

# Studying Pretty Pink Garbage: Neo-feminism in Disney Princess™ Ephemera

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Disney Princess™ is the successful children's media franchise at the center of the "princess phenomenon."<sup>1</sup> Many of the brand's products are ephemeral; that is, they are designed to be used, thrown away, and replaced. A Disney Princess™ coloring book is only useful to a child for as long as it has uncolored pages; once she has finished coloring all the pages, she will move on to another coloring book or another activity.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, such products also lack long-lasting appeal: children's interests often change quickly and, as they grow, they move on to new brands and new products.<sup>3</sup> However, even though their individual use-values are momentary, the products, taken together, still have a huge presence in the world, so their disposability does not prevent them from spreading and reinforcing dominant gender constructions.

In this study, I examine two Disney Princess™ product categories: sticker books and calendars. I have chosen to focus on these for two reasons: 1) they can more obviously be read as examples of media than some other available products; and 2) scholars have not previously studied them extensively.<sup>4</sup> One could argue that almost any Disney Princess™ product could count as "media." Even a SpaghettiOs™ label featuring a princess has a design that advertises its product through a combination of words and images that contributes to the princess' significations. At the same time, though, it is an inexpensive can of food, not an item that children typically read, play with, or otherwise interact with for any extended period of time. By contrast, sticker books have play value, whether for a few hours on a single day or multiple play sessions spread over several weeks, and calendars hang on walls or sit on desks, continuously presenting themselves to viewers. In this way, these latter

products are not that different from the picture book that a child only reads once or the television show that she half-watches while she plays with her dolls. Dolls and costumes are perhaps the more popular examples of Disney Princess™ products—they are at least the ones on which commentators tend to focus.<sup>5</sup> However, it is worth exploring other product categories to gain a more holistic understanding of the brand's relationship with gender discourses. The sticker books' and calendars' heavy use of word-image combinations makes them considerably more similar to picture books and films than dolls or costumes would be,<sup>6</sup> and in this article I consider how these ephemeral products reflect and contribute to gender discourses. My focus is squarely on their constructions of gender, but not how audiences respond to them.<sup>7</sup>

Based on the specific content of the products I analyze, as noted above, I argue that Disney Princess™ is a neo-feminist franchise. Hilary Radner coins the term “neo-feminism” to designate a set of discourses that emerged from the same social conditions as second-wave feminism, but which are focused on self-fulfillment rather than social and political change, and which support a neo-liberal worldview. Neo-feminist media largely feature middle-class or upper-middle-class white women who often use consumer items (especially clothing) to construct their identities and demonstrate their consumer and sexual power.<sup>8</sup> Overall, the products I analyze reveal that, in line with Radner's theory of neo-feminist media, Disney Princess™ emphasizes the individual at the expense of the collective; concerns itself with women's and girls' self-fulfillment through clothing; and features white princesses much more prominently than princesses of color. In this way, the brand reinforces a dominant gender ideology that, while supportive of women's autonomy, is ultimately constricting and racist.

### Disney Princess™: A Brief Overview

Disney Princess™ is a Disney Consumer Products and Interactive Media (DCPI) brand that primarily targets preschool- and primary-school girls. The brand features twelve heroines from twelve animated feature films: Snow White (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, 1937), Cinderella (*Cinderella*, 1950), Aurora (*Sleeping Beauty*, 1959), Ariel (*The Little Mermaid*, 1989), Belle (*Beauty and the Beast*, 1991), Jasmine (*Aladdin*, 1992), Pocahontas (*Pocahontas*, 1995), Mulan (*Mulan*, 1998), Tiana (*The Princess and the Frog*, 2009), Rapunzel (*Tangled*, 2010), Merida (*Brave*, 2012), and Moana (*Moana*, 2016).<sup>9</sup> The brand originated in 2000, and it is the brainchild of then Disney Consumer Products chair-

man Andy Mooney. In 2000, Mooney attended a Disney on Ice show in Phoenix, Arizona at which he saw many little girls dressed up as princesses. Having witnessed the demand for princess-themed merchandise, the next morning, he talked to his team about creating a color palette and contacting potential licensees. Originally, Disney Princess™ united the first eight princesses in the above list, adding the others later. The brand was the first time that Disney had marketed its characters separately from a film's release and the first time that it grouped together characters from different films.<sup>10</sup>

Since Mooney first pitched the idea for the brand, Disney Princess™ has not only become exceedingly profitable, but has also had a significant impact on girl-centered media: it has started a phenomenon that goes well beyond Disney. Princesses are everywhere in girl-centered media. Mattel's Barbie is the star of a series of princess-themed films, the first of which was *Barbie in the Nutcracker* (2001). Nickelodeon's Dora the Explorer becomes a princess in a 2004 two-part episode, which spawned the doll Magic Hair Fairytale Dora. At the end of the third season of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (2013) one of the main characters, Twilight Sparkle, likewise becomes a princess.<sup>11</sup> In 2018, Netflix rebooted the 1980s cartoon series *She-Ra: Princess of Power* (1985) under the title *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (2018–20). As Disney Princess™ has been at the forefront of this “princess mania,” scholars ought to analyze this brand extensively in order to understand how it contributes to gendered discourses in girl-centered media.

