Business Horizons (2020) 63, 659—669

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

ScienceDirect

KELLEY SCHOOL OF BUSINESS
INDIANA UNIVERSITY

www.journals.elsevier.com/business-horizons

Marketing feminism in youth media: A study of Disney and Pixar animation

Kristen Schiele [a,*], Lauren Louie [b], Steven Chen [c]

[a] California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, 3801 W. Temple Avenue, Pomona, CA 91768, U.S.A.
[b] University of La Verne, 1950 Third Street, La Verne, CA 91750, U.S.A.
[c] California State University, Fullerton, 800 N. State College Boulevard, Fullerton, CA 92834-6848, U.S.A.

KEYWORDS
Feminism;
Youth media;
Marketing messaging;
Feminist movement;
Disney;
Pixar

Abstract Feminism's reemergence in the mainstream has forced businesses and media organizations to be aware of and even to promote gender issues relevant to the marketing of their products, services, and brands, especially those that target young female consumers. Business scholarship has offered marketing guidelines for gendered representations, but most studies have occurred in adult consumption spheres, with less attention paid to feminist messaging in youth media. Through a thematic analysis of 17 Disney and Pixar animated films produced between 1989 and 2018 and featuring a female lead or colead, this study offers a blueprint that could help businesses develop feminist messaging in marketing communications and media directed at young female consumers. While businesses might understand that promoting positive gendered messages is necessary in the current era of heightened feminist awareness, few firms actually do it. And for the companies that do it, integrating feminist messages in a way that does not alienate mainstream consumers might prove challenging. This study's framework, which emerges from an empirical study of Disney and Pixar media, helps reduce some of these creative barriers.

1. The feminist imperative in youth media

In 2019, Walt Disney Pictures released *Aladdin*, a live-action remake of the 1992 animated classic. In contrast to the 1992 animation, the live-action film

* Corresponding author
E-mail addresses: krschiele@cpp.edu (K. Schiele), llouie@laverne.edu (L. Louie), stchen@fullerton.edu (S. Chen)

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2020.05.001

builds up the rebellious Princess Jasmine from supporting character to full-fledged colead. The remake overtly portrays her struggles against traditional gender roles and patriarchal norms. She rejects arranged marriages, dismisses the idea that a female cannot become sultan, and refuses men's attempts to silence her. A new song exclusive to the 2019 remake, "Speechless (Full)," embodies this paradigm:

> Stay in your place, better seen and not heard … I won't be silenced. You can't keep me quiet … All I know is I won't go speechless. (Scott, 2019)

Some consumers may link the song to contemporary feminist activism. The *Aladdin* remake is part of the Walt Disney Company's response to the growing consumer expectations of the #MeToo era that hold media powers like Disney accountable with respect to equitable female representation in their media (Smith, Choueiti, & Pieper, 2016). These expectations are symptomatic of a "fourth wave of feminism," which calls attention to the continued suppression of and violence toward women in society—acts that increasingly occur via the internet and social media (Maclaran, 2015). Two key emphases of this wave are the connections between broad, systemic social agendas and more individual or group-level micropolitics, and the intersectionality that occurs where systems of disadvantage (i.e., gender, race, disability, etc.) intersect with each other. This wave reaffirms poststructural feminist discourses that advocate for the deconstruction of gender binaries and for separating biological sex from gender identity.

Feminism's reemergence in the mainstream has forced businesses and media organizations to be aware of and even to promote gender issues relevant to the marketing of their products, services, and brands. In particular, marketers have the opportunity to show, amplify, and challenge systemic gender discrimination, especially in media that target young female consumers (Ebrahim, 2014). Several initiatives have raised attention to weak female representation in media. For example, two University of Southern California Annenberg studies found that female characters filled only 28.7% of speaking roles in film generally (Smith et al., 2016) and only 31.3% of speaking roles in animation (Smith et al., 2019).

Meanwhile, in business scholarship, the story of feminism and media is still unfinished (Hearn & Hein, 2015). Scholars have examined how feminist themes are played out in adult consumption (Martin, Schouten, & McAlexander, 2006; Thompson & Üstüner, 2015), but they have done comparatively less work to examine feminist narratives in youth consumption, especially in products and media that target girls. Moreover, opportunities exist to examine the significance of feminism for marketing practitioners.

This study examines female representation and feminist messaging in blockbuster animated movies. Disney and Pixar animated films are the empirical focus, owing not only to their continued dominance in the global market but to the animation studios' strategic decision to include more female lead characters and gendered narratives into their media portfolios. Even in the era of #MeToo, which has brought unprecedented attention to gender issues in society, marketers and media producers have a lot of room for improvement with respect to female representation (Smith et al., 2019). Through a study of the world's leading youth-oriented animated brands—Disney and Pixar—this article offers a framework of feminist themes that businesses can use to develop marketing communications and media for young consumers.

