011; Tanner et al., 2003). In order to determine whether these portrayals of love are unrealistic, it is crucial that we identify the prevalence of these messages within each Disney princess film in order to determine its impact on viewers. Our first research question serves to identify that presence.

RQ1: How prevalent are romantic ideals in Disney princess films?

In addition to finding the prevalence of ideals within these films, identifying the presence of challenges are equally as important. In order to determine a significant presence of unrealistic romantic expectations, idealized messages must be more prevalent than realistic portrayals. Therefore, our second research question aims to identify challenges in these films.

RQ2: How prevalent are challenges of romantic ideals portrayed in Disney princess films?

Based on previous research and criticism of the Disney franchise, messages in Disney princess movies generally portray idealized gender roles (Tonn, 2008). Thus, it may be important to assess the dialogue of romantic ideals between males and females to indicate which group expresses or pursues romance most often. Identifying which sex is potentially more invested in the relationship and expresses more romantic ideals could help future research uncover how young people are digesting these messages. Social cognitive theory purports that viewers pay attention most to those characters who are similar to them (Bandura, 1965). Thus, it is important to know how the different sexes express romantic statements in Disney films.

RQ3: Which sex of character expresses romantic statements in Disney princess films?

It can be difficult to understand the romantic ideal and challenge portrayals without then evaluating the reactions of characters involved. This is essential to pinpointing the intention of Disney's romantic messages in understanding what they are trying to say in terms of their stance on romance, ideals, and challenges. If ideal statements are responded to with a challenge (such as a negation or a counter with a realistic response to the ideal), then the ideal expressed is less influential to potential audience members. Therefore, our next question serves to identify reactions in each film.

RQ4: What are the reactions to ideals and challenges in Disney princess films?

Previous research has found in Disney movies that predominantly traditional gender representations of couples are shown (Tanner et al., 2003). The gender that pursues their romantic interest the most can be indicative of the types of relationships that are represented and portrayed to Disney viewers. Our final research question seeks to identify which gender does the most "chasing" when it comes to seeking romance and whether this changes and/or stabilizes (i.e., equal effort from both genders in pursuit of romance) over time.

RQ5: Which sex of character pursues most in Disney princess films?

Method

Sample

All 12 original Disney princess movies—*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Mulan* (1998), *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Tangled* (2010), *Brave* (2012), and *Frozen* (2013)—were used for this study. This

included all Disney and Disney Pixar films that featured a princess, excluding sequels. The sequels were omitted because they are typically movies that are not featured in the theaters and have a less prevalent focus on the romance between the primary princesses and their significant others. The Disney website features 11 princesses on their official princess website, corresponding with 11 Disney movies (www.princess.disney.com). The final movie added to this study was *Frozen* (2013), not featured on the Disney website due to its recent release in 2013. Four coders were used (three female and one male) to gain reliability for coding each movie.

Disney Films

For this study, the classic Disney princess films are classified as movies released between the years of 1937 and 1959, transitional Disney princess films are movies released between 1989 and 1998. The final category of modern Disney princess films are movies released after 2000.

Expression Variables

The primary unit of analysis to code for each movie was any expression of an ideal or challenge. Only verbal statements that were spoken or sung were coded, except for love at first sight, which allowed for nonverbal cues to signal the expression of that ideal. The definitions and codebook used by Hefner and Wilson's (2013) content analysis of romantic ideals in romantic comedy films was used for this study.

All romantic statements were coded as either ideals or challenges. A romantic ideal was classified as any verbal statement made by characters of the film that portrays an idealized perception of romance either in general or specific to the relationships in the film. An ideal expression was defined as any statement that perpetuated love and romance as powerful and perfect. These expressions offered a conception of love as hopeful and idyllic (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). Once coders determined that an ideal statement had been expressed in the movie, they categorized the ideal into one of four themes: (a) idealization of other (e.g., "you are perfect"); (b) soul mate/one and only (e.g., "there is only one person for me"), (c) love at first sight (e.g., "I knew I loved you the moment we met"), or (d) love conquers all (e.g., "none of that matters; all that matters is that I love you").

A challenge was defined as any statement that contradicted an ideal or offered a more realistic take on romance and relationships. Challenges are considered to convey a more realistic perception of romance (e.g., "it takes hard work to be in a relationship") and/or directly contradict one of the four aforementioned ideals (e.g., "there's no such thing as soul mates"). When a negative romantic statement or realistic romantic statement is made, it is considered and coded as a "challenge." These verbal statements can portray general statements about romance or be indicative of specific relationships within the film.

