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WOMEN

The Effects of Disney Films on Attitudes Towards Women

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Abstract

This study was designed to measure the effects of Disney movies on viewers' attitudes toward women's abilities in leadership positions. Participants ($N=29$, 62% female) were randomly assigned to two video conditions. The participants viewed three short Disney video clips depicting women as either heroines or damsels. After viewing the film clips they were asked to complete the Gender Authority Measure Questionnaire (Rudman 1980). Men who were in the damsel video condition had higher GAM scores than men in the heroine video condition. This was displayed through a marginal simple main effect for condition on men's scores, though it was not significant ($p=.076$). While female participants showed no difference across video conditions, the results of the male participants did support our hypothesis regarding media effects on gender, which implies that men's attitudes toward women may be less securely established and more susceptible to media influences.

The Effects of Disney Films on Attitudes Towards Women

Media is a prominent influence in shaping stereotypes and attitudes in today's society. The depictions of women can influence the viewer to have either positive or negative attitudes toward women's abilities. For example media images of women can either reinforce common stereotypes or work to form new perceptions. Previous research has shown that the effect media has on societal attitudes can be significant. One specific media source that has been the subject of much research and debate is Disney. Disney is a media source that is very prominent, readily available, and influential in our society. Past studies focused on media in general and its effect on attitudes, prejudices toward women in leadership roles, Disney's influence on various stereotypes, as well as the connection between gender stereotypes and Disney movies.

Geis, Brown, and Walstedt (1980) found that commercials had a significant effect on reinforcing societal attitudes toward women. In this study, participants viewed traditional stereotyped gender commercials, reversed role commercials which showed no difference in achievement for males and females, or they named their favorite television programs. They then were asked to write an essay about their lives in ten years. The women who viewed the traditional stereotyped commercials highlighted homemaking themes and deemphasized achievement as compared to the men and women who viewed the reversed role commercials. The women who viewed the traditional commercials were clearly affected by these commercials. This study supports our hypothesis that media does effect attitudes towards women.

Media effects on attitudes were a fundamental starting place for our research, which led us to review multiple studies regarding prejudices toward women in

leadership roles. These studies also took into account some different issues that cause these attitudes and the implications that stereotypes have on women who seek to obtain leadership positions. Eagly, Karau, and Makhijani (1995) conducted a study on women and leadership. They focused on gender and the effectiveness of leaders and found that overall men were more effective than women in masculine roles while women were more effective in less masculine roles than men. In another article by Eagly and Karau (2002) they studied prejudice toward female leaders. These studies found that attitudes toward female leaders are less positive than attitudes toward male leaders and that this makes it more difficult for women to become leaders.

A number of studies have directly examined the effects of Disney's animated films on attitudes. Studies focused on Disney's influence on stereotypes including age, gender, relationships, smoking, and race. Researchers that studied these ideas include Ryan and Hoerrner (2004) who studied smoking and drinking throughout Disney films, and Tanner, Haddock, and Zimmerman (2003) who focused on how couples and families are portrayed in Disney films. Two of the most helpful references for our study focused on the specific connection between gender stereotypes and Disney movies. Tobin, Haddock, and Zimmerman (2003) studied how gender and stereotypes were portrayed in twenty-six animated Disney films. This study found four themes defining womanhood in these films. These themes include: a woman's appearance is valued more than her intellect, women are helpless and in need of protection, women are domestic and likely to marry, and overweight women are ugly, unpleasant, and unmarried. These themes offer credibility to our central research regarding Disney as a prominent and influential media source in guiding societal perceptions of women as weak objects. Though Tobin studies patterns across many films, Dundes (2001) studied Pocahontas specifically. This is a recent film with a strong

female character. Pocahontas is a representation of a modern woman not fulfilling the typical female stereotype shown in so many other Disney films. She is independent and strong and always puts her tribe's needs ahead of her own. This film reverts the heroine back to fulfilling gender stereotypes. Even though she is a strong female leading character, gender stereotypes are still enforced regarding women sacrificing themselves for the ones they love. With this reoccurring theme of women sacrificing their own individuality for the good of the ones they love women are portrayed as less capable of being strong leaders. This common Disney theme reinforces gender stereotypes regarding women as less capable leaders. All of the previous research led us to ask, do portrayals of women in Disney movies affect viewer's attitudes and perceptions towards women?