While there are many studies of Disney's princess-themed films, there are significantly fewer that focus primarily or specifically on Disney Princess™ products, and the existing studies often are not textual analyses and, although often feminist, do not link the brand to neo-feminism.<sup>12</sup> In their works, Peggy Orenstein and Barbara Ehrenreich provide feminist commentaries, but they do not select particular products to analyze in detail, instead treating this vast and varied network of merchandise as a homogenous entity. The brand does tend to homogenize the princesses through aesthetics and narratives, but since different product categories and even individual products use unique design elements, it is worth considering how different categories and items engage with gender discourses. Other studies do focus on a single product or product category, providing more nuanced and convincing, although differing, feminist arguments. For example, Meghan M. Sweeney argues that the brand's official website acts as one huge advertisement for the products and reinforces many of the problems that critics have had with the

characters and the brand, including its adherence to strict gender codes, lack of true diversity, and the commodification of play.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, Karen E. Wohlwend argues, based on her microethnographic study of kindergarteners, that play with Disney Princess™ dolls allows children to experience the limitations of prescribed gender roles and prompts improvisation in order to overcome these obstacles and enact more satisfying identity performances.<sup>14</sup> Since Radner did not publish her theory of neo-feminism until 2011, it is not surprising that none of these studies connect the brand with this theory: they all pre-date or are contemporaneous with Radner's work. However, Radner's theory, which I discuss in the next section, now adds an enlightening new dimension to studies of Disney Princess™ and other popular culture products. This study does not treat the brand as a homogenous entity, but analyzes more than a single product or category. In this way, it avoids making sweeping claims about the brand, yet shows how certain substantial aspects of the brand both incorporate and shape gender discourses.

### **Neo-feminism**

Given its emphasis on economically independent and sexually autonomous career women, one may easily mistake neo-feminist media for feminist media. Neo-feminism does share some values with feminism, particularly with second-wave feminism because of its shared historical roots with that movement. For example, both ideologies promote women's financial autonomy and reproductive freedom. Unlike feminists, though, neo-feminists (who do not necessarily identify themselves as such) do not campaign around these issues; for them, a woman's fulfillment can be independent of her social milieu, and this focus on the individual comes at the expense of political mobilization.<sup>15</sup>

Radner derives the term "neo-feminism" from "neo-liberalism," indicating that neo-feminist discourses are deeply informed by neo-liberal ideology.<sup>16</sup> Neo-liberalism equates the citizen with the consumer and argues that the individual best exercises their democratic choices in the marketplace. It does not oppose inequality among its citizens because inequality is a virtue in this system; in it, people who work hard become rich and accrue privileges, while everyone else benefits from a "trickle down" effect. Neo-liberalism ignores the benefits of class, education, gender, and race that may have helped the rich to attain their wealth and blames the poor for making poor choices or not working hard enough.<sup>17</sup> Neo-feminism similarly encourages women

to develop their individual agency and exercise choice in consumer spaces: it suggests that women will achieve self-fulfillment through buying, wearing, and displaying consumer products.<sup>18</sup> In essence, neo-feminism is the branch of neo-liberalism that specifically shapes women's and girls' identities, instructing them in how they ought to conduct themselves as consumer-citizens of the world.

The principal neo-feminist heroine is the “can-do” woman, the female striver, who is career-oriented, better her social and economic position through hard work, and is focused on herself rather than on the political sphere. Radner traces this key figure back to Helen Gurley Brown, the author of *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962) and editor-in-chief of *Cosmopolitan* for thirty-two years (1965–97). In both the book and the magazine, Brown advocated that women form a strong work ethic and monitor themselves to ensure the maintenance of both financial stability and a high standard of appearance. Radner argues that this process of self-surveillance has been an enduring imperative, as contemporary media generally suggest that intense self-monitoring is essential to a woman's self-realization and personal fulfillment.<sup>19</sup> Brown herself was a “can-do” woman, and such women remain prominent in the media: all of the films Radner analyzes feature “can-do” heroines.<sup>20</sup> Disney's princess-themed films likewise feature “can-do” heroines. *The Princess and the Frog's* Tiana is a good example. Tiana is a hard-working but still normatively attractive young woman with big dreams. She works two waitressing jobs because she is saving money to open her own restaurant, and she never gives up on this dream, in the end combining it with marriage to a prince. The heroines of these films have exciting, fun lives, but they are individualists and not political activists. Their goals focus on themselves and maybe their friends, children, or romantic partners, but not on widespread political and social changes that will better conditions for all women.

The ideal of the “can-do” woman has filtered into Western narratives about girlhood in the form of the “can-do” girl, a model of youthful achievement that sets strict parameters for what success can be and generally excludes girls who belong to racial and ethnic minorities or who lack socioeconomic status. Anita Harris argues that in the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States, to be “successful,” girls must demonstrate academic, professional, and consumer prowess, and they must be sexually “responsible” (that is, they must not become pregnant or contract STIs). Girls must make detailed life plans to realize their academic and career ambitions and then go

on to find high-paying, respectable, and stable jobs; they must make good consumption choices and demonstrate their ability to purchase consumer goods; and they must delay motherhood until they have established their careers.<sup>21</sup> When young women manage to meet all these expectations, they fulfill the “can-do” ideal; however, failure in any of these areas causes them to become “at-risk” girls. These girls do not attain prestigious or high-paying jobs; they demonstrate “disordered consumption”; or they become pregnant at younger ages. The three aforementioned countries all construct the “can-do” girl’s experience as the normative one and the “at-risk” girl’s failure as the result of individual rather than structural limitations: the dominant discourses elide the structural disadvantages these girls often face and blame a girl’s family, culture, or her own poor choices for her inability to be a “can-do” girl.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the ideal of the “can-do” girl accords with neo-liberalism’s emphasis on hard work and consumption, as well as with its blindness to privileges that help the rich gain and preserve their wealth. It is a classist and racist ideal that presents itself as fully attainable.

On the whole, neo-feminism is a set of neo-liberal, apolitical, and individualistic gender discourses that urge women and girls to act as consumer citizens and pursue their own sense of personal fulfillment, but do not encourage them to worry about inequalities among women. What is more, it attributes inequality to poor individual choices rather than to structural disadvantages, hiding its own racism and classism and allowing the continuance of these prejudices in politics, society, and culture.

