# GENDER SENSITIVE MESSAGES DELIVERED IN THE DISNEY MOVIE *FROZEN*

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## ABSTRACT

*In the era of information technology, electronic media are broadcasted throughout the world by far-reaching multinational companies. In that way, various forms of entertainment have become inseparable from children's daily lives. Due to their extensive presence, media may have considerable influence over children's development and behaviour. Naturally, media are expected to provide not only creative entertainments but also positive didactic messages for child viewers, including those under five (5) years old. Early age education practitioners can make use of the movies to introduce the child viewers to certain values such as relevant gender sensitive messages. Frozen (2013) is a movie which depicts female independent characters that do not pursue romance as their only life goal; instead, they prefer to stay together and keep their mutual love as sisters after a long journey full of adventures.In this preliminary study, the visual and narrative elements of the movie are studied in order to analyze the gender sensitive messages wrapped in entertaining styles. To some extent, themessages can also enhancefive different developmental domains of childrennamely social, physical, intellectual, creativity, and emotion development (in short, S.P.I.C.E.).Thus, watching the movie can bring benefits to child and adult viewers from the viewpoints of entertainment, education, and child development.*

***Keywords:*** *child development; gender-sensitive messages; Frozen movi*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this era of information technology, electronic media are broadcasted throughout the world by far-reaching multinational companies. In that way, various forms of entertainment have become inseparable from children's daily lives. Due to their extensive presence, media may have considerable influence over children's development and behavior. Naturally, media are expected to provide not only creative entertainments but also positive didactic messages for child viewers.

This preliminary study is intended as a kind of mini research which analyzes the Disney movie, namely, *Frozen* (2013). The movie has "shaken" the world since it has captured hearts and minds of child viewers and adults, brought effects on industries such as music and tourism, and, to some extent, aroused the opinion that the movie has "a pro-homosexual agenda" (*http://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/the-year-in-frozen-20141231*). However, this paper will focus on the movie as an example of Disney's post second-wave feminism movie where female characters appear significantly more independent without the obligation to pursue romance as their only life goals. The visual and narrative elements of the movie are studied in order to analyze the gender sensitive messages wrapped in entertaining styles which can be an educational media to introduce gender-sensitive messages to child viewers during their developmental stages.

## 2. OVERVIEW OF THE MOVIE

*Frozen* (2013) is a Disney movie with a storyline that revolves around its lead female characters, Elsa and Anna, who are sisters and princesses from the kingdom of Arendelle. *Frozen* details the adventure and transformation they must undergo following a serious mishap during Elsa's coronation day which threatens Arendelle's future. They encounter male characters who appear as potential heroes, but in the end, the sisters prove that they can rely on themselves in rescuing each other and their kingdom. It seems that*Frozen*(2013) offers an alternative and more gender-sensitive plot where female characters are supposed to find freedom in their journey to self-discovery, and the kind of true love that prevails above all is a love between sisters instead of a romantic love between opposite sexes.

## 3. GENDER SENSITIVE MESSAGES IN FROZEN (2013)

### 3.1 Disney's Stereotypical Gender Portrayal and *Frozen* (2013) as Disney's Attempt to Introduce a Gender-Sensitive Plot

Stover (2013) states that Disney and its princess characters are often criticized for promoting unrealistic body types and narrow ideals of marriage. Matyas also notes (11, 28) that Disney has been accused of creating only one-dimensional and stereotypical heroines so often that passivity and dependence become notable characteristics of Disney princesses. This biased portrayal is a source of 'significant fire from feminists' (Brydon, 2008, p.134), because as Hecht (2) explains, representations of female characters in the media play a role in influencing viewers' attitudes and beliefs about appropriate gender roles. As a result, repeated exposure to these negative gender representations may foster children's unhealthy view on women's societal roles.

*Frozen* can be seen as Disney's response to the criticism mentioned previously as stated by the following writers. Schager (2014, para. 4) praises*Frozen* for portraying 'women forging their own identities…whose goals have nothing to do with men or achieving some standard-issue happily ever after…' In the movie,Rosten (2013, para. 2) also discovers complete reversal and subversion of Disney Princess conventions' where the sisters are 'not saved by any men'.

