

Rollins College

## Rollins Scholarship Online

---

Honors Program Theses

---

Spring 2020

# Unlearning Disney: Developing a Feminist Identity while Critiquing Disney Channel Original Movies

Maura Leaden  
mleaden@rollins.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.rollins.edu/honors>



Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Leaden, Maura, "Unlearning Disney: Developing a Feminist Identity while Critiquing Disney Channel Original Movies" (2020). *Honors Program Theses*. 108.  
<https://scholarship.rollins.edu/honors/108>

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by Rollins Scholarship Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Program Theses by an authorized administrator of Rollins Scholarship Online. For more information, please contact [rwalton@rollins.edu](mailto:rwalton@rollins.edu).

UNLEARNING DISNEY:  
DEVELOPING A FEMINIST IDENTITY WHILE CRITIQUING DISNEY CHANNEL  
ORIGINAL MOVIES

Maura Leaden

A Senior Honors Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
Requirements of the Honors Degree Program

May 2020

Faculty Sponsor: Steven Schoen

**Rollins College**  
Winter Park, Florida

## Table of Contents

- ❖ **3...Introduction**
  - Statement of purpose
  - Reflexivity
  
- ❖ **8...Literature Review**
  - Disney princesses
  - The ‘tween’ music industry & commodifying female value
  - Media influences gender identity
  
- ❖ **16...Methodology**
  - Textual analysis
  - Autoethnography
  - Limitations of autoethnography
  - Research process- Inductive approach
  
- ❖ **21...Interlude**
  - Situating my feminist identity
  - Family ties
  
- ❖ **33...Gender & False Female Empowerment**
  - Beauty & Gender identity
  - False female empowerment
  - Innocent maiden vs. sinister witch
  - Performing the ‘innocent maiden’
  - Male vs. female reactions
  - Mitchie finds power in a relationship
  
- ❖ **46...Sexuality**
  - Compulsory heterosexuality- Childhood crushes, *Autoethnography*
  - Performing ‘the sinister witch’
  - Rejection of female sexuality
  - Cheetah Girls – Limited sexuality, compulsory heterosexuality
  - Boyfriend blues, *Autoethnography*
  
- ❖ **57...Emotions & Mental Health**
  - “When There Was Me and You”- Displaced emotions
  
- ❖ **61...Conclusion**
  
- ❖ **64...References**

## Introduction

Disney Channel Original Movies, or DCOM as they will be referred to throughout my paper have been embedded in many American childhoods. For me and most of my friends growing up, they were watched repeatedly and obsessed over. We spent many hours learning the lyrics of each song (a majority of the most popular movies were musicals). After we memorized them, we would perform the songs for hours on end. It wasn't just me and my friends. The premiere of *High School Musical* in 2006 garnered 7.7 million viewers, a then record for the Disney Channel Original Movies (Caulfield, K., 2016), and its soundtrack was the top-selling album of the year when it came out (Bickford, 2012).

In this thesis, I will be studying how these Disney Channel Original Movies have interacted with my identity and my peer group identity by applying feminist and critical theories. I will be using my personal experiences as qualitative data in the form of autoethnography. "Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience" (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, p. 273). I will also use textual analysis to study the messages embedded into each soundtrack's songs which also have shaped the way I perform my female gender identity while imitating my role models.

The films I will study are *The Cheetah Girls* (2003), the *High School Musical* (HSM) movies (2006, 2007, and 2008—these three franchise films were released in three years, consecutively), and *Camp Rock* (2008). They have become important cultural texts due to their ongoing presence in the Disney Channel Original Movie canon (DCOM films are now available on Disney +, the Disney streaming service), and because of their initial popularity in which they raked up some of the highest viewing numbers in the history of the channel. On the film's

premiere nights, *The Cheetah Girls* had 6.5 million viewers (Dempsey, 2008), HSM2 is still the most viewed film in the history of the channel with over 17 million viewers on its premiere night (“Ratings Record,” 2007), and *Camp Rock* came in at 8.9 million viewers (Littleton, 2008).

