Disney's Princess Revolution:

Deconstructing Femininity in Animation

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Abstract

This thesis examines the evolution of the representation of femininity within the Disney Princess brand and how such shifts align with Disney's broader approach to gender narratives and brand strategy. The research explores how Disney's representation of female characters in the animated films *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), and *Moana* (2016) showcase the brand's use of brand feminism as a part of their marketing strategy and brand identity. The context of this research problem lies in the substantial influence Disney plays, as a global and major media conglomerate, in communicating and shaping perceptions of femininity through its Princess films. As Disney evolves its narratives, it has increasingly incorporated brand feminism as part of its corporate strategy, employing feminist ideals to enhance brand loyalty and maintain cultural relevance. Hence, understanding how femininity is constructed and communicated across the Disney Princess films is critical as these illustrations offer insight into the evolving representation of women and highlight how Disney employs feminist branding strategies to reflect cultural shifts. The main research question guiding this thesis is: How does the representation of female characters in Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), and *Moana* (2016) reflect the brand's approach to femininity and power in relation to societal discourses?

This thesis utilizes a qualitative approach, employing a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how femininity is constructed through a specific categorization. This categorization is based on four key markers of binary gender stereotypes, employed to analyze how the visuals and discourse reflect, reproduce, or challenge power relations in each film: traits, role behaviors, physical appearance, and occupations. These binary stereotypes of femininity, introduced by Deaux and Lewis (1984), serve as a framework to analyze how the films construct discourses of femininity.

Additionally, these themes reveal how femininity is portrayed in each film, reflecting the sociocultural contexts of their respective time periods. The selected animated films belong to one of the three Disney Princess eras, Classic, Renaissance, and Revival, each representing the social and feminist changes of the era in which it was produced. The main findings reveal that early Disney films like *Sleeping Beauty* reinforce oppositional views of femininity, whilst *The Little Mermaid* begins to explore themes of independence, but it does so within a primarily romantic framework. *Moana* marks a substantial shift from the previous films, emphasizing an empowered and autonomous female protagonist who transcends the rigid gender binary through nuanced depictions of femininity. This thesis concludes that the brand's evolving representation of femininity, as brand feminism, functions as a strategic business tool to align the brand with contemporary feminist discourse and a response to broader sociocultural movements over time.

Keywords: Disney, representation of femininity, gender fluidity, animation film, brand feminism

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1.   Introduction

Over the course of the past 100 years, The Walt Disney Company as a global entertainment conglomerate has solidified its position as a dominant force within popular culture and the film industry. Disney's role as a media conglomerate extends far beyond entertainment and children's education. Its extensive portfolio of owned companies including theme parks, news media, cruises, and more, playing a multifaceted role in media and business (Kinger, 2022, p. 3066). Founded in 1923 in the United States by brothers Walt Disney and Roy O. Disney, the company has brought countless narratives to life over the decades and captivated global audiences with its engaging storytelling (Hine et al., 2018, p. 2). Disney's reach has extended to owning and operating multiple brands including Pixar, Marvel, and Star Wars, attracting young girls, boys, and adults alike (Stover, 2013, p. 2). The start of the Disney Princess brand began back in December 1999, when Andy Mooney was appointed as president of Disney Consumer Products. After attending a Disney on Ice show, Mooney observed that young girls wore generic princess costumes, prompting him to encourage the creation of a Disney Princess franchise. This lead to the official launch of the Disney Princess line in January 2000, now featuring thirteen princesses. This would mark the first time princesses would be marketed as part of a franchise, additionally incorporating princess films produced decades before the officialization of the brand (Smale, 2018). Over the years, the brand has expanded from films to include numerous other products such as dolls, theme parks, and merchandise (Kinger, 2022, p. 3070). Given the pervasive influence of Disney Princess films within Western culture and around the world, depicted through their cultural references and media adaptations, the company as a whole has become a powerful force in shaping the understandings of gender and identity (England et al. 2011, p. 555). The brand, appealing to children and particularly young girls, has long communicated themes of friendship, family, and other values, and are often characterized by their romantic storylines (Hine et al., 2018, p. 6). The first Disney Princess film, *Snow White*, was released in 1937, whilst the most recent film *Moana 2*, was released in 2024; the Princess Line has spanned over 87 years and to this day still continues (Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022, p. 22). Previous research has shown that earlier princesses are often illustrated more negatively in terms of their engagement in their own narratives, with less dialogue and a narrower range of traits compared to both male characters and later princesses (Hine et al., 2018, p. 2).

Multiple theories emphasize the significance of gendered information in molding children's understanding of their gender identity. Such theories include the Social Cognitive Theory, which suggests that models (including parents, colleagues, or characters/people in the media) all contribute in conveying gender norms and stereotypes to the youth. Additionally, Gender Schema Theory emphasizes how media information, particularly youth animation, shapes children's understanding of gender as it influences their "cognitive structures" and worldviews (Schiele et al., 2020, p. 661). In other words, the representations of femininity and masculinity, conveyed through gendered information, influences children's understandings

of the world and society. This would suggest that the reinforcement of Gender Schema Theory, where repeated illustrations of loving and nurturing female characters producing cognitive structures in young viewers, lead them to associate an idealized femininity with particular feminine-coded traits and masculinity with male-coded characteristics (Schiele et al., 2020, p. 661). Hence, it is critical to examine how Disney communicates femininity through its Princesses, as such representations play a role in children's understanding of society and the world. According to the American Psychological Association, the term "femininity" may be defined as the "quality of having characteristics that are traditionally thought to be typical of or suitable for a woman" (*APA Dictionary of Psychology*, 2023). These "traditional" characteristics create a framework within which femininity is constructed and conveyed. This definition highlights the importance of gender stereotypes in understanding societal expectations placed on individuals. By examining these gender stereotypes, one may uncover how ingrained societal norms define what is acceptable and appropriate for women, and as such, how these expectations are reinforced through the representation of femininity in the animated films. Feminism generally underscores the negative ways stereotypical notions of gender may lead to restrictive categorization, favoring particular characters and voices over others, as well as illustrating imbalances in gender dynamics (Sobande, 2019, p. 2725). These stereotypes typically position femininity in opposition to masculinity, thus producing binary stereotypes that have long shaped how femininity is perceived (Schiele et al., 2020, p. 660). Understanding these binary stereotypes is critical as it allows for the examination of how femininity is challenged or perpetuated in the animated films. Further, this notion of gender stereotyping will be employed to explore how these representations have evolved alongside the brand's development as well as Disney's strategic use of representation as part of its brand identity. Additionally, the analysis will be separated into four categories, including traits, role behaviors, physical traits, and occupations, which will allow for a focused and nuanced examination of how the different aspects of femininity are depicted. This thematic categorization will offer deeper insights as to how the broader shifts in female representation contribute to the evolving discourse on femininity. Some questions to help guide the analysis include: How do the assigned traits and behaviors of female characters shape their representation of femininity? And, how do female characters' physical traits and societal occupations construct femininity?

Disney, through its strategic brand initiatives, notably brand feminism, has made branding efforts to leverage these gender representations to align with feminist ideals, shaping young girls' perceptions of femininity and in turn reinforcing its own brand identity (Sobande, 2019, p. 2730). By aligning the Disney Princess brand with feminist ideals over the decades, the company has capitalized on growing social demand for progressive representations (Liu & Yang, 2022, p. 1035). This business strategy engages with audiences by building consumer trust and loyalty through its alignment with the gradual shifts in societal values, whilst also strengthening its market position, revealing the intersection between media

representation and marketing strategies (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p. 2). It is important to note that these gradual shifts, meaning society's understanding of gender and power, are fluctuating and complex, where the brand's portrayals of female characters continue to evolve within a dynamic and non-linear landscape. The Disney Princess brand strengthens its brand identity through brand feminism, appealing to the evolving social values calling for a more inclusive and nuanced representation of gender. By promoting progressive illustrations of femininity, Disney enhances its position in the industry as a socially conscious brand, thus ensuring long-term engagement with its global consumer base, all the while influencing wider cultural narratives around femininity (Schiele et al., 2020, p. 660). More specifically, Disney builds consumer trust in multiple ways, through its memorable characters and enchanting narratives, appealing to universal emotions like love, joy, and heroism (Urrutia, 2024). Additionally, by adapting its films' core messages and ideals over time, the brand may maximize its consumer base and increase its financial revenue. This decades-long delivery of emotional experience engages and resonates with consumers, fostering brand trust and loyalty, ultimately solidifying its brand reputation (Urrutia, 2024). Hence, the focus of this thesis will be exploring the intersection between media representation, femininity, and branding within the context of this Disney brand's evolving illustration of femininity. This research will contribute to the understanding of how media representations construct and communicate gender, particularly through a critical analysis of the female characters, and how such has evolved.

The application of a critical discourse analysis aims to uncover how Disney's brand feminism serves as a business strategy in constructing and representing femininity in the animated films across time. The decision-making process in film production is framed by both technical and social knowledge "mediated by bureaucratic, organizational, and other institutional arrangements that are themselves gendered" (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 209). As such, the construction of gender representations, specifically femininity within the Princess Line, consists of substantial influence from the historical and sociocultural ideologies and contexts of the time period. Such is manifested through artistic and technical elements like dialogue, characters, narrative, and images, all which comprise a film, in this case animated. Representations in films possess significant power in shaping understandings of a social group, especially through Disney's Princess line, which has spanned nearly a century and contributed substantially in constructing cultural narratives around femininity (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 209). The ways in which films illustrate femininity is inherently connected to power dynamics, and how such is distributed and represented through the characters and their roles in the narrative. Within the context of this thesis, the notion of femininity and power dynamics is central to comprehending how Disney's evolving representations of femininity either uphold or challenge stereotypical notions of femininity. Disney's brand feminism may further reinforce or challenge the power relations between women and men, and as such, exploring how femininity is constructed and communicated through the animated films is crucial. The representation of

femininity in the brand's animated films is both a creative choice and a strategic business decision, profoundly connected to power structures and cultural ideologies (Urrutia, 2024). Hence, it is important to consider how brand feminism is employed in the animated films through the visual and textual elements, to examine how femininity is illustrated and contributes to the discourse on gender and power dynamics. Therefore, to properly understand how Disney uses dialogue, moving images, and characters to represent femininity, it is crucial to contextualize the Disney's Princess brand into three distinct periods. These periods, henceforth referenced as "Eras", acknowledged by numerous researchers and studies, corresponds to significant shifts in Disney's approach to the representation of femininity alongside shifts in societal attitudes regarding gender politics (Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022, p. 23). These three Eras are as follows: The "Classic Era" (1937-1959), the "Renaissance Era" (1989-1997), and the "Revival Era" (2009- present day). This thesis will analyze three animated films from the Princess brand, one from each Era: *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) from the Classic Era, *The Little Mermaid* (1989) pertaining to the Renaissance Era, and *Moana* (2016), belonging to the Revival Era (Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022, p. 23). Through a Critical Discourse Analysis of all three films, this thesis explores the representation of femininity in the films' visual and textual elements, analyzing the images, scenes, characters, dialogue, and narrative (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 209). By examining animated films from each of the three Disney eras, the analysis will offer insights as to how these popular culture representations have evolved to perpetuate or challenge stereotypical understandings of gender. Therefore, the guiding question for this thesis is as follows: How does the representation of female characters in Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), and *Moana* (2016) reflect the brand's approach to femininity and power in relation to societal discourses?

2.   Theoretical Framework

The theories and concepts that encompass this study are rooted in gender studies and media analysis. The theoretical baseline of this thesis involves the works and notions of media theorists John Fiske (2010) and his concept of popular culture, Judith Butler's (1988) understanding on gender performativity, and Stuart Hall's (1997) notion of representation in the media in relation to Roland Barthes' semiotic theory (1977). To examine the representation of femininity within the Princess brand's cinematic universe, a nuanced analysis requires the integration of various theoretical perspectives. These elements will collectively illuminate how the brand portrays female characters and contributes to the cultural discourse of the communication of femininity to its audience. Therefore, the following theories will be employed to explore the interplay between the line's portrayal of femininity and the feminist branding strategies involved across the three animated films.