2. Feminism defined

Feminism is defined as a social movement and systems of thought that include a "wide ranging set of theories, politics, and practices that … contest the dominant gender order" (Hearn & Hein, 2015, p. 626). Generally, feminism highlights the damaging ways stereotypical concepts of gender lead to privileging particular voices over others, restrictive categorizing, and unequal gender relations (Thompson & Üstüner, 2015). Having said that, different schools of thought have expressed feminism in various ways.

The plurality of feminism is embodied by four waves of feminist movements that reflect different priorities, desired outcomes, and methods over time (Maclaran, 2015). The first wave can be traced to the suffragette movement in the 1850s, which advocated for women's access to the current social order, including rights to vote and to hold political office, access to public spaces, and property rights. The second wave of feminism occurred between the 1960s and 1980s and challenged women's domestic roles and the structural inequality further found in the workplace, while also seeking reproductive rights and access to public spaces. The third wave advocated the separation of biological sex from gender and the deconstruction of gender binaries (e.g., male/female, men/women). Maclaran (2015) suggests

that we are now in a fourth wave of feminism, which is driven by social media and the internet. This fourth wave intermixes third-wave micropolitics with sociopolitical agendas, and it renews challenges to sexual misconduct.

Accompanying these waves are the different feminist ideologies (Bristor & Fischer, 1993; Hearn & Hein, 2015). *Liberal feminism* conceptualizes men and women as being fundamentally the same with significant differences in gender stemming from socialization and unequal access to opportunities. *Women's voice/experience feminism* suggests there are fundamental differences between male and female experiences and that women's experiences are perceived as inferior in the dominant patriarchy. *Poststructural feminism* focuses on the deconstruction of gender binaries and the ways our experiences are understood. This perspective challenges the marginalization of women and seeks to heighten gender equality. Since feminism is a multifaceted set of movements, priorities, and methods, this study takes particular interest in how these many kinds of feminism are introduced to young consumers through youth media. By examining how feminist themes and gender schemas are communicated through film, managers may better understand how organizations can respond to and participate in feminist movements and discussions of gender.

2.1. Youth media as a tool for socializing gender and feminism

Media is a key influencer of children's understanding of gender based on the meanings, relations, and representations they portray (Gerbner, 1999). Gender schema theory holds that media information provides schemata—cognitive structures that store and connect previously learned information and associations—that influence how people organize gender associations (Bem, 1983). Specifically, gender schema theory suggests that exposure to mediated representations of gender can lead viewers to adapt worldviews that only match those media representations. In other words, youth animation provides a rich field to study what is learned, what is reinforced, and how children process gender categories (England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011).

A robust examination of youth media is imperative given media producers' recognition of the financial power of young female consumers and their investment of significant resources to target them (Hains, 2009). Media created for young girls are at once problematic and promising. On the one hand, they can be problematic when they solely reinforce patriarchal gender norms, in which female characters are passive, domesticated prototypes judged by their physical appearance (England et al., 2011; Sharmin & Sattar, 2018). On the other hand, media producers have begun to infuse "girl power" and "progirl" themes that promote ambitious, independent female characters (Hains, 2009). This latter point illustrates how popular media can spur positive change, however incremental the change might be (Murray et al., 2019).

3. Methodology

We selected Disney and Pixar animated films as the context of study. Disney is a $240 billion entertainment business encompassing film, television, theme parks, broadcast, character licensing, and merchandising (Forbes, 2019). In 1937, Walt Disney Animation Studios produced the first feature-length animated film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and the studio went on to release over 55 canon films. In 2006, Disney acquired Pixar Animation Studios, makers of the Toy Story and Cars franchises. Most pertinent to this study is the Disney Princess line, a $5.5 billion branding initiative between Disney's film and merchandising divisions that showcases its flagship heroines aimed at young girls (Suddath, 2015). The popularity and global reach of Disney and its subsidiary Pixar has made it a target of intense feminist scrutiny (Coyne, Linder, Rasmussen, Nelson, & Birkbeck, 2016; England et al., 2011; Sharmin; Sattar, 2018).

With respect to female representation, Disney is outperforming its competitors in the youth media market. This present study finds that 17 of 50 of Disney and Pixar films produced between 1989 and 2018 featured a lead female character. In comparison, their competitor DreamWorks Animation produced 35 animated features, of which only four featured a female lead character. Other competitors Sony Pictures Animation and Illumination released 17 and eight animated theatrical films, respectively, and none featured a main female character. Overall, female representation in youth animation has room to improve, given that only 21 of 110 films produced by the top animation studios in the last 30 years featured a female lead or colead.