Through the research presented in our literature review the affects of media, specifically Disney, has been significantly influential on societal stereotypes. When relating this to perceptions of women in leadership positions we expect that participants who view video clips portraying women as damsels in distress will view women as less capable of being strong leaders than participants who view women as heroines. To test this hypothesis, 29 participants were randomly assigned to either watch the damsel video clips or the heroine video clips, after which they completed a questionnaire measuring attitudes in regard to gender authority.

Methods

Participants

Our study had 29 participants, 11 males and 18 females. We started with a total of 31 participants but 2 male participants were excluded because they gave the same

response to all items on the GAM. The participants' average age was 20, with the youngest being 18 and the oldest being 22. Their ethnicities were primarily Caucasian, 89%, with 7% Asian and 4% multi racial. All participants were students of Hanover College. The participants were selected from the psychology subject pool as well as from acquaintances of the researchers, 41% were from the subject pool and 59% were acquaintances.

Materials

In our study we used six video clips taken from five Disney Animated Films. The clips were 3 minutes long, totaling to a 9 minute video sequence for each condition. The Damsels condition included: Sleeping Beauty, Little Mermaid, and Aladdin. An example of the plot is characterized by a princess is being attack by an evil sea witch. Her true love runs a ship into the witch, killing her, and saving the princess. The Heroines condition included: Little Mermaid, Pocahontas, and Mulan. An example of the plot is characterized by an Indian princess who saves her true love, a white male, from being killed by her father. These films were viewed on a large projector screen in a Hanover College classroom. A questionnaire was also used to conduct this study. We used the Gender and Authority Measure questionnaire that is made up of fifteen questions (Rudman & Kilianski, 2000). The participants responded to the questionnaire by rating their attitudes toward each statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire is designed to measure the preference of male versus female authorities. The questionnaire asks questions such as, "If I were in serious legal trouble, I would prefer a male to a female lawyer"; "The people I look up to most are women" (reversed); and "For most college courses, I prefer a male professor to a

female professor". The complete questionnaire can be found in the Appendix. This questionnaire has high correlation between the items on the questionnaire ($\alpha=.82$).

Procedure

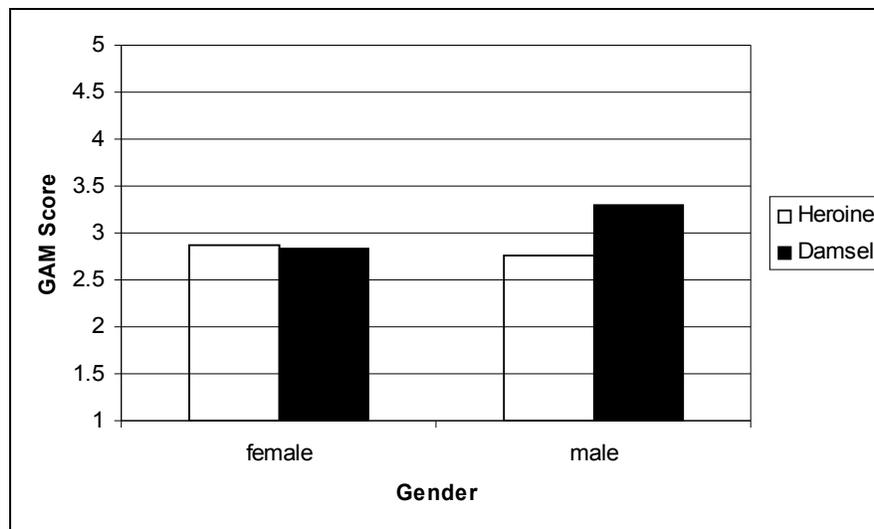
The participants in this study were told that the study was designed to examine the effects of various Disney movies on attitudes. All participants signed an informed consent form. We did not disclose certain information because we did not want to reveal that we were measuring attitudes toward women's abilities in leadership positions. Participants were informed that all information about their identity would be kept anonymous and would not be associated with the responses given. For this study participants were randomly assigned into the different video conditions by signing up for a time that had been pre-determined, without their knowledge, to be in the damsel or heroine condition. Except for the independent variable of video condition the participants were treated the same in both conditions so that no expectancy effects were present. Once the participants had watched the video clip and answered the questionnaire, they were given a debriefing form which informed the participants not only where they could view the final results of the study but also of our complete hypothesis and the results that we were looking for. Once handed the debriefing form the participants were thanked for their participation in the study and dismissed.

Results

Participants' attitudes towards women in leadership positions were measured using the 15-item Gender Authority Measure questionnaire. This questionnaire has a reliability of $\alpha=.82$. This alpha indicates that all items on the GAM questionnaire were highly related to each other.