2.1 Popular Culture and Power

John Fiske's notion of popular culture will serve as the basis of this thesis, particularly to comprehend how the selected Disney films represent gender (Fiske, 2010, p. 4). Fiske, a prominent media scholar, expresses the concept of culture as a long-lasting site of struggle between those with power and those lacking it; a constant arena where power dynamics play out. He highlights how visual content in the form of television programs or films do not have a unique meaning, but are open texts which are capable of being read distinctly by different people (Fiske, 2010, p. 84). Similarly, media scholar Jonathan Gray explores the concept of popular culture by emphasizing how "the intersection of popular and political communication… is in fact central to our engagement with information and entertainment alike" (Gray, 2017, p. 18). Fiske accentuates the significance of how audiences interact with information and entertainment, highlighting how such engagements play into shaping perceptions. The Disney Princess brand exerts substantial cultural influence by blending entertainment with socio-political messaging (Schiele et al., 2020, p. 663). More specifically, these films often convey implicit messages regarding identity, gender roles and expectations, making them central to how popular media shapes, reflects, and may even reinforce or challenge broader political or cultural narratives around femininity (Schiele et al., 2020, p. 662). Additionally, Fiske claims popular culture to be "the culture of the subordinated and disempowered" where power relations become apparent, including "traces of the forces of domination and subordination" which ultimately are pivotal to the social system and how one's social experience (Fiske, 2010, p. 4). Thus, this notion is critical in recognizing that media consumption is not a passive experience but rather an active exchange that contributes to forming societal views and norms. Further, he emphasizes how the body is a site of "cultural and political struggle […] where politics can best disguise itself as human nature" (Fiske, 2010, p. 1). His notion of popular culture suggests films are not just entertainment but sites where power relations, specifically with regards to gender, are portrayed. In other words, the body is not merely a natural or biological construct, but is deeply embedded within both cultural and political practices. This framework will be employed to analyze how Disney strategically incorporates political and cultural messages into brand feminism to build a progressive brand image. Hence, an analysis on both the physical depiction of the characters as well as the dialogue on the representations of femininity will be conducted to ascertain how gender stereotypes are encoded within the films. This perspective will be utilized when analyzing how Disney's illustration of female characters may perpetuate or challenge prevailing gender norms.

2.2 Feminist Film Theory as a Critical Lens

This thesis will integrate Feminist Film Theory to analyze Disney's brand feminism strategy within its Princess brand to explore how the media giant employs feminist narratives within its marketing

framework. The Feminist Film Theory will provide a critical lens through which the gender dynamics of each Disney film may be analyzed, as this theory critiques the way in which cinema represents women and how films may or may not perpetuate patriarchal ideologies of gender. Feminism refers to a social movement and systems of thought that involve "a wide ranging set of theories, politics, and practices" advocating for gender equality (Schiele et al., 2020, p. 660). It is multidisciplinary in its meaning and offers insights without favoring any social group or any one individual (Maclaran et al., 2022, p. 76). Early feminist criticism was targeted at stereotypes of women, for the most part in American Hollywood films. In the mid-1970s, British feminist film theorist and filmmaker Laura Mulvey introduced the notion of the "active" male gaze "arguing that the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form" (Marnel Niles Goins et al., 2020, p. 120). Since then, feminist critics aimed to comprehend the prevalent "power of patriarchal imagery" as well as the "fixed and endlessly repeated images of women" as "objectionable distortions", which propelled the call for a positive imagery of women within cinema (Smelik, 2007, p. 491). The narrative structure of early cinema constructed visuals that catered to the male gaze, establishing a gendered binary opposition based on activity and passivity. Within this context, the analysis will uncover how the Disney Princess films, particularly the earlier films, construct and communicate femininity, ultimately developing an understanding of an idealized femininity that caters to the male gaze. A change in representation occurred when early feminists perceived Hollywood cinema to be tailor-made for male desire and fundamentally patriarchal (Smelik, 2007, p. 491). Hence, the notion that early cinema tends to portray male characters as active and female characters as passive will be employed to analyze how early Disney Princess films have evolved (or not) in terms of female representation. Specifically, this theory will be applied to examine the illustration of female characters from early to contemporary Princess films, spanning a period of 57 years. This theory will be employed to uncover the female representation in cinema focusing on elements of body image, femininity, and sexuality (Smelik, 2007, p. 494). Further, it will be utilized to critically assess the broader construction of feminine roles and conveyed stereotypes within the Disney brand. This theory will serve as a critical lens to examine dialogue, visual elements, and narrative shifts in the selected Disney films. This theory provides a critical lens through which to analyze representation, gender, and power in Disney's films, to further uncover how the company has adapted its narratives to align its brand with feminist movements.

2.3 Brand Feminism as a Corporate Strategy

Brand feminism refers to a brand that leverages feminist ideals and empowerment in their marketing and branding to strengthen their brand identity (World Federation of Advertisers, 2018). More specifically, Disney situates itself as a forward-thinking business, employing feminist branding to acclimate its brand to modern feminist discourse (Tian, 2023, p. 31). As consumers expect media to reflect more

empowered and authentic representations of gender, Disney's storytelling is intertwined with both business strategies and social movements, ensuring the brand aligns with evolving demands of contemporary culture and appeal to its audiences. This thesis explores how feminist branding is leveraged within three films from Princess brand to maximize appeal and resonate emotionally with consumers (Maclaran et al., 2022, p. 79). Such feminist branding strategies emphasize diversity in representation, empowerment, and the challenging of societal norms (Sobande, 2019, p. 2725). This thesis analyzes how the three Disney animated films leverage feminist values as part of its Princess brand identity, but also how the brand engages with the broader gender political discourse, by challenging, perpetuating, or reinforcing gender roles. Gender politics entails the "power dynamics, societal norms, and expectations" that revolve around the roles of males and females, encompassing multiple factors including intersectionality (race and class) and gender identity (Sobande, 2019, p. 2725). Brand feminism within the media is a marketing strategy where a company adopts imagery and themes to promote its brand and products to its audiences (Schiele et al., 2020, p. 660). Brand feminism is often tied to acts of "resistance and solidarity" in response to systemic oppression (Sobande, 2019, p. 2724). Therefore, an analysis of how Disney employs feminist branding requires a tapping into the stereotypically "dominant ideologies which are characteristically masculine" or feminine to draw insight as to how the brand includes images and cues illustrating its perpetuation and/or support of women's empowerment (Sobande, 2019, p. 2725).

Hence, this notion will be employed to analyze how female characters in *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), and *Moana* (2016) embody varying levels of ambition and agency, and how this depiction has evolved over the decades. The significant reemergence of feminism in mainstream media within the past decade has compelled media organizations to be both aware and promote gender issues within their branding and/or marketed products. More specifically, brands now have the "opportunity to show, amplify, and challenge systematic gender discrimination, especially in media that target young female consumers" (Schiele et al., 2020, p. 660). Considering the young female audience targeted by the Princess brand, it is part of corporate social responsibility for influential companies like Disney to craft narratives that promote positive gender representations (Schiele et al., 2020, p. 663). The theme of defying patriarchal expectations directly aligns with feminist discourses which in turn sheds light on restrictive gender representations. Female rebellion against rigid patriarchal structures and norms is a strategy which aims to promote female empowerment, especially within Disney's female-led narratives (Tian, 2023, p. 32). This thesis investigates Disney's instrumentalization of gender, analyzing its female characters to reorient its market position and positively influence its brand perception, through the three selected films spanning over nearly six decades of the Princess brand.

Ultimately, by employing Feminist Film Theory, the analysis focuses on dissecting the layers of gender representation in the Disney films by focusing on how visual and textual elements illustrate feminist

themes. This thesis examines how Disney's marketing strategies utilize brand feminism, an approach leveraging feminist values to enhance brand identity, loyalty, and trust with its young female audience (Maclaran et al., 2022, p. 78).

2.4 Binary Oppositions of Gender Stereotypes as a Framework

Building on this foundation, this thesis will employ Karl Deaux and Laurie Lewis' (1984) understanding of gender stereotypes. This framework will be utilized to observe the depictions of gender stereotypes of masculinity and femininity through the structure of binary opposition. According to Deaux and Lewis, "the human mind perceives difference most readily in terms of the opposite which is defined as binary opposition concept" (Deaux & Lewis, 1984, p. 1). This concept is significant in comprehending human cognition, but it also applies to social constructs, including gender. As Butler highlights, gender is a sociocultural construct and not a fixed identity; therefore, analyzing gender representation through binary oppositions will help reveal how deeply ingrained social norms and stereotypes are (Butler 1988, p. 10). Feminist critics aim to comprehend the power of patriarchal imagery through the use of structuralist theoretical frameworks, in the same way as this thesis will employ Deaux and Lewis' list of binary oppositions (Smelik, 2007, p. 491).

The concept of gender stereotypes consists of preconceived notions on the behaviors and roles appropriate to men or women, which leads to the narrow interpretations of masculinity and femininity (Deaux & Lewis, 1984, p. 5). Gender bias highlights how stereotypes reinforce an imbalance in power, categorizing femininity and masculinity as oppositional and socially constructed categories based on both power dynamics and cultural standards (Ji, 2021, p. 451). As French philosopher and semiotician Roland Barthes argued, stereotyping establishes a clear and symbolic frontier between binary oppositions including "us and them", "the acceptable and the unacceptable" and occurs where there are substantial inequalities of power (Hall, 1997b, p. 44). Power, as he claimed, was typically directed against the subordinate or the marginalized group (Hall, 1997, p. 258). By employing this framework of binary oppositions of gender stereotypes as the baseline of this thesis, we can better understand the power dynamics and social constructions of gender in the selected animated films. Furthermore, this understanding is crucial for critically assessing the rigid frameworks that may perpetuate or challenge inequalities based on these constructed distinctions.

Deaux and Lewis understand the complex interplay of gender stereotypes across numerous components: traits, role behaviors, physical appearance, and occupation. These components are set apart by two categories: masculinity and femininity (Deaux & Lewis, 1984, p. 5). The component of traits refers to the characteristics of an individual's personality. For instance, according to Deaux and Lewis' framework, masculinity is socially depicted as being independent whereas femininity is depicted as being

dependent. In patriarchal ideology, males were considered as the essential subjects both in the narrative and spectators (through the male gaze), and additionally possessed traits including strength and emotional detachment. In contrast, femininity is described as possessing traits of dependence, emotional, and subjective (King, 2021, p. 124). Second, physical attributes relate to the physical aspect of an individual, focusing on body shape and weight. This beauty ideal is based on features of physical attractiveness, centered on the tone of skin, small body size, and blonde and blue eye-ed characteristics. Third, role behavior refers to the activities and function of a person in society, or more specifically within the domestic frame of a family. In this binary opposition of gender stereotypes, masculinity is viewed as possessing the role as "family man" defined by dedication, responsibility, and providing. Conversely, femininity is stereotypically viewed as being the "housewife", characterized through nurturing and selfless traits (Deaux & Lewis, 1984, p. 9). Finally, occupation is the work or job that is allegedly done by a specific gender. Within this stereotypical context, masculinity is perceived as having an interest in the outdoors: committing to hard work and adventuring. Femininity, however, is perceived as having an interest in working inside the house, such as cleaning or decorating (Deaux & Lewis, 1984, p. 5).

Nevertheless, Butler criticizes the binary gender system (male/female) which often assumes that gender roles (masculine/feminine) correspond directly to biological sex. Butler argues this constraints gender expressions within rigid categories where gender is expected to mirror biological sex (Butler, 1990, p. 6). By conceptualizing gender as independent of sex, Butler describes gender as becoming a "free-floating artifice", highlighting how gender is flexible and a gender construct, established through cultural practices, social interactions, and performative acts (Butler, 1990, p. 9). Hence, the terms "masculine" and "man" could apply to both male and female bodies, emphasizing the non-fixed and performative nature of gender (Butler 1988, p. 10). It is important to note the rigidness and limitations of employing the List of Binary Oppositions in capturing the full spectrum of gender identity (Deaux & Lewis, 1984, p. 1). Therefore, this thesis will utilize a new framework that views gender as a spectrum; one that acknowledges the fluidity and multiplicity of gender expressions. The necessity to move beyond binary opposition towards a more nuanced understanding of gender reflects the contemporary notion that gender is complex and exists across a wide spectrum, rather than in a binary gender system. This shift will allow for a more inclusive analysis that accommodates a wider range of gender identities and expressions, thus enriching our understanding of gender representation within the media.

The analysis will consist of employing Deaux and Lewis' method to establish a foundational understanding of stereotypically binary gender roles within the Disney films. This method will serve as a baseline for critically transitioning to explore the concept of fluid gender identity, where gender is not viewed as a fixed construct, but rather as a spectrum of expressions and performances. Through the integration of contemporary gender theories, this analysis will delve into how female characters embody

these stereotypical gender binaries, and the evolution from the earlier film to most contemporary. This dual method will allow for the analysis of the evolution of gender representation from gender binaries towards more complex and nuanced understandings. Through this method, the same categories (traits, role behaviors, physical traits, and occupations) will be reevaluated by applying contemporary gender theories that view gender as a flexible range. In this manner, Disney films set across different decades may be analyzed through the lens of gender as a performance and culturally constructed role. All in all, this thesis will examine how these categories are constructed, challenged, and blurred within the films.