To investigate how feminism is marketed in youth media, we analyzed animated films from Walt Disney Animation and from Disney's subsidiary Pixar that featured a female lead or colead and

Table 1. Disney and Pixar animated theatrical features with a female lead (1989—2018)

Film title	Female leads or coleads	Original theatrical release date	Animation studio	Synopsis
The Little Mermaid	Ariel	November 17, 1989	Walt Disney Animation	A mermaid princess makes a Faustian bargain with an unscrupulous sea-witch in order to meet a human prince on land.
Beauty and the Beast	Belle	November 22, 1991	Walt Disney Animation	A young woman whose father has been imprisoned by a terrifying beast offers herself in his place, unaware that her captor is actually a prince who was physically altered by a magic spell.
Aladdin	Jasmine	November 25, 1992	Walt Disney Animation	When a street urchin vies for the love of a beautiful princess, he uses a genie's magic power to pass himself off as a prince in order to marry her.
Pocahontas	Pocahontas	June 23, 1995	Walt Disney Animation	An English soldier and the daughter of an Algonquin chief share a romance when English colonists invade 17th-century Virginia.
Mulan	Mulan	June 19, 1998	Walt Disney Animation	To save her father from death in the army, a young maiden secretly goes in his place and becomes one of China's greatest heroines in the process.
Lilo and Stitch	Lilo	June 21, 2002	Walt Disney Animation	A Hawaiian girl adopts an unusual pet, who turns out to be a notorious extraterrestrial fugitive.
Home on the Range	Maggie, Grace, and Mrs. Calloway	April 2, 2004	Walt Disney Animation	To save their farm, the resident animals go bounty hunting for a notorious outlaw.
The Princess and the Frog	Tiana	December 11, 2009	Walt Disney Animation	A waitress, desperate to fulfill her dreams as a restaurant owner, is set on a journey to turn a frog prince back into a human being, but she has to face the same problem after she kisses him.
Tangled	Rapunzel	November 24, 2010	Walt Disney Animation	The magically long-haired Rapunzel has spent her entire life in a tower, but now that a runaway thief has stumbled upon her, she is about to discover the world for the first time—and who she really is.
Brave	Merida	June 22, 2012	Pixar Animation	Determined to make her own path in life, Princess Merida defies a custom that brings chaos to her kingdom. Granted one wish, Merida must rely on her bravery and her archery skills to undo a beastly curse.
Frozen	Elsa and Anna	November 27, 2013	Walt Disney Animation	When the newly crowned Queen Elsa accidentally uses her power to curse her home with an infinite winter, her sister Anna teams up with a mountain man, his playful reindeer, and a snowman to change the climate.
Inside Out	Riley and Joy	June 19, 2015	Pixar Animation	After young Riley is uprooted from her Midwestern life and moved to San Francisco, her emotions conflict over how best to navigate a new city, house, and school.
Zootopia	Judy Hopps	March 4, 2016	Walt Disney Animation	In a city of anthropomorphic animals, a rookie cop bunny and a cynical con-artist fox must work together to uncover a conspiracy.
Finding Dory	Dory	June 17, 2016	Pixar Animation	The friendly but forgetful blue tang fish Dory begins a search for her long-lost parents, and everyone learns a few things about the real meaning of family along the way.

Table 1 (*continued*)

Film title	Female leads or coleads	Original theatrical release date	Animation studio	Synopsis
Moana	Moana	November 23, 2016	Walt Disney Animation	In ancient Polynesia, when a terrible curse incurred by the demigod Maui reaches Moana's island, she answers the ocean's call to seek out the demigod to set things right.
Cars 3	Cruz Ramirez	June 16, 2017	Pixar Animation	Lightning McQueen sets out to prove to a new generation of racers that he's still the best race car in the world.
Ralph Breaks the Internet	Vanellope	November 21, 2018	Walt Disney Animation	Six years after the events of *Wreck-It-Ralph*, Ralph and Vanellope, now friends, discover a Wi-Fi router in their arcade, leading them into a new adventure.

were produced between 1989 and 2018. We included all human and nonhuman films and excluded ensemble casts (Table 1).

We adopted Chen and Shih's (2019) framework for analyzing cinematic data. We began by independently screening all 17 Disney and Pixar films. Based on the screenings, we each developed case summaries for each film, which provided a story synopsis, character profiles, detailed notes on gender representations, key scene descriptions and quotes relevant to gender representations, song lyric analysis, and structural analysis of the films. Then, we compiled a master case summary for each film that retained points of convergence from the three individual case summaries and ensured that major themes relevant to gender were not missed.

Next, we subjected master summaries to the iterative coding stages of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In the open coding stage, we fragmented the text into open codes. In the axial coding stage, we pooled similar open codes into higher order categories. Finally, in selective coding, we compared cases to one another using codes identified in the open and axial coding stages. Specifically, we expanded on the relationships between core categories as they applied across cases, and then we engaged in cross referencing to enhance credibility of the analysis.