### **Analyzing Disney Princess™ Ephemera**

From October 2015 to September 2018, I collected Disney Princess™ products to inform my doctoral research. I acquired picture books, sticker books, and calendars, as well as other miscellaneous items (see Fig. 1). I bought the merchandise rather than taking pictures or printing out images from the Internet because I wanted both to read and carefully examine the items’ text and ensure that I understood each item’s design elements.<sup>23</sup>

To analyze my collection, I examined each item’s individual narratives, images, captions, and overall design, with a focus on characterization, iconography, use of color, and cover designs. I then connected these aspects of the merchandise to the larger media culture and to neo-feminism, and from these observations, identified some overarching themes. I also counted how many stories in the treasuries starred each princess and how many times each

princess, her companions, and iconography from her film appeared in each sticker book and calendar. These counts allowed me to gain a sense of which princesses DCPI and its licensees promoted most forcefully within these particular product categories in the 2015–18 period, as well as to consider how the higher visibility of these princesses may have affected the brand’s overall constructions of girlhood and womanhood. This article extracts the information about the sticker books and the calendars from the larger analysis, focusing on and showing the value in studying the most ephemeral items. In the interest of space, it only reports on the visibility of the princesses themselves rather than on their companions and their films’ iconography.

The following analyses are divided into three subsections, each of which discusses a different neo-feminist dimension of these products: the products’ emphasis on individual empowerment at the expense of solidarity; how the products promote clothing consumption and use as fundamental to girls’ and women’s success; and the dominance of white princesses and how this dominance reinforces the “can-do” ideal’s racism.



Fig. 1. Part of the Disney Princess™ picture book, sticker book, and calendar collection.

*Individual Empowerment > Collective Feminist Politics*

The items in my Disney Princess™ collection promote the individual empowerment of female-identified individuals over and above a collective feminist politics; that is, they promote women's right to personal choice and the power of such choice, but not the recognition of women as a political group and the need for that group to act together to address social issues that affect it. Even though the brand unites twelve characters, these twelve remain divided from one another. Orenstein notes that Mooney wanted to maintain the princesses' individual "mythologies," and so decided that, when appearing together, they should never make eye contact or even seem to see or notice one another.<sup>24</sup> The sticker books' and calendars' covers, as well as images within both types of products that feature multiple princesses, demonstrate this design concept: the princesses are blind to one another's existence, and so remain locked in their own worlds. Even though they appear as a group, they cannot connect with one another and experience solidarity. One could therefore read these group images of the princesses as visual metaphors for neo-feminism because neither one encourages women to see and empathize with one another's needs and experiences. Disney Princess™, however unintentionally, graphically represents neo-feminism's own blindness to political solidarity and social inequality among women.<sup>25</sup>

The sticker books prevent the development of community through their intense emphasis on the princesses' individual stories: they elevate the princesses above everyone who appears around them, and they insist on the uniqueness of each princess, preventing any suggestion that there is overlap between these worlds. Jo Casey's *Disney Princess: Enchanted: Ultimate Sticker Book* and Gaurav Joshi and Lisa Stock's *Ultimate Sticker Collection: Disney Princess* both contain a number of sections featuring multiple princesses, but, rather than solidly uniting the princesses as a group, these sections highlight their individuality and keeps their association loose. Casey's book includes a section called "Friends and Family" that features (among others) Cinderella's Fairy Godmother and Pocahontas's animal friends, Meeko (a raccoon) and Flit (a hummingbird). The accompanying captions explain the relationship between each featured character and one of the princesses. For example, the text under the Fairy Godmother notes that this character is responsible for Cinderella's transformation from raggedy servant to belle of the ball, and the caption under Meeko and Flit emphasizes the animals' desire to protect Pocahontas.<sup>26</sup> Even when professing to discuss other characters, the section



remains about the individual princesses and their stories; everyone else plays a supporting role in the princesses' tales, preventing equality and mutual exchange between "friends."<sup>27</sup> Joshi and Stock's sticker book features the princesses' individual skills in a section called "What a Talent!," which ensures the skills' uniqueness by never including any two princesses with similar talents. For instance, it highlights Tiana's skills as a chef and Ariel's talent for song, and omits Snow White and Aurora: their inclusion would weaken the singularity of each princess since Snow White is also handy in the kitchen and Aurora also has the gift of song.<sup>28</sup> The closest the sticker books come to making comparisons between the princesses are the vague statements that open each section; in this case, the opening notes that the princesses possess many skills in which they take pride and which they hone.<sup>29</sup> Such statements create thematic unity, ensuring the coherence of the book and brand, but their vagueness disallows the recognition of specific similarities and overlaps among the princesses, maintaining their distinctness and separateness.

The calendars strongly align with and reinforce neo-feminist narratives through their extensive focus on expressions of individual identity and their presentation of the princesses as "can-do" women or girls. In one image, Merida takes aim with her bow and arrow, highlighting her skill with the weapon and her passion for archery. The caption, "My fate is in my own hands," refers to the determination she shows to live life on her own terms.<sup>30</sup> Despite the close bond she has with her horse and the one she forges with her mother by the end of *Brave*, Merida stands alone rather than alongside Angus or Queen Elinor. The image thus encourages self-reliance and the forging of one's own path within an individualist context. In another image, Jasmine rides Aladdin's magic carpet, and the caption, "Explore from above," is an exhortation to travel and learn about the world.<sup>31</sup> Jasmine is enjoying life by herself, having displaced her male partner who does not appear in the image, and, flying through the air, she appears free of constraints. As princesses, Merida and Jasmine occupy positions of power, and in these images, they appear as self-determining and ambitious individuals, "can-do" women who exercise their independence and move through the world with confidence.

