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March 20, 2017

“More Badass Than Cinderella:”
Understanding the Relationship Between Body Esteem, Media, and Race for Undergraduate
Women at a United States University.

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Abstract

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This research study attempts to understand the relationship between racial identity, media watched as a child, and body esteem for women. In particular, I ask: how does watching Disney Princess movies as a child affect women’s body esteem years later and does it affect Black women and White women differently? I investigate this question using a survey and in-depth interviews and located individuals through a preliminary survey. The interview focuses on childhood memories and current thoughts regarding Disney princess movies. The survey consists of a body-esteem scale and general demographic information.

Based on the literature, I hypothesized that Black women who watched more Disney princess movies as children are more likely to have internalized a body ideal more aligned with White norms including thinner body shapes, straighter hair, and lighter skin than Black women who did not watch as many Disney princess movies or did not watch them as often. Similarly, White women who watched more of this media are more likely to have internalized this Disney princess body ideal than White women who watched other media as children.

The data show that White women, on average, had higher body esteem than Black women by an average of half a point on the body esteem scale used in this study. Contrary to my expectations, there were no clear differences between the two groups of women who were more likely to be influenced by Disney princess movies. However, White women who were likely to be influenced by Disney princess movies, on average, had lower body esteem than White women who were likely not to be influenced by these movies. Based on these data, regardless of race, women who watched many Disney princess movies/ watched them often, on average, had body esteem lower than the groups that did not watch many Disney princess movies/ watched them often. Essentially, based on these data the body esteem of women who watched many Disney princess movies or watched them often really are likely to be influenced negatively even ten or more years in the future.

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Introduction:

It is hard to believe that some of the most beloved childhood characters featured in Disney movies have some disastrous implications for children five or ten years down the road. Instead of teaching kindness and bravery, Belle and Elsa are more likely to teach girls and young women how society expects their bodies to look and how to accept their place in society, especially in relation to men (Coyne et al: 2016). While there are some redeeming factors in these movies, Disney princess movies portray a number of problematic stereotypes and norms. None is as widespread and potentially harmful as the Disney princess body ideal.

Although the Disney princess body ideal is one that is often seen and occasionally discussed, Disney princess movies have a tremendous amount of power when it comes to creating norms for young girls and shaping their future expectations. In one study, 96% of 105 preschool girls had “viewed Disney princess media” at some point in their lives and half of the girls “viewed Disney princess media” on a monthly basis (Coyne et al: 2016). Yet, there are few, if any, other movie franchises that depict women as protagonists, rather than side characters who are in only the movie to further the plot or even just the romantic sub-plot.

The impossible beauty ideals represented by Disney princesses are easily documented. All of the Disney princesses have waists literally smaller than their eyes; large breasts and hips as well as a rib crushing torso; slender, long limbs; light skin, even the multi-cultural princesses have lightened skin not necessarily aligned with typical features of that racial or ethnic group; and generally long straight hair (Coyne et al: 2016). While there are a few exceptions to the above criteria, such as Merida from Disney’s *Brave* who has bouncy red curly hair, the fact that almost all of the princesses fit these criteria is jarring when considering the potential effects for

the diverse group of young girls watching and cherishing these movies and the characters they portray.

When young girls begin watching these movies before they can even remember, they grow up with the hope, sometimes expectation, that one day their bodies will, perhaps magically, look like the princesses they have grown to idealize. It is important to note, of course, that Disney princess movies are by no means the only media that portray unrealistic ideals for women. From video game characters to photo shopped models, hyper-sexualized and impossibly thin women can be seen just about everywhere. When considering that fact, it comes as no surprise that many women are able to trace their current, often unrealistic, body ideals to these many and ever-present images from childhood and beyond. It is important to note, however, that not all media portray the same cultural norms. Disney princess movies are aligned with mainstream U.S cultural values and expectations that portray what are essentially White beauty norms even going so far as to associate beauty with Whiteness or lighter skin both implicitly and explicitly (Cappiccie et al: 2012; Towbin et al: 2003; Farherty: 2001). While many subcultures exist in the United States, it is nearly impossible to isolate oneself from these mainstream norms when these movies are the ones that play on television, the images posted on billboards along the highway and so forth. Needless to say, these representations are seen not only in the United States but throughout the world.

The Disney princess body ideal is unattainable for most women, though for many women it has become engrained as the norm that they will carry with them through childhood and into their adult lives (Towbin et al: 2003). This body type is not, in and of itself, bad or wrong but the association made for young girls between looking this way and being beautiful, loveable and accepted by society is where the problem lies. Girls are socialized to believe that in order to do

and be all of the things that the princesses do and are, their physical appearance is inherently a necessary aspect of that expectation. More so than just the thin limbs and large eyes, having lighter skin and long straight hair is an inherent component of the Disney princess body. While socializing girls to believe that they will only be accepted by society when they are thin, tall and pretty is problematic, what does it mean for girls who come to realize the added implications of the racial difference between themselves and these beloved characters?

While a number of studies have analyzed the effect of Disney princesses on young girls, they have ignored the importance of intersections of gender with other identities that may alter the outcomes for different individuals. Race is an incredibly important intersecting identity in American society today (Craig: 2002; Banks: 2000). Being a Black woman in America is not comparable to being a White woman or a Black man in America. Black women have their own set of both gendered and racial expectations based on this unique identity. For example, Craig (2002) writes about the concept of straight hair for the Black community and how its meaning differs for men and women. For Black women, having straight hair is seen as an attempt to conform to White feminine beauty norms. Black men have also experienced the social pressure of straight hair but this pressure was not aligned with an attempt to mimic White men but rather proof to be of a certain class and was a pressure stemming from within the Black community (Craig: 2002). In order to better understand the intersection between race and gender for Black women regarding beauty norms, I decided to study differences between Black and White women and internalization of mainstream beauty norms.

To date, Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog* is the only animated Black Disney princess and while she is an overall valuable addition to the diversity of Disney princesses, she has a similar body and features that the other princesses have including a thin waist and large

eyes. Not only that, Tiana has long straight hair and only slightly darker skin than most of the other princesses. Hence, while Tiana is Black, many believe that Disney did not go far enough in their portrayal of the first Black princess (Moffit and Harris: 2014)

When Black girls are exposed to these characters and are socialized to believe that this is how mainstream society believes beautiful women look, it can lead to an even further disconnect between how they look and how they believe they should look. Alternatively, Black girls may consciously reject the Disney White standard of beauty, irrespective of how often they viewed Disney princess movies as a child. Given the important dynamics underlying the intersection of race and gender, understanding the unique perspective of Black women in America and the relationship between body esteem and this genre of film for them is crucial to developing a full picture of how media can affect self image.

This research attempts to understand whether watching Disney princess movies growing up affects the future body esteem of women and, if so, whether it affects women with a White or Black racial identity differently. I have investigated this question using both qualitative data with in-depth interviews and quantitative data with a survey. The 17 participants in this study all attend a small private university located in the Southern United States. Because this topic focuses on the intersection between media, self-concept and racial identity, each individual issue on its own as well as the intersection between them are important in order to understand the weight and theoretical framework for this research study. Thus, my research addresses two questions: whether there are differences in body esteem between Black and White women attending an elite predominantly-White university, and whether there are within-group differences in body esteem depending on whether or not they were avid viewers of Disney princess movies.

Literature Review:

In this study, I use the following conceptual definition of “the media” as presented by Finn (1997). Finn studies whether media use - defined as watching TV, listening to the radio, reading for pleasure, and watching movies – compared to other leisure activities including conversation, party going, spectator sports and religious activities have different relationship to specific personality traits (Finn: 1997). I operationalize media for the purposes of my study as “Disney princess movies”, relying on the specific definition created by Disney.

What Does it Mean to be a Disney Princess?

Disney relies on three criteria for being inaugurated into this exclusive club of being a “Disney princess” (Disney Entertainment). One must have a starring role in an animated feature film created by Disney, be human or mostly human (in the case of both Ariel and Tiana), and cannot appear primarily in a sequel. What is more interesting is the official status of being a princess is not a requirement; for example, Mulan is not born of royalty nor does she marry into royalty but she makes the list because of her incredible act of heroism in the movie, a notion created specifically in order to allow her to be included in this franchise (Disney Entertainment).

While there are many strong female characters throughout Disney movies, the list of official Disney princess movies and the princesses who star in them is surprisingly short. The official list of Disney princess movies includes *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, *Pocahontas*, *Mulan*, *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled*, *Brave* and *Frozen* as well as all of the sequels starring these same characters (Disney Entertainment). The official princesses, therefore, are all of the girls starring in these movies including Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora, Ariel, Belle, Jasmine,

Pocahontas, Mulan, Tiana, Rapunzel, Merida, and Elsa and Ana (Disney Entertainment). This assembly of Disney royalty is an incredibly exclusive group and while there are many other heroines, in Disney movies including Nala from *The Lion King* and Meg from *Hercules* these women or female characters, regardless of their royal or godly status in the movies that feature them, are not considered official Disney princesses.

Princesses and their stories have been and still are one of the most important themes for girls' literature (Whelan: 2012). Throughout time and across various cultures, the princess narrative has been an ever changing and incredibly fluid one. Some princesses are kind while others are not, some aspire for true love while others rule aside their fathers. Once Disney began to stake a claim to this narrative, however, the concept of what princess tales are and what it means to be a princesses became much more narrow (Whelan: 2012). When analyzing the princess theme as told by Disney, the messages are less than ideal for young girls, especially compared to others previously seen in princess tales. For example, *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Aurora* (1959) (often referred to as *Sleeping Beauty*) all teach the lesson that it is a woman's place to be quiet and beautiful while a prince is expected to rescue her from whatever terrible situation she finds herself (Whelan: 2012). These narratives replaced other ones where women were more outspoken, heroic and awake such as those found in Greek myths so that the only narrative of what it means to be a woman, let alone one that society approves of, is to fit the mold of a Disney princess (Whelan: 2012).