4. Feminist messaging in Disney and Pixar animation

Between 1989 and 2018, Disney produced 50 animated theatrical features: 30 from Walt Disney Animation Studios and 20 from Pixar Animation Studios. Seventeen of these 50 films feature a female lead or colead character. Disney's success seems to be linked to the production of female-led films. During its so-called Renaissance period (1989—1999), Disney produced 14 animated theatrical features that were critically lauded for their progressive portrayals of young women and increasing attention to cultural diversity. During Disney's slump (2000—2009), it produced only three films that featured a female lead, but the company turned again to female protagonists in its more recent revival (2010—present): nine of 18 films in this period had a female lead or colead. The 17 female-led films shared the umbrella theme of "breaking traditional gender boundaries." This umbrella theme was expressed in the five different ways that comprise this study's typology (Table 2). Understanding the different iterations of Disney's core messages on feminism and gender will suggest strategies for how managers and media companies can understand how their own works interact with gender schemata and how they can develop more equitable frameworks.

4.1. Transcending patriarchal expectations

Female rebellion against rigid patriarchal structures is rich fuel that powers the engine of female-led Disney narratives. Twelve of the 17 films in the sample feature a story in which the heroine needs to break through patriarchal expectations to attain self-actualization. Disney strongly conveys that young women should persist and move beyond those expectations. The theme is crystallized in movies set in premodern societies, such as *Moana*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Brave*, where male power and patriarchal expectations have unrivaled authority (Table 2).

Table 2. Feminist themes in Disney-Pixar youth media

Feminist theme	Theme description	Examples	Supporting quotes and illustrations
Transcending patriarchal expectations	A heroine rebels and breaks through patriarchal expectations, and through hard work and persistence she achieves self-actualization.	*Moana*, *Princess and the Frog*, *Zootopia*, *Cars 3*, *Brave*, *Frozen*, *The Little Mermaid*	"I wish I can be the perfect daughter, but I come back to the water no matter how hard I try … the voice inside sings a different song." (*Moana*) "No right, no wrong, no rules for me, I'm free … That perfect girl is gone." (Elsa from *Frozen*) "I remember Daddy told me fairy tales can come true. You gotta make 'em happen, it all depends on you. So I work real hard each and every day." (Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog*)
Rejecting domestication	Emancipation from the role of the domesticated woman.	*Tangled*, *Moana*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*	Ariel disobeys her father's orders to avoid contact with the human world: "As long as you live under my ocean, you'll obey *my rules* … I am never, *never* to hear of you going to the surface again. Is that clear?" (*The Little Mermaid*) "Try to understand, I've never done a thing on my own … I've never even been outside the palace walls." (Jasmine from *Aladdin*)
Appropriating masculine attributes and roles	Heroines adopt traits that are deemed masculine by wider society, and this is frowned upon.	*The Little Mermaid*, *Brave*, *Mulan*, *The Princess and the Frog*	Ariel is an adventurous young woman who likes exploring and collecting trinkets from the human world. In the film's reality, both activities are considered uncharacteristic of a young woman. (*The Little Mermaid*) Judy Hopps has to work above and beyond to overcome her demure stature and to prove to her male compatriots that she is worthy of being a police officer. (*Zootopia*)
Reframing the meaning of true love	Heroines make their own romantic choices and reframe the meaning of "true love" beyond romantic pairings.	*Brave*, *Frozen*, *Moana*, *Ralph Breaks the Internet*	In *Brave*, the core relationship is between Merida and her mother. Vanellope and Ralph share a deep but platonic friendship. (*Ralph Breaks the Internet*)

For instance, the eponymous heroine of *Moana* dreams of sailing on the open ocean but consigns herself to the role set out for her by her father, Chief Tui, which is to assume his seat as the future chief of her people. When dangers threaten their secluded island kingdom, Moana faces an internal struggle: whether to break the rule established by her father—to never go beyond the reef—or to venture beyond it to seek salvation. Early in the film, Moana's proposal to venture beyond the reef is immediately shut down by her father. Chief Tui claims that her decision will endanger her people and encourages her to take the role expected of her. Meanwhile, Moana's grandmother encourages the young heroine

to pursue her own identity: "That voice inside is who you are."