In addition to coding the ideals and challenge statements, the reactions toward such statements were also measured: positive, negative, mixed, or none. Verbal and nonverbal reactions were measured because viewers presumably notice both types of reactions.

A negative consequence was defined as any type of punishment that was delivered in response to the expression. Examples of punishments included rejection of the source verbally or nonverbally. This could include the target reacting by rolling the eyes or turning away, as well as a verbal expression of disagreement with the ideal or challenge statement. In order to code reactions of statements, each had to be a direct response to the expression and a direct response to the source. For each expression, coders chose one of four options as reactions: positive, negative, mixed, or neutral/no reaction.

Coders also analyzed the overall takeaway message of the film by selecting from five categories: (a) idealization of other, (b) soul mate/one and only, (c) love at first sight, (d) love conquers all, or (e) challenge. Coders were trained to think about the entire message or takeaway theme of the film in order to code this variable. Finally, coders measured three single-item codes that responded to the following questions: "Do the primary characters end up together in the romantic sense?" (*yes or no*), "Is there a wedding?" (*yes or no*), and "Which character does most of the romantic pursuing?" (*primary male, primary female, both characters equal*). Coders were instructed to use the "both" response option sparingly.

Training and Reliability

Four undergraduate students (three females, one male) served as coders for this project. These coders were blinded to the research questions and met with the first author once a week for 9 weeks to learn protocol for analyzing the films, to familiarize themselves with the codebook, and to practice coding romantic comedy films not included in the final sample. Training of coders continued until they reached 80% agreement on judgments of practice movies for 3 consecutive weeks on all of the variables, except for takeaway message, which had agreement levels that fluctuated between 65% and 75%.

During the coding process, coders independently watched each film twice on DVD. Each coder watched the film in a quiet room on his or her computer. On average, it took coders approximately 4 to 5 hours to complete the coding process for each film. Coding took place over a 1-week period. Scholars of content analyses suggest that reliability testing should be completed on 10% to 50% of the overall sample (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002). Thus, we randomly selected six movies, or 50% of the sample, to be used for reliability testing. Reliability was assessed at two levels. First, coders established reliability on the identification of units. Following a unitizing procedure similar to the one outlined by Cissna, Garvin, and Kennedy (1990), coders recorded the precise minute in the film that marked the beginning moment of each expression that was identified. Next, the consistency in choosing the same values for each variable was calculated. To assess agreement among coders, intercoder reliability was calculated using Fleiss' kappa, an extension of Cohen's kappa. This allows for more than two coders and makes corrections for agreements based on chance (Fleiss, 1971; Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005). Across the six selected films, the reliability coefficient for expression type was .84 and for character sex it was .92. For consequences of reactions it was .70. Fleiss' kappa was again used to assess reliability at the overall film

level. The reliability coefficient across six tests for the takeaway message variable was .67, the coefficient for weddings was .98, the coefficient for pursuing was .82, and the coefficient for ending up together was .91.

Although acceptable by conventional standards, the reliability alpha for the takeaway message was low (.67). This resulted because the coders agreed on four of the six films used for reliability purposes. They disagreed on *Cinderella* and *The Little Mermaid*. For *Cinderella*, one coder thought the film represented a soul mate/one and only takeaway message, particularly because of the narrative regarding the perfect shoe. The other coder believed that the plethora of negative relationship references throughout the film outweighed the happy ending. Two additional coders independently analyzed the film and concluded that the soul mate/one and only was the appropriate code. For *The Little Mermaid*, the coders disagreed on whether the takeaway message was soul mate/one and only or love conquers all. Again, two additional coders analyzed the film separately and chose love conquers all as the appropriate category.

Results

Please see [Table 1](#) for the frequencies of all study variables sorted by film. Please see [Table 2](#) for film examples of the five expressions.