In order to convey gender-sensitive and positive self-esteem messages, the movieemploys visual and narrative elements to reinforce those didactic ideas. Watching positive didactic ideas is especially crucial for young viewers, because as stated by Morawitz & Mastro (132, 138), in observational learning 'the more an individual likes the media models, the more likely he/she is to adopt the modeledbehavior', and through this young acquire appropriate gender roles, self-evaluative standards viewers can and beliefs.

*Frozen*'s plot features two lead female characters who are not damsels-in-distress in need of male rescuers. Rosten (2013 para. 2) supports this statement and emphasizes that '…The story from start to finish is the tale of two sisters'. The sisters have clashing personalities: the divine-like Elsa possesses tremendous supernatural power, and the worldly, freedom-loving Anna has none but is always in touch with reality. They are complete opposites of each other but almost inseparable and always ready to protect each other without needing any male character's help. In this way, without having to introduce a hero between them, they already fit the classic Disney couple description where 'one side of the couple is identified with reality, the other with the imaginary, divine, or unreal…' (Altman, 2013, p.154). *Frozen*'s gender-sensitive plot and its didactic ideas of female independence and positive self-esteem are detailed in the following part.

### 3.2 How *Frozen* (2013) Delivers and Reinforces Didactic Messages

Some of *Frozen*'s didactic messages are 1) one should never be afraid to embrace who

they truly are, 2) do not judge people by their appearances, and 3) true love may appear from an unexpected source. These messages are in line with the message carried by Disney's postmodern princesses: their character strength lies mainly in wit and passionate ideals instead of beauty (Stover, 2013) as their romance becomes more realistic and love is no longer their only goal (Hecht 56-57). These messages conform to Disney's aim to introduce a more gender-sensitive film featuring independent female characters on their road to self-discovery without any need for a Prince Charming rescuer.

The first didactic message, that one should never be afraid to embrace who they truly are, is delivered in Elsa's character development through the story, especially when she breaks into singing the film's main theme, 'Let It Go'. At the beginning of *Frozen*, Elsa and Anna are visually portrayed as fulfillments of the classic Disney princess mold where princesses and heroines are youthful, pretty, white and bourgeois (Brydon, 2008) and living in exotic and unrecognizable lands (Hill, 2007). Before, during, and shortly after coronation as the new Queen of Arendelle, Elsa is visualized in clothing and hairstyle which represent her isolation. She looks uncomfortable in a tight-fitting dress constraining her movements and long sleeves and gloves that all seem to be designed to oppress her power. Her hair is arranged in a perfect braid which symbolizes a situation where everything is measured for precision. Elsa's visual portrayal matches Do Rozario's observation (2004) regarding Disney princesses who struggle for autonomy and are uncomfortable in their own bodies.

Visualization of Elsa's life in the castle reinforces how unhappy she is with restrictions in her life. Once she inadvertently freezes Arendelle and escapes to the mountains, her characterization narrative shifts dramatically. While singing 'Let It Go' in the middle of snow-covered seemingly lifeless mountains, she looks happier than ever and gradually natural elements on the mountains respond to her presence positively. The entire snowy landscape comes to life eventually to accompany her singing and creates a magical castle which protects her. Elsa's escape and eventual discovery of freedom symbolizes a heroine's path of self-discovery and learning to embrace her unique personality (Matyas 23).

The scene where Elsa breathes life to Olaf - the snowman- signifies that her power can actually bring life. In this particular scene, she symbolizes some kind of earth-goddess whose touch creates life. By presenting Elsa's touch of life accompanied by her powerful song, Disney recognizes the role of women characters in folk musical as 'the source of life—the land, the mother,…who helps it grow and brings the new fruit forth' (Altman, 1989, p.317). The presentation of positive messages reinforced by lyrics in a song is an example of atmosphere narrative which conforms to Disney's understanding of the influence of music over impressionable young audience who 'will remember the messages in a powerful and lasting way' (Hill, 2007).

Eventually, Arendelle recovers from its winter after Elsa ceases her winter curse once she realizes that no matter what, Anna always genuinely loves her. Here, the visualization and narrative setting show Arendelle returning to its former glory once Elsa gains self-acceptance and recognition of Anna's unconditional love. Ellington (33) affirms this message as a manifestation of Disney's lesson that women should pursue what they desire because 'the best way to live life is to follow one's heart', and this conforms to the didactic message of embracing who you truly are.