These first three Disney princess movies along with *The Little Mermaid* (1989) make up the first wave of Disney princesses. Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) is the first to break from this narrative as a more dynamic and fleshed out character with her own thoughts and feelings. The second wave of Disney princess movies include *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*

(1992) and *Mulan* (1998). All of the women featured in these films have more unique personalities and desires but all of these movies end with the princess finding true love, which to date has meant cis-gendered men. In this way, the second wave of Disney princess movies moved away from the original narrative of princesses being passive characters in their own movies but still portrays the idea that true love is most important. There is also a third wave of Disney princess movies, which so far has consisted of *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Frozen* (2013), and *Moana* (2016). This third wave finally moves away from the narrative of true love and needing a man. It is important to note that *Tangled* (2010), which was released between *The Princess and the Frog* and *Frozen*, in many ways aligns itself with more secondary themes where romance is still a key aspect of the narrative and the happily ever after for the protagonist (Whelen: 2012).

Moana is truly the first Disney princess movie to have no mention of a love interest, which is the crux of this third wave of Disney princesses (Knight: 2016). *Moana* is the future leader of her tribe and sets on a mission to find the demigod Maui in order to return the heart he stole from Te Feti, the goddess who once created all the islands. *Moana* and Maui make this quest in order to prevent sure disaster for *Moana's* people and their island. (Disney Entertainment). While Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog* and Ana from *Frozen* all find love interests, it is more of a secondary aspect of the movies than it has ever been in previous Disney princess movies (Whelen: 2012). *Frozen* helps bridge this gap with an emphasis on the love between sister while also having one sister find her true love. While Disney princess movies have changed over the course of their existence, the aspect of socialization remains the same in the way that Disney still holds a key to understanding the perpetuation of gender norms in American society today (Whelan: 2012). As mentioned before, when it comes to the Disney

princess body ideal, this trope is still seen in even the more modern Disney princess movies with the exception of Moana. It is also important to note that Moana has a fuller frame than the other princesses have and is a step closer to including more diverse body types in the Disney princess lineup. Moana, however, has not officially been inducted into the Disney princess franchise but has already been referred to as the first Polynesian princess (Disney Entertainment).

Media and Body Esteem

Media such as Disney princess movies are one tool of many where children learn what society expects of them and the norms to abide by (Whelan: 2012) . Characters in movies and television shows interact in generally socially acceptable ways and make it obvious when it is not so with severe consequences for the deviant character or with laughter as is done in other media (Meskill: 2007; Rhodes and Ellithorpe: 2016). There are many theories regarding how and to what extent children internalize what they watch. Social identity theory states that individuals learn who they are and in which groups they belong based on similarities to individuals already in the group and their shared values, behavior and style of speech to name a few. This form of socialization creates in-groups and out-groups. Social comparison is a major part of this process where individuals, now members of the in-group or who perceive themselves to be so, model their behavior even more so to those in this group and are more likely to view the beliefs and actions of the group and its members more favorably (Stets and Burke: 2000). Using this understanding, when girls see Disney princesses as similar to themselves or even whom they want to be when they are older, it can be difficult for them to discern negative aspects of the princesses, their actions or how they look and sound.

McLean, Paxton and Wertheim (2016) studied the relationship between media that

portray a thin-ideal and body esteem for adolescent girls. These authors laid out a number of potentially protective factors including media literacy and thinking critically about media as well as some risk factors including the adoption of this thin-ideal as one's own ideal. Another important risk factor is that the tendency to compare others' appearance to one's own is highly correlated with lower body esteem after watching thin-idealized media. The above mentioned study, however, analyzed the relationship between risk and protective factors with internalizing realistic thin-idealized images such as models as opposed to cartoons and media children would generally grow up watching. Another important note about this study is that all of the participants were adolescents, who are more likely to be able to think more critically about the media they consume than children (McLean, Paxton, Wertheim: 2016).

Research shows that the relationship between media and viewer's self-concept is complex and has a number of factors influencing the internalization of what is seen. Hays et al (2010), conducted an experiment in a laboratory to study whether being exposed to thin-ideal media or more general media unrelated to this ideal or to beauty affects how the participants, all between the ages of three and six years old, played. While there were no obvious results showing that this immediate exposure affects the types of play these children chose, older girls did prefer thinner images regardless of which group they were a part of. The older girls were also more likely to want to change something about their physical appearance (Hayes et al: 2010). Thus, this study shows that small-scale exposure to this form of media has little effect on girls' body image, but that the older girls were more likely to have already internalized this ideal most likely due to having experienced more of this kind of media over the course of their lives than their younger counterparts.

Want (2014) makes the argument that these kinds of studies focus on experiments where

body satisfaction and thin-media are studied in a lab rather than in reality with other potential influences. Conducting only experiments in a lab can skew results and not necessarily show long term effects of watching this media or the effects of watching it often. Most importantly, lab experiments cannot accurately depict the long term effects of seeing this ideal time and again growing up and what it means for one's future ideal and body esteem (Want: 2014). For this reason, I decided to study the relationship between media as remembered by the participants and test body esteem separately. While it will become nearly impossible to draw direct connections between these two components, ultimately my hope is to find new connections between the importance of childhood media and body-esteem using this iconic and specific form of childhood media as the focus.

Body esteem is the concept of how one feels about their physical looks including body shape and size, weight, skin tone, hair texture and other features. In many regards, one's body esteem is inevitably linked to one's body ideal, which is the way that one wishes to look physically. Body ideal is often formed through various agents of socialization including one's parents and other authority figures, peers, education in school and media.

Studies continue to demonstrate a positive relationship between media, specifically media where thinner characters are portrayed as more likeable or more desirable as role models, and subsequent body esteem for both girls and women alike. Bazzini et al (2010) conducted a study focusing on whether Disney movies portray and promote the Beauty-Goodness Stereotype. This stereotype yields one of the biggest critiques on Disney because it promotes the idea that all beautiful humans and creatures are good and all ugly ones are evil. What is so unique about this idea is that beauty and ugliness are socially constructed, meaning that this relationship is cyclical. Bazzini et al (2010) found that the physical features of a character did predict their

portrayal in this direction, meaning that Disney movies do hold true to the Beauty-Goodness Stereotype. Katz (1995) explains this relationship even further citing how beautiful and ugly people in each stage of life are treated differently. For example, children who are considered better looking receive higher grades while their less attractive peers are more likely to receive punishment regardless of their behavior (Katz: 1995). There are many less than ideal outcomes from the fact that this stereotype holds true. For example, this portrayal means that popular media, including Disney movies, essentially help create these norms by portraying this clear cut association, especially in regards to characters acting in socially acceptable ways. In that way, Disney and similar media may cause children to associate beauty with societal acceptance and ugliness as bad.

Subsequently, these researchers conducted an experiment where they exposed children ages six to eleven to either a Disney movie portraying this stereotype or one that does not portray it. The findings show that when asked to rate their peers, they did rate their more attractive peers as more likeable but this held true regardless of the immediate exposure to media (Bazzini et al: 2010). The results of this study are all the more daunting because it shows that these children had already internalized this stereotype, most likely in part from having watched Disney movies as well as through other media that portray a similar association. Throughout its existence, Disney has portrayed “beautiful” characters as better and kinder along with being loved by society. One can see that in Disney movies throughout time, the (Disney-defined) beautiful characters generally have lighter skin while the villains are darker and tend to lurk in the shadows. Thus, when adding a racial component to this study, the implications for young Black women’s body esteem are all the more concerning.

Race and Body Esteem

Given that the predominant media definitions of “beautiful” perpetuated by Disney and other media outlets extol White features, we would expect to find differences between White and Black women and their respective body esteem. In general, studies show that Black women tend to have higher body esteem compared to White women. Studies conducted by Jefferson and Stake (2009) as well as Makkar and Strube (1995) both came to the conclusion that Black women were less likely to have body disturbances and are more likely to have higher self-evaluations.

Makkar and Strube (1995) studied whether having higher body-esteem before partaking in the study or if having high levels of African self-consciousness makes a difference when being exposed to White models. There were 60 participants, all Black women, who were evaluated pictures of either attractive Black models, attractive White models or had no pictures to evaluate. Afterwards, all participants completed body esteem scales. The results show that Black women who had higher self-esteem prior to participating in the study and higher levels of African self-consciousness were less likely to be affected by exposure to images of White models (Makkar and Strube: 1995). Jefferson and Stake (2009) similarly learned that Black women were less likely than White women to be dissatisfied with weight and specific physical features including hair texture and skin color. Based on this study, Black women were also less likely to compare themselves to media beauty figures and were less likely to internalize Western beauty standards or show significant relationships between body esteem and the internalization of these norms (Jefferson and Stake: 2009).

Some of these findings are not surprising because they show a connection to a counter discourse that often makes a point to separate and differentiate itself from mainstream White

beauty ideals. In opposition to the racism Black women faced throughout American history in regards to mainstream White beauty norms, this community defied these standards and created their own beauty norms. Craig (2002) portrays the uncomfortable intersection where Black women find themselves wedged between fighting the sexism of the Miss America Beauty Pageant while also hosting their own Miss Black America pageant in protest to the discrimination Black women have faced in relation to this specific contest. This latter grievance boils down to the fact that Black women have always been excluded from mainstream beauty norms, which glorifies White women (Craig: 2002).

Black women who can more easily access Black counter-discourses in themselves and around them are less likely to have internalized the beauty ideals associated with mainstream culture including the Disney princess body ideal. This is not to say, however, that each subculture does not have its own beauty standards and expectations but these norms are often entirely different than mainstream ones. In that way, it is possible that the Black women who watched many Disney princess movies growing up are more likely to have internalized these mainstream norms and have been surrounded by them more often growing up than the Black women who had minimal exposure to Disney princess movies.