At first glance, this message of independence and self-confidence seems like a great one for the calendars to promote, especially since they include princesses from diverse backgrounds in their imagery; however, their support of the "can-do" ideal is problematic because, while they seem to expand the ideal, they do not substantially challenge its racism or classism. The calendars

provide little to no recognition of the barriers that some women and girls face because of their race, ethnicity, or class. An image of Tiana in a sparkling green gown and evening gloves bears the caption “Dreams are the spice of life.”<sup>32</sup> The story of this working-class African American heroine who must struggle to realize her restaurant dream becomes an image of conventional female glamour. Similarly, calendar images of Cinderella only show her in her ball gown, never in her servant garb, and they have captions such as “Dare to Dream” and “Stay Strong and Journey On,” which hearken back to her escapist dreams and perseverance without exploring the hardships she faces due to her stepfamily’s cruelty.<sup>33</sup> In the calendars, the princesses’ individual gowns and the iconography from their films (such as Tiana’s restaurant and the clock from *Cinderella*), rather than their narratives, become the markers of uniqueness. The presence of princesses from diverse backgrounds improves media representation, but it does not truly do anything to question and expand our notions of womanhood and girlhood.

Critics sometimes object to Disney’s princesses on the grounds that they are passive and insipid, and therefore poor role models for little girls.<sup>34</sup> In the sticker books and calendars, though, they are active young women who dream big, have ambitions, and pursue a variety of interests, ranging from music to athletics. However, this high level of activity does not make them feminist and they are still not ideal role models for young girls because, locked in their separate worlds and enjoying more privilege than most of the people and animals around them, they lack true community and collective consciousness. In the end, the products do not have any real feminist edge.

#### *Clothing Consumption and Use as Key to Success*

The Disney Princess™ sticker books and calendars place a high premium on conventionally feminine self-presentation, suggesting that normative attractiveness and the consumer objects that produce it—especially clothing items—are key to success and happiness. In these products, the image of the “can-do” girl and the “can-do” woman becomes bound up with self-expression through dress, a situation that reflects and enhances neo-feminism’s consumerist orientation.

Disney Princess™ uses iconography and color to create a hyperfeminine aesthetic, and through this aesthetic, it emphasizes conventional feminine self-presentation achieved via consumer products as a key means for girls’ and women’s self-development and self-expression. The sticker books and

calendars both use an abundance of pink (ranging from baby pink to magenta), various shades of purple, and other pastel colors. This color palette is conventional within girl-centered media: for example, similar palettes are found in Barbie™ and Hasbro's My Little Pony™. The princesses' clothing most often consists of items specifically associated with women and girls, such as dresses and bras, and the clothing's detailing and the accompanying iconography make both the items and the princesses intensely feminine. The cover of Joshi and Stock's *Ultimate Sticker Collection* presents seven princesses (Mulan, Merida, Ariel, Snow White, Cinderella, Tiana, and Jasmine) wearing enhanced versions of highly recognizable outfits from the films (for example, Cinderella wears her ball gown and Ariel wears her seashell bra, both of which have acquired extra sparkle), and it surrounds these seven princesses with flowers and gems. Inside, there is a section entitled "Princess Style," which explicitly connects clothing with identity. Its opening paragraph states that a princess may use clothing as a disguise, but usually uses it to showcase her true self.<sup>35</sup> In the world of Disney Princess™, clothing makes the woman and tells other people who she is.

The calendars' depictions of the princesses are markedly similar, and the added device of the caption builds connections between elaborate dress, success, and identity-building. Often, the princesses adopt modeling poses, such as standing and smiling, folding their hands, placing a hand on a hip, or even holding a rose, and they do so against backgrounds of flowers, gems, and castles. The image captions regularly take the form of imperative statements and, because of their combination with these hyperfeminine images, these imperatives involve attention to personal appearance. For example, an image of Rapunzel gives the command, "Follow your passion," but shows the princess standing with her luxurious blonde hair draped over her arm rather than painting or exploring (passions that she exhibits in *Tangled*).<sup>36</sup> Rapunzel's real passion seems to have become modeling. Similarly, an image of Mulan encourages readers to "Dream big," but shows the princess posing in a sparkling *hanfu*, not saving China from invaders.<sup>37</sup> Big dreams are suddenly not primarily about victory, but about looking conventionally attractive. Through such word-image combinations, the calendars suggest that to be successful and achieve the identity of a "can-do" girl and later "can-do" woman, in addition to being confident and making good decisions, girls must also adhere to these intense and narrow standards of self-presentation.

Many other Disney Princess™, DCPI products, and Disney texts send these same messages, reinforcing this ideal for women and girls across many media and making it practically inescapable within the Magic Kingdom. There are, of course, the Disney Princess™ costumes that mimic the princesses' hyperfeminine gowns, which are available for girls' games of dressing-up and role-playing. The Frozen™, Sofia the First™, and Elena of Avalor™ brands all style their female leads in similar ways as Disney Princess™, even expanding these stylings to younger girls and explicitly encouraging girls to invest in the fashion industry. *Ultimate Sticker Collection: Frozen* features multiple images of Elsa looking confident and self-possessed in the shimmering gown she magically creates for herself, again suggesting that looking the part is essential to success.<sup>38</sup> Sofia the First™ pushes these grooming ideals on to preadolescents by styling the eponymous preadolescent Sofia in a manner consonant with the official princesses. Most of the images in a 2015 Sofia the First™ calendar show Sofia wearing her poufy, beaded lavender gown and tiara, and even the image for May of Sofia in her nightgown shows her primping her hair while a tiara still oddly crowns her head.<sup>39</sup>

Finally, the *Elena of Avalor Fashion Design Sketchbook* purports to teach girls about the process of clothing design, providing a "Design Guide" that gives tips on incorporating different sources of inspiration into designs, choosing a color palette, and (re)creating fabric patterns, and then several pages on which to practice these skills.<sup>40</sup> Even outside of its princess-themed media, Disney texts feature girls using clothing as a means to and marker of success. For example, on Disney Channel's *Hannah Montana* (2006–11), heroine Miley Stewart uses glamorous fashions to transform herself into Hannah Montana, a teen pop sensation, and the D-Signed label, a clothing line based around Disney Channel series, sells girls an image of success through the clothing items' association with the series' stars.<sup>41</sup> Disney Princess™, then, is only one small part of The Walt Disney Company that promotes clothing consumption and use as a means to identity development, self-fulfillment, and achievement: there are many other brands simultaneously promoting this neo-feminist message, reinforcing it and developing it across multiple platforms.