The theme of disrupting patriarchal expectations is also displayed in films set in contemporary settings, such as *Zootopia* and *Cars 3*. In *Zootopia*, Judy Hopps is a young female rabbit who is determined to prove that a petite female has what it takes to graduate a police academy full of large male carnivores (a code for male power). In an early sequence, Judy's family tries to dissuade her. Her father suggests that she settle and become a carrot farmer like all her predecessors. Similarly, in *Cars 3*, Cruz Ramirez is a racing coach who internalized her family and coworkers' assertions that she is "not a racer" and thus suppressed her racing ambitions. During the climactic final race, the male owner of her racing team dismisses her dream: "just go do your job … take off that spoiler and those racing tires; you look ridiculous. You are a trainer, remember, not a racer." By the film's end, Lightning McQueen, the longstanding hero of the *Cars* films, steps aside to help Cruz actuate her dream of racing in the final race.

Disney heroines transcend patriarchal expectations through hard work and persistence. In past films, Disney heroines had to rely on a miracle, often embodied by wishing on a star (e.g., *Cinderella*) or in a chance meeting with a prince (e.g., *Sleeping Beauty*), to actuate their dreams. Current-epoch Disney heroines do not rely on wishes upon stars but actuate their dreams through working hard. The theme of working hard to achieve one's dreams is embodied in the lyrics of *The Princess and the Frog*'s flagship song, "Almost There," in which Tiana sings about breaking through unjust systems and gender barriers to achieve her dream of opening her own restaurant. The theme of working hard is carried through in other films in the Disney library, such as *Zootopia* and *Cars 3* (Table 2).

To sum up, many Disney and Pixar films portray heroines who have ambitions and identity goals that are inhibited by patriarchal figures and norms (Table 2). These films cleverly depict how even benevolent figures and well-meaning expectations (as in *Moana* and *The Little Mermaid*) are restrictive, suppressive, and even harmful to the heroine. Disney and Pixar films encourage young female consumers to push through patriarchal expectations to achieve their own agency. More broadly, the theme of pushing beyond patriarchal expectations aligns with feminist discourses that bring attention to restrictive gender categories and systemic social injustice.

4.2. Rejecting domestication

Disney heroines of the current epoch reject the role of the domesticated woman. Lead characters in 11 of the 17 films exemplify this theme. The need to emancipate themselves from their domestication is immediately introduced in the opening acts of many Disney and Pixar films. For instance, *Tangled*'s opening song, "When Will My Life Begin?," sees Rapunzel yearning to break free from her mundane, domesticated life. The scene plays out with Rapunzel completing a litany of daily chores before ending on a reflective note as she questions her domestication: "[I'll] just wonder, when will my life begin?"

The framing of domesticity as mundane and repetitive also occurs in other films, such as *Beauty and the Beast*. In the movie's opening sequence, Belle sings about her frustrations with provincial life and its brute repetition: "Every morning just the same/since the morning that we came/to this poor provincial town." The lyrical bridges sung by local villagers that intercut Belle's verses simultaneously espouse the values that the locals hold for women and chastise Belle as being strange for not following traditional feminine mores. Later in the film, Gaston, a grandstanding hunter who seeks to court Belle, pitches her his picture of an ideal life: "A rustic hunting lodge, my latest kill roasting on the fire, and my little wife massaging my feet while the little ones play on the floor with the dogs. We'll have six or seven." Belle vehemently rejects Gaston's portrait of a domesticated wife. Instead, Belle is drawn to intellectual pursuits and to grand adventure akin to the stories in the books she loves to read.

An extension of the "reject domestication" theme is the heroine's desire to journey into the outside world, which the heroine's family frames as a dangerous place. In nine of the 17 current-epoch Disney and Pixar films, the outside world is a double threat, containing not only beastly perils but also new values that subvert the patriarchal hegemony that constricts the films' heroines. For instance, the opening act of *Tangled* sees Rapunzel express her desire to leave the tower in which she spent her entire life to see the mysterious floating lights outside her window. Mother Gothel—Rapunzel's false mother and captor—discourages Rapunzel from leaving: "The outside world is a dangerous place with horrible, selfish people. You must stay here, where it is safe."

The restriction from leaving the home is repeated in other Disney films (Table 2). For instance, Chief Tui, Moana's father, declares the

world beyond the reef as a threat to his island kingdom, and he forbids anyone, especially Moana, from leaving the island for their own safety. Similarly, in both *The Little Mermaid* and *Aladdin*, the father figures strictly forbid Ariel and Jasmine, respectively, to explore the realms beyond their kingdoms. Yet it is only in leaving the home that the heroines begin their journeys of self-actualization.

Clearly Disney and Pixar, through their animated narratives, are encouraging young women to pursue experiences outside of the domestic realm. Disney has long portrayed the domesticated woman as a prisoner (e.g., Cinderella). But in its contemporary offerings, the media giant is pushing the message further and positioning the rejection of expected domesticity as the tipping point of the heroines' transformative journeys.