Indeed, there is a debate in the literature over whether and to what extent Black girls and women hold negative body images as compared to their White counterparts. For instance, Capodilupo and Kim (2014) found that Black women do experience negative body image. Important aspects include both negative and positive effects from interpersonal relationships, including the influence of family members and Black men, and negative effects from the media as well as experiences of oppression (Capodilupo and Kim: 2012). However, it is important to note that due to the small sample size, specificity of the group, and use of convenience sampling,

it is difficult to generalize these findings to larger populations.

While the above study focused on the internalization of the thin-ideal, Capodilupo has also conducted a number of studies focused on different beauty norms including hair and other aspects related to one's body and beauty ideal not associated with one's body shape and size. One of the main focuses in Capodilupo's 2015 study is to understand if the way and amount that Black men internalize women's body ideals as portrayed in White mainstream media affects how Black women view their own bodies. The results of this study show that Black women have lower body esteem when they believe that Black men internalize White body ideals more, thus making these women feel invisible to Black men and inadequate. Ideals relating to hair, skin color, and facial features were found to matter more for the participants than did body size or shape (Capodilupo: 2015).

Capodilupo's study explained above touches on all of the elements of my research, including the emphasis on media and its effects, the portrayal of thin White individuals as the ideal, the unique struggles that Black women face in relation to these ideals, and body-esteem and body image differences between White women and Black women. One can see that Capodilupo's study focuses on how Black women perceive Black men's internalization of White mainstream body ideal. My research, in contrast, attempts to delve deeper into if, and if so how, Black women have internalized these ideals themselves through Disney princess movies rather than how they perceive others have internalized these norms.

Based on the research conducted by Capodilupo and Kim, among others, one can see that media portrayal affect Black women differently than they do White women in distinct and important ways. Hesse-Biber et al (2010) questioned how, if at all, attending a predominantly White college affects Black students' racial identity and body image. The study was conducted

as in-depth interviews that focused on the many nuances and specifics of each woman's story. Interviewers were given a flexible set of guiding questions to help ensure a similar focus for all interviews by asking about such topics as the participants' family, the school environment, participants' racial identity as well as body image. The researchers coded different components of the responses including the women's sense of belonging during childhood, which looked at the racial makeup of their hometown related to how White the culture was and how much and to what extent participants identified with their White peers. This study found four groups that the participants fit into based on their responses to body image related questions and racial identity. These groups were referred to as "White enough," "Black and proud," "floater," and "bridge builder." The first group strongly identified with White culture though they racially identify as Black. The second group identified with Black counter-culture and was very aware of the differences between Black and White women culturally and physically. The third group identified with both cultures but kept them separate. The last group had mixed friend groups but had low adherence to the beauty ideals found in White culture (Hesse-Biber et al: 2010). This study shows important variation in Black woman's experience regarding their racial identity in relation to those around them with at least four possible paths.

My study builds on Hesse-Biber et al's research by also focusing on college women who attend predominantly White institutions by specifically looking at how media may affect the racial identity and body awareness. In addition, while Hesse-Biber et al (2010) only focus on Black women, I compare Black and White women, looking at whether and how frequent viewing of Disney princess movies correlates with their body esteem

The majority of the literature shows that White women will have lower body esteem than Black women. However, one of the most important factors that lead to this phenomenon is

whether the participants, Black or White, have internalized Western beauty norms as well as whether the Black participants in particular have a strong sense of African self-consciousness (Makkar and Strube: 1995). Taking these two studies with the Hesse-Bibers et al 2010 study, it may be possible that Black women who have internalized Western, or White, beauty norms and have not developed high levels of African self-consciousness are more likely to have lower body esteem than Black women who have not internalized these White norms and are more engrained in African or Black culture (Hesse-Biber: 2010).

Further, it is possible that the Black women who frequently watched Disney princess movies growing up are more likely to have internalized White beauty norms, either through watching these movies or because this media is correlated with other media or forms of socialization that leads to internalization of White, mainstream norms.

To address these questions, I have created four groups: Black women with significant exposure to Disney princess movies, White women with significant exposure to Disney princess movies, Black women with minimal exposure to these movies, and White women with minimal exposure to these movies. Interviewing both Black and White women as well as those with minimal and significant exposure to Disney princess movies will help control for both the effects of racial identity and the extent to which participants have internalized these White mainstream beauty norms and body ideal. That is not to say, however, that Black women who watched many Disney princess movies necessarily have low self-esteem or are not engrained in Black counter-culture. Controlling for the amount of exposure to this specific media will help better delve into whether or not Disney princess movies have these negative effects on women who watched them as children with different implications for different racial and ethnic groups.

Hypothesis:

Based on the above theoretical framework and literature, my hypothesis is that race will correlate with the relationship between media and self-concept, specifically regarding one's body esteem. My hypothesis states that Black women who watched more Disney princess movies as children are more likely to have internalized a body ideal more aligned with White norms including thinner body shapes, straighter hair, and lighter skin than Black women who did not watch as many Disney princess movies or did not watch them as often. Similarly, White women who watched more of this media are more likely to have internalized this Disney princess body ideal than White women who watched predominantly other media as children. As a result, the survey trends will show that White women and Black women who had significant exposure to Disney princess movies have lower body esteem.

Methods:

For this study, I used a mixed method with the focus on qualitative data. To solicit respondents, I distributed a preliminary recruitment survey asking about race and childhood viewing of Disney princess movies (see Appendix A). I then contacted potential participants who indicated on the recruitment survey that they were willing to participate in the in-depth interviews. These respondents were interviewed and completed an additional and totally distinct survey. In the interview, I asked questions regarding childhood media watched, specific questions regarding Disney princess movies, family structure and its relationship to media as well as more current thoughts about Disney princess movies (Appendix B). The survey asked participants questions regarding racial identity, age, as well as more general information regarding how many Disney princess movies they watched as children and how often they

watched these movies (Appendix C). The survey also included a body esteem scale created by Mendelson et al that asks participants to rate (from one to five) how true a statement is for themselves including “I like what I look like in pictures,” “I wish I looked better,” “I really like what I weigh,” and other questions focused on body esteem, body ideal, and comparisons between the way the participant looks and how they feel they look to how others look (Mendelson et al: 1998).

The sample for this study is a total of 17 undergraduate women who currently study at an elite private university in the U.S. southeast. I selected this sample size and study site on the basis of the time and resource constraints on the study. However, the advantage of sampling from a single educational institution was that the institutional environment was held constant. All of the participants are cis-women in order to limit potentially important variables such as navigating gender norms and the internalization of beauty ideals in relation to one’s body and societal expectations as a trans-woman or non-binary individual. All of the participants identify as either Black or White. One participant identified as both White/ Caucasian and Native American and one identified as White/ Caucasian and Hispanic/ Latina. I decided to include these women in this study because both identified as White/ Caucasian on the initial recruitment survey and I had learned of their multiple racial identities only after I interviewed them. Thus, in order to control for as many variables as possible, only Black and White cis-women were selected for this study, though the literature might suggest that other racial and ethnic groups may experience this media differently and would most likely internalize the Disney princess body ideal uniquely from either Black or White participants.

The preliminary survey asked participants basic questions including gender, racial identity, general information about their experiences watching Disney princess movies, and

whether they would be interested in participating in a more in-depth interview. I distributed the survey primarily through Facebook by posting the link and a short explanation on various pages and messaging individuals whom I know would be willing and able to help ensure a more diverse group of women saw and could respond to this preliminary survey. 136 individuals responded to this preliminary survey with 74 agreeing to participate in an in-depth interview. Broken down by racial demographics, 63% of respondents were White, 8% were Black, and 28% were of different racial identities that were not being studied here. The preliminary survey was administered online where participants provided answers to these questions on their own time and without any guidance other than the questions and introduction in the survey. I then used the responses of individuals potentially interested in participating in an in-depth interview to create the groups mentioned above.

From this preliminary survey, 48 women met the criteria of identifying as either Black or White and agreeing to participate in an in-depth interview. These individuals were then separated into groups roughly based on how seemingly important Disney princess movies were for them growing up, as explained more in-depth below.

Both the interviews and supplemental survey were conducted within the same time period in order to minimize the time between each part where participants may reconsider their intuitive answers to the questions and further research the specific topic of my thesis, which could alter the results. The interviews were conducted prior to the supplemental survey in order to minimize the priming affect of discussing body image and esteem before delving into Disney princess movies and causing participants to think about these characters and movies in relation to these ideas. All of the interviews were conducted in semi-private locations in study rooms at the university's library or student recreation center. Interviews lasted between 15 and 50 minutes,

depending on participants' time limitations, the details they wished to provide, and the follow up questions asked.

MEASURES

Frequency of exposure to DPM

Because Disney is a uniquely widespread media for both children and adults throughout America and the world, it was very unlikely to gather participants who had never seen any of these movies. Therefore, participants were separated into groups based on how influential these movies more likely were for them as children and into adulthood after they completed the preliminary survey, which was the method used to ensure I interviewed at least four women from each group. Specifically, these groups were created based on how many Disney princess movies they watched from the ages of four to eleven and how often they remember watching them. The understanding is that if a participant watched all of these movies and watched them often, Disney princess movies most likely had a larger impact on them than for an individual who watched only some of these movies or only watched them scarcely.