A two-way ANOVA conducted between gender and video clip type on GAM scores indicate that there was not a significant main effect of video clip type on GAM scores, $F(1,25)=1.54$, $p=.226$. This test also indicates that there is no significant main effect of gender on GAM scores, $F(1,25)=.866$, $p=.361$. A significant interaction between the video clip type and gender on GAM scores was also not found, $F(1,25)=2.145$, $p=.155$.

Figure 1. Effects of gender and video clip type on Gender Authority Measure scores.



As shown in Figure 1., there appears to be a slight interaction between gender and video clip type, though the interaction is not significant. For males, the damsel video clips led to higher Gender Authority Measure survey scores than the heroine clips. The different clips appear to have had no effect on females' scores.

There was a marginal simple main effect of video clip type for males on GAM scores $F(1,25)=2.995$, $p=.096$. Men who viewed the damsel video clip sequence scored marginally higher on the GAM questionnaire than men who viewed the heroine video

clip sequence. There was not a significant difference between women's GAM scores after viewing the different video clip sequences $F(1,25)=.032, p=.859$.

Discussion

Our hypothesis stated that participants who viewed the Damsel in distress video clips would score higher on the Gender Authority Measure survey, indicating more negative attitudes toward women in authority, than those participants who viewed the Heroine video clips. This hypothesis was not supported by our data which indicated that, across genders, there is no effect of the different video portrayals of women on people's attitudes towards women in authority positions. One possible reason for this might be that the participants already have solidified attitudes toward women based on previous personal experience and teachings. Another reason may have been that participants did not want to reveal their sexist attitudes and answered the questionnaire in a way that was unbiased towards women.

The marginally-significant interaction between gender and the type of video clips viewed implies that males may have less cemented views towards women in leadership positions than their female counterparts. Women may want to view themselves as capable leaders which lead them to score women's abilities the same regardless of the video sequence they viewed. Men, not having this vested interest, were more susceptible to the video clips and changed their attitudes towards women.

Previous research in this area has studied the portrayal of women in commercials and the effect it has on individuals' views of women (Geis, Brown, & Walstedt, 1984). It was found that women, after viewing traditional gender roles, imagined that they would be a homemaker rather than a successful business woman.

The men and women who viewed reversed roles did not limit women in this respect. This study supports our hypothesis that media can affect society's attitudes towards women's achievement capabilities.

A limitation to our study was that the use of Disney movies may not have impacted adults as well as it might children. Adults may have had a greater response to movies with real people in them making the experiment more compatible with their age group. Another limitation to the study was the use of the Gender Authority Measure questionnaire. This survey was not focused enough on women's leadership and asked questions that were irrelevant to our hypothesis because the questions were focused on occupations rather than leadership measuring occupational gender stereotypes as well as leadership stereotypes. A fault with our procedure was that the transitions between the video clips were very abrupt and may have distracted the participants.

Future research should examine the effects of the portrayal of women in Disney films on children who had never viewed the video clips. This should yield more significant results because children are more impressionable and have fewer preconceived attitudes. If effects were found, they would emphasize the strength of media in shaping the society's views on women in leadership positions. Future research could also focus on the gender differences of how effective media can be because men were more affected by the different video conditions than women.

Conclusion

In summary, though we did not find any significant results, our study has potential for future application that may yield higher correlations between media and

attitudes towards women. We did find that men might be more effected than women on this issue perhaps due to women's strong opinions on their own leadership abilities.

Appendix

The Gender Authority Measure

1. If I were in serious legal trouble, I would prefer a male to a female lawyer.
2. The people I look up to most are women.^a
3. I would feel more comfortable if the pilot of an airplane I was traveling on were male.
4. I would rather be stopped by a woman police officer (vs. a man).^a
5. I probably prefer that the U.S. president is a man, versus a woman.
6. In general, I would rather work for a man than for a woman.
7. If I were having a serious operation. I would have more confidence in a male surgeon.
8. When it comes to politics. I would rather vote for women than for men.^a
9. For most college courses, I prefer a male professor to a female professor.
10. Personally, I would rather take orders from a man than from a woman.
11. In general, women make better leaders than men do.^a
12. In most areas, I would rather take advice from a man than from a woman.
13. In general, I would rather take orders from a man than from a woman.
14. If I were being sentenced in court, I would prefer that the judge be a woman.^a
15. In general, I feel more comfortable when a man (vs. a woman) is in charge.

a. items require reverse scoring

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