Whilst these components are independent in themselves, their dynamic interaction amongst one another can reinforce the overall perceptions of masculinity and femininity. Deaux and Lewis' list of binary oppositions in gender stereotypes identified pairs of emotions such as rational/emotional and independent/dependent based on masculine and feminine categories (Deaux & Lewis, 1984, p. 2). This binary opposition blends with Mulvey's framework by shedding light on how early cinema may reinforce gender stereotypes through contrasting representations of activity and passivity (King, 2021, 121). It also shows how films can perpetuate or challenge gender norms using these binary, stereotypically gendered oppositions within their narratives. Their notion on gender stereotypes will be employed in this thesis to explore how the complex nature of gender stereotypes contributes to the representation of gender and possible persistence of binary oppositions in societal perceptions of gender (Deaux & Lewis, 1984, p. 2). This theory will allow for a nuanced analysis of how gender stereotypes are being challenged or reinforced, and thus formulate an understanding of the complexity of gender identity construction and representation in the three Disney films.

Finally, this paper will follow previous literature in dividing the Disney's princess films into three separate "eras" (Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022, p. 36). As Butler emphasizes, gender is a construct which is constantly evolving. This is why outlining an era-specific construct to illustrate the representations of gender in the selected animated films will allow for a nuanced analysis of how these portrayals have evolved over time in Disney's princess universe. This will offer insights into the company's adaptive representation strategies within the shifting landscape of gender representation in the media. First is the "Classic Era" (1937-1959), then comes the "Renaissance Era" (1989-1997), and lastly, the "Revival Era" (2009- present day) (Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022, p. 38). These eras are distinguished by their significant shifts in storytelling, animation technology, as well as how princesses were portrayed in the narratives (Johnson, 2015, p. 10).

2.5 Gender Performativity to Explore Femininity

Additionally, Judith Butler's concept of "gender performativity" will be employed in this analysis to comprehend how gender is depicted in the three Disney films (Butler, 1988, p. 42). In order to frame the

subsequent insights, the distinction between the terms gender and sex must be clarified. According to Psychologist Robert Stoller, who was the first to distinguish between the terms gender and sex, the concept of sex refers to the physical and biological characteristics of an individual's body, whilst gender indicates how feminine or masculine behavior an individual displays based on social factors including "social roles, position, behavior and identity" (Mikkola, 2022). Renowned philosopher and gender studies scholar Judith Butler emphasizes how gender is not a fixed identity, but rather "an identity tenuously constituted in time -an identity instituted through a stylized repetition" and behavior (Butler 1988, p. 10). According to Butler, "gender is real to the extent that it is performed" (Butler, 1988, p. 9). Drawing inspiration from John L. Austin's description of the "performative", where all utterances must be viewed as actions, as well as the Derridean notion of iterability further suggests that "every act is itself a recitation", Butler transcends these notions by arguing that repeated performances themselves construct gender (Hall, 1999, p. 184). Her notion posits that gender is constructed through repeated behaviors and cultural practices, instead of being a fixed characteristic determined by biology.

Nevertheless, Butler emphasizes the idea that certain actions or behaviors are often perceived as a reflection of an individual's gender identity. More specifically, society often interprets specific actions, including how someone dresses, behaves, or speaks, as an expression of gender, "and that these acts either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in a way" (Butler, 1988, p. 9). Therefore, she acknowledges that these acts may either align with or challenge societal expectations of gender. For instance, acts that align with expected gender norms reinforce stereotypical gender identities, making them appear stable and natural (Butler, 1988, p. 10). On the other hand, acts that deviate from norms challenge the stereotypically binary notions of femininity or masculinity. Hence, the notion of gender performativity and iterability will be utilized to analyze how the female characters in the Disney Princess films perform their gender through actions and dialogues, providing insights as to how these performances shape societal understandings of femininity and masculinity.

Similarly to Fiske, Butler's framework emphasizes the social and cultural construction of gender identity, and how social norms, expectations, and power dynamics may shape one's understanding as well as their performance of gender (Butler 2004, p. 42). Butler emphasizes how gender does not remain the same over time as it varies with race and class, hence gender must be viewed in accordance to "cultural intersections" that have "produced and maintained" gender (Butler, 1988, p. 8). The intersectionality of gender, including factors such as race, sexuality, and class, also influence the performative acts through which gender is expressed. Considering that femininity is constructed through repeated performances, there is a margin for subversion or resistance against preconceived or binary notions of a gender (Butler, 2004, p. 10). Therefore, this thesis will analyze how repetition of particular behaviors accorded to female characters may challenge or perpetuate stereotypically binary gender norms.

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Hence, Butler's concept of "gender performativity" will offer a lens to understand how gender is not a static construct and how it is reshaped and represented in distinct ways within Disney's cinematic universe (Butler, 2004, p. 51). Therefore, her notion on gender will be employed to examine how Disney's representation of its female characters in the selected animated films perform gender within their narratives. This will allow for the analysis on how gender is constructed through narrative and visual elements, including how it has shifted within the Disney Princess brand over the decades by analyzing the repeated portrayal of certain types of behaviors. This will provide insights into the portrayal of femininity and Disney's strategy in engaging with contemporary societal norms and values with regards to gender.

2.6) Representation in the Media

Lastly, Stuart Hall's understanding of "representation" is critical in the production of meaning within language (Hall, 1997, p. 5). Hall, a renowned cultural theorist, emphasizes how representation is based on two systems, or processes. The first system allows one to give meaning to the world due to a system of concepts and images formed in people's mind; a conceptual map where "objects, people, and events are correlated with a set of concepts or mental representations" (Hall 1997, p. 17). On the other hand, language is the second system of representation in the process of creating meaning. Essentially, Hall argued how meaning is produced through language and how language is then interpreted by an individual or a society. Moreover, Hall claimed that the process of representation is not about reflecting reality, but rather involves the complex interplay of mental concepts with linguistic and visual symbols constructing meaning (Hall 1997, p. 18). The cultural significance stems from how these elements, including visuals, language, and narrative, fit into a broader societal framework that assigns meaning to gender roles, shaping how audiences understand female agency and representation (Hall, 1997, p. 34). He discussed the complex nature of representation, especially when dealing with "difference" and "the other", which triggers attitudes and emotions that can instill fears or anxieties within the spectator (Hall, 1997, p. 226). The image or text carries numerous meanings, which illustrates both an event (denotation) and conveys a message (connotation) (Hall, 1997, p. 230). This relates to Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, with regards to denotation and connotation, where the surface level of representation is enhanced by deeper layers of meaning (Barthes, 1977, p. 169). Barthes' notion suggests that deciphering the message of an image also involves interpreting a person or the occasion's "otherness" and its "difference", hence a binary opposition. Barthes' notion that visual representations inherently convey messages about their "otherness", often reinforcing stereotypes, will be employed to analyze how the three Disney films challenge or preserve binary distinctions around gender (Hall, 1997, p. 230). Nevertheless, binary oppositions have been regarded as being reductionist and over-simplified, where one pole of the binary was socially perceived as the "dominant one". There is a significant relation of power amongst the poles of a binary opposition, where

"difference" is key to construct meaning through a dialogue with "the other" (Hall, 1997, p. 235). Hence, this thesis will examine how visuals and language are utilized to create meanings around gender.

2.7) The Princess Eras: Setting the Stage

The three animated films that will be analyzed all form a part of what Disney as a company understands as their "Disney Princess" brand. This thesis follows previous literature in separating the Princess brand films into three separate "eras" of films (England et al., 2011, p. 8; Fought and Eisenhauer, 2022, p. 23; Stover 2013, p. 3). This approach allows for a nuanced examination of the narrative and visual elements of the films to comprehend how gender is constructed, represented, and challenged over time. These eras serve as the backbone to this analysis, providing a structured lens through which to explore how the Disney brand leverages brand feminism as a strategy within its portrayals of gender representation in the films. As Disney princess narratives evolved, so did its marketing strategies, adapting to new social landscapes and thus implementing feminist branding (Bhadra 2023, p. 24). These eras are set apart by their aesthetic and stylistic aspects, including their approach to gender politics. Disney, as a global entertainment industry has navigated the promotion of gender issues within its marketing strategies to align with modern feminist movements of the time (Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022, p. 32).

The Classic Era (1937-1959), marks the beginning stages of the Princess brand, renowned for the passive and beautiful nature of the princesses; representations that have been widely critiqued for their representations on gender and identity. This Disney Era features a conservative depiction of the "ideal" female character, as this analysis will explore through *Sleeping Beauty* (Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022, p. 28). During this time period, Hollywood's culture and production code enforced particular gender-coded roles and representations in films (Motion Picture Association of America, 2023). The second Era (1989-1997) began 30 years after release of the last Princess film in the first era, *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), when *The Little Mermaid* (1989) was released. Disney's fourth Princess film, *The Little Mermaid*, was released in 1989 and marked the beginning of a new of feminist representations (Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022, p. 27). In the late 90s, films that acknowledged feminist ideas substantially increased marketing sales, consistent with Disney gradually positioning its new brand as progressive for the audiences of the time. A trend in the mass media aimed to reshape what society imagined as "empowered girlhood" which Disney quickly caught on (Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022, p. 28). Lastly, the long period between the Renaissance and Revival Era was significantly shorter than the 30 year span separating *Sleeping Beauty* and *The Little Mermaid*. The Revival Era (2009-present day) faced major shifts in societal discourse, accelerated by the emergence of internet culture and social media, which led to the rapid evolution of online feminist criticism (Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022, p. 27). Third-wave feminism was progressing during this time period, where a social push for more

intersectional understandings of femininity prompted an enhanced space for discourse revolving around gender fluidity, race, and trans and nonbinary identities (Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022, p. 33). This analysis investigates Disney's strategic adaptation to changing societal values, and thus conduct a critical discourse analysis on the representation of its female lead characters in terms of gender representation.

3) Research Method and Design

This section will aim to outline the methodological approach undertaken to examine the representation of gender roles within the Disney Princess Brand, and more specifically, the three selected Disney films. Given Disney's influential role within the media market and in shaping children's perceptions of gender and identity, the analysis uncovers how representations of femininity are conveyed (Stover, 2013, p. 2). Disney comprises thirteen princess films, which the company considers part of their "Disney Princess" brand (Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022, p. 47). These princesses "have come to represent more than just animated film characters; they have become cultural icons of childhood and tokens of an idealized girlhood" (Golden & Jacoby 2017, p. 1). These characters do not merely exist within the confines of their storyworlds but rather they extend their influence onto the real world. The Disney Princesses, as enduring cultural icons, play a considerable role in shaping understandings on gender perceptions, conceptualizing and understanding femininity (Stover, 2013, p. 1). Therefore, the analysis, of the qualitative nature, will employ a critical discourse analysis framework, which will aim to dissect the portrayals of the female characters and narratives. The data selection process involved a selection of one film from each Princess Era in order to showcase the evolution of the representation of femininity across time. In order to achieve this, all thirteen Disney Princess films were first categorized into their respective eras: The Classic Era (1937-1959), the Renaissance Era (1989-1997), and the Revival Era (2009- present day), as referenced in Appendix 1. The selected films based on their respective Era are: *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) from the Classic Era, *The Little Mermaid* (1989) from the Renaissance Era, and *Moana* (2016) from the Revival Era. This method allows for a diverse selection of Princess films from different time periods whilst ensuring one film from all three Eras would be analyzed. This approach further ensures the analysis explores a broad spectrum of the brand's trajectory in shifting representations of femininity. The following chapter serves as an overview of each selected film highlighting its key elements that make up the storyline.

3.1) Operationalization

The operationalization of the key concepts from the research question, including femininity and brand feminism, require breaking down these concepts into measurable units that may be observed and analyzed within the three animated films. This process will link the aforementioned theoretical frameworks

to the methodological approach by identifying particular indicators that will further guide the analysis. These indicators are assessed on the visual, textual, and narrative aspects of the films. Regarding the concept of femininity, the indicators serving as the basis to analyze how femininity is represented are: traits, role behaviors, physical traits, and occupations. With regards to brand feminism, the indicators are brand identity and brand messaging. Below is the operationalization table, indicating the concept, indicators, examples from data, and an explanation of how the theoretical concepts are measured.

Concept	Indicators	Examples from Data	Explanation
Femininity	Traits	*Sleeping Beauty*: Aurora's passivity and dependence on male intervention.	Deaux and Lewis' binary oppositions and Butler's gender performativity is applied to observe how traits like passivity, strength, and emotionality reinforce or challenge stereotypes around femininity.
	Role Behaviors	*The Little Mermaid*: Ariel pursues her romantic desires and independence.	Role behaviors are observed through characters' decisions and behaviors, measuring agency though housewife roles, and independence, employing Butler's gender performativity and Deaux and Lewis' binary opposition.
	Physical Traits	*Sleeping Beauty:* Aurora's idealized beauty as a central focus.	Feminist Film Theory and Hall's representation theory is used to observe the characters' external appearances and clothing. The level of sexualization and adherance to idealized beauty standards will serve as the measurement.
	Occupations	*Sleeping Beauty:* lack of occupation yet confined to domestic realm.	Deaux and Lewis' binary oppositions is used to investigate how female occupations may challenge stereotypical understandings of femininity. The evidence is observed through leadership, domesticity, and involvement within indoor/outdoor roles.
Brand Feminism	Brand Identity	Moana's empowerment through her leadership role and self-discovery journey.	Brand identity is observed through the corporate alignment with empowerment and feminist values. The evidence includes female characters with various traits and breaking the gender binary as outlined by Deaux and Lewis.
	Brand Messaging	Moana represents a fusion of stereotypically binary characteristics as an	Brand messaging is observed through female empowerment and fluid representation of the female characters

		independent, nurturing, and determined leader.	using Feminist Film Theory. This may be empowering language and character behaviors conveying feminist ideals.