Since Disney Channel began catering to tween entertainment in 1997, it has capitalized on the idealization of postfeminist girlhood and has positioned its characters and audience “as young-women-in-training” (Blue, 2017).

### **Statement of Purpose**

This project will study the construction of female gender identity in a few of the most popular DCOM films, while also arguing that the media interacted with my own development of identity and character as a young girl from approximately ages 5-10 years old. I will be analyzing these texts with the framework of postfeminism, which has come to fruition after the third wave of feminism in the 1990s. A lot of the films being produced within this time period promote ‘girl-power’ and a female’s ability to create her own narratives, yet they are still ruled by underlying patriarchal narratives. “Postfeminism encourages girls and women to accept patriarchy and find it pleasurable...Through sexual subjectification, women are taught that their power is rooted in physical appearance and sexuality, and are encouraged to objectify themselves for a false sense of agency (Cox & Decarvalho, 2016, p. 10). In this paper, I will describe how this is at work in these DCOM movies.

While there have been many analyses and critiques of classic Disney feature-films such as *Snow White* (1938), *Cinderella* (1950), and even more modern premieres like *Frozen* (2013) and *Moana* (2016) (England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011; Heatwole, 2016; Hine, Ivanovic, & England, 2018), there is a gap in the scholarship and understanding of how films produced by

the Disney Channel (rather than Walt Disney Studio feature films) shape children's gender schemas. And this gap may be especially significant because DCOM movies, with their tween-targeted songs, merchandising and marketing, constituted a kind of cultural milieu for girls like me and my friends.

The cult-following of these movies resulted in *High School Musical* being turned into a school play performed around the United States, DVDs for purchase, soundtracks sales for each film, and even solo music careers for a few of the stars from these films. Disney actively moved its audience beyond viewers to fans engulfed in an immersive fandom (Blue, 2016). The legacy of Disney Channel and DCOM movies continues with the 2019 dawn of the Disney + streaming service. A whole new generation of audiences are now able to watch these films and pick up on the messaging written into the films and accompanying songs and products with their scripts for the performance of gender (Wohlwend, 2009).

### **Reflexivity**

As a feminist scholar, it is critical that I address the perspectives and limits of my own subject position within this project. Reflexivity can be described as “a process by which [researchers] recognize, examine, and understand how their social background, location, and assumptions can influence the research” (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 3). Since the inspiration for this project grew out of personal interest, I come to this project with a lot of insight, but also a lot of baggage. I have a very long history with the Walt Disney World company, and I am still an active consumer of their products as a college student going to school in Orlando, Florida. My involvement with the company was even greater when I was a tween myself. Between the ages of 5 to 13, I enthusiastically watched the Disney Channel and participated in its culture and

consumerism by buying the CDs and DVDs that accompanied my favorite television shows and DCOM movies.

I also engaged in roleplay, in which I would pretend to be these characters. This early involvement with roleplaying as a child points to the need for feminist analysis of my media habits growing up, because they certainly influenced my current female gender identity: Driscoll (2013) called roleplay one of the “greatest concerns in feminist critiques of girls’ sexualisation” (p. 292). Specifically, “commodified forms of young gender roleplay deemed to be hyper-feminine... and associated images of girl-as-beautifully-innocent-ideal-object [like] ‘tween’ culture that seek to imitate ‘teen’ fashions and desires” (p. 292). Since I did participate in this gendered roleplay of the hyperfeminine realm as a child, I am coming into this research from a biased background. In this research, I will have to contradict some of the things I was socialized to love as a child. My 8-year-old friends and I would imitate teen desires by playing make-believe games where we would carefully describe what we wanted each other to imagine that we looked like (pretty, of course) and pretend that we had boyfriends.

Therefore, based on my past, some of my data may be biased and based in emotion. I was raised in a home-environment that did not question the teachings of Disney, so in investigating this research, I am engaging in my first attempts to resist Disney’s narratives. For me, Disney is still a treasured vacation spot; however, completing this research has given me a more complex perspective and a kind of defense mechanism. I will be less likely to fall blindly into the narratives dispelled by Disney. I cannot as easily fall under the spell of the storylines anymore. The feminist research considered in this project creates counter-narratives to the ‘once upon a time’ and ‘happily ever after’ storylines that Disney is known for, and they have inspired a new

way to engage with media. And as a feminist and scholar, these counter narratives are also part of my identity.