The second message about not judging people from their appearances is closely related to how Hans' character, as Anna's suitor, is visually portrayed and narrated. Hans appears as an attractive Prince and a possible suitor for Anna. Fristly, he is physically described as a brave and handsome prince as most fairytale heroes do (Neikirk, 2009). His bravery is narrated through his decision to search for Elsa. He challenges her supernatural power under the pretext of rescuing Arendelle'speople and bringing the country to its former glory. His seemingly heroic acts conform to the observation that

Disney generally portrays men as natural 'rescuers who save the day' and rescue women (Towbinet.al., 2008). However, later in the film, Hans is revealed to be a power-hungry villain who wants to murder Elsa and to use Anna to usurp Arendelle's throne. He is a wicked Prince Charming. His visualization that does not comply with his narrative characterization reveals that Disney no longer maintains the beauty stereotype that '… attractive characters displayed higher intelligence, lower aggressiveness and greater moral virtue' (Bazzini et al., 2010, p. 2698). Meanwhile, Kristoff, who initially appears as an uneducated ice harvester who only helps Anna because of payment, is actually a dependable and good man. Kristoff's narrative characterization puts him in what Bruce (2007) categorizes as the third type of Disney's more developed prince who enables viewers to see his internal struggles and character growth. This reinforces the message that judging people from their appearances is not advisable. Hans' revelation as a villain in disguise is exactly the point because, as Burger explains in *Thoughts on Liberty* (2013), the movies is also about 'a cautionary tale about romance'.

The third message is about true love coming from an unexpected source which is visualized and plot-narrated by Anna's ordeal after Elsa accidentally freezes her heart. Informed that Anna can only be healed by an act of true love, Kristoff mistakenly returns her to Arendelle to receive Hans' kiss but Hans actually never loves Anna. Kristoff, who is revealed to be genuinely in love with Anna, rushes back to her rescue. Thus, viewers may expect that his kiss of true love will save Anna's life. Through dramatic visuals of Kristoff's rescue attempt through a snow storm, viewers are led to believe that *Frozen* portrays conventional female victimization where women are dependent on stronger males for their rescue (Neikirk, 2009). However, this visualization of Kristoff's rescue is flipped because finally Anna never needs his help. She independently rescues herself, Elsa, Kristoff and the entire Arendelle. The plot narration of Anna's heroism conforms to Hecht's research findings (42, 51) that more recent Disney princesses are characters having the most independent and wield power to rescue their suitors from harm. Mastro & Morawitz (133) assert that female friendships can be more supportive than male friendships with female friendships, and this portrayal shows important positive role models for adolescents and young adults. The visual elements in the following picture can illustrate how the close friendship between Anna and Elsamakes Kristoff an outsider.

The gender-sensitive messages and other didactic messages need to be introduced to child viewers during their developmental stages to develop self-esteem, creativity, and open-mindedness among children, especially girls. The following part will describe and discuss the stages of child development and



**Figure 1. A Movie Clip that Depicts how Anna and Elsamake Kristoff an Outsider**

(source:http://freedomhunger.blogspot.com/2014/03/recovery-lessons-from-frozen.html)

how Frozen can be used to enrich the children psychologically and socially during their development.

## 4. CHILD DEVELOPMENT

### 4.1 Early Childhood Education

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is the act of teaching individuals who are in early youth ranges from birth until eight years. That age span consists of the most remarkable and pivotal stages in life. As stated by National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), it spans the human life from birth to eight years. Early childhood, as indicated by Bear and Johnston (2008), frequently focuses on learning through playing done by kids. As indicated by UNESCO's Early Childhood Care and Education Unit (ECCE), early childhood is characterized as the period from birth to around eight years of age which is a period of critical mental health. These years establish the framework for subsequent learning. Templeton (2004) expresses that specialists in the field and early childhood teachers both perspective the parents as Early Childhood Education takes numerous structures relying upon the convictions of the education or parents. A great part of the initial two years of life are spent in the formation of a child's first "feeling of self" or the developing of their first character. This is an essential piece of kids' make-up how they first see themselves, how they think they should function, how they anticipate that others will work in connection to them.