Disney Princess™ and several other DCPI brands and Disney™ texts, as is fitting for consumer products, uphold a consumerist ideal. Specifically, they promote the neo-feminist principle of using clothing items to develop and communicate personal identity and the idea that a well-groomed, conventio-

nally feminine appearance is necessary to success. While there is nothing wrong with enjoying clothing and using it to express one's individuality, the neo-feminist "can-do" ideal is narrow and limiting, and by representing it on so many platforms, Disney renders it an imperative.

### *The Rule of the White Princess*

Orenstein titles both of her works about Disney Princess™ and the related girlie-girl culture after Cinderella, suggesting that this princess is highly visible in the brand's products. Meanwhile, Orenstein challenges her readers to find Pocahontas and Mulan in the merchandise, claiming that, although these two are official princesses, they only rarely appear in the brand's merchandise.<sup>42</sup> After counting the number of times each princess appears in my collected sticker books and calendars (for the purposes of this study, I call each appearance of a princess a "princess image"), I determined that Cinderella, Ariel, Belle, and Rapunzel are highly visible in these products, while Pocahontas and Mulan are as difficult to find as Orenstein claims they are. Despite the apparent inclusiveness of the official Disney Princess™ line-up, with its variety of racial and ethnic identities (white, Middle Eastern, Powhatan, Han, African American, and Pacific Islander), the dominant princesses in the products I collected are white and the Powhatan and Han princesses are significantly underrepresented.<sup>43</sup> The brand's "diversity" may therefore actually be deceptive and weak.

In the four sticker books in my collection, the most visible princesses are all white; on the whole, these products discriminate against the princesses of color and deny them representation proportional to their numbers. For proportional representation, the white princesses would need to appear in 63.6% of the images and the princesses of color would need to appear in 36.4%; however, the white princesses occupy 71% of the images and the princesses of color appear in only 29%. The princesses who appear the most frequently are all white: Ariel (13.4%), Cinderella (11.1%), Aurora (10.7%), and Belle (10.7%). Pocahontas and Mulan each only appear in small percentages of the images, 3.4% and 6.9%, respectively.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps the re-release of *The Little Mermaid* on Blu-ray and DVD in 2013 boosted Ariel's popularity during this period, resulting in her noticeably higher total. It makes sense for DCPI to capitalize on demand for certain princesses, but DCPI also stimulates demand for particular princesses by marketing them heavily. In other words, part of the reason Ariel remains marketable is because DCPI keeps

re-releasing her film, creating hype around the re-releases, and putting her image on products. Additionally, it is possible that the creators of the sticker books found it harder to incorporate the cross-dressing soldier Mulan and the athletic, deerskin-clad Pocahontas into these highly visual texts' hyperfeminine aesthetic, a situation that would indicate that the maintenance of this aesthetic takes precedence over diversity and representation.<sup>45</sup> The sidelining of Pocahontas and Mulan would therefore seem to stem from less concerted marketing efforts involving these princesses and a desire to maintain an aesthetic that does not have space for princesses who do not adhere to strict Western standards of physical attractiveness and deportment.

The calendars in my collection tell a similar story of representation to that of the sticker books: Belle and Cinderella are the favorites (15.1% and 14.5% of the princess images, respectively), followed by Rapunzel and Ariel (14% and 12.3%); Pocahontas and Mulan appear the least (2.23% and 2.79%); and the white princesses are massively over-represented (78.3%).<sup>46</sup> Calendars, like sticker books, are a highly visual medium; consequently, designers are going to focus on the princesses with the highest visual impact and who best fit the overall aesthetic. Cinderella's sparkling ball gown and glass slippers, Belle's stunning yellow dress, Rapunzel's magical locks, and Ariel's flashy red hair all contribute to striking visuals. It is odd that Tiana only appears in 6.7% of the princess images, given that she usually wears an elaborate green dress that can easily compete with Cinderella and Belle's gowns, while Jasmine, who wears a crop top and harem pants, appears in 10.1%. Perhaps the designers of these calendars found Jasmine's sexier outfit and perceived exoticism more eye-catching and so included her more often. However, such representations suggest that princesses of color are most visually enticing when they fulfill the stereotypes of women of color as overtly sexual and as people whose bodies are the privileged sites of their power and agency.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, the calendars' enormous white bias reinforces a racist equivalence between whiteness and beauty. Thus, the calendars, even more than the sticker books, enforce conventional white feminine self-presentation.

Disney Princess<sup>TM</sup> nominally includes multiple princesses of color, but the percentages of the princess images dedicated to each of the princesses of color and to the princesses of color as a group in these sticker books and calendars suggest that this inclusivity is an illusion. Perhaps the situation has changed in products released after September 2018, and perhaps a study of different product categories or of a larger number of items would change the

results.<sup>48</sup> However, understood in relation to the neo-feminist ideals of the “can-do” girl and woman, these Disney Princess™ sticker books and calendars imply that only conventionally attractive white women and girls can meet these definitions of success, and that the achievements of women of color will always be lesser than those of white women.