Research Question 1

The first research question asked how prevalent romantic ideals are in Disney films. All films contained at least one ideal expression. There were a total of 188 ideal expressions, which averaged to 15.7 ideals per film. A goodness-of-fit chi-square analysis indicated that there was a significant difference among the four categories, $\chi^2(3, N = 188) = 35.02, p = .000$. Post hoc analyses revealed that the *idealization of other* expression ($n = 82_a$) occurred significantly more often in these films than would be expected by chance, whereas *love at first sight* ($n = 35_b$), *soul mate/one and only* ($n = 33_b$), and *love conquers all* expressions ($n = 38_b$) occurred significantly less often. For example, in the transitional period film *Aladdin* (1992), the title character idealizes Princess Jasmine when he sings to her: "I'm in a whole new world with you."

A series of chi-square tests of homogeneity were conducted comparing types of ideals by time period, $\chi^2(6, N = 188) = 12.12, p = .049, V^* = .18$. Overall, half of the ideals were expressed during the transitional period ($n = 93$) compared to the other two time periods combined ($n = 95$). Please see [Table 3](#).

For the classic time period, idealization of other was most commonly expressed (see [Table 4](#)), whereas love conquers all was more frequently portrayed during the modern time period (see [Table 5](#)). For example, Princess Aurora expresses her idealization of other in the classic time period film *Sleeping Beauty* (1959): "Well, he's tall and handsome, and ... and so romantic." Later, during the modern period, Prince Naveen tells Tiana that he would be willing to give up his status for her love: "I'm not sure I want to be a prince anymore, 'cause then we would have to go our

Table 1 Frequencies of Study Variables by Film

Film	Idealization of other	Love at first sight	Soul mate/one and only	Love conquers all	Challenge	End up together	Wedding	Pursuer
Classic								
Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs	2	1	1	0	0	Yes	No	Male
Cinderella	2	3	5	2	1	Yes	Yes	Male
Sleeping Beauty	7	1	2	4	10	Yes	No	Male
Transitional								
The Little Mermaid	10	12	7	2	19	Yes	Yes	Female
Beauty and the Beast	10	2	4	3	30	Yes	Yes	Male
Aladdin	7	1	3	2	9	Yes	Yes	Male
Pocahontas	5	2	1	2	9	No	No	Male
Mulan	16	0	2	2	14	Yes	No	Female
Modern								
The Princess and the Frog	10	1	3	4	3	Yes	Yes	Male
Tangled	4	4	1	2	7	Yes	No	Male
Brave	1	0	0	0	12	No	No	n/a
Frozen	8	6	6	15	28	Yes	No	Male

Table 2 Categories of Expressions With Definitions and Examples

Categories	Definition	Example statement(s)
1. Idealization of other	Any expression that indicated a character was perfect, flawless, and wonderful in a romantic sense.	<p>"I'd rather die tomorrow than live a hundred years without knowing you" (<i>Pocahontas</i>, 1995).</p> <p>"You're the best thing I never knew I needed. So now it's so clear I need you here always" (<i>The Princess and the Frog</i>, 2009).</p>
2. Soul mate/one and only	Any expression that suggested there was only one perfect love for a character. Destiny and fate work in tandem to connect true lovers.	<p>"Deep in my soul, I know that you're my destiny" (<i>Mulan</i>, 1998).</p> <p>"Someday my prince will come. Some day we'll meet again. And away to his castle we'll go to be happy forever I know" (<i>Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs</i>, 1937).</p>
3. Love at first sight	Any expression that suggested that love happens immediately after meeting. Can be verbal, nonverbal, or a mix of both.	<p>"When I find the right girl, I'll know. Without a doubt, it'll just [bam] hit me. Like lightning" (<i>Little Mermaid</i>, 1989).</p> <p>"All at once everything looks different, now that I see you" (<i>Tangled</i>, 2010).</p>
4. Love conquers all	Any expression that conveyed that love was the only thing needed to deal with obstacles in a relationship.	<p>"No matter what happens I'll always be with you" (<i>Pocahontas</i>, 1995).</p> <p>"No matter what you will become, I still love you till the end" (<i>Beauty and the Beast</i>, 1991).</p>
5. Challenge	Any expression that conveyed a practical view of relationships or contradicted an ideal.	<p>"True that he's no Prince Charming" (<i>Beauty and the Beast</i>, 1991).</p> <p>"Love is putting someone else's needs before yours" (<i>Frozen</i>, 2013).</p>

separate ways. I don't want that, I want to stay close to you, no matter what. Because ... I love you" (*The Princess and the Frog*, 2009).