These groups were created based on how many Disney princess movies the participants watched and roughly how often they watched these movies as children. Because at the time that these groups were created I was not sure whether the number of movies seen or how often participants watched these movies as children would prove to be more important, both were considered when splitting participants into groups. Table 1 shows how the groups were created. As one can see in Table 1, the groups were consistent regarding watching habits between racial identity groups. What is interesting to note is that groups of both Black and White participants who had significant exposure to Disney princess movies growing up watched many Disney

Racial Identity

The variables in this study include racial identity, operationalized by the self-proclaimed identity of the participants in the recruitment survey. The question was phrased as a choice between different racial identities including White/Caucasian, Black/ African America, Hispanic/Latina, and a few others. Because participants were found through the preliminary survey where they had already identified their race, the participants all identified as White/Caucasian or Black/African American though two, as mentioned above, identified as White/Caucasian and another identity. None of the participants identified as both White/Caucasian and Black/African American, thus eliminating the possibility of individuals falling into more than one group based on racial identity.

Body Esteem

The supplemental survey accompanying the interview asked participants about their body-esteem, operationalized by the Mendleson et al scale titled “Body-Esteem Scale for Adolescents and Adults.” This scale asked questions about how one perceives one’s own body in relation to others, their ideal body and whether the participant believes others approve of her body. Some of the questions include “I’m as nice looking as most people,” “I’m proud of my body,” and “other people consider me good looking.” Participants provided an answer based on a Likert scale between one and five with an answer of one meaning “never” and an answer of five meaning “always” (Mendleson et al: 1998). The final component of the survey asked participants which Disney princess movies they watched as children, which was operationalized by how many and how often participants watched these movies. A list of the Disney princess movies that were released before 2009 was provided for participants to mark those they had seen between the

ages of four and eleven years old as well as a question asking them to estimate roughly how many times they had seen each movie between that age range.

To analyze the data, I found the conditional mean of each group, which were stratified by racial identity of participants and watching habits.

Insider/outsider status

One of the most difficult parts of this research for me was coming to terms with my own privilege. As a White woman writing about the experiences of both White and Black women, it has been difficult for me to accept that I can portray each woman's story accurately and in its entirety. I am extremely grateful to all of the women who participated in this research study for being genuine and allowing me to tell a part of their stories through my research.

Results:

The groups for my analysis consist of four Black women who had significant exposure to Disney princess movies, five White women who had significant exposure to Disney princess movies, four Black women who had minimal exposure to Disney princess movies and four White women who had minimal exposure to Disney princess movies (see Table 1).

Who's the Favored of Them All?

Every participant aside from two admitted to having had a favorite Disney princess growing up. Some of the women named two that particularly spoke to them. The princesses that was cited the most as the participants' favorite princess were Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* and

Mulan. For participants citing Ariel as their favorite princess, reasons ranged from the fact that she had red hair like the participant or that she was a mermaid, which was exciting and unique. Chava, a White participant who watched many Disney princess movies growing up including many of the sequels, noted that she loved Ariel's daughter from *The Little Mermaid II: Return to the Sea* because, "I think when I was younger I resonated more with her telling her mom off and also I really just wanted to find out that I was secretly really half mermaid" (Interview with Chava). Mulan was, and many participants argued is still, the most courageous of the Disney princesses and even those for whom she was not their favorite often noted this about her. Many participants used the specific idea of Mulan being "badass" in relation to her bravery, which I elaborate on more below.

Cinderella and Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* were tied for second place with three women each citing them as their favorite Disney princesses. Belle was beloved especially for her love of reading, which participants identified with growing up and to this day. Brittney, a Black participant who watched a significant number of Disney princess movies as a child, noted that "all the other princesses and like most other movies like the girl is always super pretty and obviously Belle is really pretty but I was like a huge book worm as a kid and so I was like 'oh like she also likes to read. This is so cool'" (Interview with Brittney). Participants pointed to Cinderella's hard work and kindness as to why they loved her growing up. Jamie, a White participant who did not watch a significant number of Disney princess movies growing up states that her favorite princess was, "Pocahontas (ummm) I feel like I resonate with like that type of thing a lot (laugh) like nature and all that stuff" (Interview with Jamie). Only one woman stated that Jasmine was her favorite princess, which was because "Jasmine was Arab like me." (Interview with Dana). It is important to note that some of these women chose their respective

princesses simply because they had not watched many of the other Disney princess movies.

Broken down by groups, two of four Black participants with minimal exposure to Disney princess movies favored Cinderella, one favored Belle and another cited Jasmine as her favorite. Two of the four Black women with significant exposure to Disney princess movies stated that Belle was their favorite, one preferred Mulan while the fourth loved Meg from *Hercules* who is not technically a princess and therefore cannot be considered. Of the White women with minimal exposure to Disney princess movies, one preferred Cinderella, another preferred Pocahontas, a third cited Ariel and one did not have a favorite princess growing up. Of the White participants with significant exposure to Disney princess movies, two favored Mulan, two loved Ariel and one cited both Mulan and Ariel as her favorites.

Analyzing the participants' favorite princesses based on their racial identity, four White women claimed Ariel as their favorite princess and three Black participants cited Belle as their favorite. Interestingly, none of the White participants cited Belle as their favorite and none of the Black participants favored Ariel. When grouping participants based on exposure to Disney princess movies, four of the participants who watched a significant number of these movies named Mulan as their favorites and three of the participants who watched a minimal number of Disney princess movies favored Cinderella. When stratifying favorite princesses by exposure to Disney princess movies, all of the women who favored Mulan watched a significant number of Disney princess movies and all of the women who liked Cinderella best watched only a minimal number of these movies growing up.

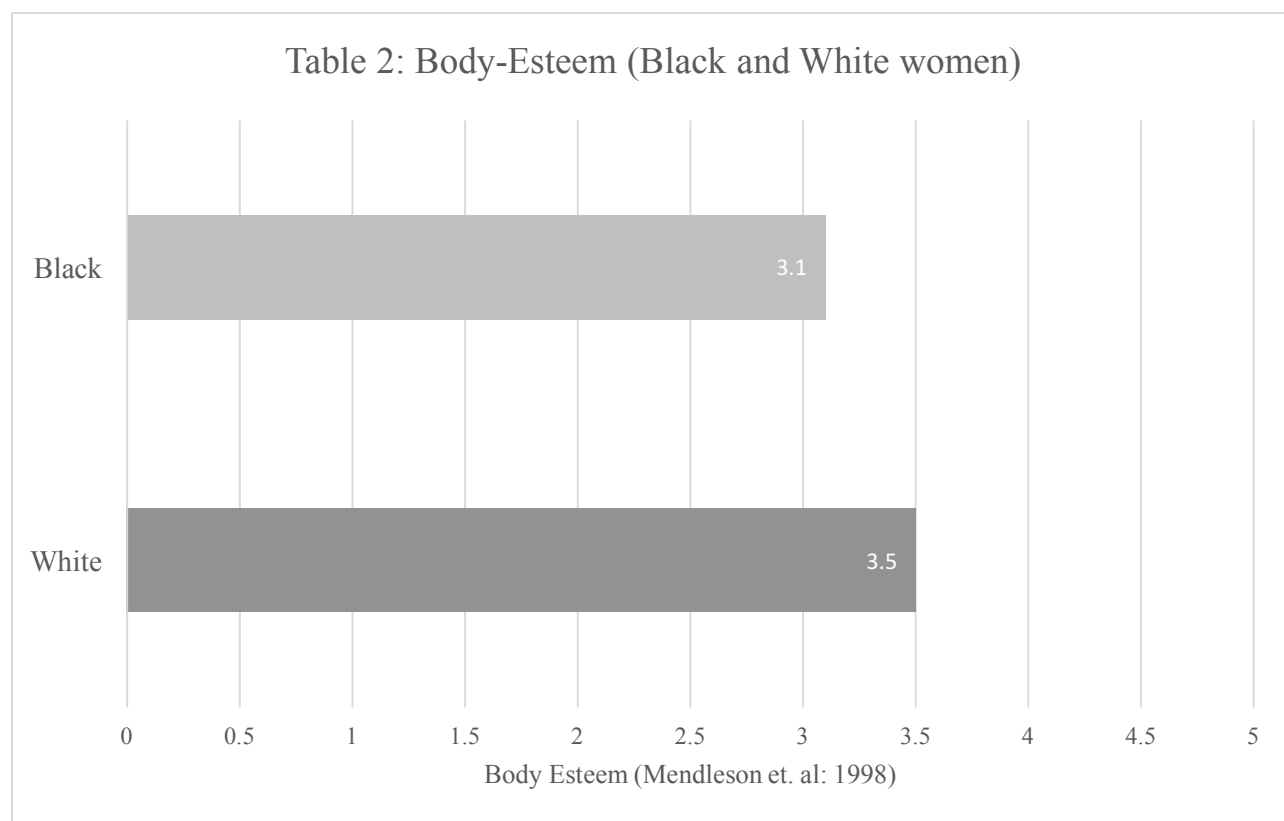
Most, if not all, of the participants have seen Cinderella and Frozen, which are two of the most iconic Disney princess movies and both portray a thin, White, blonde protagonist. Only some of the participants mentioned the multi-cultural Disney princess movies such as Mulan,

Pocahontas and Aladdin. These movies were not at all the focus for many of the participants and it often took more time for them to remember about these movies when being asked about Disney princesses and the movies featuring these characters than more of the classic, White princesses and movies starring those women.

There were common themes among the participants regarding their thoughts and feelings towards the princesses, regardless of which princess was each woman's favorite. Specifically, there was a particular love for Mulan and a distinct dislike of Snow White. Four participants stated that Mulan was their all time favorite Disney princess and most of the time when discussing Mulan, participants used the specific phrase "badass" or in some way noted that Mulan comes off as the strongest and most self-reliant princess. Many participants also noted that while Mulan was not their favorite growing up, she would be their current favorite because of her bravery and the fact that she is the protagonist who stars in one of the more progressive princess movies. One participant noted that she "really liked movies that had girls doing things. For that reason, was drawn more to, like, *Mulan* and *Pocahontas*. I liked those way more than I liked *Cinderella* or *Sleeping Beauty*" (Interview with Chava). Similar to this woman, many participants made direct comparisons between *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* to *Pocahontas* and *Mulan* citing the fact that the former movies were less driven by the princesses and more by other characters, especially men such as the king or a prince. One White participant, Mara, noted that while *Sleeping Beauty* and *Mulan* were two of her favorite princesses, she would be more willing to suggest *Mulan* or *Tangled* to someone she were babysitting because "I would kind of lean towards what I consider better, like, not as like anti-feminist movies," which she specified were more empowering for girls in her opinion (Interview with Mara).