3.2) Film Overview

Sleeping Beauty **(1959)**

     Sleeping Beauty (1959) is a classic Disney animated film telling the story of Princess Aurora, set in a fantastical medieval kingdom with magical beings. The story begins when the kingdom celebrates the newborn princess and a trio of three fairies, named Merryweather, Fauna, and Flora, bestow gifts upon her. However, the ceremony is quickly interrupted by the arrival of the witch Maleficent. Consumed by her jealousy, Maleficent casts a spell on Aurora decreeing that on her sixteenth birthday, the Princess will prick her finger on a spindle and fall into a deep sleep. Nevertheless, one of the fairies softens the curse so as an alternative to dying, Aurora will remain asleep until her true love's kiss awakens her. In order to protect the Princess, Aurora was sent to live in a cottage in the forest with the three fairies. Sixteen years later, the Princess meets a mysterious stranger and falls in love with him. When Aurora returns to the castle, Maleficent lures her into a trap where she pricks her finger and falls into a deep sleep. The three fairies then find the man Aurora fell in love with, who turns out to be her betrothed Prince Phillip, who fights against the witch to reach the princess. The Prince then kisses the sleeping Princess, who awakes from her curse and both live happily ever after (Clark et al., 1959). This film was produced by Clyde Geronim, written by half a dozen male scriptwriters, and Walt Disney as its producer (Clark et al., 1959). With a $6M budget, *Sleeping Beauty* collected a gross revenue of $51M.

The Little Mermaid **(1989)**

     The Little Mermaid (1989), released 30 years after *Sleeping Beauty* and belonging to the Renaissance Era, narrates the story of Princess Ariel. Ariel's fascination with the human world has led her away from her royal duties, where she scavenges deep-sea shipwrecks and discovers human artifacts. In response to her defiance of her father King Triton's rules, King Triton assigns Sebastian the crab to look after Ariel and dissuade her from embarking on dangerous adventures. On one of her trips to the surface, she witnesses a shipwreck. This is when Ariel saves a young man, Prince Eric from the ship and begins to fall in love. Separated by land and sea, Ariel longs to meet him again, so the witch Ursula offers her a deal to transform her into a human for three days where she must receive a "true love's kiss" or become Ursula's prisoner. As a payment to transform her mermaid tail into legs, Ariel must give up her voice to the witch, who secretly has other plans to overtake the throne. Ariel spends the next three days with Eric, voiceless and waiting to be kissed, until Ursula disguises herself as a human and hypnotizes Eric into marrying her.

With the help of her animal friends and King Triton, Ariel saves Eric's life. Nevertheless, Ariel's time on land is over and she returns to her mermaid form about to succumb to Ursula's wrath, until Ariel's father trades his life for hers. The film comes to an end when Ariel and Eric work together to defeat Ursula, save King Triton, and restore peace to the sea. Ultimately, Ariel becomes permanently human and marries the love of her life, Prince Eric, with the blessing of her father. This animated film was directed and written by Ron Clements and John Musker (J. Musker & Clements, 1989). With a $40M budget, *The Little Mermaid* collected a gross revenue of $84M upon its initial release, and over $210M worldwide to this day (IMDb, 2025).

***Moana* (2016)**

The third and last film, *Moana* (2016) is an animated film set in ancient Polynesia on the island of Motunui, telling the story of Princess Moana. Moana has always been drawn and connected to the ocean, a sentient being in the film, which finds different ways to communicate with her. Regardless of the Chief's warnings about venturing beyond the reef surrounding her island, Moana has always longed to go beyond. She discovers how she comes from a long line of voyagers and that the reason for her island's quickening deterioration due to Maui, the shape-shifting demigod, who stole the heart of the goddess who brought life in the ocean, Te Fiti. Te Fiti, consumed by anger and loss, becomes Te Ka, a volcanic demon filled with rage and violence. In order to heal her island, Moana ventures out onto an epic journey across the Pacific Ocean to restore Te Fiti's heart. The ocean, having chosen her for this quest, provides her with the heart, so she may return it to Te Fiti. Together, Maui, Moana, and her companion Heihei face numerous dangers, yet continue to sail and navigate across the ocean. After an argument between Maui and Moana, he abandons her on her quest, but she does not give up. Using her sailing skills and returning to Te Ka, the ocean clears a path to connect the two, where Moana sings and reminds Te Ka this is not who she truly is, and restores the Heart to Te Fiti. This act heals the oceans and islands bringing prosperity and life back. Returning to her island, Moana helps her people reconnect with their heritage and forgotten identity. This film, belonging to the Disney Princes brand's Revival Era, was directed by the same individuals as *The Little Mermaid* (1989), J. Musker, R. Clemens, Chris Williams, Don Hall, Osnat Shurer, and Jared Bush. With a $150M budget, *Moana* collected a gross revenue of $690M since its initial release (Nash Information Services, LLC., 2025).

3.3) Method of Analysis: Critical Discourse Analysis

This thesis will employ a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its primary methodological approach. A CDA, according to Teun van Dijk, uncovers meanings suggested within a text and attempts to explain the discourse structures of social interactions (van Dijk, 2015, p. 468). A critical discourse analysis

addresses social and/or political problems, and more specifically focuses on the ways in which discourse reproduces, represents, or challenges "relations of power abuse (dominance) in society" (van Dijk, 2015, p. 467). Moreover, a CDA incorporates a variety of techniques from the cross-discipline of discourse studies, therefore making it a flexible method to examine the complexities of a text. Hence, analyzing the dialogue, visual elements, and narrative structures of the Disney films can reveal how the brand positions female characters within roles that either challenge or conform to binary gender expectations. This method focuses on the ways in which "discourse structures may influence specific mental models and generic representations… and especially how beliefs may thus be manipulated" (van Dijk, 2015, p. 473). This approach offers a framework to analyze the nuanced and often implicit ways in which these films contribute to the social construction and perception of femininity, especially amongst young audiences (Stover, 2013, p. 2). By employing a CDA as the method to analyze each princess film across distinct eras, this thesis will critically examine how gender representation has evolved in response to shifting societal attitudes. This approach will provide insight into the interplay between media representation, gender politics, and Disney's brand feminism, offering a critical lens of the representation of femininity in major cultural institutions and businesses like Disney.

A CDA, as a multidisciplinary method, focuses on numerous aspects of a text, thus enabling a comprehensive examination of how these two means of communication (visual and textual) work together to produce meaning. This is why, both visual and textual material from the film will be analyzed to draw holistic and comprehensive insights as to how each film is conceptualized. It is also important to note that CDA focuses on the "linguistic character of social and cultural processes and structures", rather than just language itself (Machin & Mayr 2012, p. 4). More specifically, a critical discourse analysis focuses on how language may reflect and produce power relations, analyzing whether a text is perpetuating dominant social ideologies. More specifically, a CDA is actively "committed to political intervention and social change", and thus this method of analysis will allow the examination of how the dialogue and media representations play into gender norms and gender politics (Mayr & Machin, 2012, p. 4). This method will serve as a platform to critique how the films shape sociocultural perceptions of femininity, power, and identity. Overall, applying a CDA for this thesis can uncover the underlying power structures and ideological constructs embedded within the narratives of Disney Princess films (Mayr & Machin, 2012, p. 5).

Moreover, this study will employ Barthes' notion of semiotic theory and how images can denote and connote (Barthes, 1977, p. 20). In semiotic terminology, the denotation process consists of depicting concrete visual aspects of the image, including their illustration of particular people, places, objects, and setting in order to generate initial ideas. Afterwards, based on the denotation process, the connotation process takes place. The latter involves uncovering the ideas and values communicated through what is represented. More specifically, this entails the cultural association of visual and textual elements on top of

its denotative meaning (Mayr & Machin, 2012, p. 54). This methodological approach goes a step further to analyze the data through a critical discourse analysis. This approach will steer the analysis in a direction that allows for the thorough observation of all textual aspects, and uncover how such plays a role in the communication of power relations in terms of gender (Mayr & Machin, 2012, p. 12).

More specifically, to gather the raw data systematically, the initial findings will be categorized in three different sections: attributes, setting, and salience based on their denotative and connotative meanings, as shown in Appendix 2 (Mayr and Machin, 2012, p. 32). The attributes category is concerned with how objects communicate ideas, values and ultimately discourses (Mayr and Machin, 2012, p. 51). The setting category focuses on the composition of the image and how such connotes discourses (Mayr and Machin, 2012, p. 52). Lastly, the salience section is centered around cultural symbols, color, tone, and foregrounding (Mayr and Machin, 2012, p. 54). This data will be gathered by writing down observations in each section to draw meaning from the displayed visual content. Each film will be viewed a minimum of three times to gain a deep and insightful understanding of its content, characters, plot, and themes. This step is critical in becoming familiar with the material and gain a deep understanding of the scenes (Mayr and Machin, 2012, p. 49).

All in all, the elements that will be analyzed through a multimodal approach, including both visual and textual aspects of the animated films by focusing on the aspects most salient to this research. The textual elements will be conducted using the script of each film, with a particular emphasis on examining tone, narrative voice, and the use of language, to analyze the discursive strategies in shaping gender narratives. Additionally, the visual elements will be drawn from the scenes, including the character design, settings, lighting, scene composition, and color scheme (Mayr and Machin, 2012, p. 13). Together, the textual and visual elements of the films will be observed and analyzed to explore how these elements contribute to the overarching discourse on brand feminism within the Disney Princess brand through its storytelling techniques. Sepcifically, the analysis of each scene will be carried out in the following manner: first, a description of the scene along with figures found in Appendix 2; second, a critical analytical interpretation though the process of denotation and connotation; third, a discussion and comparison between films embedding theoretical connections; and lastly, an analysis of the films' contexts with regards to the chapter theme and brand feminism. This structured framework will allow for all visual and narrative elements of the films to be recorded and facilitate the extraction of deeper meanings and interpretations. Therefore, as introduced by Mayr and Machin (2012) this thesis will employ a critical discourse analysis which will draw substantiated conclusions from the visual and textual data to derive an explanation as to how the representation of female characters in Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), and *Moana* (2016) reflect the brand's approach to gender narratives.

4) Analysis and Results

The analysis section will be organized around key discourses identified within the three animated films, employing a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how femininity is represented through the visual and narrative elements. The analysis is based on the themes outlined by Deaux and Lewis (1984): attributes, role behaviors, physical traits, and occupations, whilst uncovering the denotative and connotative discourses as defined by Barthes (1977). In each section, 1-2 scenes will be analyzed, first describing the scene, then the critical analytical interpretation, the discussion of the films' contexts with regards to the theme and theory, and a film comparison to uncover underlying discourses of the brand's construction of femininity and power.

4.1) From Passive to Active: The Evolution of Traits in Disney Princesses

This section analyzes scenes from the animated films to assess how feminine traits are portrayed and communicated in relation to the construction of femininity. In *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), Princess Aurora's emotional reaction upon receiving her royal crown positions her as passive, reflecting broader themes of feminininity. Upon arriving at the castle, Flora presents Aurora with her royal crown, and Aurora breaks into tears, thinking of the young man she met in the forest earlier that day (figures 1-3).

Flora: "The symbol of thy royalty. A crown to wear in grace and beauty as is thy right and royal duty". (Geronimi, 1959, 0:48:00)

Marking the moment Aurora officially assumed her royal duties, the emphasis on "grace" and "beauty" reflects the idealized feminininty of the time, as passive and ornmanetal. Visually and textually depicting Aurora's dissatisfaction with her royal duties and her desire for a romantic relationship reinforces this dichotomy, where femininity is perceived as lacking without romantic fulfillment. This strengthens the idea that women are not fit to govern or possess royal responsibilities on their own. The scene reinforces patriarchal ideals as well as Deaux and Lewis' concept of the gender binary, where femininity is presented as inherently tied to emotionality, particularly within romantic contexts regardless of the minimal connection (Deaux & Lewis, 1984, p. 7).

Released after World War II, *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) showcases how Disney sought to capitalize on shifting sociocultural dynamics by appealing to the "new woman" of the 50s: a return to classical understandings femininity, illustrating women as "dutiful wives and mothers or childlike sex kittens" (Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022, p. 25; Stover, 2013, p. 2). This illustration of women as devoted to romantic and domestic ideals is reflected in this scene through Aurora's immediate emotional response to the man from the forest, as her sense of self-esteem hinges on romance rather than objective and rational thinking

(Deaux & Lewis, 1984, p. 8). In doing so, Disney depicts femininity as passive and reactive, ultimately reinforcing gendered power structures (Butler, 2004, p. 12; King, 2021, p. 20). This scene reinforces the notion that feminine traits are defined by emotions and romantic fulfillment, illustrating how emotional expression is an inherent, normalized, and expected trait for women, hence affirming stereotypical and binary notions of gender stereotypes (Deaux & Lewis, 1984, p. 1).