Besides my upbringing, my individual identity aligns in other ways with the Disney ideal. I am a white, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class, and able-bodied female. When I watched the shows growing up, I did not notice any type of representation missing. I saw myself represented on the screen, and so I did not question who might be excluded. It was ‘normal’ to me. I did not have exposure or interpersonal interaction with individuals that contradicted this world of white, cisgender, and heterosexual ‘normalcy’. Because of this legacy, when I began my own critique for this paper, I did have an honest struggle. A lot of representation and diversity was missing from it, but since the time I had been consuming it, it looked fine to me—therefore, I did not pause to think about the other narratives I was missing out on. I did not think of the varying identities and world issues outside of my own ‘bubble’ and the one that was reflected back to me on the television. My worldview as a child was not necessarily expanded by the media I consumed because I was a direct product of the idealized Disney narratives.

I did not truly comprehend alternative narratives or ways of life until I came to college and had the chance to develop interpersonal relationships with community members who were different from me in almost every way: political beliefs, gender identity, sexual orientation, etc. It wasn’t really until I started taking classes presenting alternative experiences and narratives in my sophomore, junior, and senior years of college that I was exposed to critical and feminist theory. It was a real awakening to me, and I believe that it led me to this research. I had a sense that these new theoretical perspectives might help me better understand the cultural forces that shaped me, and in some ways might continue to constrain me.

In completing this research, I was determined to revisit my childhood innocence and try to understand why I had not yet flourished to the self I desired, and that seemed authentic to the college identity I was working toward. Instead of truly finding my voice and passions in college, I was hung up on finding a boyfriend, wondering why had I not had the courage to find my own true voice yet, and why I was so timid and shy? Of course, these struggles cannot all be blamed on the postfeminist narratives presented in Disney Channel Original Movies, but perhaps there was a connection—a piece in the puzzle—if I could just figure it out.

In performing this research, I had to turn my head from my childhood adoration of these characters and re-examine my appreciation. I had to face my own privilege. I had to explore media through a feminist lens, which I had not done in-depth prior to this research. I had to notice what was left out of the DCOM world. It was a true learning experience for me.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Disney films, and particularly Disney films through the lens of critical, feminist and queer theory, have been the subject of scholarly investigation for years now. For example, see studies by Heatwole (2016), Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo (2009), and Hine, Ivanovic, & England, (2018) which introduce the scope and variety of this literature by questioning Disney's continued celebration of outdated and submissive princesses like Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty, point out the aggressive heterosexuality present in children's animation, and explore how new Disney films such as *Moana* (2016) introduce an androgynous female character, yet fails to make her pass as a "princess" in the likes of Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty.

For the purposes of this study, I will limit the review here to key themes within Disney scholarship and other related media studies literature that resonate particularly deeply with the texts I am examining and my methodological approaches. To begin, Disney's first film was released less than a century ago, in 1938, when *Snow White* premiered. Since then, Disney has managed to produce a market so extensive that their princess movies alone have become a cultural phenomenon and even their own franchise (Heatwole, 2016).

### **Disney princesses**

These Disney princess films dominate children's media, construct a product consumerism around themselves (England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011, p. 555), and through the behaviors and social roles displayed by the leading female characters, map the coordinates of a very post-feminist notion of femininity (Heatwole, 2016). Common traits displayed by these princesses have been described as, "affectionate, helpful, troublesome, fearful, tentative, and described as pretty" (England, Descartes, Collier-Meek, 2011, p. 562).