### **Conclusion: Neo-Feminist Princesshood**

From studying these particular Disney Princess™ products, and by taking these ephemeral media objects seriously as sites of signification, it becomes clear that this brand perpetuates neo-feminist ideology in its sticker books and calendars. By emphasizing the individual and excluding representations of true community, insisting on clothing as the primary means to self-development and self-fulfillment, and overrepresenting conventionally attractive white women, these ephemeral products insist on the “can-do” ideals of success. While the confidence and autonomy that neo-feminism promotes are positive qualities, and while using clothing for self-expression can be fun and is not necessarily harmful, the presence of strong neo-feminist messages in other Disney texts and brands, such as *Sofia the First*™ and *Hannah Montana*, and in the wider popular culture through films like the ones Radner analyzes, turns this ideology’s ideals into mandates, limiting the representations of women and girls and perhaps even narrowing their perceived options.

Depictions of princesses are changing, however, and perhaps this milieu will induce similar changes in Disney Princess™ or result in its decline. *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* features princesses, but the series focuses on a female friendship group in which each member has a distinctive personality but remains capable of acting as a member of the collective. *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* is a landmark of inclusive representation, as it features many characters of color as well as queer characters; in fact, the heroine herself falls in love with another woman by the end of the series. Even Disney’s *Frozen* (2013) focuses on the bond between two royal sisters, Elsa and Anna, and Disney’s *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (2018) features several princesses working together as a team. In the future, maybe Disney Princess™ itself will move away from strict neo-feminist ideals, or maybe these other girl-centered products will eclipse its popularity, moving the dominant discourses about gender away from neo-feminism and towards a greater variety of feminisms.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ten years after its inception in 2000, Disney Princess™ earned \$4 billion at retail. By 2015, Claire Suddath observes that the brand's earnings had grown to \$5.5 billion, making it Disney's second-biggest seller, bested only by Mickey Mouse. See "Disney Princess Power," *License Global* 12, no. 4 (2009): 40–41, 40; Claire Suddath, "The \$500 Million Battle Over Disney's Princesses: How Hasbro Grabbed the Lucrative Disney Doll Business from Mattel," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, December 17, 2015, <https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2015-disney-princess-hasbro/>. By "princess phenomenon," I mean the large number of princess-themed products, manufactured or licensed by both Disney and other companies, that are available on the market and that primarily target young girls. See Lisa Orr, "Difference That Is Actually Sameness Mass-Replicated: Barbie Joins the Princess Convergence," *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* 1, no. 1 (2009): 9–30; Peggy Orenstein, *Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches from the Front-Lines of the New Girlie-Girl Culture* (New York: Harper, 2011); Peggy Orenstein, "What's Wrong with Cinderella?," *The New York Times Magazine*, December 24, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/24/magazine/24princess.t.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Since my interest in this article is in girl-centered media, I assume a female-identified subject.

<sup>3</sup> According to Dan Fleming, a popular toy line typically only has a two- or three-year lifespan. See Dan Fleming, *Powerplay: Toys as Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 116. Furthermore, Daniel Thomas Cook and Susan B. Kaiser observe that, once individuals reach their "tween" years (roughly ages eight to twelve), they are often eager to leave their childhood behind and to appear more "grown up" to their peers, prompting them to abandon earlier interests. See Daniel Thomas Cook and Susan B. Kaiser, "Betwixt and be Tween: Age Ambiguity and the Sexualization of the Female Consuming Subject," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 4, no. 2 (2004): 203–27, 218–19.

<sup>4</sup> I use "sticker book" to designate books that provide a large collection of stickers and ask the child-user to complete activities using at least some of those stickers, often also leaving the child with a large number of extra stickers with which she can do as she wishes. These books range in length from sixteen pages, as in Jo Casey's *Disney Princess: Enchanted: Ultimate Sticker Book*, which has seven pages of activities, four pages of stickers, a title page, and four blank pages, to ninety-six pages, as in Guarav Joshi and Lisa Stock's *Ultimate Sticker Collection: Disney Princess*, which has thirty-one pages of activities, thirty-two pages of stickers, a title page, and thirty-two blank pages. The stickers themselves and the activity pages are usually glossy, except in *Disney Princess: 1000 Stickers*, in which they are matte paper, making them suitable for writing, drawing, and coloring, activities that the book also includes.

<sup>5</sup> See Barbara Ehrenreich, "Bonfire of the Disney Princesses," *The Nation*, December 24, 2007, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/bonfire-disney-princesses/>; Rebecca C. Hains, *The*



*Princess Problem: Guiding Girls Through the Princess-Obsessed Years* (Naperville: Sourcebooks, 2014) and *Growing Up with Girl Power: Girlhood on Screen and in Everyday Life* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012); Orenstein, *Cinderella Ate My Daughter* and “What’s Wrong with Cinderella?”; Karen E. Wohlwend, “Damsels in Discourse: Girls Consuming and Producing Identity Texts through Disney Princess Play,” *Reading Research Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (2009): 57–83, 77.

<sup>6</sup> The Disney Princess™ dolls are examples of dolls that derive from films. Barbie™ dolls and Bratz™ dolls are examples of dolls who appear in films, albeit as human characters, not as toys. For studies of these latter films, see Sarah Becker, Danielle Thomas, and Michael R. Cope, “Post-feminism for Children: Feminism ‘Repackaged’ in the Bratz Films,” *Media, Culture & Society* 38, no. 8 (2016): 1218–35; Orr, “Difference That Is Actually Sameness”; Karen Orr Vered and Christèle Maizonniaux, “Barbie and the Straight-to-DVD Movie: Pink Post-Feminist Pedagogy,” *Feminist Media Studies* 17, no. 2 (2017): 198–214.

<sup>7</sup> Audience studies and the related field of fan studies have produced several good studies of Disney fans. For example, see Nettie A. Brock, “The Everyday Disney Side: Disneybouncing and Casual Cosplay,” *Journal of Fandom Studies* 5, no. 3 (2017): 301–15; Tom Robinson, Scott Haden Church, Clark Callahan, Mckenzie Madsen, and Lucia Pollock, “Virtue, Royalty, Dreams, and Power: Exploring the Appeal of Disney Princesses to Preadolescent Girls in the United States,” *Journal of Children and Media* 14, no. 4 (2020): 510–25; and Rebecca Williams, “Embodied Transmedia and Paratextual-Spatio Play: Consuming, Collecting and Costuming Theme Park Merchandise,” in *Theme Park Fandom: Spatial Transmedia, Materiality and Participatory Cultures* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 181–210.