Unlike *Sleeping Beauty*'s (1959) narrative where Aurora passively awaits the Prince's kiss to free her from the spell, *The Little Mermaid* (1989) presents Ariel as an active agent, positioning her as the rescuer rather than the rescued. As Ariel defies her father's orders and swims to the surface, she saves Prince Eric from drowning and safely brings him to shore (figures 4 and 5).

Princess Ariel: "He is beautiful" (Musker & Clements, 1989, 0:25:22)

The connotations of Ariel's actions when she watches over him as he lays in her arms reflects a romanticized view of femininity emphasizing a woman's admiration, yet positions her as an agent of change, marking a departure from earlier depictions of passivity (figure 5). Ariel's active role highlights a shift toward a more nuanced and inclusive representation of femininity in Disney's Renaissance Era, whilst Aurora remains rooted in the Classic Era's rigid gender norms. The composition of the image with Ariel centered in the frame and gazing down at Eric, places her in a position of agency and control, subverting stereotypical notions of femininity and illustrating her as actively engaging in the narrative (figure 5). During the 1980s, the concept of the "male gaze" as a dominant framework within Western visual culture became controversial due to its exclusion of the female spectator and female gaze (King, 2021, p. 125). However, Ariel's role as Eric's savior subverts the "damsel-in-distress" narrative and declaring him as "beautiful" further challenges the male gaze by positioning Eric as the object of her admiration and Ariel the subject of the gaze (Smelik, 2007, p. 2). This reversal of the male gaze challenges the conventional gender dynamics by shifting the focus away from the female as the object of attention to the male, establishing a space for female spectator and altering binary power dynamics (Fiske, 2010, p. 71). From the 1950s to the 1980s, social norms around femininity underwent substantial changes; once idealized as dependent, passive, and graceful, femininity evolved and Disney's brand feminism adapted to these changes (Andi Zeisler, 2008, p. 13). This nuanced shift does not dismantle the male gaze but rather reconstruct the meaning of femininity it by suggesting female characters may hold both active and admiring roles.

However, despite being positioned as the rescuer, Ariel is depicted as bound to male intervention to ensure her own freedom. As Ursula takes Ariel underwater after she fails to kiss the prince, she demands Ariel's voice, until King Triton intervenes to save his daughter's life (figures 6-8).

Ursula: "Of course, I always was a girl with an eye for a bargain. The daughter of the great sea king is a very precious commodity" (Musker & Clements, 1989, 1:11:12)

Ursula's choice of the word "commodity" reduces Ariel to an object of trade or utility, which in turn reflects a connotation of exploitation. The textual and visual elements of the scene carry connotations of ownership and objectification, suggesting the daughter of a powerful figure is primarily viewed as a valuable object. Specifically, the language used, "great sea king" and "very precious commodity", emphasizes a significant binary understanding of femininity; where a woman's social, economic, or political connections are worth more than her own capabilities. This reflects an ongoing societal conflict, struggling to fully break away from viewing women through an objectifying lens (King, 2021, p.122). The dialogue plays into the binary and gendered notion of femininity as dependent and objectified. This reinforces the binary opposition of femininity as weak and dependent on powerful male figures (eg. her father King Triton) where masculinity is associated with control and strength (Deaux & Lewis, 1984, p. 7). Showcasing Ariel's value and identity are tied to her relationship with male figures (her father and the Prince), significantly contrasts to Ursula as a powerful and fearful character on her own. Ursula reflects a version of femininity that is self-assertive, independent, and strategic, yet Disney positions her as the antagonist and villain of the narrative (Sharmin & Sattar, 2018, p. 54). By making these traits central to her villain role, the Disney Princess brand suggests that femininity performed outside of gendered norms, as defined by Deaux and Lewis' gender binary, are dangerous and unconforming (Deaux & Lewis, 1984, p. 6). This version of femininity is framed as self-serving and morally corrupt, contrasting sharply with Ariel's romanticized femininity focused on romantic relationships. This scene highlights the tension between emerging feminist ideals and representing femininity through a stereotypically binary lens.

The following scene from *Moana* (2016) underscores the importance of discovering one's true self beyond societal constructs, resonating with broader themes of gender fluidity. Towards the end of film, Princess Moana and Te Ka face one another (figures 11-13).

Moana sings "Know Who You Are": "I have crossed the horizon to find you. I know your name. They have stolen the heart from inside you. But this does not define you. This is not who you are. You know who you are" (Musker & Clements, 2016, 1:18:50).

The visuals of the scene, showcasing Moana's role as a wayfinder and instructing the ocean to allow Te Ka to come to her, become a metaphor for cultural restoration and redefining femininity (Figure 12). The dialogue emphasizes her empathy and awareness, and unlike the previous Disney Princess films, Moana's song emphasizes personal identity and self-worth, rather than a relationship to another. Deviating from employing aggression or brute force, Moana's ability in seeing beyond one's external appearance challenges gender binaries by illustrating how emotional intelligence becomes vital strengths, regardless of gender. The scene is marked by a dramatic transformation from Te Ka's cataclysmic and fiery form to Te Fiti's serene greenery (figures 12 and 13). Whilst the destructive monster embodies the patriarchal narrative

of uncontrolled female emotions, Moana's actions reframe Te Fiti's identity, representing femininity as deeply connected to nature and powerful. This depiction constructs femininity not as a single identity, but as multifaceted, encompassing both devastation and creation, rage and serenity, and ultimately positioning femininity as an empowered and holistic representation (Hall, 1997b, p. 9). The Princess' strength is encompassed by her resilience, empathy (to all beings), and strategic thinking: traits which challenge the binary understanding of strength and power as exclusively physical or aggressive. She challenges the idea that femininity as an identity is not fixed but fluid and defined by personal understanding. By rejecting Te Ka's external appearance as purely destructive, Moana helps restore her original identity, symbolizing the ability to redefine oneself beyond imposed traits (Butler 1988, p. 10). The visual grandiosity of Te Ka in flames juxtaposed with the green blooming of nature highlights Hall's concept of representation as a space of renegotiation between cultural meanings (Hall, 1997b, p. 9-10). Disney depicts Moana embodying traits that are stereotypically distributed between gender binaries: bravery and strength as masculine-coded, and nurturing and empathetic as feminine-coded, merged into a single character (Deaux & Lewis, 1984, p. 5). She represents a fusion of characteristics that redefine femininity, emphasizing that qualities are not exclusive to any one gender but rather human attributes, promoting a more inclusive and empowering understanding of gender identity (Butler, 1988, p. 10). This portrayal invites a broader discussion on the flexibility of gender identity and the potential for individuals to embody a spectrum of traits and abilities not bound by predisposed gender constructs.

Unlike earlier princesses who relied on male intervention, Moana takes full control of her narrative and fate. Where *Sleeping Beauty's* Aurora awaits rescue in a deep sleep and *The Little Mermaid's* Ariel depends on her father's rescuing, Moana's actions showcase a progressive representation of femininity. Disney's rebranding of feminine traits, demonstrated through Moana's ability to heal, empathize, and empower as central traits to her leadership, modernizes the portrayal of femininity resonating with third-wave feminist ideals (Sobande, 2019, p. 2725). By the time *Moana* was released, third-wave feminism had taken center stage due to the radical shifts in societal discourse triggered by the "explosion of internet culture in the 2000s" (Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022, p. 32). The rise in social media and online feminist criticism pushed for more intersectional understandings of femininity and introduced a new accountability for media creators like Disney to produce narratives aligning with contemporary feminist values (Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022, p. 33). These evolving representations showcase broader societal understandings of femininity and align with Disney's brand feminism by strategically adapting contemporary feminist ideals to engage with the shifting gender politics of each time period (Schiele et al., 2020, p. 665).

4.2) Feminine Behavior as a Performance: How the Princesses Navigate their Roles

In *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), female characters' role behaviors contribute significantly to the discourse on the representation of a passive and nurturing femininity. At the start of the film, after Maleficent casts a spell on Aurora, the three fairies convene to discuss how they can protect the Princess given her uncertain fate (figures 14 and 15).

Fauna: "Take care of the baby, oh I'd like that".

Merryweather: "Well, yes but we'd have to feed it-"

Fauna: "-and wash it and dress it and rock it to sleep. Oh I'd love it" (Geronimi, 1959, 0:13:48)

Fauna's enthusiastic reaction to caring for Aurora encapsulates the stereotypically feminine pleasure associated with caretaking, reinforcing the societal expectation that women find absolute fulfillment in caretaking (figure 14). Her tone of joy and eagerness, further illustrated by her body language as she swirls and smiles in adoration, highlight a profound cultural narrative equating womanhood with selflessness and service to others, hence reinforcing the notion that women's primary satisfaction derives from performing domestic duties. Merryweather's pragmatic outlook challenges the romanticized view of caretaking by offering a much more practical and logical view, highlighting the commitment and laborious task caregiving involves, and not just a labor of love. By questioning the idealization of this domestic role, her perspective encourages a reevaluation of how society values and perceives caregiving tasks (Stover, 2013, p. 3). The interplay between Fauna and Merryweather presents a nuanced depiction of femininity that resonates with Gray's concept of popular culture "as an intersection of popular and political communication" (Gray, 2017, p. 18). Gray suggests that this intersection shapes how audiences engage with information being presented and used as entertainment, implying how popular narratives, including the Disney Princess brand, carries substantial underlying messages about social values and expectations. Hence, the contrasting views between the two fairies emphasize different cultural attitudes toward femininity and motherhood. Whilst Fauna's celebration upholds binary stereotypes of women's role as housewives, Merryweather's rationality presents a counter-narrative that challenges these stereotypes by encouraging critical and objective thinking.

This following scene in *The Little Mermaid* (1989) depicts Ariel as determined yet tied to romantic fulfillment. In this scene, after Ariel saves Eric from the shipwreck, she watches him from the sea as he wakes and walks further inland.

Princess Ariel sings: "What would I give to live where you are? What would I pay to stay here beside you? What would I do to see you smiling at me? Where would we walk, where would we run… And I could be

part of your world… Watch and you'll see, someday I'll be part of your world". (Musker & Clements, 1989, 0:26:51)

The discourse of the theme song "Someday I'll be part of your world" and her body language leaning towards the shore as she sings, expresses a longing for a better life beyond her current boundaries (figure 16 and 17). The repetition of the pronouns "I" and "you", along with the occasional "we" further emphasizes the tension between Ariel's personal longing for independence and her dependency on a romantic relationship to fulfill her dreams. The song conveys her aspirations in wanting to diverge from her predefined roles within her world, suggesting a yearning for exploration and self-determination. Nevertheless, the visual and binary opposition between Ariel's underwater world as enchanting and restrictive contrasts significantly to Eric's land-based world illustrated as a realm of opportunity and freedom, ultimately embodying her aspirations and desires. Hence, this further underscores a cultural narrative in which female fulfillment is framed as attainable solely through the integration into male-dominated spaces. According to Hall, this circulation of meaning through language, images, and signs, as illustrated in this scene, shows how the film constructs femininity within the dominant patriarchal system (Hall, 1997b, p. 10).

Ariel's desire to leave her world and absorb herself into Eric's reflects a broader cultural narrative where women's agency is framed as secondary to their romantic fulfillment. The language employed "what would I give" emphasizes the sacrifices women make to conform to societal ideals and her own happiness being tied to her proximity to his world; reinforcing the idea that agency and freedom remain outside her environment. However, as Ariel actively pursues her freedom by leaving her underwater world to join Eric on land, this highlights a desire that although tied to romance, showcases ambition and agency. This portrays the brand's improved representation during the rise of second-wave feminism in mainstream media, incorporating more contemporary ideals on femininity (Smelik, 2007, p. 2). This shift toward a more dynamic female role contrasts to Aurora who was confined to her environment, dependent on Phillip's actions, and unquestioning of her environment.

Further in the film, Sebastian observes Ariel's curiosity for land from afar and says, "Oh, somebody's got to nail that girl's fins to the floor" (Musker & Clements, 1989, 0:32:26). This line shows his clear discomfort with Ariel's yearning to explore, establishing a conflict between guardianship and control. The metaphor of nailing her finds to the floor symbolizes the extreme measures to keep her grounded and restrict her freedom, underlining the oppressive structures that limit female independence. Sebastian's resistance reflects a patriarchal society's fears where women's growing independence and autonomy challenged long standing patriarchal norms (Schiele et al., 2020, p. 660). His dialogue reflects the tension between Ariel's growing agency and the restrictions imposed by societal expectations.