One of the most iconic princesses, *Cinderella* (1950), is critiqued by scholars because the film demonstrates and reinforces patriarchal pre-feminist American ideology. *Cinderella* echoes the values of an era before feminism, where women were often reduced to their ability to please a man through marriage (Heatwole, 2016). Cinderella performs her femininity as usefulness and personal attractiveness: being hard working, having self-control, and 'adhering to the ideal' as her way to grab the attention and desire of the man of her dreams (Prince Charming). Heatwole (2016) criticizes this film for teaching women to be passive, especially when it is still being viewed, idealized, and even performed by modern women who are living in a time after the third wave of feminism and still waiting for their prince to come. "The Disney Princess line...[robs]

the presumed audience of otherwise clear shifts away from the pre-second-wave visions of girlhood in the early Disney princess films and even away from those partly shaped by the emergence of postfeminist discourse” (Heatwole, 2016).

We can see the narratives of Disney princesses start to change with the times as cultural movements like second-wave feminism take hold in the 1980s and increase a woman’s capacity for opportunity. *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Little Mermaid* (1989), and *Pocahontas* (1995) have narratives of choice, self-knowledge, and rebellion (Heatwole, 2016), yet they still do not offer enough of an empowerment and active-choice for women because these actions are invariably done with the help of a man (Heatwole, 2016).

Still later, another wave of more modernized Disney princesses came about in which new princesses and narratives developed. Despite less narrowly gendered characters like Moana from *Moana* (2016) and Merida From *Brave* (2012), scholars showed that children don’t identify these characters as Disney princesses. The princess trope still very strongly exists as the original Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty who represent very traditional, passive women from an era before the feminist movement emerged. They are represented as the original princesses with gowns and castles. *Tangled* (2010), *Brave* (2012), *Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Frozen* (2013), and *Moana* (2016) are the most recent films, with *Brave*, *Frozen*, and *Moana* pushing the narratives even further, leaving the princesses without any love interest at all. It is interesting how the characteristics of each princess and ‘leading-lady’ have changed over time for the Disney Company. England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek (2011) praise Princess Tianna for being career-oriented in *Princess and the Frog* (2009) when she opens her own restaurant, and Hine, Ivanovic, & England (2018) celebrate Elsa from *Frozen* (2013), and Moana for their independently heroic actions without any princes in sight.

Today's most recent princesses, like Moana and Elsa, express passion, independence, and sisterly love rather than romantic love (Hine, Ivanovic, & England, 2018). However, released in 2016 and 2013, respectively, these were premiered way after the DCOM movies that this research will be focusing on, which were released in 2006-2008. When these DCOM movies came out and I was between ages 5 and 10 years old, there were not many Disney Princess movies being made.

### **The 'tween' music industry & commodifying female value**

Following the explosion of Disney Princess movies in the 1990s with the release of *Pocahontas* (1995), *Mulan* (1998), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), and *Tarzan* (1999), Disney found another way to capture young girls' attention, and make money, through the dawn of the modernized pop princesses like The Cheetah Girls and Hannah Montana on their newly kid-focused network, The Disney Channel. Disney Channel was founded in the 1980s and turned 'tween' focused in 1997. They quickly started signing some of the child actors onto their record label (Sterngold, 1997). With the company's ability to expand content across the company's divisions, Robert Iger, chief executive of Disney, called this "the 'Disney Difference'":

Miley Cyrus, for example, produced a "Hannah Montana" soundtrack CD that sold 8 million copies worldwide, performed in a sold-out summer concert tour, inspired games for the Nintendo DS hand-held and Wii consoles that have sold more than 1.7 million units, and made special appearances on Disney's website (Chmielewski, 2008).

The company's consumer products division revenue went up by 29% in 2008 (to arrive at \$870 million), and its operating income increased by 38% (arriving at \$322 million). They credited

this to the success of the television series, *Hannah Montana*, *High School Musical*, and *High School Musical 2* (Chmielewski, 2008).

Disney has experienced great financial success and global influence. Disney is one of the largest media conglomerates in existence, reaching across multiple industries and channels. With a revenue of \$55 billion in 2017, Disney was “the country’s second-largest entertainment company after Comcast” (Zeitchik, 2018). They have Disney Channel, Disney XD, ABC, Freeform, ESPN, Marvel, etc. This is what adds to the pervasive element of their presence. By leveraging their assets to create ‘pop princesses’ out of their young female actresses, Disney began to re-write what success meant for girls all across the globe.