4.3. Appropriating masculine attributes and roles

To break traditional gender roles, some Disney heroines assume masculine attributes or masculine identities. Thirteen of the 17 current-epoch films have female lead characters that display characteristics that are traditionally categorized as masculine. Some heroines adopt such masculine attributes outright. For example, Merida, from *Brave*, is impetuous, is a skilled archer, and owns a weapon. Her mother subscribes to traditional gender roles and is dismayed by Merida's behavior. She says, "A princess should not have weapons, in my opinion." Meanwhile, other heroines' adoption of masculine attributes is subtler. Belle is physically a prototypical feminine princess but enjoys reading and "adventure in the great wide," which within the reality of the film are considered masculine pursuits. Others are industrious go-getters who adopt a strong work ethic—a laudable characteristic usually attributed to ambitious males. Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog* works double shifts to save enough money to open her own restaurant. Table 2 displays more examples of the appropriation of traditional masculine attributes.

An interesting case is Mulan, who assumes a male identity to take the place of her ailing father in the Chinese military. Mulan is headstrong and not the "quiet and demure … graceful, polite, delicate, refined, poised … punctual" woman that her family and male-dominated Chinese society want her to be. In the song "Reflection," Mulan ruminates on the tension between traditional feminine expectations and her true self.

Through their films, Disney and Pixar encourage young female consumers to adopt identities and attributes that do not align with traditional gender roles. Within the films in the sample, the heroines' adoption of masculine attributes is initially frowned upon by their families and societies. By the ends of the films, the naysayers (and audience) realize that the heroines' chosen (versus assigned) identities are key to the completion of their journeys. In other words, the films reward their heroines for realizing their individual potential rather than for defaulting to prescribed categories.

4.4. Reframing the meaning of true love

Disney and Pixar represent gender prominently in how they frame "true love." In older Disney princess films like *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*, the heroines eagerly await their white knights to rescue them from their situations. These early princesses are chosen. The idea of true love has since shifted in several ways. First, the female protagonists are now often the choosers. For example, Merida (*Brave*), Jasmine (*Aladdin*), and Pocahontas reject the men that are chosen for them and make their own romantic choices.

Second, many Disney and Pixar films expand the definition of true love beyond romantic princess-prince pairings to encompass other kinds of loving relationships, such as sisterhood (e.g., *Frozen*), mother-daughter relationships (e.g., *Brave*), and friendships (e.g., *Ralph Breaks the Internet*) (Table 2). For instance, in *Frozen*, Elsa accidentally freezes her sister, Anna, and the movie reveals that only "an act of true love" can undo the damage. The script plays on the audience's expectation that the act of true love will come from a male romantic interest. The film's concluding scenes reveal that, in fact, sisterly love can undo the damage. Olaf the snowman explains the meaning of love in the film: "Love is putting someone else's needs before yours." Finally, some films cast aside romantic interests altogether (e.g., *Moana*, *Finding Dory*, and *Inside Out*).

Disney's efforts to highlight different types of loving relationships in their animated media provide young consumers a lens through which to consider loving relationships beyond the princess-prince dyad. More broadly, such messages reinforce the company's inclusive branding.

4.5. Summary of findings

The film analysis reveals an umbrella theme that underlies Disney and Pixar youth animation: Women can achieve dreams and self-discovery

through persistence—by pushing gender boundaries, abandoning restrictive expectations (especially as to a woman's "place"), and working hard. The umbrella theme represents a "soft feminism" that one might expect from a seemingly risk-averse, multibillion-dollar company like Disney. But compared to their competitors, Disney and Pixar stand at the vanguard with respect to female representation in youth-directed media.

5. Strategic implications

Businesses now operate in an era of heightened feminist awareness, in which marketers and media producers must continually examine gender representation in their marketing communications and media, and especially in those directed at young female consumers. The call to bring gender issues to the forefront of marketing might sound like an obvious strategic recommendation, but many businesses still do not do it (Smith et al., 2019). For instance, Disney's competitors in the animation space (e.g., DreamWorks and Sony Animation) still publish media libraries in which females are underrepresented. But even companies that do address gender and feminist discourses need to integrate them in organic, meaningful ways that do not alienate mainstream consumers. Based on this study's thematic findings (Table 2), the paragraphs below provide a blueprint that businesses can use in crafting gender narratives in youth media.

Businesses can promote positive messages that encourage people to transcend the gender norms that characterize our society. In their animated films, Disney and Pixar encourage young female consumers to push through patriarchal and domestic expectations to achieve their own agency. Other businesses can develop marketing communications and media that promote the same message. Moreover, marketers and media producers can use the theme of rejecting domestication to embolden young girls to take risks and to explore interests that are "not for girls," no matter how far from home that pursuit may take them. For instance, for the 2020 Super Bowl, Microsoft developed a commercial featuring Katie Sowers, the first female coach in the male-dominated National Football League, which documented her journey in breaking down barriers for women in the NFL.