Therefore, Ariel's representation aligns with Hall's concept of representation, as the juxtaposition between her autonomy and romance reflects evolving but still culturally constructed meanings of femininity (Hall, 1997, p. 226). Ariel's repeated acts of defiance, by not attending her royal duties, dreaming of life with Eric on land, and exploring forbidden places, constitute a performance of femininity that disrupts the passive and obedient roles stereotypically associated with femininity in the Classic Era. This aligns with Butler's notion of gender as a "stylized repetition of acts" where Ariel's performance draws new dimensions to Disney's representation of femininity as a more active and ambitious (Butler 1999, p. 10). This scene highlights the shifting cultural ideals of the 80's, where women's independence became increasingly portrayed within popular culture, but still framed by a romantic framework and limited by societal fears around female agency (Andi Zeisler, 2008, p. 14).

This following scene from *Moana* (2016) will now serve to uncover the role behaviors displayed by Moana through the scope of gender fluidity and representation. As Moana, Maui, and Heihi journey to Lalotai to retrieve Maui's hook, climbing a steep mountain prompts a discussion about their roles (figures 18-23).

Maui: "We? No. me. You are gonna stay here with the other chicken".

In response, Moana begins scaling the mountain on her own without discussion or complaint.

Maui: "So, daughter of the chief, I thought you stayed in the village. You know, kissing babies and things"

Princess Moana: "My people didn't send me. The ocean did" (Musker & Clements, 2016, 0:54:57)

The dialogue employed by Maui, "stay" and "the other chicken", implies a stereotypically masculine-coded statement of dominance and embodying the protector role, further implying that as a female and "daughter of the chief", Moana should remain safe and passive (Deaux & Lewis, 1984, p. 4). Maui's belief of her role as "daughter of the chief", "staying in the village" and "kissing babies" highlights the deeply ingrained sociocultural stereotypes of women's roles being limited to domestic spheres, whilst Moana's actions visually destabilize these expectations (figure 20). The dialogue showcases the restrictive nature of binary gender roles and patriarchal expectations, which often confine female characters to specific societal roles and opportunities (Hall, 1997a, p. 270). Further, Moana's handling of her fears, specifically when asking Maui about their destination, highlights her need for information and reassurance, emphasizing both her vulnerability and the courage to confront it. This balanced integration of emotional intelligence and bravery challenges the binary where the latter is perceived as mutually exclusive with vulnerability. Additionally, the climb becomes symbolic of breaking free from restrictive cultural constructs, serving as a powerful representation of evolving gender politics, positioning her as autonomous and determined (figures 22 and 23). Despite Maui's attempt to limit her to passive and stereotypically female roles, Moana's

actions reflect a defiance against patriarchal expectations, encouraging a more gender-fluid representation of role behaviors. The sharp contrast between Maui's judgment and Moana's confidence and determination highlights a renegotiation of gender norms, presenting broader cultural shifts towards empowering representations of women (Maclaran et al., 2022, p. 79). As Butler suggests, gender is not an inherent identity but a construct that is performed through repeated behaviors, demonstrated through Moana's continuous rejection of the discouragement she receives from male characters (Butler, 2004, p. 51). Portraying her as a leader whose purpose derives from a personal calling challenges the Classic and Renaissance princess narratives, often limiting female characters to predefined social expectations. Therefore, this prompts a more holistic and realistic representation of human traits transcending binary gender role behaviors.

4.3) Gendered Bodies: How Appearances Reflect Gender Expectations

This section will now focus on how physical attributes are depicted, and how such reinforces or challenges stereotypical notions on gender. At the beginning of *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), Princess Aurora is dancing in the forest and singing with the animals as she discusses her wishful encounter with a young man. Princess Aurora: "I met a prince. He's tall and handsome. And so romantic. Oh yes, we walk together and talk together. And just before we say goodbye, he takes me in his arms, and then, I wake up".

(In Figure 28, the animals lower their wings in discouragement at the Princesses' words)

Princess Aurora: "Yes, it's only in my dreams. But they say if you dream a thing more than once, it's sure to come true" (Geronimi, 1959, 0:27:28).

The tone is dreamy and idealistic, a recurring theme within the film, emphasizing the romantic and fantastical nature of her aspirations. The visual aspects of the scene (figures 24-26), including her graceful movements, soft features, and laughter with the adoring forest animals present Aurora's embodied beauty and elegance as idealized femininity (Bhadra, 2023, p. 7). The visual elements in the scene highlight a repetition of actions, where her movements, soft and delicate, and her interactions with nature reinforce the illustration of innocence and purity (Butler 1999, p. 179). The choreography of the Princess's actions as she sings and dances through the forest alongside her soothing voice and golden hair reinforce a particular type of feminine identity. The overlexicalization of "dream" highlights how the character frames her desires as dreams, positioning her as a passive character who awaits the realization of her wishes rather than actively pursuing or initiating them (Mayr & Machin, 2012, p. 38). Emphasizing Butler's assertion that "gender is real only to the extent that it is performed", Aurora's actions repeatedly align with cultural ideals of beauty and grace (Butler, 1988, p. 9; Henke et al., 1996, p. 236). Additionally, by describing the Prince as "tall and handsome" and "so romantic", Aurora centers her romantic aspirations on physical

attractiveness and gestures, suggesting these are the emblematic signs of romance. This form of passivity directly aligns with Classic Era princesses portraying femininity as waiting for their romantic destiny to unfold on its own, further suggesting that romantic desires are the ideal achievement for women (Muir, 2023, p. 22). Aurora and Phillip barely converse when the Prince becomes smitten by her beauty, grace, and romantic yearning, emphasizing its importance in romantic relationships (Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022, 26). Ultimately, this substantially reduces the complexity of gender identity by disregarding a spectrum of traits beyond these rigid, binary roles. This scene further highlights the idea of romance as a "figure of hope in dark times" during the Cold War, further emphasizing the ideal of women's roles centered around caretaking (Muir, 2023, p. 22).

Moreover, the climactic scene in *The Little Mermaid* (1989) where Ursula persuades Ariel to trade her voice for a chance to be human with Eric reveals deep connotations on the importance of physical appearance and gender roles. As Ursula bargains for Ariel's voice in exchange for life on land, Ariel begins to show doubt (figures 27-30).

Princess Ariel: "If I become human, I'll never be with my father or sisters again".

Ursula: "That's right. But you'll have your man. Life's full of tough choices, isn't it? No more talking, no more singing. Zip".

Ursula: "You'll have your looks, your pretty face. And don't underestimate the importance of body language. The men up there don't like a lot of blabber. They think a girl who gossips is a bore. Yes, on land it's much preferred for ladies not to say a word… Come on, they're not at all impressed with conversation… it won't cost much just your voice" (Musker & Clements, 1989, 0:42:27)

The textual elements between Ariel and Ursula's interactions, reflect a pivotal moment of manipulation, emphasizing themes of self-sacrifice and the societal devaluation of women's voices (Figures 27-29). Ursula's dialogue suggests femininity is a socially constructed performance, where visual and physical cues are considered as the primary markers of a woman's value. This sacrifice is not just physical but metaphorical, representing a loss in identity and agency. Ariel's voice, which is a defining aspect of her character, is symbolically linked to her independence and self-expression. This scene encapsulates the construction of femininity through repeated societal expectations; Ursula's advice reinforces that femininity is performed through continued compliance and the importance of physical appearance rather than opinions (Butler, 1988, p. 4). Additionally, this transformation from empowered mermaid to voiceless human suggests her femininity is adaptable to meet societal ideals of acceptance and beauty (Butler 1999, p. 174). Ursula's dialogue implies that physical traits are sufficient for her to secure a man's affection and attention. Ursula's remarks expose a deeply ingrained societal expectation that equates femininity with beauty and compliance, articulating a cultural discourse that positions women as ornamental objects to please men

behaviourally and visually (King, 2021, p. 124). This encapsulates a repressive stereotype that women should restrict their voices to be more appealing to men, emphasizing the importance of non-verbal communication or body language, as more befitting for a girl.

The symbolism of her voice emphasizes the disproportionate sacrifices women often make to conform to societal expectations, specifically within the pursuit of personal relationships (figure 30). The former aligns with Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, where the "unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form" (King, 2021, p. 121). Ariel embodies a self-sacrificial femininity as she gives up a key element of her identity, her voice, in order to pursue her romantic aspirations with Eric in the human world. While driven by romantic desire, the Princess embodies a more nuanced and active form of femininity as she makes decisions on her own fate. At the time of the film's release, the second wave of feminism was gaining momentum transforming mass media into a "political battleground for gender representation", hence marking a gradual evolution in representation (Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022, p. 27). Ultimately however, both Aurora and Ariel showcase the limited scope for female empowerment as they showcase femininity as dependent on male approval and romantic fulfillment as central to a woman's identity.

Moreover, in analyzing the physical attributes of *Moana* (2016), this section explores how her appearance reflects a more empowered femininity. In this scene, Maui and Moana negotiate who amongst them is the wayfinder and in control of the journey. In this scene, Moana is wearing a traditional Polynesian attire made of Tapa cloth in the islands of the Pacific Ocean (figure 36).

Maui: "If you wear a dress, and you have an animal sidekick… you are a princess. You are not a wayfinder. You will never be a-"

The Ocean stings him with a paralytic dart the Kakamora shot on their sailboat cutting off his remark.

Princess Moana: "You can talk. You can teach. Wayfinding" (Musker & Clements, 2016, 0:52:12)

Maui's comment ties femininity to physical appearance, ultimately reinforcing a gendered stereotype where women are defined by external appearance rather than by their actions. Her attire, both emblematic of her Polynesian culture and practical in terms of mobility and agency for her mission, connotes empowerment and resilience rather than adhering to ideals of beauty. Her dress is a portrayal of cultural expression rather than a limitation to her own desires (Hall, 1997b, p. 3). By merging her cultural expression symbolized by her dress with traits like leadership, Moana embodies a progressive model of femininity that is intrinsically tied to her cultural identity, hence serving as a renegotiation of gendered meanings (Maclaran et al., 2022, p. 78). Her character represents a fusion of attributes that challenge the binary gender divide. This aligns with Disney's Revival Era feminist branding aiming to showcase women

as empowered, active agents whilst honoring their cultural uniqueness (Maclaran et al., 2022, p. 80). Maui's dismissal for her aspirations imply her physical appearance outweighs her capabilities as anything other than a royal figure, much less a wayfinder, indicating a reductionist view and rigid gendered undervaluation of her character (Muir, 2023, p. 26). Moreover, the Ocean's reaction to Maui's statement, perceived as a rejection of his gendered and binary speculations, serves as a narrative correction by challenging these gendered stereotypes and affirming Moana's abilities (Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022, p. 33). Moana's calm demeanor after the Ocean stings Maui highlights her unwavering determination and readiness to transcend binary roles and expectations, further accentuating her confidence as a leader (figure 36). Maui's statement reflects gender assumptions from pre second-wave feminism ideals, which associated femininity with beauty and male dependence (Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022, p. 27). Additionally, it also serves meta-textually as a critique of Disney's own Princess brand history, highlighting how earlier princesses were often confined to these stereotypical roles of passivity.

More specifically, the earlier princesses embody more stereotypical aesthetics and idealized feminine physical features. In Figure 34, Aurora's flowing blue dress, golden hair, blue eyes, and regal demeanor are symbolic to her character as the narrative prioritizes her beauty and passivity (Muir, 2023, p. 29). This aligns with the 1950s ideals of femininity equating external beauty with worth, emphasizing how marriage and appearance are the most desirable and acceptable roles for women at the time (O'Keefe, 2014, p. 56). On the other hand, Ariel's vibrant red hair, slim waist, and seashell bikini accentuating her mermaid identity play a critical role within the narrative yet enforces the notion of a sexualized representation of femininity (figure 35). Both princesses are sexualized in their appearance, framed towards the male gaze that not only objectifies them but limits their roles by substantially reducing their autonomy and agency (Maclaran et al., 2022, p. 78). In essence, the Classic and Renaissance Era represent femininity as linked to passivity and aligning with patriarchal ideals of idealized beauty (Muir, 2023, p. 26). *Moana* (2016), released during fourth-wave feminism, strongly aligns with fourth-wave feminism ideals by advocating for the deconstruction of gender binaries and challenging sociopolitical norms that limit representations of femininity (Schiele et al., 2020, p. 660). Moana's non-sexualized features demonstrates a substantial shift in Disney's feminist branding regarding the Princess line, reflecting the growing cultural emphasis on empowering women through a multifaceted model of femininity (Schiele et al., 2020, p. 661).