“The American Girl Type”

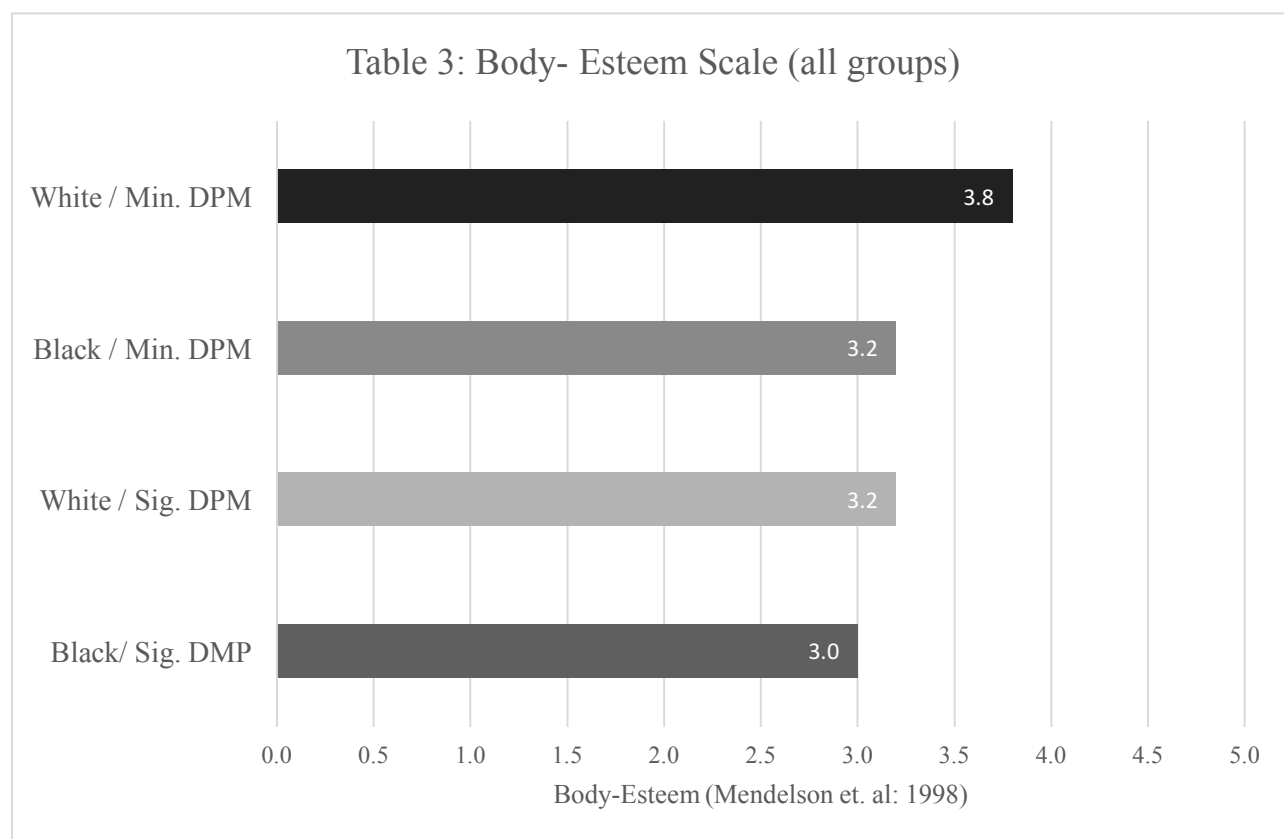
Surprisingly, the data gathered from the Body-Esteem for Adolescents and Adults (Mendleson et al: 1998) show that White women, on average, had higher body esteem than Black women by an average of .4 points on the Mendleson et al (1998) body esteem scale (refer to Table 2).



Black women who watched a significant number of Disney princess movies had, on average, the lowest body esteem of all four groups. Black women who watched a significant number of Disney princess movies had an average body esteem that was lower than Black women who watched a minimal number of Disney princess movies by .2 points (refer to Table 3).

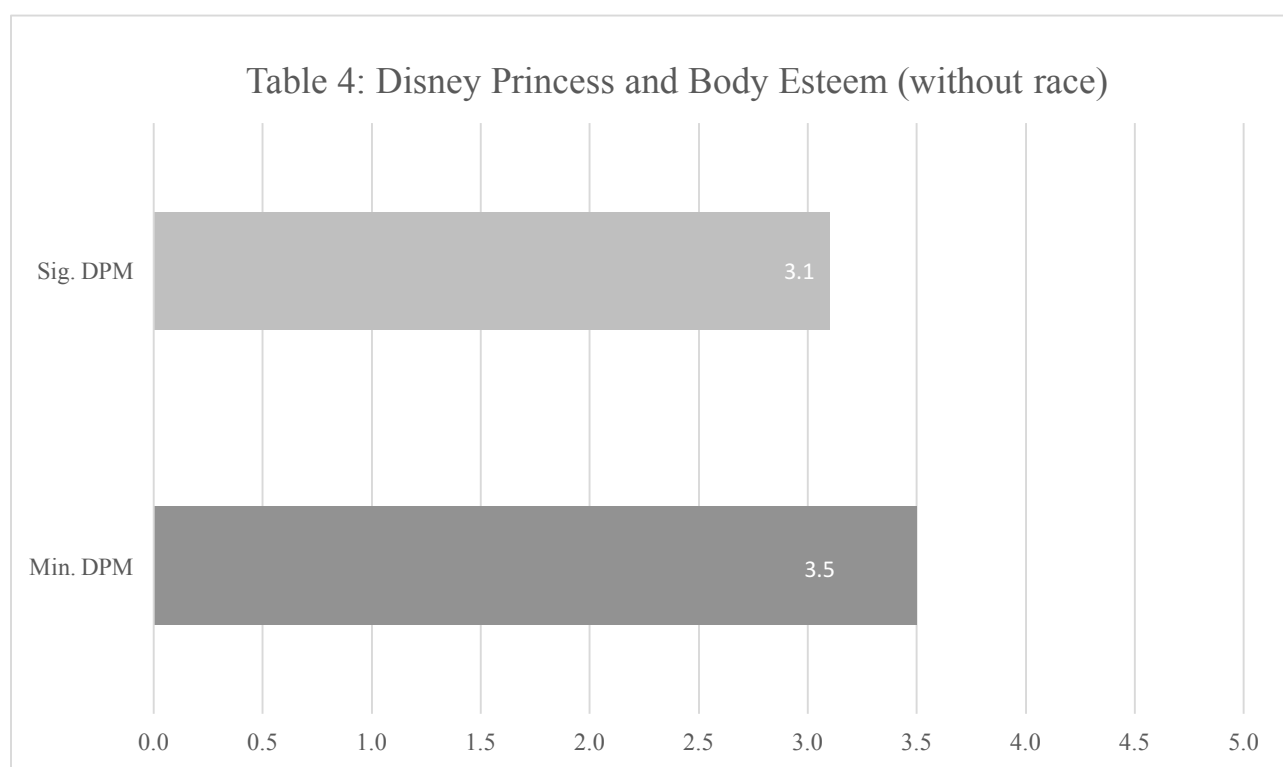
While there did not appear to be an effect of watching DPM on body esteem among

Black women, I found important differences among White women. White women who had significant exposure to Disney princess movies, on average, had lower body esteem than White women who had minimal exposure to Disney princess movies by .6 points on the scale (refer to Table 3).



Interestingly enough, White women who watched a significant amount of Disney princess movies and Black women who watched a minimal amount had the same average on the body esteem scale (refer to Table 3). Black women and women who watched a significant number of Disney princess (regardless of race) had the same average on the scale as did White women and women who watched only a minimal number of Disney princess movies (regardless

of race) (refer to Tables 2 and 4). When comparing the women who watched a significant number of Disney princess movies compared to those who watched only a minimal amount, the former group had a body esteem average that was .4 points lower than the latter group (see Table 4). Essentially, based on this data the body esteem of women who watched many Disney princess movies or watched them often really are more likely to be influenced negatively regarding their body esteem even ten or more years in the future. It is important to note, however, that this sample is too small to generalize.



Based on the literature, the Black participants who watched a minimal amount of Disney princess movies should have the highest body esteem of the various groups as measured by the survey. As one can tell, the results in this study do not depict this expectation. There are a number of reasons why this may be true. For example, because all of these women study at a predominantly White university, it is possible that regardless of their exposure to Disney princess

movies, all of these women throughout their lives have been more exposed to White norms. It is also possible that all of the Black women who volunteered to participate in this study were more likely to follow White beauty norms than Black women in general or even than those who attend this university. Because there are also only eight participants in this study who identify as Black/African American, the results seen here cannot be generalized further.

Influence of the Disney princess body ideal

Many of the women discussed the Disney princess body ideal and cited it as one of their biggest critiques of these movies. Two participants spoke explicitly about how watching these movies influenced their desire to be thin. Mara spoke about how one can see the influence of this body ideal in Disney princess movies and other media from her childhood and beyond. To her, this ideal includes “a perfect skinny tall figure but like maybe not tall but petite figure but like I don’t know” (Interview with Mara). This quote shows the uncertainty about all of the attributes of this ideal but one thing for certain is that the ideal includes being perfect and being thin. In some ways this uncertainty is all the more concerning because this ideal is inescapable. If the ideal were closely linked with a certain height, perhaps some girls and women who could never fit that ideal would be able to push away the desire to fit this norm. Weight, on the other hand, is an aspect of one’s body that many believe is in their control through dieting and exercising. Mara’s quote portrays the Disney princess body ideal she sees in her mind without having all of the specific details, thus making it that much easier for individuals to morph their ideal into a more realistic one and, in some ways, make it seem like their own idea rather than the socialization of the media they consumed.