Additionally, marketers and media producers can craft products, services, and brands that convey to young consumers that they can overcome discriminatory systems and challenges through hard work. Marketers have pervasively used the "hard work" theme in marketing communications that target male consumers (Holt & Thompson, 2004), but there has been comparatively limited deployment of this strategy to appeal to female consumers. In Disney films, this theme is conveyed through characters like Tiana (*The Princess and the Frog*) and Judy Hopps (*Zootopia*), who break through unequal systems and gender barriers and who achieve their career goals through persistence. They do not need to rely on a miracle or a man to make their dreams come true.

While marketers often target either men or women with their products, services, and brands, they could try to overcome traditional gender coding. They could develop ad concepts or stories in which male protagonists take on more feminine coded attributes, just as female protagonists take on more male coded attributes to reinforce that these traits are properties of individuals rather than being inherently and distinctly male or female. For example, Dove's Men+Care marketing campaign teaches men that they too can enjoy a relaxing, sensuous shower and take care of their skin, activities that are traditionally coded as feminine. Deodorant maker Secret's Ladies' Room #StressTest commercial, which depicts a transgender woman in the restroom as other women enter, is another example. The viewer is encouraged both to empathize with the woman's familiar fear of exclusion and, in line with fourth-wave feminism, to reject restrictive gender categories that would seek to exclude her.

Finally, businesses can expand the types of loving relationships that are portrayed in their marketing communications and media in order to grow their brands and better speak to the wide variety of experiences embodied by young consumers. Many contemporary female-targeted animations (such as *Mia and Me)* include gender stereotypes, especially in regard to heterosexual romance and jealousy. But the media landscape is now portraying more mixed ensembles, longer character arcs, and LGBTQ+ representation, as with *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* and *Steven Universe*. Likewise, Disney is using its vast media umbrella to more prominently feature platonic friendships (e.g., *Moana*, *Ralph Breaks the Internet*), parental love (e.g., *Brave*), and even LGBTQ+ relationships. While integrating LGBTQ+ characters and relationships into youth media might seem controversial, Disney sits at the vanguard with its production of *Andi Mack*, a top-rated cable show for children between the ages of 6 and 14. The show features the character Cyrus

Goodman, who is considered the first openly gay main character in children's television.

6. Other strategic recommendations

More broadly, businesses should consider other recommendations pertinent to gender representation beyond the thematic blueprint outlined above. First, marketers and media producers should include more top-billing female leads and be mindful of the gender balance in their media. This means not only increasing the quantity of female characters in media but also increasing their speaking time, considering the content of what they say, and enhancing their character roles. Overall, media offerings remain male-centric, but #MeToo-era pressures bode well for media producers that take the initiative on female inclusion (Smith et al., 2019).

Additionally, marketers and media producers should include more diversity with respect to cultures and body types in their female representations. Businesses can foster an environment in which consumers are more accustomed to seeing non-hegemonic cultures and body types, for which unique challenges and triumphs take form. Giving young consumers, including underprivileged youth, opportunities to see heroes of different cultural origins and body types is important to their identity, self-esteem, and well-being (Hunt, Ramon, & Tran, 2019) and beneficial to the larger population (Kidd, 2016).

Marketers and media producers can also renovate existing brands and properties. Disney has used live-action remakes of existing properties to reimagine their female protagonists. For example, 2019's *Aladdin* gave Jasmine much more screen prominence, agency, and leadership qualities compared to the animated film from 1992. Such renovations allow Disney to "flip the script" on old properties. Disney Junior's *The Rocketeer* is a new animated series that reimagines the original comic book and 1991 film from the lens of Kit Secord, a young girl who picks up the mantle of the titular hero, formerly occupied by an adult male (Brzeski, 2019).

Alternately, businesses can review their media portfolios and revise problematic gender content in aged media. For instance, Disney's 2019 Blu-ray rerelease of *Toy Story 2* removed a "casting couch" scene from its end-credit reel. In the scene, Stinky Pete, a lascivious, elderly man, tells the Barbie twins that he can get them a part in the next *Toy Story* sequel as he strokes one of their hands. Disney realized that Pete's predatory promises to the Barbies was akin to sexual harassment. Media companies have also posted content warnings for media that cannot easily be altered. Careful cultivation and trimming of existing media provide a way for media producers to act responsibly with their gendered representations.

7. Concluding remarks

By focusing on feminist representations in youth media, this research demonstrates how media producers and marketers can respond to the growing expectations of #MeToo-era customers. This study shows how Disney now uses a more diversified definition of a female lead, reinforced by a growing variety of motivations, roles, relations, and ideologies. The heterogeneous representations allow consumers from diverse backgrounds to include Disney characters in their identity projects. Specifically, these representations can help young female consumers challenge the dominant social order and exert their own agency. By breaking gender boundaries, these characters transcend the expectations and limitations enforced by the patriarchy. A key to Disney's success is the continued portrayal of women's struggles and women's ability to overcome them. This soft feminism offers other media producers and marketers a solution for producing socially responsible, feminist media that constantly questions gender norms in a way that will mitigate the alienation of mainstream consumers.