4.4) From Unassertive Royalty to Empowered Leaders: Changing Occupations

This last section will dive into the ways in which each animated film represents femininity in terms of Occupations. One of *Sleeping Beauty*'s (1959) final scenes showcases a strong gender binary through a repressive and passive representation of femininity in comparison to a strong masculinity. When Prince

Phillip escapes the castle where he was kidnapped, fights Maleficent in her dragon form, and awakens Princess Aurora with a kiss, he restores joy and liveliness in the kingdom (Geronimi, 1959, 1:11:28). Figure 37 depicts the Prince atop the hill fighting the dragon on his own, positioning him as a heroic and brave character. Prince Phillip, positioned at the center of the frame, contrasts sharply with Aurora's vulnerability and passivity as she merely lays in bed awaiting rescue (figure 38 and 39). Moreover, the scene's transition from cold, lifeless tones to a bright, warm tone following Phillip's kiss, visually reinforces the idea that romantic love and male agency are central to a woman's fulfillment and liveliness. The lack of dialogue combined with the harmonious music enhances the dreamlike, passive nature of the scene. Specifically, the absence of shared words creates an almost sacred atmosphere where the kiss becomes the sole action restoring life, emphasizing that Aurora's agency and awakening are entirely dependent on male intervention (Mayr & Machin, 2012, p. 38). This "stylized repetition of acts" that constitute femininity as strictly dependent and inactive, reinforces stereotypically masculine role behaviors as active and dominant, engendering a strict gender binary (Butler 1999, p. 179). In the 50s (just prior to the second wave of feminism), the American public was increasingly encouraged to embrace the appeal of the "nuclear family", substantially promoted as the keystone to societal values (O'Keefe, 2014, p. 57). So much so, that popular culture of the 1950s-60s "raised young women to be sexually charged and hyper aware of their public appearances but ultimately women were told to channel their sexuality into marriage and procreation" (O'Keefe, 2014, p. 56). Disney's branding strategies capitalized on the sociocultural narrative surrounding women's roles during this period (Schiele et al., 2020, p. 661). This encapsulates the ideal of a "damsel-in-distress"; a critical theme during the 1950s, depicting women relegated to domestic settings or as victims awaiting rescue by male heroes (Bhadra, 2023, p. 3). The portrayal of Princess Aurora adhered to a rigid binary: femininity is stereotypically associated with dependence and powerlessness, whilst masculinity is linked to strength and action (Deaux & Lewis, 1984, p. 1).

A pivotal scene within *The Little Mermaid* (1989) highlights a renegotiation of gender roles and occupations, constructing femininity in a more nuanced way, moving away from binary stereotyping. Prince Eric and Princess Ariel take a carriage ride, with Eric holding the reins and Ariel holding two baguettes and a bouquet, before he offers her the reins and she enthusiastically takes control (Musker & Clements, 1989, 0:57:30). Whilst the scene has no dialogue, this emphasizes the visual storytelling and symbolism of power not confined by gender. Ariel actively engages in an adventure by driving the horse carriage, an occupation symbolizing control and direction, symbolizing her autonomy and ambition to lead. This act challenges the typical narrative of male assertion, especially as Prince Eric's initial awestruck reaction quickly turns into one of acceptance and relaxation as he sits back with a smile on his face and his hands behind his head (figure 43). Prince Eric's positive reception further underscores a change in gender politics, and how male characters are also subject to the evolving gender narratives in Disney films (Schiele et al., 2020, p. 661).

Disney positions Ariel as a heroine, appealing to the expanding push for improved representation whilst maintaining the romantic framework that defines early princess narratives (Sobande, 2019, p. 2738). This balance showcases a gradual progression of gender representation by modernizing its princesses. Nevertheless, this is done without fully renouncing her narrative's grounding in romantic aspirations, including how the transfer of power originates from the Prince as his give. This ensures Ariel remains aligned with ideals that were critiqued by second-wave feminism ideals, where femininity was often confined to romantic success (Stover, 2013, p. 3).

This scene, a metaphor of Ariel taking control over her own life and destiny, is crucial in reshaping female representation. This performance of agency challenges the gender binary outlined by Deaux and Lewis (1984) by subverting the passive and dependent femininity that typically represented female princesses in the Classic Era of Disney princesses (Butler, 2004, p. 43). Further, Ariel's fearlessness and drive in exploring new terrain single-handedly exemplifies her as a model of empowerment. This shift in dynamics and narrative is highlighted as a positive trait that defies rigid gender norms and transforms Ariel's character from the passive princess ideal into an active and confident player in her own journey. Additionally, this scene aims to reframe the context of romantic relationships by promoting a model of partnership based on mutual respect and equality. As Ariel embodies a more fluid understanding of femininity, portrayed as proactive and adventurous, her actions reflect Disney's branding efforts to modernize its princess archetype in response to changing cultural norms (Sobande, 2019, p. 2736). Whilst Ariel is also seen engaging in nurturing behaviors, where she gives Prince Eric the flowers and bread, this blends masculine-coded and feminine-coded behaviors where both man and woman can exhibit the same traits and occupations, suggesting a more integrated approach of gender fluidity (Sobande, 2019, p. 2729). By positioning Ariel as an independent and self-reliant individual, she embodies a more progressive model of femininity that aligns with the feminist ideals of the 1980s (Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022, p. 25). This scene serves to educate its audience about the possibilities of more equitable gender roles and contributes to a broader cultural dialogue about healthy relationships within more contemporary storytelling (England et al. 2011, p. 555).

Lastly, examinining the occupations in *Moana* (2016), this section highlights how Moana's role as a leader and navigator redefines the representation of female agency and empowerment. This scene occurs at the start of the film where Moana must figure out her role as the next Chief and the responsibilities she is expected to undertake. In one of the first scenes of the film, the Chief and Moana stand atop Motunui's tallest mountain, observing stones stacked by past chiefs, following an earlier argument between Moana and her father about her desire to explore beyond the reef (figures 44-46).

Chief of Motunui: "There will come a time when you stand on this peak and place a stone on this mountain. Like I did. Like my father did. And his father, and every chief that has ever been. And on that day when you add your stone you will raise this whole island higher. You are the future of our people, Vaiana. It's time to be who they need you to be" (Musker & Clements, 2016, 0:10:45).

This pivotal scene juxtaposes two central themes: the tension between tradition and innovation as well as her personal versus royal responsibilities. Eventually, Moana's stone symbolizes how leadership in her culture is not confined by gender regardless of the previous male-dominated leadership. Nevertheless, the Chief's assertive tone and his dialogue, emphasized by the repetition of exclusively male predecessors ("my father" and "his father"), showcase the performance of a stereotypical masculinity and the expectation that Moana conform to a specific predescribed role within her community. This dialogue reinforces cultural and gendered representations of leadership as a stereotypical masculine occupation. Nonetheless, the shift in language, from the focus on male lineage to the inclusion of "you", signifies in gender politics as her father recognizes her potential as a leader. The dialogue, embodying both old and new forms of leadership, symbolizes a broader ideological shift towards gender inclusivity within leadership roles. This challenges the historical exclusion of women as leaders of their community and further signifies a cultural shift towards recognizing leadership as irrespective of gender. Ultimately, her rejection of this expected role and her assertion of her own identity as a wayfinder to heal her community challenges this performance, and redefines femininity and leadership beyond gendered expectations (Butler, 2004, p. 43). This rejection represents a negotiation between long-established towards evolving gender roles, showcasing signficant empowerment unlike the earlier Princesses (Hall, 1997b, p. 9).

This scene marks a critical moment in Disney's branding of Moana as an empowered female protagonist who breaks away from stereotypically gendered roles, like Aurora and Ariel, where leadership and occupations were not central to their character development. Initially pressured to follow her father's and ancestor's footsteps and conform to their traditional notions of leadership, Moana reshapes her own identity and leadership role as an active and self-determined force that transcends historical and societal gender norms. This act of self-defining is a powerful narrative of gender fluidity, highlighting how such is nuanced rather than a fixed identity. This contemporary redefining of leadership, central to the Revival Era princesses, showcases Moana's approach as negotiating the status quo and actively seeking new ways of leading and embracing risks to ensure the welfare of her community (Schiele et al., 2020, p. 661). At the time of *Moana*'s release, third-wave feminism was a prominent cultural force advocating for the redefinition of gender norms. This encouraged a push for a more gender fluid representation and emphasis on the intersection of race, culture, and gender, as Moana not only challenges gendered expectations but also reconnects with her cultural heritage (Sobande, 2019, p. 2738). This scene speaks to the broader

feminist discourse and Disney's growing effort to align with evolving gender politics of the 21st century and an intersectional approach to gender (Stover, 2013, p. 5).

5) Conclusion

This research set out to examine how the representation of female characters in Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), and *Moana* (2016) displays the brands evolving approach to gender narratives. By analyzing these three films, spanning 57 years from the earliest to the latest examined film, it is evident that Disney has showcased a substantial shift in the portrayal of female characters and femininity, aligning and responding to broader cultural and societal movements over the decades (Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022, p. 22). All three princesses embody a particular societal attitude and reflect the prevailing gender norms of their respective time periods (Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022, p. 23). As a major entertainment company, Disney's evolving representations of femininity are deeply tied to its branding strategies, which have adapted to changing social movements and feminist ideals in order to remain relevant and profitable within the global market (Maclaran et al., 2022, p. 78). The analysis of the three films highlight the company's broader efforts in capitalizing on social and feminist movements as part of their brand identity: feminist branding. The research explores how the female characters in the Disney Princess line reflect the company's branding of femininity in order to appeal to contemporary audiences. The company's approach in marketing its films to a progressive audience, especially within the context of a growing demand for more diverse portrayals of femininity, increases Disney's brand loyalty (Maclaran et al., 2022, p. 369). This strategic alignment with modern feminist ideals enhances consumer engagement by maintaining cultural relevance, ultimately building a deeper sense of connection and trust between the media giant and its audiences. Such is reinforced as consumers perceive their social and cultural beliefs are shared in Disney's representations, ensuring customer retention and relevancy (Stover, 2013, p. 3).

Disney's branding of femininity shifts from passive portrayals in the Classic Era to more complex and empowered representations in the Renaissance and Revival Eras. This evolution across the films and Eras is influenced by shifting gender politics as well as Disney's desire and strategy to align with the growing feminist discourse of the 20-21st century. The films reveal a progression from the stereotypically binary representation of femininity illustrated in *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), to the romanticized yet self-sacrificial femininity of *The Little Mermaid* (1989), to the more fluid and empowered femininity by Moana. The three films all reflect a distinct gender narrative, shaped by their particular sociocultural and historical context at the time. In order to delve into an analysis of how Disney's representation of female characters evolved, it was crucial to separate the analysis in two different ways. On one hand, the data gathering method involved selecting a film from each of the three Disney Princess Eras, including the Classic,

Renaissance, and Revival, and on the other hand, separating the insights into thematic sections based on Deaux and Lewis' (1984) framework. More specifically, the animated films from distinct eras showcase how the Disney Princess line adapted its storytelling and branding to align with societal shifts, highlighting how the media giant responded and framed its narratives to maintain relevance and allure as a leading entertainment (Schiele et al., 2020, p. 661).

Sleeping Beauty (1959), from the Classic Era, contributes to the societal discourse at the time by reinforcing the patriarchal ideas prevalent in the 1950s, upholding an ideal of submissive femininity constructed as an identity to be preserved for male desire as the ideal of a submissive femininity (Sobande, 2019, p. 2739). The film reflects how femininity was constructed for the male gaze and communicated the lifelong ideal of femininity as attaining romantic happiness, offering a substantial contrast to empowered portrayals in the following Disney Princess Eras (Schiele et al., 2020, p. 661). *The Little Mermaid* (1989) from the Renaissance Era, showcases Ariel as driven by romantic desire, yet embodies a more assertive and determined form of femininity compared to earlier princesses like Aurora. This nuanced character development both enriches Ariel's role and further serves as a model for younger audiences. Although the brand feminism in this film did not fully dismantle the gender binary, a more fluid approach to femininity was represented. The necessity of selecting a film from the Renaissance Era is key in highlighting Disney's transition in branding strategy by navigating ideals of romantic desire with rising ideals of personal agency. Thus, the analysis reveals Disney's response to the evolving societal discourse of femininity and the gendered power structures of the late 80s to represent move towards empowered female characters. Lastly, *Moana* (2016), from the Revival Era, showcases an inclusive and fluid representation of femininity, where nurturing and compassionate traits coexists with strength, autonomy, and leadership. Princess Moana reflects fourth-wave feminism ideals of a multifaceted femininity, breaking free from a gender binary. This shift is part of Disney's broader feminist branding strategy, integrating feminist ideals of the time in the narrative to promote its brand as socially attuned to consumers' expectations (Sobande, 2019, p. 2725). This may boost consumer loyalty by presenting itself as a socially relevant brand and resonate emotionally with consumers. By organizing the analysis as one film from each Era, this allowed for the exploration of how Disney adapted and reframed its illustration of female characters over time. This shift in representation stemmed in the growing waves of feminism, depicted from pre-second-wave feminism emphasizing grace, beauty, and passivity, to third wave feminism calling for self-determination, and fourth wave feminism pushing for intersectionality and empowerment (Schiele et al., 2020, p. 660). Therefore, Disney capitalized on societal expectations of femininity as a branding strategy to solidify its place in the entertainment industry and align with sociocultural values.