For this reason, early care must confirm that, in addition to, employing carefully selected and trained caretakers, programme policy must emphasize links with family, home culture, and home language. This policy implies that caregiver must uniquely care for each child using developmentally appropriate practice care to support families rather than a substitute for them. Yusuf (2010) adds that if a young child does not receive sufficient nurturing, nutrition, parental/ caregiver interaction, and stimulus during this crucial period, the child may be left with a developmental deficit that hinders his or her success in preschool, kindergarten/nursery, and beyond. Therefore, children must receive attention and affection needed to develop in a healthier manner.

The objectives of early childhood education according to the National Policy on Education (2007) are 1) affect a smooth transition from home to the school, 2) prepare children for the primary level of education, 3) provide adequate care and supervision for children while their parents are at work, farms or market, etc., 4) inculcate social norms in them, 5) inculcate in children the spirit of inquiry and creativity through the exploration of native and local environment, playing with toys, doing artistic and musical activities, etc., 6) teach co-operation and team spirit, 7) teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, shapes and colours, through play, and 8) teach good habits, especially good health habits.

According to Yusuf (2010), these goals are praiseworthy; however, a considerable measure must be done to accomplish them. For instance, secondary school kids in Nigeria are in a basic phase of their advancement. Along these lines, she focused on that they should be occupied with figuring a self-idea, setting up a character, creating word related aptitudes and mindfulness, and experiencing challenges in the realm of instruction accomplishment. Teachers must give the privilege and convenient help to empower the kids build up the world-related skills that will make him/ her feasible in the society (P. 47-49).

Research has demonstrated that half of a person'sintelligence potential is produced by the age of four and that early childhood involvement can lastingly affect intellectual capacity, personality, and social behaviour (Rubinstein and Pederson, 1995). In this manner, early childhood is a period where environment really has vital effects on deciding how the mind and focal sensory system develops and creates.

There are five different developmental domains of children which all relate to one another and they can be referred to as the SPICE of life:

- **Social** domain which refers mostly to the ability to form attachment, play with others, co-operation and sharing, and being able to create lasting relationship with others.
- **Physical** domain where the development of five and Gross motor skills take place.
- **Intellectual** domain which deals with the process of making sense of the world around them.
- **Creative** domain which relates to the development of special abilities creating talents. Music, Art, Writing, Reading, and singing are all ways for creative development to take place.
- **Emotional** domain which deals with the development of self-awareness, self-confidence, and coping with feelings as well as understanding them.

Being exposed to and engaging in developmentally appropriate practice can have profound effects on the way that a child develops in all five of these domains.

Media, specifically, electronic media, has picked up an amazingly ubiquitous presence in the lives of the children around the world. Research conducted by Vygotsky (1961) on the learning of North American and European kids has found that as much as 80% of information they pick up by the age of 11 is learnt from the media outside the classroom. In short, media can and should be incorporated both in the sense of environment and of pedagogy into a more broad setting of child development since children learn by listening, speaking, reading, writing and viewing (media) more and more. The times of just confining children's media use for fear that it hinders character development are over. With children utilizing media for everything from playtime to figuring out how to communicate, it is important that parents utilize these chances to reinforce children's social-emotional development.

A standout amongst the most vitally important media that influence childhood development is movies or motion pictures. Today numerous magnificent motion pictures demonstrating a wide range of differing qualities are promptly accessible. Motion pictures affect youthful kids (Narahara, 1998). The main characters in the motion picturesshould, therefore, contribute good examples and meanings of masculinity and femininity for kids. Since kids are dynamic and critical viewers, movies and their animated graphic turn into a social asset for them to learn social norms (Jackson, 2007). Images or characters in movies can create positive or negative emotions in young children, and when children understand their peers' cultural traditions they are more likely to form a more positive perspective of themselves and others (Nahl & Bilal, 2007). Since the characters are more developed, individuals have a tendency to become moreemotionally bonded to the characters and storylines. Children's movies from several years ago (including Disney movies) also displayed well-developed characters, and those characters had a tendency to have a more profound emotional meaning to their viewers.