<sup>8</sup> Hilary Radner, *Neo-feminist Cinema: Girly Films, Chick Flicks and Consumer Culture* (London: Routledge, 2011), 6, 9, 11. The women are also usually heterosexual, but this article does not deal with sexuality since none of Disney’s official princesses exhibit any LGBTQ+ characteristics.

The wave metaphor is commonly used to describe the history of feminism, but it is one that erases certain theorists, places, and identities from this history. While I cannot get into its limitations here, I choose to retain the wave metaphor because its prevalence in the literature makes for ease of reference, though this retainment is with full recognition of the metaphor’s omissions. For a more thorough critique of the wave metaphor, see Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> There is some debate over whether or not Moana is an official princess. On *princess.disney.com*, Moana appears in the character list and, like the princesses whose official status is certain, she appears against a pink background. The only characters who do not appear against a pink background are Elsa and Anna, who instead appear against a blue background, indicating their unofficial status in Disney Princess™ and their official status in Frozen™. See “Disney Princess,” accessed December 4, 2021, <https://princess.disney.com/>. This page also features a link to *Disney Princess: Tales of Courage and Kindness* on Disney Books. The description of the book says that it “[f]eatures stories about all 12 Disney Princesses – plus two bonus stories about the Frozen Queens!” See “Tales of Courage and Kindness,” accessed December 7, 2021, <https://books.disney.com/book/tales-of-courage-and-kindness/>. Finally, some recent Disney Princess™ products feature Moana prominently on their front covers, including *Disney Princess: 5-Minute Princess Stories* (2019) and *Disney Princess: Storybook Collection: Advent Calendar* (2021). Consequently, I am including Moana in my list of official princesses.

<sup>10</sup> “Disney Princess Power,” 40; Orenstein, “What’s Wrong with Cinderella?” and *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, 13; Suddath, “How Hasbro Grabbed the Lucrative Disney Doll Business from Mattel.” The Disney Consumer Products division merged with the Disney Interactive division in 2015 to form DCPI. See Tony Lisanti, “Disney’s Vision for the Future,” *License Global* 20, no. 3 (2017): 104–08, 105.

<sup>11</sup> *Dora the Explorer*, season 4, episode 1, “Dora’s Fairytale Adventure,” aired September 24, 2004 on Nickelodeon; *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, season 3, episode 13, “Magical Mystery Cure,” aired February 16, 2013 on The Hub.

<sup>12</sup> Some key examples of film analyses include Elizabeth Bell, “Somatexts at the Disney Shop: Constructing the Penitents of Women’s Animated Bodies,” in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, eds. Elizabeth Bell, Linda Haas, and Laura Sells (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 107–24; Amy M. Davis, *Good Girls and Wicked Witches: Women in Disney’s Feature Animation* (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing, 2011); Rebecca-Anne C. Do Rozario, “The Princess and the Magic Kingdom: Beyond Nostalgia, the Function of the Disney Princess,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 27, no. 1 (2004): 34–59; Jill Birnie Henke, Diane Zimmerman Umble, and Nancy J. Smith, “Construction of the Female Self: Feminist Readings of the Disney Heroine,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 19, no. 2 (1996): 229–49.

<sup>13</sup> Meghan M. Sweeney, “‘Where Happily Ever After Happens Every Day’: Disney’s Official Princess Website and the Commodification of Play,” *Jenness: Young People, Texts, Cultures* 3, no. 2 (2011): 66–87.

<sup>14</sup> Wohlwend, “Damsels in Discourse,” 77.

<sup>15</sup> Radner, *Neo-feminist Cinema*, 9, 11.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, 2.

<sup>17</sup> George Monbiot, “Neo-liberalism – the Ideology at the Root of All Our Problems,” *The Guardian*, April 15, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot>.

<sup>18</sup> Radner, *Neo-feminist Cinema*, 6.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, 19–20, 23.

<sup>20</sup> For example, *Legally Blonde’s* Elle Woods (Reese Witherspoon) grooms herself professionally and physically, studying hard to prove herself at law school and using clothing and accessories to present herself as girlie-but-able, and *Maid in Manhattan’s* Marisa Ventura (Jennifer Lopez) is a hotel maid with aspirations of becoming a manager who finds herself swept into a world of glamor and romance when she “borrows” a Dolce & Gabbana coat from a hotel guest.

<sup>21</sup> Anita Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2004), 16–25. I understand “good” consumption choices here to mean a good education and quality clothes, accessories, and household wares.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, 25–32. Harris here notes “bad” or “disordered” consumption choices to include the use of tobacco, alcohol, and drugs.

<sup>23</sup> As I had limited research funds and live in St. John’s, Newfoundland, a small city on Canada’s east coast, I was restricted in my ability to look for and acquire products. To find relevant items, I regularly visited Coles, Chapters, Walmart, and Dollarama, and I searched on both Amazon and Indigo’s websites. (Indigo is a Canadian bookstore chain. Coles and Chap-

ters are both Indigo brands: the former is a small bookstore and the latter is a large bookstore. Dollarama is a Canadian chain of dollar stores, and Walmart is an American discount department store that has a strong presence in Canada.) I also visited second-hand bookstores and used book sales. I never bought anything that cost more than \$25 CDN before tax or shipping, and, in the picture book category, I primarily bought treasuries, eliminating the need to find and purchase many small books. My collection is therefore the result of savings strategies, serendipity, and calculated thought about which items would provide the greatest interpretive yield.

<sup>24</sup> Orenstein, “What’s Wrong with Cinderella?”