Moreover, the separation of the analysis into the categories of traits, role behaviors, physical traits, and occupations as outlined by Deaux and Lewis' binary oppositions was essential in answering the thesis question as it allows for a systematic and nuanced examination of how femininity is represented across the Disney Princess brand and its Eras (Deaux & Lewis, 1984, p. 5). Each category allowed for a detailed and thematic exploration of the different dimensions of femininity, thus providing a baseline framework to examine how femininity was being portrayed within the narratives and branding strategies. The traits chapter focused on the personal and emotional attributes of the female characters, specifically the Princesses. By focusing on characteristics of dependence and emotionality, the analysis aimed to uncover how such traits influenced the agency of the female character, and their actions and choices. Where Aurora's emotional passivity illustrated by her deep sleep and reliance on male rescue limits her agency, Ariel's emotional longing for freedom drives her to take audacious actions like trading her voice, although with her agency narrowed down to romantic fulfillment. Second, the Role Behaviors chapter was crucial to uncover how the dialogue and actions perpetuate or challenge existing societal gender norms at the time of the films' release. Examining what roles the female characters embody and how they behave, this chapter was essential to analyse how their agency is shaped by the societal expectations placed on them. Aurora's role being reactive to other's actions and primary role focused on romantic desire differs significantly to Moana's role as one of leadership and wayfinder, unrestricted by previously accepted societal roles of women as housewives (Deaux & Lewis, 1984, p. 5). This chapter explored how Disney's evolving representation of female characters showcases changing gender expectations, including how agency, power, and femininity became increasingly more complex and fluid over time. Further, the Physical Attributes chapter plays a crucial role in exploring how female characters' physical traits and appearance are constructed and contribute to their representation in the narrative. In *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) and *The Little Mermaid* (1989), the princesses' physique is illustrated as idealized objects of desire, substantially emphasizing a sexualized physicality constructed for the male gaze. Such differs in Moana's portrayal through practical and cultural attire. Hence, this chapter is essential to explore how Disney's representation of femininity has changed from a romanticized/sexualized beauty to an active physicality not confined by external appearance but complimenting inner strength and cultural beauty. Lastly, the chapter on Occupations was essential to analyze how Disney reflected and challenged societal discourses on the representation of femininity and power through its female characters. Whilst Aurora and Ariel's roles align with the domestic stereotype and reinforce the cultural discourse at the time, Moana's leadership role as a wayfinder and protector of her community emphasizes her agency and empowerment within the narrative (Deaux & Lewis, 1984, p. 9). These chapter separations enabled a detailed and compartmentalized outlook on the representation of femininity to ensure all aspects were explored.

In addressing the theoretical implications of the research findings, utilizing Deaux and Lewis's binary model of gender stereotypes provided a useful framework to analyze gender representations of the female characters in each film. The binary model, which contrasts femininity and masculinity through four components, traits, role behaviors, physical attributes, and occupations, served as a themed framework to identify how gender stereotypes were being reinforced or challenged across the three films. However, although the model enabled a structured analysis, the complexity of gender representation in the films demands an increased nuanced and fluid comprehension than binary oppositions may offer. Therefore, the model functioned as a foundational tool, further highlighting the limitations of relying on a binary and rigid framework of gender. The Disney films, especially *Moana* (2016), defied and transcended the binary categorizations of masculinity and femininity, indicating that gender is not a fixed binary concept but rather a wider spectrum of roles and traits. The analysis demonstrates that the binary gender frameworks, although useful for thematic categorizations, must be adapted to showcase a more evolved and complex comprehension of gender accounting for the intersectionality and fluidity of identity. Hence, the findings reveal that the discourse surrounding gender in the media requires a shift from rigid categorizations that recognizes gender as a social construct and performance, receiving influence from culture and society.

The findings suggest that Disney, as a major business in the film industry, not only adapts to the feminist ideals of each era but additionally contributes in shaping societal views on gender. By analyzing the progression of female representation across the Disney films *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Moana*, this thesis uncovered the company is both reflective of and participant in the evolution of gender narratives within a social context. Each film reveals the company's efforts at integrating the societal values and movements, shaping and redefining representations of femininity accordingly. The tension between classic and contemporary representations in terms of binary stereotypes showcases Disney's strategic navigation of sociocultural change, illustrating the dynamic relationships between societal transformation and this entertainment business. Whilst the Classic Era film adheres closely to binary stereotypes, later films from the Renaissance to the Revival Era increasingly and actively subvert these norms towards a more nuanced, non-binary representation (Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022, p. 33). The results of the research demonstrate that Disney's evolving illustrations of female characters showcase a shift from reinforcing binary gender stereotypes towards embracing more complex, fluid understandings of femininity. Ultimately, this reveals the brand's influence in shaping and redefining female empowerment in popular culture and specifically, the film industry.

The societal implications of this research suggest Disney's representation of female characters plays a substantial part in shaping cultural perceptions of power and women as a social group. The brands' transition from passive and dependent representations of women in *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) to leading and

empowered female characters in *Moana* (2016) shows the need to break away from stereotypical representations of femininity. This in itself has the ability to encourage audiences, specifically young girls, to embrace a broader understanding of the concept of gender and power dynamics. Early princess films communicate an idealized femininity to young audiences, which carries significant implications considering the massive influence and power Disney possesses within the entertainment industry (Stover, 2013, p. 2). Hence, Disney's moral and business decision to align with social movements portrays more nuanced representations, now presenting femininity as empowered and dynamic. This encourages a more diverse and inclusive understanding of femininity, helping to broaden societal expectations for young girls and women through empowerment (England et al. 2011, p. 555). Overall, Disney's global influence may have widespread implications of how gender is perceived across various cultures, perhaps fostering gender inclusivity. The practical implications consist of far-reaching consequences. The brand itself encourages other media producers from the film industry and beyond to reconsider how female characters are depicted on screen. This sets a precedent for portraying women in roles aligning with contemporary ideals.

This study, however, involves multiple limitations which must be taken into account. Firstly, there is a limited scope of films utilized as the analysis is based on three Disney Princess films, when in reality there are over a dozen and still more being released every couple years. Whilst this analysis provides an understanding of the evolution of female representation of the Princess brand, the limited range of analyzed films may not fully capture the wider trends or strategies across all Disney Princess films. This may in turn limit the generalizability of the results. Second, this thesis focuses on animated films as the single medium and point of analysis, and with a focus on the Disney's Princess line. On one hand, due to the focus on a single medium, the analysis may not fully depict the company's approach to gender representation across its entire media empire. This includes theme parks across the world, merchandise (toys, clothing, stationary…), TV shows and other mediums developed by Disney which as a whole contribute to the brand's overall representation (Kinger, 2022, p. 3070). On the other hand, this extends to other brands within Disney's company. Disney's multiple brands all contribute to how the company represents gender within distinct contexts, audience targets, and periods of release. Investigating Disney's "brand feminism" beyond the animated films, particularly within their various mediums and marketing would provide valuable insight as to how gender is represented in a more multifaceted manner (Liu & Yang, 2022, p. 1035). Additionally, as the focus of this study is to explore gender representation, specifically the construction of femininity, other dimensions of identity may have been overlooked. These dimensions include race, sexuality, social class which all naturally intersect with gender (Gray, 2017, p. 18). Disney's films illustrate complex identities, hence, focusing on gender and culture as the focus of the analysis may limit the understanding of how such is represented. To fully grasp how one aspect of identity is represented in the media, one must observe and take all aspects of identity into consideration, as all are interconnected.

In terms of the future research avenues, there are multiple directions future studies could undertake on the basis of this thesis. First, considering Disney's global reach, future studies could explore how the representation of female characters in these animated films is interpreted and perceived across various cultural contexts. Investigating how audiences pertaining to non-Western countries and cultures receive Disney's evolving gender narratives would yield significant insights into the universality of these illustrations. Hence, conducting a cross-cultural analysis of gender representation in Disney could further uncover how different international markets receive such films. What's more, this research aimed to explore how gender was represented within animated Disney films, as one of the main sources of media for children and parents. In order to broaden the scope on how children and the general audience perceive gender, a comparative study with other media giants should be conducted. Other major media companies, which include Dreamworks or Pixar have similarly shaped and influenced gender narratives within the media (Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022, p. 22). Hence, a comparative study amongst Disney and competitors would provide a deeper understanding of the industry's role in shaping gender discourse. Lastly, to further deepen the analysis of Disney's evolving illustrations of gender, future research could look into the reception of these films in terms of audience perception. This would consist of conducting a quantitative study focusing on the different age groups, social groups, and cultural backgrounds. Understanding how audiences internalize the empowerment themes across the Eras and as such conducting a longitudinal study to comprehend the influence of these film's on children's gender attitudes could expose further data on the practical implications of media representation.

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Appendix A: Methodology

Disney Princess Brand Animated Films
Classic Era (1937-1959)
Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937)
Cinderella (1950)
***Sleeping Beauty* (1959)**
Renaissance Era (1989-1997)
***The Little Mermaid* (1989)**
Beauty and the Beast (1991)
Aladdin (1992)
Pocahontas (1995)
Mulan (1998)
Revival Era (2009-present)
The Princess and the Frog (2009)
Tangled (2010)
Brave (2012)
***Moana* (2016)**
Raya and the Last Dragon (2021)

Appendix B: Raw Data

Salience: *Sleeping Beauty* (1959)	
Denotation	**Connotation**
00.11.30 Shortly after Maleficent casts a spell on Princess Aurora, the three fairies discuss amongst themselves how they can protect her	Fauna: (Enthusiastic + captivated by idea of being a caretaker) - Reinforces idea→ women as caretakers (societal expectation

considering her fate is now uncertain.

Fauna: "Take care of the baby, oh I'd like that"
Merryweather: "Well, yes but we'd have to feed it"
Fauna: "- and wash it and dress it and rock it to sleep. Oh I'd love it!"

Components
- Role behavior (housewife)
- Occupation (indoors)

= Gender stereotypes of femininity
 Supported + challenged

embedded within the minds of young girls)
- Nurturing + caring + loving→ stereotypical role as mothers
- Duty + personal fulfillment
  - Limiting representation of women's fulfillment to roles defined by selflessness + service to others

Merryweather:
(Thinks objectively + logically)
- Expresses the laborious realities + critiques romanticization of caretaking/motherhood
- Challenging the narrative that caregiving is always a labor of love and fully rewarding
- Highlights how caretaking is commitment that involves hard work
  - Encourages a reevaluation of how caregiving tasks are valued and perceived in society, advocating for a more equitable recognition and acknowledgement of these roles

Fauna:
(Further emphasizes stereotypical joy of traditional female roles)
- Reinforces stereotypical gender roles→ deep acceptance + celebration of such roles
  - Women are expected to find complete satisfaction in the labor of caregiving
- Validating + enhancing importance of traditional female roles

Classic Era→ confine female characters to domestic, passive, nurturing roles (being immersed and adoring it) → 20th century femininity

Appendix C: Analysis Figures
<u>Figures Chapter 1: From Passive to Active: The Evolution of Traits in Disney Princesses</u>

Sleeping Beauty (1959)

Figure 1	**Figure 2**	**Figure 3**

The Little Mermaid (1989)

Figure 4	**Figure 5**

Figure 6	**Figure 7**	**Figure 8**

Moana (2016)

Figure 9	**Figure 10**	**Figure 11**

Figure 12

Figure 13

Figures Chapter 2: Feminine Behavior as a Performance: How the Princesses Navigate their Roles

Sleeping Beauty (1959)

Figure 14

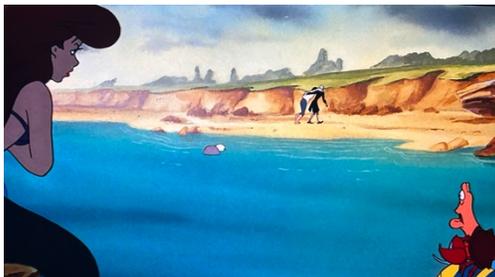

Figure 15

The Little Mermaid (1989)

Figure 16

Figure 17

Moana (2016)

Figure 18

Figure 19

Figure 20

Figure 21

Figure 22

Figure 23

Figures Chapter 3: Gendered Bodies: How Appearances Reflect Gender Expectations
Sleeping Beauty (1959)

Figure 24

Figure 25

Figure 26

The Little Mermaid (1989)

Figure 27

Figure 28

Figure 29

Figure 30

Moana (2016)

Figure 31

Figure 32

Figure 33

Figure 34

Figure 35

Figure 36

Figures Chapter 4: From Unassertive Royalty to Empowered Leaders: Changing Occupations

Sleeping Beauty (1959)

Figure 37

Figure 38

Figure 39

The Little Mermaid (1989)

Figure 40

Figure 41

Figure 42   **Figure 43**

Moana (2016)

Figure 44   **Figure 45**   **Figure 46**