Another series of chi-square tests of homogeneity were conducted by testing between each pair of time periods. Only the results of the test comparing transitional versus modern time periods were significant, $\chi^2(3, N = 158) = 10.39, p = .016, V^* = .26$. For these time periods, more ideal expressions occurred during the transitional period

Table 3 Frequencies of Ideal Expressions by Time Period

Time Period	Ideals
Classic	30 _b
Transitional	93 _a
Modern	65 _b
Totals	188

Note. $\chi^2(6, N = 188) = 12.12, p = .049, V^* = .18$.

Numbers with different subscripts differ significantly at the $p < .05$ level.

Table 4 Frequencies of Expressions by Time Period

Time period	Idealization of other	Love at first sight	Soul mate/one and only	Love conquers all	Challenge	Totals
Classic	11 _a	5 _b	8 _b	6 _b	11	41
Transitional	49	17	17	11	81	174
Modern	23	11	10	21	50	115
Totals	82	33	35	38	142	330

Note. $\chi^2(8, N = 330) = 17.46, p = .026, V^* = .16$.

Numbers with different subscripts differ significantly at the $p < .05$ level.

Table 5 Frequencies of Expressions by Time Period

Time period	Idealization of other	Love at first sight	Soul mate/one and only	Love conquers all	Challenge	Totals
Classic	11	5	8	6 _b	11	41
Transitional	49	17	17	11 _b	81	174
Modern	23	11	10	21 _a	50	115
Totals	82	33	35	38	142	330

Note. $\chi^2(8, N = 330) = 17.46, p = .026, V^* = .16$.

Numbers with different subscripts differ significantly at the $p < .05$ level.

($n = 93$) versus the modern period ($n = 65$). When comparing across the two time periods, idealization of other was more common during the transition period ($n = 48$ vs. $n = 23$), whereas love conquers all was more prevalent during the modern period ($n = 21$ vs. $n = 11$). Please see Table 6.

Results of the test comparing classic versus modern time periods were not significant, $\chi^2(3, N = 95) = 2.48, p = .478, V^* = .16$. Results of the test comparing classic versus transitional time periods were also not significant, $\chi^2(3, N = 123) = 2.97, p = .396, V^* = .16$.

Table 6 Frequencies of Ideal Expressions by Time Periods of Transitional and Modern

Time period	Expressions idealization of other	Love at first sight	Soul mate/one and only	Love conquers all	Totals
Transitional	48 _a	17	17	11 _b	93 _a
Modern	23 _b	11	10	21 _a	65 _b
Totals	71	28	27	32	158

Note. $\chi^2(3, N = 158) = 10.39, p = .016, V^* = .26$.
 For each column, numbers with different subscripts differ significantly at the $p < .05$ level

Research Question 2

The second research question asked how often challenges to the romantic ideals are portrayed in Disney films. All films contained at least one challenge expression. There were a total of 142 challenge expressions, which averaged to 11.8 challenges per film, or one challenge every 7.5 minutes. A series of chi-square tests of homogeneity were conducted comparing ideals and challenges by time period, $\chi^2(2, N = 330) = 5.28, p = .070, V^* = .13$. Results of this test approached significance. See Table 7. Ideals ($n = 30$) were nearly three times more common than challenges ($n = 11$) during the classic period, whereas the other periods contained more equal ideal and challenge expressions. For example, Hans tells Anna in the modern period film *Frozen* (2013) that he faked his love for her: “You were so desperate for love, you were willing to marry me, just like that!” These types of challenge expressions were much more common during recent time periods. Further, a one-way analysis of variance revealed that all relational expressions (ideals and challenges) were significantly more common per film during the modern phase ($M = 8.58$) compared to the transitional ($M = 5.51$) and classic ($M = 4.12$) periods, $F(2, 330) = 14.96, p = .000$.

Research Question 3

The third research question asked about the sex of the characters who express romantic statements in Disney films (see Table 8). A chi-square test of homogeneity was conducted comparing ideals and challenges by sex of character, but results were not significant, $\chi^2(1,$

Table 7 Frequencies of Expressions by Ideals and Challenges

Time period	Ideals	Challenges	Totals
Classic	30	11	41
Transitional	93	81	174
Modern	65	50	115
Totals	188	142	330

Note. $\chi^2(2, N = 330) = 5.28, p = .071, V^* = .13$.