As stated previously, numerous young children relate themselves with Disney movies. The characters in Disney movies are frequentlywell-developed, and they are inspiring young admirers. Numerous children watch these motion pictures again and again until they memorize the dialogues and melodies in them. Positively, Disney motion pictures can reinforce kids'literacy, communication, critical thinking and adapting abilities (Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, Tanner, 2004). However, almost all of Disney motion pictures comprise of a hero and a romantic dream which should be watched and enjoyed proportionally by child viewers so that they can be utilized by parents, teachers, or adults to support child S.P.I.C.E. development.

Despite the fact that movies cannot substitute for firsthand contact with persons of diverse groups, they can surely develop and widen their understanding. Early childhood experts may observe kids' motion pictures to be one way to seeing, understanding, and tolerating the rich assortment and uniqueness of persons (Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, Tanner, 2004). As opposed to imagining

that the distinctions among us do not exist, motion pictures help children find what is comparable and diverse among persons and groups of persons.

## 4.2 How *Frozen* can be an Educational Media to Deliver Gender-sensitive Messages

As elaborated in the previous part, movie is considered an essential media that can help children build up their identity, intellectual and social aptitudes. In order to convey gender-sensitive and positive self-esteem messages, *Frozen* employs visual and narrative elements to reinforce those ideas as in line with the idea of five different developmental domains of children, S.P.I.C.E. It can be seen from the elements that run through the whole movie that this is a film where the two main characters are both female, and how those female characters are drawn in exaggerated proportions and dominating roles. It should be noted that in this paper, the important idea is not whether or not *Frozen* is actually a feminist movie or promoting stereotypesbut it is the idea that children can be noticing how the sexes are portrayed in films and then forming (and defending) their opinion. To get clearer understanding on how Frozen can be an educational media to deliver gender-sensitive messages, more elaboration is presented below.

### 4.2.1 Social Aspect

In this realm children learn to play with others and form attachments, and they begin to cooperate and share with each other. *Frozen* can help reinforce these aspects of social development because there is a give and take that goes on. Much has been made from the role of the two main characters in *Frozen*, Princess Elsa and Princess Anna. Some praise Disney for finally breaking out of the traditional helpless-princess-waiting-for-her-prince stereotype, whereas others blast the film for teaching children (girls in particular) that heroines are always beautiful, helpless without a man, and mostly just out to find their prince. In *Frozen*, Anna acts like a prince who needs to save his Princess (Elsa). She is bravely facing the sword swung by Hans in order to save Elsa. At the end of their struggle, they give each other love's kiss-the love of a sister, not a man, being the important distinction. It is clear that true love is not always found with a man, as many fairy tales teach, but can be found in any other person, regardless of gender.



**Figure 2. A Movie Clip that Depicts how Anna is Bravely Facing the Sword Swung by Hans in Order to Save Elsa.**

### 4.2.2 Physical Aspect

In *Frozen*, Anna is found running wildly, jumping here and there, and is quirky, playful, and a little bit awkward, in the most charming

way. This is not, at any point, a story about a frail girl being saved by a noble man. Her attitudes and manners break traditional, antiquated female and princess gender roles of Disney movies. She also has no fear, which is necessarily possessed by men. She is okay by jumping into a cliff, even jumps right before the male character (Kristoff).

Societypresumes that the issue of sexism primarily relates to girls because girls tend to grow up thinking that the only thing that matters is their appearance. However, through this movie, childrenare taught to express whoever they want to be or whatever they want to do, whether it conforms to traditional roles or not as long as they convey good deed and what they do can provide positive impact on others. Additionally, as caregivers to children, parents should model egalitarian activities at home that reinforce gender equality. For example, a man can be a nurturing caregiver and a woman can do chores that require physical power. This reinforces the message that judging people from their appearances is not advisable; labelling that girls arealways weaker than boys in all aspects is not advisable too. In the movie, Prince Anna is, indeed, the heroine not Hans nor Kristoff.