The ‘modern pop princesses’ of Disney Channel receive fame, financial success, acclaim, (royalty, you might say), and become role models for millions of young girls. The network’s emphasis on the commodification of these actresses’ fame and celebrity-status translates into an understanding that they are valued for their ability to perform and gain a following; therefore, their intrinsic value comes from what others think of them, not themselves. Blue (2016) writes that the pop-star persona that these characters embody demonstrates a:

Cultural shift toward envisioning girls as confident, energetic, assertive, and hyperfeminine (i.e., ‘can-do’) multitalents. The Walt Disney Company has helped produce this shift just as it has benefitted from the reification of celebrity that demands girls’ greater public visibility and desire to perform accordingly. (p. 176)

These females were seen as successful due to their commodified talent—that is what brought them appreciation and value. Therefore, society and viewers began placing value on the *image*, not the individuals behind the content. This robs young girls of individuality and demands that everyone live up to the same standard of hyperfemininity. The Disney mediascape and continued

marketing and commodification of the child actors' creative content imagines and sells "a universal girlhood that can continually be accessed again via consumption" (Heatwole, 2016).

However, the perceived talent might not have even been the biggest thing to bring these females value. The on-screen heterosexual romantic relationships (minus the sexuality/ and overt physicality) that they engaged in on-screen, and especially those glorified in the tween tabloids, link fame, success, and heterosexual identity for young women fans, and tell them that they need to have a man in their lives to be valued. This fits into the postfeminist ideal of 'having it all' – having success, fame, *and* a boyfriend.

Even if girls do not have boyfriends, Disney Channel still encourages them to find their value in other places besides themselves. *Hannah Montana* (2006), a 'pop princess' who had her own television show on the network following the success of The Cheetah Girls, has a few love interests throughout the show, but she is always nervous that they will not accept her identity since she has a secret (Hannah Montana is only her celebrity façade. In 'real life' she is just normal Miley Stewart). Bickford (2015) offers a postfeminist reading of *Hannah Montana* by analyzing that even if Hannah's number-one relationship isn't with a man, she is still fraught over her friendships:

Miley's friendship, on the other hand, looks more like the romances in those postfeminist dramas: it is a deeply felt, emotionally fraught, and intensely valued relationship whose stability and continuity is desired but, despite all Lilly's protests to the contrary, clearly *not* assured. Instead, it is vulnerable and demands continually reaffirmation. Just as the postfeminist singleton's difficulty attaining a satisfying intimate life is thematized by the precariousness of romance, here a parallel desire for satisfying intimacy in childhood is staged around the precariousness of best friendship (p. 75).

Clearly, women cannot attain a satisfying intimate life if they do not have friends or romance.

### **Media influences gender identity**

Children come to understand who they are and their options for acting in the world through observing others and imitating the behavior they see. This is supported by scholarship ranging from cultivation theory and the Gender Schema Theory to Judith Butler's (1990) theory of performativity. Cultivation theory "proposes that visual media, such as television and film, may provide a particularly powerful vehicle to help develop concepts regarding social behavior and norms" (Hine, Ivanovic, & England, 2018, p. 2). According to the Gender Schema Theory, it is not just social behaviors and norms that young viewers learn. These behaviors are specifically coded for gender, typically within the binary meaning masculine or feminine gender. "Children develop beliefs about the world based on their interpretations of observations and experiences...which they then internalize into their own cognitive frameworks (or schemas)" (Hine, Ivanovic, & England, 2018, p. 2). These theories indicate that we build our own reality, but that our options are limited because we base our patterns of thinking on the environments/experiences that we are exposed to.

From these schemas, we develop our own identity. Furthermore, identity, especially as it is shaped by gender, is more than just a mental construct. Identity is enacted. Butler (1990) argues that we don't develop our gender until we perform it by imitating others. This is when gender identity takes shape and becomes consequential and meaningful in the lives of children, in the doing. Therefore, the context of this identity formation takes place within a profoundly social context. In the contemporary world, this context is also deeply enmeshed with media texts.