Table 8 Frequencies of Expressions and Reactions by Film

	Expressions	Reaction	Positive	Negative	Mixed	No reaction	Sex of expresser			Takeaway
							Male	Female	Both	
Classic										
Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs	4		1	0	1	2	2	2	0	Love conquers all
Cinderella	12		5	0	0	7	5	6	1	Soul mate
Sleeping Beauty	24		2	6	4	12	4	17	3	Love conquers all
Transitional										
The Little Mermaid	50		10	9	2	29	25	24	1	Love conquers all
Beauty and the Beast	49		11	13	3	21	23	26	0	Love conquers all
Aladdin	22		9	11	1	1	12	8	2	Love conquers all
Pocahontas	19		6	3	1	8	4	13	2	Soul mate
Mulan	34		5	8	0	21	18	16	22	Challenge
Modern										
The Princess and the Frog	21		8	2	0	11	11	9	1	Soul mate
Tangled	18		5	6	3	4	6	11	1	Love conquers all
Brave	13		5	2	1	5	4	9	0	Challenge
Frozen	63		18	18	1	26	25	26	12	Challenge

$N = 306$) = 1.12, $p = .290$, $V^* = .06$. We also ran the test for each separate time period. The results of the test comparing classic versus transitional were significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 205) = 3.87$, $p = .049$, $V^* = .14$, revealing that females ($n = 25$) expressed more romantic statements during the classic time period than did males ($n = 11$), whereas males and females expressed roughly the same amount of romantic expressions during the transitional phase ($n = 82$ vs. $n = 87$, respectively). For example, classic time period princess Snow White expresses this ideal in her film: “One song, my heart keeps singing, of one love only for you” (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, 1937). Results of the test comparing classic versus modern time periods were not significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 137) = 2.45$, $p = .117$, $V^* = .13$. Results of the test comparing transitional versus modern time periods were also not significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 270) = 0.23$, $p = .636$, $V^* = .03$.

Research Question 4

The fourth research question asked about the reactions to romantic expressions in Disney films. A series of chi-square tests of homogeneity were conducted comparing ideals and challenges by type of reaction, $\chi^2(3, N = 330) = 68.73$, $p = .000$, $V^* = .46$. Nearly half of the expressions ($n = 147$) received a neutral or no reaction. Of those expressions that received a reaction, challenges were most often punished, whereas ideals were most often rewarded with a positive reaction, $\chi^2(1, N = 163) = 57.55$, $p = .000$, $V^* = .59$; see Figure 1. This pattern remained consistent regardless of time period (see Table 8). For example, when Flynn Rider tells Rapunzel: “You were my new dream,” she tearfully responds with a rewarding reaction: “And you were mine” (*Tangled*, 2010).

Research Question 5

The fifth research question asked about which sex of character romantically pursued the other most in Disney films. A goodness-of-fit chi-square analysis indicated that there was a significant difference between the sexes, $\chi^2(1, N = 11) = 4.46$, $p = .035$.

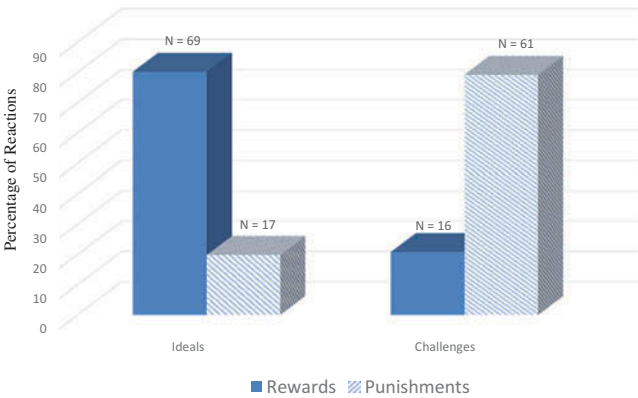


Figure 1 Reactions to Ideal and Challenge Expressions.

Post-hoc analyses revealed that males were the dominant romantic pursuers in 9 of the 11 films that featured a romantic relationship (see [Table 1](#)).

Discussion

This study presents a quantitative content analysis of the romantic expressions portrayed in Disney princess movies. The results of our study indicate that Disney princess films do contain a prevalence of romantic expressions and that there is a transition over time from classic through transitional to modern films in terms of overall number of ideals and challenges expressed. In general, analyses revealed that idealization of other was the most prevalent ideal of the four across all films in the three eras, and the transitional era contained half of all the ideals expressed in all the films combined. Further, ideals were three times more common than challenges in classic films, whereas ideals and challenges were expressed equally in transitional and modern films. In general, across all three eras, challenges were most commonly met with punishing and negative reactions, whereas ideals were most often rewarded. Finally, there were no sex differences in terms of ideal expressions, but male characters were the dominant romantic pursuers in 9 of the 11 films.