On the other end of this belief, one participant, Remy, stated that she feels like “when

you're a little kid you don't really focus on that kind of stuff because, I mean Barbie movies cater to everybody, you're not thinking about 'oh Barbie's so skinny' and Barbie is supposed to be all about (ummm) girl power" (Interview with Remy). This participant grew up in a situation that allowed her to see past the physical bodies of these characters. When I asked her more about her experiences with body esteem, she seemed to not really have struggled with it citing the fact that her parents were more focused on her grades than her body. Remy's story is a hopeful one in comparison to many of the other women's experiences regarding these topics. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Remy was one of the participants who did not watch many Disney princess movies as a child even though she watched many of the Barbie movies, which also portray main characters, such as Barbie, with an unrealistic body type similar to the one found in Disney princess movies.

Dana, a Black participant, spoke at length about body image and how watching Disney princess movies affected this concept for her. From the length and style of their hair to their large eyes and tiny waists, these princesses have affected Dana's body ideal throughout childhood and up until she came to college. She spoke about her experiences in high school and always feeling like she was never thin enough even though now she looks back and wonders how she could ever have thought that way about herself both because she was very thin in high school and because she now realizes how troubling that thought process is. The road to self acceptance, especially in regards to physical looks, is a long and hard one. It took Dana until college when she finally realized "I don't care I'm beautiful because I'm me and that's beautiful and like (laugh) it should not have taken me until I was 20 to figure that out" (Interview with Dana). Many Black participants spoke about the beauty norms they feel they must live up to. Some spoke of more White mainstream beauty standards including losing weight or having straight hair while others

spoke more about the shame they felt not having a curvy figure, a beauty ideal generally more aligned with Black cultural norms than White ones.

The most disheartening accounts regarding the effects of the Disney princess body ideal are from the women who spoke of the relationship between this ideal and their personal struggle with eating disorders. While by no means can one make a linear connection between watching Disney princess movies as a child and developing disordered eating behaviors later in life, the desire to be as thin as a Disney princess is a reality for many young women and one they take quite seriously. One of the most difficult parts of growing up for women who have internalized this ideal, often without being aware of the fact that they have, is that eventually they look in the mirror and realize that they do not have the perfect Disney princess body they hoped to have or in some cases assumed they would.

Theo spoke about what it was like for her growing up and idealizing these princesses and seeing this connection between thinness and societal acceptance. She noted that even as a 20 year old woman she can still see the image in her mind of what she thought she would look like as an adult, which she had very much based on Disney princesses and Barbie dolls. While Theo had many role models in her life including her mother and grandmothers, she “thought that’s just kinda how you grew up and one day you looked like that... thinking about what I was going to look like when I was older and (laugh) do I definitely not look like that but I can see that image in my mind that I’ve had for years and compared to a Disney princess, they’re really not that different” (Interview with Theo). Theo spoke about her struggle with an eating disorder and how seeing this portrayal of beautiful, thin, loved women time and again throughout childhood and to this day makes her hope for a better future where a Disney princess can be overweight and society can reach a point of true body positivity. On a more hopeful note, many participants,

Theo included, noted that Disney princess movies are “moving in the right direction, I don’t know that they’re moving fast enough” (Interview with Tessa).

Disney princesses are, by nature, the protagonists of their films where the audience hopes to see their success. When every single one of these female protagonists has eyes literally larger than their waist, this message of thinness equaling affection and acceptance from society, there is no wonder that girls grow up, consciously or unconsciously believing that they need to be thin to be loved and accepted.

“Of Course She’s Gonna be White Because She’s Smart and Pretty”

Regarding the qualitative interviews, few of the respondents mentioned race when discussing Disney princess movies but those who did had a wide array of responses. Some respondents spoke of how progressive it is that there is a Black Disney princess (Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog*) while others argued that the movie and protagonist were not as progressive as they would have liked. For example, a number of participants expressed dislike of the fact that the main character, Tiana, spent most of the movie as a frog. Dana, a Black participant who has seen just about every Disney princess movie, stated that she has made a point not to see *The Princess and the Frog* because of the many problems in the movie and its portrayal of Black women and Black culture (Interview with Dana).

Some participants commented explicitly about the link between beauty and Whiteness as portrayed by Disney princess movies. In the words of one Black participant:

“It’s like, you know, like in *Beauty and the Beast* where Belle, she’s like smart and she’s pretty and you’re like of course she’s gonna be White because she’s smart and pretty and whatever and then it’s like the same with like Cinderella and like so all the pretty

and all they are is just pretty, like well spoken, well mannered princesses like Cinderella and Belle and Snow White are all like White and then all the sassier like more I guess (I don't know if I can curse) the more like badass one's, they're like darker so like Pocahontas and like even Tiana is like more badass than I would say Cinderella" (Interview with Dana).

While one may read this comment as an empowering sentiment about the multicultural princesses who portray more than just beauty, Dana felt differently. For her, these movies informed her that she could not just be pretty and smart like the White girls, she had to be strong and sassy as well. She noted that while it may have been meant as a place of pride for Black and other minority women, it has become a source of shame for her because "you kinda like see the movies less as like a nice like part of representation and more kind of like a caricature of how White people view you" (Interview with Dana).

Tessa, another Black participant, similarly noted the shame she felt growing up not seeing a single Disney princess who looked like her racially.

"It was really hard growing up not seeing anyone who looked like me on TV, which really, really sucked and like I wanted to be like a princess like everyone else but like being reminded 'cause like I went to predominantly White institutions like my whole life, being reminded that I didn't look like everyone, didn't look like the princesses was, like, really traumatizing for me as a kid and so it took me a really long time to be proud of being Black. And I think Disney princesses played a huge role in that because I loved princesses so much." (Interview with Tessa).

When asked if she would have felt differently had she grown up watching *The Princess and the Frog*, she replied stating "I think it would have made me feel just as bad. It would have

made me feel like I don't even deserve to be a princess, I might turn into a frog" (Interview with Tessa). This sentiment towards *The Princess and the Frog* was visible throughout a number of the interviews I conducted as well, primarily from the Black participants.

Many women noted that, while increasing representation of minority groups is good, the way Disney has been portraying these women and the stories chosen for them to star in are not always these participants' ideal. A number of participants including Tessa, quoted above, spoke about how unhappy they were that the first Black princess spent almost the entire movie as a frog, thus minimizing the fact that she was a strong and beautiful Black woman starring in a Disney princess movie. Most of the participants in this study stated that in regards to diversifying their princesses, they believe Disney has been moving in the right direction but has not gone far enough or doing it fast enough.

While some of the participants spoke about the link between race and beauty explicitly, many spoke in a more coded manner that still indicates this connection. It is important to note that it is likely that some of these women were unaware of the connection being made by their comments, which is all the more daunting when realizing just how far American society is from the racial equality that is often cited as the state of race in America today. The type of hair associated with Disney princesses is the most notable depiction of how these women understood the link between beauty and race. One participant kept referring to the long hair that princesses are known to have as well as the fact that she liked *Sleeping Beauty's* Aurora because "she was blonde like me" (Interview with Mara).

Tessa also cited the relationship between beauty and the cut and style of one's hair was as important for her growing up. This Black woman endured the painful experience of being told by her elementary school friends that she could not be a princess because she did not look like

Cinderella, specifically that her hair was ugly and dark instead of blonde. When asked whether she thought having seen these movies as a young Black girl rather than a young White girl changed her view on the movies, one Black participant who watched more of the Barbie spinoff movies than the original Disney princess movies spoke of the fact that Barbie has long blonde hair and fits the “American girl type” (Interview with Remy). This participant also noted that she thinks “it’s better now for girls than it was back then (ummm) just that they’re embracing the different body shapes and the different hair types and stuff like that with the new Barbies but back then everything was sort of... you know, one way. Like the skinny doll” (Interview with Remy). To Remy, the body shape hair and racial identity of Barbie dolls were all linked in a way that she may not have noticed when she spoke of these three components of Barbie dolls when she was growing up compared to how they are today.

Felicity, another Black participant, spoke of how her mother always wants her to put more effort into her appearance, specifically regarding her hair. To this participant’s mother, Felicity’s hair must take significant time to do with a clear preference of straightened hair. Even though Felicity’s mother recently went natural regarding her hair, meaning not putting products in to chemically alter her hair, Felicity’s mother still straightens her hair every day (Interview with Felicity). The implications of preferring straightened hair is important to note because of the cultural significance. Straightened hair has always been associated with Whiteness and the relationship between straightened hair and having one’s hair done nicely shows the internalization of the connection between Whiteness and beauty. Many scholars have studied the personal, cultural, subconscious, and social meaning of one’s hair (Banks: 2000; Craig: 2002). Thus, while the topic of hair may seem irrelevant to this study, these comments are some that show the connection between race, beauty and Disney princesses.

While these are only a handful of examples from the interviews, there is a clear association between hair type and race as well as a direct link between the feminine icons that are Barbie dolls and Disney princesses and their hair cut and color, which have traditionally aligned with White beauty norms such as having straight hair. In this way, while woman may not specifically use racial terms to identify Disney princesses and beauty standards, there are nonetheless specific indicators of this White beauty norm.

Cinderella Starring Brandy

One of the most interesting reoccurring references in the interviews was Brandy, specifically the 1997 remake of *Cinderella* starring this famous Black singer. With Brandy as Cinderella and Paolo Montalban, a Filipino-American, as Prince Charming, this particular remake is one of a kind in the diversity of its cast. For some of the Black participants who spoke of this movie, it was one that instilled a sense of pride in their racial identity and helped teach them that “princesses come in all shapes and sizes” (Interview with Tessa).