Karen Wohlwend (2009) writes about the production of identity for young girls playing with Disney princesses. Her ethnographic study of a Kindergarten class found that children reenact and even police playtime so that their playmates stick to the narratives portrayed in Disney films. Wohlwend identified themes in young girls' play from 3-5 years old that included preoccupied attention to four emergent themes: "Beauty, a focus on clothing and accessories, princess body movements, and exclusion of boys" (Hine, et. al., p. 3). By play-acting and embodying the gender they see in Disney films, kids learn that beauty is important for females/feminine identity, and females re-enact/perform this in response—like the dutiful viewers that they are.

Wohlwend (2009) was particularly concerned with the accessibility and actually pervasiveness of the Disney princess narrative—how it comes into the world after children see it on their TVs at home. In today's commodified world, kids can become their favorite characters after watching them on the screen, and not just through re-creating their actions. "The pervasive availability of consumer products associated with the Disney Princess films blurs the line between play and reality, allowing children to live in-character" (p. 2). Driscoll (2013) supports this. As referenced previously, she says that the most harmful stereotypes which feminist critics should be sure to engage with are roleplay games where girls are made out to be hyperfeminine princesses (or fairies) who are most worried looking pretty. Roleplay should be managed with some caution because young children are imitating a gender performance that they probably do not know much about—other than that they are supposed to be either the girl or the boy. The stylized actions that they imitate based on the character's gender might not reflect who the child truly is or who they want to be. The historically limited agency of the Disney Princesses automatically limits the children's power and agency if they imitate them in their play-time. And

based on Judith Butler's (1990) theory of performativity, this innocent imitation—might turn into a longer-lasting gender identity shaped by the limited-agency roles that girls engaged in during their playtime. My own imitations of DCOM characters and themes shaped my early perspectives on how I should and did enact my own femininity.

## **Methodology**

In this project, I will combine textual analysis of DCOM song lyrics with autoethnography, a rich revisiting of my understanding of the surroundings and culture as my identity as a young girl was shaped by my upbringing, and is now informed by critical and feminist theory. I will practice autoethnography to write evocative, accessible narrative inquiry and use my own experience with DCOMs as qualitative data revealing how I, as a young girl, saw the world after interacting with these films and their soundtracks. Autoethnography can be an especially useful way to study the deep level interactions of media texts with identity formation (Stern, 2013; Boylorn, 2008). By combining the capacity of autoethnography to explore the personal impact of media texts, and critical feminist textual analysis as a way to explore cultural patterns, I strive to bring new insights into the ways DCOM media has worked to shape, and often limit, modern notions of femininity.

## **Textual analysis**

Textual analysis is a well-used methodological tool in media studies because it is helpful to interpret how texts work to shape the world-view of its consumers. "Discourse defines reality," (McKee, 2001), therefore, textual analysis wagers that what people hear and see in the media (what they consume) starts to shape their worldview. They may also begin to imitate what

they hear on TV. In the case of my project, young kids imitate the music they learn in the movies by singing the songs repetitively. In other words, we learn how to act based on the media we consume. Textual analysis also allows us to interpret patterns in the media we consume. “Texts provide insight into the intentions, beliefs, values, and norms of any given culture” (Duvall, 2012, p. 388). In dominant texts such as these DCOM movies, the text both reflects and shapes the viewer’s culture. The DCOM movies I’m studying garnered millions of views on the premiere nights alone.

With this tool, we can analyze the “hegemonic representations of gender, race, class, and sexuality” (Duvall, 2012, p. 388) in our texts. Hegemonic representations can be described in this case as the descriptions of gender that are used so often that they become normalized and they get consumed without question. For example, focusing on heterosexual relationships, showing that girls like to shop, showing boys participating in basketball—these are all examples of hegemonic expectations of gender. They become reproduced as unquestioned realities, which continue the presences of hegemonic values (Duvall, 2012).