<sup>25</sup> The princesses do interact with one another in other Disney texts, including ABC’s *Once Upon a Time* (2011–18) and the animated film *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (2018). However, as these texts do not belong to Disney Princess™, they are not relevant to this study.

<sup>26</sup> Jo Casey, *Disney Princess: Enchanted: Ultimate Sticker Book*, designed by Lisa Lanzarini and Julie Thompson (New York: DK Publishing, 2015), 4–5.

<sup>27</sup> In the films, some of these supporting characters do only appear to help a princess, while others are much fuller characters, supporting the princess but also acting in compelling or amusing subplots. For example, the Fairy Godmother only appears to help Cinderella, but Meeko continually spars with Governor Ratcliffe’s pug, Percy, in comic scenes. The relationship between the films and the products is complicated and fascinating since the products may take their inspiration from any part of the film, potentially distorting the film’s messages or even changing how one views the film. This topic is, however, beyond the scope of this study.

<sup>28</sup> Guarav Joshi and Lisa Stock, *Ultimate Sticker Collection: Disney Princess*, edited by Joshi, Stock, and Chitra Subramanyam, designed by Neha Ahuja, Lynne Moulding, and Chitrak Srivastava (New York: DK Publishing, 2015), 8–9.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, 8. The exact quotation is, “The princesses prove that they are so much more than just pretty faces. Between them they have a very long list of impressive talents! They all take pride in being good at the things they love, and try hard to keep getting better.”

<sup>30</sup> *Disney Princess: A 16-Month 2016 Calendar* (Dayton: Daydream, 2015), May.

<sup>31</sup> *Disney Princess: Official 2018 Calendar* (Waltham Abbey: Danilo, 2017), January.

<sup>32</sup> *Disney Princess: A 16-Month 2016 Calendar*, June.

<sup>33</sup> *Disney Princess: Official 2018 Calendar*, October; *Disney Princess: A 16-Month 2017 Calendar* (Indianapolis: DateWorks, 2016), April.

<sup>34</sup> See Orenstein, *Cinderella Ate My Daughter* and “What’s Wrong with Cinderella?”; Jena Stephens, “Disney’s Darlings: An Analysis of *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled*, *Brave* and the Changing Characterization of the Princess Archetype,” *Interdisciplinary Humanities* 31, no. 3 (2014): 95–107; and Bridget Whelan, “Power to the Princess: Disney and the Creation of the 20th Century Princess Narrative,” *Interdisciplinary Humanities* 29, no. 1 (2012): 21–34.

<sup>35</sup> Joshi and Stock, *Ultimate Sticker Collection*, 26.

<sup>36</sup> *Disney Princess: A 16-Month 2016 Calendar*, November.

<sup>37</sup> *Disney Princess: A 16-Month 2017 Calendar*, October.

<sup>38</sup> Lauren Nesworthy and Susan Reuben, *Ultimate Sticker Collection: Frozen*, edited by Lisa Stock and Nesworthy, designed by Clive Savage and Chris Gould (New York: DK Publishing, 2015), 5, 20. See also the front and back covers and the many extra stickers at the back of the book.

<sup>39</sup> *Sofia the First: 2015 Calendar – 12 Months* (Ashland: Bendon Calendars, 2014).

<sup>40</sup> *Elena of Avalor Fashion Design Sketchbook* (Baltimore: Make It Real, 2017). The Design Guide occupies pages 1–10.

<sup>41</sup> Morgan Genevieve Blue, “D-Signed for Girls: Disney Channel and Tween Fashion,” *Film, Fashion & Consumption* 2, no. 1 (2013): 55–75, 59–61.

<sup>42</sup> Orenstein, *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, 14.

<sup>43</sup> Since Aladdin’s Agrabah is a fictional kingdom, it is not clear whether Jasmine belongs to any particular ethnic group; hence, I cannot be more descriptive than “Middle Eastern.” Since Moana, the Pacific Islander representative, did not begin appearing in merchandise until after the period in which I collected merchandise, my collection does not include her, and my data is based on a total of eleven rather than twelve princesses and four rather than five princesses of color.

<sup>44</sup> All percentages for the sticker books are based on a total of 1512 princess images, which includes any images of princesses that appear anywhere in the book (e.g., cover, activities, and extra pages of stickers). Merida also only appears in a small percentage of the princess images: 4.9%. However, I am only interested in the princesses of color in this section, and so will not be discussing Merida’s relative absence. There is some variation from book to book. For example, Mulan receives a fairly high percentage of the images in Joshi and Stock’s *Ultimate Sticker Collection* (9.72%), but appears in zero images in *Disney Princess: Mosaic Sticker Book*. The reasons for this variation ought to be interrogated, but I do not have the space to enter into this discussion here. For now, I am interested in the overall data set and what it says about these particular products.

<sup>45</sup> Casey’s book attempts to absorb Pocahontas by including an image of her in her ball gown from *Pocahontas II: Journey to a New World* (1998), but the effect is one of whitewashing. See Casey, *Disney Princess: Enchanted*, 3.

<sup>46</sup> These percentages are based on a total of 179 princess images. This total includes front cover art, and it counts some monthly images multiple times because sometimes more than one princess appears in the illustration for a given month. It does not include the majority of images from the back covers since most such images are thumbnails of the images inside the calendars: their inclusion would change the quantity of images of each princess, but not each princess’s percentage of the total images.

<sup>47</sup> Celeste Lacroix, “Images of Animated Others: The Orientalization of Disney’s Cartoon Heroines from *The Little Mermaid* to *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*,” *Popular Communication* 2, no. 4 (2004): 213–29, 226–27.

<sup>48</sup> Having also counted the number of stories each treasury in my collection allots to each princess, I can say that this product group did not change the results: the princesses of color, particularly Pocahontas and Mulan, remain noticeably underrepresented.