One Black participant who had significant exposure to Disney princess movies expressed how important this Cinderella remake was to her growing up. She expressed how difficult it was growing up without any Disney princesses who looked like her racially. She spoke of an experience where her White friends in elementary school told her that she could not wear the princess dress she had on because her hair was not blonde like Cinderella’s hair. The saddest part, Tessa explained, was that she internally agreed with her friends because it is true that her hair was and still is not long, blonde and straight like Cinderella’s hair in the original movie. The implications that this participant, Tessa, would not be a princess because of her hair is a racially charged comment (see above). The fact that Tessa agreed with her White friends on this point

shows the internalized racism that she had already faced before this experience. For Tessa, having a version of *Cinderella* where the princess was a beautiful Black woman made all the difference because she finally saw a princess who looked like her racially (Interview with Tessa).

Another participant, also Black but who had minimal exposure to Disney princess movies, explained that the only Disney princess movie she saw growing up was *Cinderella*. Most of the movies in general that she watched were the movies that played on TV, thus she was exposed to many of the remakes of *Cinderella*, since those could be seen on TV without having to purchase the VHS tapes or DVDs, including the one starring Brandy. This version of *Cinderella* was this participant's favorite but she informed me that it was most likely because it was the first version of the movie she had seen growing up rather than anything specific about this version (Interview with Crystal).

The only White participant to reference Brandy's rendition of *Cinderella* did so in a very different capacity. This woman referenced Brandy because, growing up, she was terrified every time she saw pictures of the singer in magazines or toys in the store. She informed me that "I was very genuinely scared of Black people until I was exposed" (Interview with Theo). Theo explained that having come from a homogenous town in the Southern United States, she grew up in an atmosphere where she never had to interact with individuals from different backgrounds or of different races. She referenced Brandy as a prominent Black person she saw in magazines and dolls of her in stores to depict her reaction to seeing someone who looks so different from herself, her family, and most everyone she interacted with growing up. Theo explained that she believes had she grown up seeing more more diverse groups of people in movies and on TV, it would not have taken her so long to overcome this fear. The importance of this woman's experience is that it shows how a lack of diversity not only harms those from marginalized

groups but harms every single individual living in a racist system and who are not exposed to individuals from different racial and ethnic backgrounds even in television shows and movies. At the very least, this movie shows that having one movie where a Black woman is portrayed as a classic Disney princess can have important and long-lasting effects for the Black girls who watched this movie though does not alter their understanding of White beauty norms and internalizing them. Similarly, while Theo and a number of other White participants noted that they wished for more Black princesses, this version of *Cinderella* starring Brandy did not alter their view of the Whiteness of Disney princesses.

“Pants are for Boys”

Many of the interviews ended up focusing more on gender norms than I had expected. For example, many participants used the phrase “damsel in distress” to describe the more classic portrayals of Disney princesses in regards to the fact that these women always needed a man to save them. When discussing this gender norm, one participant adamantly stated, “I just feel like, especially in, like, this day and age, like, damsel in distress just doesn’t need to be a thing. Like over and over and over” (Interview with Jane). When discussing gender norms, participants related specific instances that Disney princess movies and other similar media taught them explicit norms such as wearing dresses and feeling more beautiful when wearing makeup. For example, one participant explained that she did not wear pants until she was 12 years old because “pants are for boys” and asked her mother not to buy her pants (Interview with Chava).

Many participants spoke specifically about the expectation from their mothers and grandmothers to abide by gender norms, whether it be by always having their nails done or by knowing how to cook. Interestingly enough, many women spoke of how their grandmothers in

particular are very strong women and have been important role models for them growing up and how they, in many ways, broke gender norms while still expecting their granddaughters to abide by certain gender norms. Felicity, a Black participant, spoke of this juxtaposition in regard to both her grandmothers:

“she’s always just been like ‘I used to like drive those trucks and I used to be in charge of all the men and like everybody told me that I couldn’t do it but I had to do it.’ So it’s just like ‘there’s nothing you can’t do. Like there’s no box you can put yourself in’ but then it’s weird because at the same time she’ll also be like ‘a lady needs to cross her legs’ and like do this and like why, and my other grandma would be like ‘why don’t you know how to cook’ and do this and I’m just like (laugh) I’m confused.” (Interview with Felicity)

When discussing feminine gender norms, which most participants touched on at least a couple times in the interview, many participants related these concepts to their mothers. One participant stated that her mother “had very specific ideas of how one is supposed to behave in society, like, she was a very country club kind of lady” who was very specific about what clothing her children could or could not wear and around whom they could wear certain articles of clothing, which incidentally was racially based. This White participant, Vanessa, spoke of her mother’s preference for Vanessa and her sister to wear Kate Spade and J. Crew along with a number of other high end, expensive clothing lines. These brands were the ones Vanessa had to wear when she needed to make a good impression depending on whether her mother “knew that I wouldn’t be seen by anyone who she considered important” such as her father’s co-workers or if she went shopping with her mother. Vanessa spoke of how growing up, most of her friends were Black and if “I were going over to their house, I could wear whatever I want. I could’ve had like

chalk on my hair and been totally fine because, like, it didn't matter what I looked like”
(Interview with Vanessa).

Even the participants who had not seen many Disney princess movies spoke of their experiences with gender norms and their mothers' influence in this regard. It seemed that regardless of whether one grew up more feminine or more as a “tom boy,” feminine gender norms influenced their lives. The trend seems to be that most of the participants who watched many Disney princess movies identified more with these feminine gender norms than those who opted to watch other media or were more focused on playing outside.

Many women spoke about playing outdoors as children. Some women spoke of the difference between themselves and their siblings where their siblings loved playing sports and getting dirty while they preferred playing indoors. Other participants expressed their love for playing outdoors. What is most interesting is that women from all different groups spoke of playing outdoors. Some were forced by their parents to play outside, though they do not remember disliking it while others spoke of always wanting to be outside. In some cases, this love of nature manifested itself in some relation to the Disney princess movies they watched. For example, Jamie, a White participant with minimal exposure to Disney princess movies, spoke of her love of nature and how, almost entirely for that reason, Pocahontas was and still is her favorite Disney princess. She mentioned that she was much more likely to be found outside in the garden or by the bay than inside watching Disney princess movies or playing with dolls
(Interview with Jamie).

Tessa, one of the Black participants who watched Disney princess movies often, spoke of the juxtaposition between herself and her sister in this regard. Where she loved all things frilly and girly, her sister loved playing sports and being outside. This was, again, a reoccurring theme

in regards to the fact that Tessa self identified as a “girly girl” while her sister was much more of a “tom boy” (Interview with Tessa)

At the same time, it is important to note that this relationship did not always hold true for participants. Many of the women who played outside often also loved Disney princess movies. Mara spoke of the fact that her mother encouraged her and her sister to play outdoors rather than watch TV inside the house. While Mara watched many Disney princess movies throughout her childhood, she does not have any memories of being disappointed that she was forced to play outside often (Interview with Mara). Thus, in this small sample, there is no substantial link between women who watched a significant number of Disney princess movies as children and a dislike of the outdoors.

A number of participants spoke of reenacting various Disney movies when playing with friends or siblings growing up. Mary, a White participant with significant exposure to Disney princess movies, spoke fondly of memories where she and her older sisters would reenact various scenes of Mulan. Mary was always the comic relief character, Mushu, who was her favorite character (Interview with Mary). Theo, a White participant with minimal exposure to Disney princess movies, often reenacted Cinderella starring as the main character while her neighbor “kind of liked to be the villain in all the different stories, ‘cause that was a little bit more her” (Interview with Theo). It is interesting to note that Cinderella was Theo’s favorite princess as child. Perhaps these games, in part, lead to the participants’ respective love and fondness for these movies citing these respective characters as their favorite princesses.

Limitations and Future Research

The focus on retrospective data is one limitation in this study. To some extent, the

assumption by using this data was that it would help provide a longitudinal dataset in order to understand how watching these movies may have effects for women many years in the future, however, there are bound to be limitations in participants' memories. Some of these limitations in memory may include how many Disney princess movies they watched, how often, and what their feelings were growing up verses how they feel about these movies now. Some of the participants seemed to have very vivid memories while others were more hesitant about their thoughts and feelings regarding these movies, especially those who watched a minimal number of Disney princess movies growing up.

There are many ways this research can be furthered, all of which are important ways to understand more about what individuals learn from the media they consume. Some of my suggestions for future research include different racial groups and analyzing how Disney princess movies affected them including, but by no means limited to, Asian American women, Latina American women, and women of various mixed racial identities. It is likely that women from each of these racial backgrounds will have very different opinions on Disney princess movies and have been socialized differently in relationship to their racial or ethnic identities and respective upbringings. Another area of future research is the variable of gender. One can imagine that cis-gendered men are likely to have been socialized very differently than cis-gendered women, if nothing else due to the fact that Disney princess movies are generally understood as media meant for girls. It is also important to better understand how trans-individuals and non-binary individuals have been socialized through Disney princess movies. The answers to all these questions are ones I cannot predict.

It seems that Black women who watched many Disney princess movies were quite affected by the Whiteness of all of the princesses. One of the biggest downfalls of this research

is, of course, the small sample size. Even the quantitative data is not very generalizable because there are fewer than 30 samples and the preliminary survey only asked respondents very basic questions regarding racial and gender identity and watching habits growing up. The results of this study, however, suggest the importance of Disney princess movies for young girls and the relationship between their future body esteem even ten years down the road.