Our first research question asked about the prevalence of romantic ideals in Disney films. We found that idealization of other was the most prevalent ideal portrayed across all three eras of Disney princess films. When comparing the types of ideals within each individual time period, idealization of other was the most prevalent ideal in classic films, whereas love conquers all was most prevalent in modern films. Our results also indicate that the transitional period alone contained half of all expressions in our study. One reason for this might be that there is generally less dialogue in classic films than later films. For example, Aurora only accounts for 18 lines of dialogue and 18 minutes of screen time in the entire *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) film. Furthermore, modern films portray fewer ideals overall when compared to the other two eras. These data indicate that the portrayal of romantic ideals, in relation to amount of dialogue, does decrease over time, which is consistent with other research (Whelan, 2012). It appears that the Disney franchise is making the decision to present more realistic portrayals of romance with the newer iterations of the princess story. However, there is also a reduction over time in the overall discussion of romance. Both ideals and challenges appear less often in the more recent princess movies. Future research should investigate how viewers process the different eras of these princess films.

Our second research question asked about the prevalence of challenge expressions in Disney films. Our findings indicate that ideals were three times more common than challenges in classic films and that transitional and modern films revealed equal portrayals of ideals and challenges. The fact that Disney princess films in the transitional and modern eras are posing an increasing number of challenges to romantic ideals could be a good change for Disney cinema. It seems that the classic movies conclude with the idea of “happily ever after,” whereas the more modern movies, such

as *Princess and the Frog* (2009) and *Frozen* (2013), seem to portray more underlying themes consistent with independence, without a “happily ever after” based solely on finding romance. The increased prevalence of challenge expressions in these films means viewers are seeing more realistic portrayals of love and romance than did the viewers of their parents’ generation. Instead of watching romantic relationships form with ease, or “just happen,” young viewers who watch these movies today see that the ideal is challenged and that romantic relationships often take hard work and sacrifice to truly thrive. Hefner and Wilson (2013) analyzed recent romantic comedy films and also found that those movies portrayed a large number of challenge expressions. Our data add to that by demonstrating the changes in content over time. In an analysis of gender in Disney princess films, England et al. (2011) also present data that show changes over time. The authors argue that the gendered portrayals become more complex over time in a shift from gendered roles to more nuanced depictions. Taken together, our results and those of other film analyses suggest that Disney portrayals have shifted over time to generate more complex narratives, with modern films portraying a wide range of themes, including more realistic and anti-ideal expressions.

Our third research question sought to determine the sex of the characters that expressed romantic statements in Disney films. Our research revealed no statistical differences between sexes in terms of character expressions. This finding is contrary to the results of Hefner and Wilson (2013), because their results indicated that males express ideals more than females, whereas women express challenges more than men. It could be that the inherent idealistic nature of a princess story means that ideal expressions may be common from both character sexes. Furthermore, princess narratives revolve around the stories of female characters, which means that the princesses are given more attention and license to express ideals and might equal males in their expressions. In short, the idealistic nature of a princess story and the focus on the female character in these stories means that the divide between males and females on expressions of ideals and challenges might not exist in Disney films.

Our fourth research question sought to investigate the reactions to romantic expressions in Disney films. Our analyses discovered that nearly half of all expressions were met with neutral or no reaction. For example, in the *The Little Mermaid* (1989), when asked about finding “the right girl,” Prince Eric responds: “I know she’s out there somewhere; I just haven’t found her yet.” His uncle gives no reaction to this soul mate ideal expression. In addition, many of the ideals were expressed via singing monologues, in which the characters often revealed multiple ideal/challenge portrayals to the audience without directly addressing the love interest. Finally, “no reaction” was often coded when an ideal or challenge was expressed and the film was cut to another scene before the viewer could see a reaction. However, for expressions that received reactions, challenges were overwhelmingly met with negative and punishing reactions, whereas ideals were met with positive and rewarding reactions. For example, when Eugene tells Rapunzel in *Tangled* (2010): “You were my dream,” she responds with: “And you were mine.” This is a positive reaction to an ideal. To the contrary, when Rapunzel’s mom expresses the challenge statement that Eugene does not truly like Rapunzel and that he is only spending time with her so he can get the crown, Rapunzel responds angrily and a disagreement ensues. The reaction of ideals and challenges