References

Bem, S. L. (1983). Gender schema theory and its implications for child development: Raising gender-aschematic children in a gender-schematic society. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 8*(4), 598—616.

Bristor, J. M., & Fischer, E. (1993). Feminist thought: Implications for consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research, 19*(4), 518—536.

Brzeski, P. (2019, October 3). Geena Davis unveils partnership with Disney to "spellcheck" scripts for gender bias. *Hollywood Reporter*. Available at https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/geena-davis-unveils-partnership-disney-spellcheck-scripts-gender-bias-1245347

Chen, S., & Shih, E. (2019). City branding through cinema: Creating Hong Kong's postcolonial identity. *Journal of Brand Management, 26*(5), 505—521.

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Coyne, S., Linder, J., Rasmussen, E., Nelson, E., & Birkbeck, V. (2016). Pretty as a princess: Longitudinal effects of engagement with Disney princesses on gender stereotypes, body esteem, and prosocial behavior in children. *Child Development, 87*(6), 1909—1925.

Ebrahim, H. (2014). Are the "boys" at Pixar afraid of little girls? *Journal of Film and Video, 66*(3), 43—56.

England, D., Descartes, L., & Collier-Meek, M. (2011). Gender role portrayal and the Disney princesses. *Sex Roles, 64*(7/8), 555—567.

Forbes. (2019, May 15). The 100 largest companies in the world by market value in 2019 [Graph]. *Statista*. Available at https://www.statista.com/statistics/263264/top-companies-in-the-world-by-market-value/

Gerbner, G. (1999). The stories we tell. *Peace Review, 11*(1), 9—15.

Hains, R. (2009). Power feminism, mediated: Girl power and the commercial politics of change. *Women's Studies in Communication, 32*(1), 89—113.

Hearn, J., & Hein, W. (2015). Reframing gender and feminist knowledge construction in marketing and consumer research: Missing feminisms and the case of men and masculinities. *Journal of Marketing Management, 31*(15/16), 1626—1651.

Holt, D. B., & Thompson, C. J. (2004). Man-of-action heroes: The pursuit of heroic masculinity in everyday consumption. *Journal of Consumer Research, 31*(2), 425—440.

Hunt, D., Ramon, A., & Tran, M. (2019). Hollywood diversity report 2019: Old story, new beginning. *UCLA*. Available at https://socialsciences.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/UCLA-Hollywood-Diversity-Report-2019-2-21-2019.pdf

Kidd, M. A. (2016). Archetypes, stereotypes, and media representation in a multi-cultural society. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences, 236*, 25—28.

Maclaran, P. (2015). Feminism's fourth wave: A research agenda for marketing and consumer research. *Journal of Marketing Management, 31*(15/16), 1732—1738.

Martin, D. M., Schouten, J. W., & McAlexander, J. H. (2006). Claiming the throttle: Multiple femininities in a hypermasculine subculture. *Consumption, Markets and Culture, 9*(3), 171—205.

Murray, J. B., Brokalaki, Z., Bhogal-Nair, A., Cermin, A., Chelekis, J., Cocker, H., et al. (2019). Toward a processual theory of transformation. *Journal of Business Research, 100*, 319—326.

Scott, N. (2019). *Speechless (full) [song]. On Aladdin (original motion picture soundtrack)*. Walt Disney Records.

Sharmin, T., & Sattar, J. (2018). Gender politics in the projection of Disney villains. *Journal of Literature and Art Studies, 8*(1), 53—57.

Smith, S., Choueiti, M., & Pieper, K. (2016). Inclusion or invisibility. *USC Annenberg*. Available at https://annenberg.usc.edu/sites/default/files/2017/04/07/MDSCI_CARD_Report_FINAL_Exec_Summary.pdf

Smith, S., Choueiti, M., Pieper, K., Yao, K., Case, A., & Choi, A. (2019). Inequality in 1,200 popular films examining portrayals of gender, race/ethnicity, LGBTQ, & disability from 2007 to 2018. *USC Annenberg*. Available at http://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/aii-inequality-report-2019-09-03.pdf

Suddath, C. (2015, December 17). The $500 million battle over Disney's princesses. *Bloomberg Businessweek*. Available at https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2015-disney-princess-hasbro

Thompson, C., & Üstüner, T. (2015). Women skating on the edge: Marketplace performances as ideological edgework. *Journal of Consumer Research, 42*(2), 235—265.