**Figure 3. A Movie Clip that Depicts how Anna Deals with Wolves with a Bundle of Fire**

### 4.2.3 Intelligent Aspect

This aspect is where children start developing and discovering that they have special abilities, which can turn into talents as they grow. In the movie, Anna knows how to deal with wolves when she and Kristoff encounter some wolves during their sled-trip. She hits one of wolves with a bundle of fire. She also knows how to deal with rope (throwing the axe tied with rope to save Kristoff). It shows that anyone (not only boys) should develop their critical thinking and problem-solving ability which can help them when they encounter difficult time.

### 4.2.4 Creative Aspect

Creativity relates to any kinds of art, including music. Music is a great way to help kids learn. They begin to associate songs with actions, and it makes the actions more fun to do. As in *Frozen*'s themesong, *Let it Go*, the lyric "*be the good girl that you always have to be*" is one of the lines in the song. That piece of lyric reinforces the idea of being happy and free.

Different tones, musical patterns, simple and repetitive but meaningful lyrics, beautiful music arrangements composed in seven songs can be enjoyed while watching the movie. Children can see colorful backgrounds dominated by cool colors to match "frozen" situations, listen to songs, watch the actions and movements of the characters, and feel the whole atmosphere built harmoniously in the movie. To notice colors, shapes, sounds, textures can activate the right side of human

brain where creativity is developed. This development can encourage kids todiscover colors, shapes, and shapes in their environment and construct meaning out of them, and arts educationcan nourish this development. Even if the child does not grow up to be an "artist", the creativity and skills that are developed in an arts education are transferrable.

male trait, not female. This example strongly supports the hegemony. The first impression of Elsa was that she was this strong and independent female character even though Elsa is a female, she is still taking on the characteristics of a male role. It is important to recognize that the concept of hegemony applied to Frozen represents expectations,




**Figure 3. A Movie Clip that Depicts how Elsa Sings *Frozen*'s Theme Song "Let it Go"**

#### 4.2.5 Emotional Aspect

In this realm, children become self-aware and learn to build confidence, while learning to cope with and understand their feelings. As in *Frozen*, a recurring statement taught to Elsa by her father reinforces the hegemonic portrayals: "*conceal- don't feel*". The writers encountered this phrase at least five times throughout the film. It was first stated by Elsa's father when she was a child as he gave her gloves to protect and hide her powers. This statement reiterates the typically male characteristics in Disneymovies that men and boysare supposed to express their emotions physically or violently instead of emotionally (Towbin, et al., 2008). Men and boys are not supposed to show their emotions, and that is clearly what Elsa's father has taught her to do as well. As stated before: "[boys] never show their emotions, and they die with their boots on," (Larson, 2013, p. 271). Aside from Elsa portraying very stoic characteristics, she also acts violently in the film when she does show her emotions, which is characteristically a

perceptions, and "is a lived system of meaning and values" (Goldman, 1982, p. 364).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Frozen (2013) is a form of modern entertainment created to deliver both entertaining and didactic messages. It is entertaining in the way that it is portrayed artistically and vividly as always the case of Disney movies, and it can be used as a tool to introduce gender-sensitive messages which are also in line with the five different developmental domains of children (S.P.I.C.E). These gender sensitive messages can be introduced to child viewers since they will be citizens of "a global village" where encounters with and experiences in various cultures cannot be denied in which self-respect and mutual respect are equally important as well as open-mindedness. However, the gender-sensitive messages should be introduced carefully by considering many aspects. Despite its shortcomings, the movie proves that

Disney kingdom is now 'a man's world dependent on a princess' (Do Rozario, 2004).

Frozen's themes are deep and beautiful. It reclaims the concept of true love saving the day, recasting it for the 21st century in a way that makes the caring heart of a woman as powerful as the sword of her prince. The movie completely shares nice scenerio for some feminists, that the main characters act bravely, make a decision, and do not want to be held back by the male characters. Although the movie offers sly commentary on its own genre, with lots of fun being poked at Anna's immediate engagement to handsome prince Hans and Kristoff being slightly sarcastic, but it never reaches such a disaster. *Frozen* is, at heart, an exceptionally excellent version of the classic Disney cartoon musical.

Huge number of people who watch this movie could quibble about the action finale, but Frozen wraps that up in an inspired way that touched everyone deeply. In the end, it is a wonderfully girl-powered story which melted every frozen heart.

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