would align with previous research, suggesting that the “fairy tale” genre rewards and supports romantic ideal statements (e.g., Hefner & Wilson, 2013). Although our findings indicate that ideal expressions are becoming less prevalent and challenge themes appearing more often in modern Disney films, the results of this research question also indicate that when those ideal statements are expressed they are met with rewarding reactions. In this sense, these findings have implications in terms of social cognitive effects, in that young viewers may be exposed to multiple messages about romance (both idealistic and realistic); however, the idealistic expressions are met with the most favorable reinforcing responses by other characters whereas the realistic challenges to the ideal are met with punishing reactions. According to Bandura (1965, 1986, 1989, 2002), the idealistic expressions would be the remarks that young people attend to and model the most. Future research should investigate which messages viewers are attending to most in order to truly untangle the complexity and implications of these portrayals.

Our fifth and final research question asked which sex did the most pursuing when it came to forming romantic relationships. Analyses found that men were the more dominant pursuers in 9 of the 11 films that featured a romantic relationship. These depictions could be a result of the common theme in these films, which is the “damsel in distress” that Tonn (2008) analyzed and noted was very common in earlier Disney princess films, such as *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). However, there was no difference among time periods because virtually every film portrayed the male character as the pursuer. Although Disney has reduced the amount of romantic ideal expressions over time, there remains a clear gender distinction in terms of roles. Males and females express ideal and challenge statements equally, and there has been a reduction in ideal expressions over time, but the female portrayals of being rescued and romantically pursued by males has persisted. Given the heteronormative nature of these Disney films, the gendered portrayals in terms of romantic pursuit could merely be a reflection of the Western cultural ideal of romance: Man pursues woman until they fall in love and live happily ever after, with no deviation from this tradition (e.g., England et al., 2011).

The results of our study may help inform future effects research regarding the potential impact of viewing these Disney princess films on young children’s perceptions about romance. For example, cultivation theory suggests that viewing fantasized screen media content is associated with corresponding beliefs about the real world (Gerbner, Cross, & Gross, 1976). In light of the results of this study, for example, viewers could view a Disney princess movie and subsequently develop the belief in the idealization of one’s romantic partner. This study provides the groundwork for future studies that can test cultivation within this context. In addition, social cognitive theory purports that viewers learn behaviors from mediated portrayals, particularly when that behavior is rewarded rather than punished (Bandura, 1989, 2002). The results of our study indicate that idealized expressions of romance were more often rewarded, whereas challenge expressions were more likely punished. Thus, a viewer who watches these Disney princess films could embrace the themes of romance and reject the negative and realistic components of relationships. These attitudes could have

behavioral implications for young people as they learn about love and begin to navigate their first relationships. Future research can use our study as a foundation for testing these theories.

Limitations and Conclusion

This content analysis of Disney princess films has contributed to the expansion of children's media research, specifically in terms of providing a more thorough understanding of media messages and potential media influence for young audiences. Although our findings do contribute to the belief that there is in fact a measurable shift over time in Disney princess films from overly idealistic to increasingly realistic, the evidence is not significant enough to deem a true correlation between idealization and classic films or realistic relationships and modern films or any true progression in the transitional phase. Large gaps of time between the films' releases and among our three eras in general also proved to be challenging.

In general, there has been a trend away from the ideal and toward the more realistic. That is, modern Disney princess films have shown a rapid progression in recent years toward more realistic portrayals of love. However, less encouraging is the finding that these realistic portrayals and challenges to the ideals are met with more punishing reactions from other characters, whereas the ideal expressions are more often rewarded. The portrayals of Disney princesses have become less fairy-tale and more realistic, but the message to child viewers may have not changed. From a social cognitive perspective, the results of this study demonstrate that the idealistic portrayals of love are the ones that are met with the most rewarding reinforcements from other characters, whereas the realistic statements and challenges to the ideals are met with punishments. Thus, although ideal expressions have slowed in Disney films during the modern era, the ideals are still rewarded and that could have important implications for what young viewers absorb with exposure to these films. Future effects research can uncover this association in more detail.

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