Conclusion:

In an ideal world, Disney princess movies and the rest of the media consumed by children would be a mere form of keeping them occupied and engaging their imagination while their parents or caregivers are busy but, as one can see, it is much more than that. Children learn from the media they watch and these lessons stay with them well past their childhood. It is important to note, however, that children are not passively absorbing whatever they see in the media. Lowe (2003) conducted a number of interviews with pre-teen and teen girls with the focus on their thoughts and feelings of Britney Spears. From this study, one can see that these young women had very complex and sometimes seemingly contradictory thoughts about Spears. Many of these comments portray deep consideration of what the messages are in Spears' songs and what they mean for women in terms of their sexuality primarily. For example, these young women referred to Spears as a "slore," which is a combination of the words slut and whore to indicate their disapproval of how Spears acts and dresses. The participants argued that Spears does so in a way that reflects poorly on all women and girls. On the other hand, the participants also spoke of how some of Spear's songs are very empowering for them and the lyrics align with many of their beliefs and what they hope to hear from a role model. In this way, these young women expressed seemingly conflicting thoughts and feelings about Spears, which shows just how thoughtful and

analytical they are, even as pre-teens, regarding the media they consume (Lowe: 2003).

Similarly, from the interviews with the women for this research study, there were many conflicting thoughts and feelings about Disney princess movies. Most women could see how these movies may have negatively affected their self-concept or expectations for the future but still cherish these movies as an important part of their childhood. When I asked about whether they would show Disney princess movies to a younger niece, nephew or someone they were babysitting most said yes with little hesitation. Some women had caveats with their answer including the idea that it depends on if this child wanted to watch a princess movie or that they would only recommend certain movies, specifically the older Disney princess movies. One Black participant noted that if the child were Black, she would most likely not recommend a Disney princess movie. Even though many of these women can link some of their negative body esteem and other harmful norms learned from Disney princess movies, very few, if any, would not pass along these movies and what they have learned from them to the next generation of consumers.

Though I am not especially hopeful that this change will happen soon, I cherish the point in time in the future where Disney princess movies no longer teach young girls about a limited place in life and what society expects of them in regards to gender norms, beauty, and body ideals, either because Disney has finally moved forever away from these tropes or because society has finally taken a stand against them.

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APPENDIX A: Preliminary Survey

The questions below will be sent to undergraduate women at Emory University through email and Facebook. Undergraduate women at Emory answer these questions as Google Form to ensure the survey is convenient and comprehensible. Because the form in this state cannot be downloaded or attached to the Emory IRB website, the questions are replicated below.

The language used in the email or Facebook post inquiring Emory undergraduate women to complete this survey is as such:

Hi All,

My name is Sari Flomenbaum and I am a senior at Emory. I am currently working on collecting data for my honors thesis in the sociology department. My thesis focuses generally on the relationship between childhood media and self-concept. Below is a very, very short survey that would help me immensely if you can fill it out. The purpose of this survey is to learn more about how often undergraduate women at Emory watched Disney princess movies. Women who watched these movies often and women who did not watch these movies often are equally important for this study. The second purpose of this study is to gather participants who would be interested in participating further in this study. All responses will be confidential and participation is completely voluntary. My honors thesis will include data only from those of you who identify as women.

If you have any questions, concerns, or suggestions, please feel free to email me at (email address here).

Thank you all so much!

Childhood Media and Race... Want to Learn More?

My name is Sari Flomenbaum. I am a current senior at Emory University and am conducting research for my honors thesis in the sociology department.

By filling out this quick survey, you will be helping me collect preliminary information for my thesis.

All responses will be anonymous, confidential and shared with no one.

If you have any questions or would like to know more about my research, please feel free to email me at (email address here).

Thank you for taking this survey!

1. Which gender identity best describes you at this point in time? (Please choose only one).

Woman

Man

Trans individual

Gender non-conforming

Other

2. Which race/ ethnicity best describes you? (Please choose only one).

Native American or Alaskan Native

Black or African American

Asian, Asian American, Hawaiian Native or Pacific Islander
White or Caucasian
Hispanic or Latino
Multiple ethnicities
Other

3. As a child (roughly ages 4-11), did you watch any Disney princess movies?

Examples of Disney princess movies include Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin, Pocahontas, Mulan, The Princess and the Frog, Tangled, Brave, Frozen or any sequels to the above mentioned movies.

None

1-3 movies; I watched these movies often

1-3 movies; I watched each about once or twice (not often)

More than 3 movies; I watched these movies often

More than 3 movies; I watched each about once or twice (not often)

Other

4. Would you be interested in participating in an in-depth interview related to these topics?

Yes or possibly (selecting this option is not binding and you can decline to participate at any time)

No

If participant answered yes to the fourth question, the form asks the following section:

Email Address

None of the previous survey answers will be linked to you through your email address or in any other way. The email address you enter below will be used solely to contact you for an in-depth interview.

Please enter the email address you would like to be contacted for the in-depth interview.

APPENDIX B: Interview Guide

Below is a general guide of questions for the interview portion of this study. Questions may be elaborated on or skipped if the answer has already been obtained from the participant. The participant will be asked to give as much information as they are able or feel comfortable. Elaboration on questions is greatly encouraged and follow-up questions regarding answers may be asked. Consent will be obtained prior to beginning the interview and will be reviewed, on tape with the interviewer, before any questions are asked.

Participants have the right to refuse to answer any questions or stop the study at any time. All identifying information will be removed from the data. The tape recordings of the interview will be kept in a locked place and all of the transcripts will be password encrypted.

(“As a child” = between the ages of 4 and 11)

General Childhood Memories - Disney/ Disney Princess Movies

Growing up, what kind of movies did you watch?

What was your favorite movie?

Can you tell me about a time when you watched a movie as a child? (eg- who was there, where you were, etc.)

Did you watch any Disney princess movies growing up? (Some examples include Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs; Cinderella; Sleeping Beauty; The Little Mermaid; Mulan; Pocahontas; Aladdin; and Beauty and the Beast)

Did you have a favorite Disney princess growing up? Why was she your favorite?

Can you tell me about a time when you watched a Disney princess movie as a child? (eg- what age, who was with you, what was the setting, etc.)

Do you have any positive memories related to Disney princess movies? (eg- dressing up for Halloween, etc.)

Do you have any negative memories related to Disney princess movies? (eg- your brother making fun of you for watching Disney princess movies, etc.)

Family Questions

What was your family structure growing up? (eg- siblings, both parents, divorced parents, lived with your aunt, etc.)

How did your siblings feel about Disney princess movies?

How did your parents/caregiver feel about Disney princess movies?

Growing up, did you have any conversations about Disney princess movies or Disney princesses with your parent/caregiver, siblings, friends, etc.? Can you tell me about these conversations?

Other Important Women During Childhood

Were there any other important adult females in your life?

How did they feel about Disney Princess movies?

Current Thoughts on Disney/ Disney Princess Movies

How do you feel about Disney princess movies now?

Do you still watch Disney princess movies? Can you tell me more about that? (is it generally with friends, when they're already on TV, when babysitting, etc.)

Do you have a different favorite Disney princess now or no longer consider X princess your favorite? Why? (X - formally favorite Disney princess, if stated earlier)

Would you be willing to show a Disney princess movie to someone you were babysitting, a younger niece or nephew, a younger sibling, etc.?

Do you feel that these movies have made any sort of lasting impression on you?

Do you feel that the media you watched affected how you viewed yourself physically?

Do you feel that the media you watched affected your opinion of your worth? (non-physically)

As a black woman, do you think you had a different watching experience than white women had as children?

Do you feel that being a black woman you internalized and understood media differently? (eg- did you notice hair more, skin-tone, features, etc.)

APPENDEX C: Survey

Demographic:

How do you describe yourself? (Check one)

Male

Female

Transgender

Do not identify as female, male, or transgender

Which race/ ethnicity best describes you? (Check all that apply)

Native American or Alaskan Native

Black or African American

Asian, Asian American, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

White or Caucasian

Hispanic or Latino

Other

What is your current age?

18 or younger

19

20

21

22

23

24 or older

Disney Princess Movies:

Please circle the movies you remember watching as child (roughly ages 4-11).

NOTE: If any movie was released after the above-mentioned time frame, regardless of if you have seen it or not, please do not circle said movie.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

Cinderella

Sleeping Beauty

The Little Mermaid

Beauty and the Beast

Aladdin

Pocahontas

Mulan

How many times on average have you seen the movies you marked above as a child? Roughly _____ times each.

Body- Esteem Scale for Adolescents and Adults (Mendelson et. al: 1998)

Instructions: Indicate how often you agree with the following statements: ranging from never (1) to always (5), circle the appropriate number beside each statement.

	Never (1)	Seldom (2)	Sometimes (3)	Often (4)	Always (5)
I like what I look like in pictures	1	2	3	4	5
Other people consider me good looking	1	2	3	4	5
I'm proud of my body	1	2	3	4	5
I am preoccupied with trying to change my body weight	1	2	3	4	5
I think my appearance would help me get a job	1	2	3	4	5
I like what I see when I look in the mirror	1	2	3	4	5
There are lots of things I'd change about my looks if I could	1	2	3	4	5
I am satisfied with my weight	1	2	3	4	5
I wish I looked better	1	2	3	4	5
I really like what I weigh	1	2	3	4	5
I wish I looked like someone else	1	2	3	4	5
People my own age like my looks	1	2	3	4	5
My looks upset me	1	2	3	4	5
I'm as nice looking as most people	1	2	3	4	5
I'm pretty happy about the way I look	1	2	3	4	5
I feel I weigh the right amount for my height	1	2	3	4	5
I feel ashamed of how I look	1	2	3	4	5
Weighing myself depresses me	1	2	3	4	5
My weight makes me unhappy	1	2	3	4	5
My looks help me to get dates	1	2	3	4	5
I worry about the way I look	1	2	3	4	5
I think I have a good body	1	2	3	4	5
I'm looking as nice as I'd like to	1	2	3	4	5