When performing textual analysis, we should consider the stereotypes we see playing out on the screen and what kind of hegemonic ideologies are being perpetuated. In order to do this, we can ask questions like, what is the character’s role? Specifically, to study the representation of women, we ask questions like—what are the females wearing? How do they react to each other? Do they take control of the narrative? (McKee, 2012).

It is also important to consider the context of these texts when they are analyzed. The context and genre will help situate how the messages presented in the text are going to be perceived by their viewers. For example, in the context of these movies, the time is mid-2000s. This is before the #MeToo movement and Obama’s presidency. The show is rated G, so the

viewers are roughly 5-13 years old, and a majority of them are female. Nonetheless, it is never the goal of textual analysis to discover an essential meaning of the text. For example, Disney's *Cinderella*, released in 1950, is still watched by millions of children around the world. The original text is shaped by its 1950s white, upper-class American context in ways that continue to perpetuate the values of that era, yet the film is also received into a world today that is much more conscious of issues like gender and racial diversity. The goal of my approach to the texts I study is less to locate "meaning," and more to examine them as cultural artifacts that reflect the time and place of their construction, and as texts that helped shape the very particular world of my own childhood.

### **Autoethnography**

Autoethnography is cultural analysis through personal narrative. It asks researchers to use personal experiences as primary data, but also systematically collect data and analyze and interpret it like ethnography (Boylorn, 2008). Each individual has a unique set of experiences which form the way we see and interact with the world. Writing and learning autoethnography is described as "being in the presence of other academic researchers who think the human sciences should be relevant to real people leading actual lives, deal with social, ethical, and moral issues, and work on behalf of social justice" (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 10). It is meant to be accessible and interesting. To the extent that my autoethnographic work can be valuable to others, it is important that I take into account my relationship with culture and pop culture and can provide an example of experience that helps readers experience it "viscerally" (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014, p. 15). Feminist media scholar, Danielle Stern (2013) does this in her writing when she says:

The class and gender hierarchy inherent in American capitalist media, especially of the 1980s, impacted my identity at a young age. Cable was for those with money, of which we had little. Girls should be beautiful, with flawless skin, to be happy. As I grew older and needed braces and glasses, I began feeling more like an outsider. (p. 418)

The quote begins to situate the reader in the time and culture which Stern grew up in and which shaped her perspective as a young woman making decisions on lifestyle, relationships, college, but especially her identity.

The use of this method in Stern's research approach makes her article more accessible and relatable because she shares stories of her childhood and her high school crushes and college relationships. She reveals her insecurities and questions if she can even be a feminist scholar if she is addicted to men and shopping. The honesty in her writing of her struggles with performing a feminine gender identity while studying feminist media reveals a real need for more scholarship on this topic more apparent. We need to be aware of, as women, what the media we consume is telling us or else we will unthinkingly absorb and reiterate its prevailing ideologies.

We cannot escape the patriarchal narratives that guide our lives if we do not acknowledge them first. In her essay, Stern calls researchers to think about text and audience "beyond textual representation and identification to performativity" (p. 420). That is, Stern invites us into her world to watch how the notions of femininity the media texts she engages shape the way she performed her own femininity. Beyond that, she invites us to think of the ways that gender representations work performatively, providing patterns for embodying the culture's gender norms, that become recreated in ourselves as our own gender (Butler, 1990). That is what I hope to do in this paper. I hope to invite you through autoethnography to get an idea of the ways that I imitated the gender identities I saw on TV in my own life.

### **Limitations of autoethnography**

Although autoethnography is a valuable research tool which allows “the process of self-reflexivity [and] can lead scholars to richer contributions to the field,” (Stern, 2013), there are a certain amount of limitations with this methodology that should be acknowledged.

Autoethnography is similar to the feminist research method of oral history, which encompasses an epistemology that grants the subject the ‘right to know,’ not the researcher. In the same way that the data from oral history is subjective to the individual, it is subjective practice for autoethnography as well. Therefore, although the study represents and gives voice to an individual’s experience, it should not be used to represent an entire population. It is necessarily incomplete.

### **Research process- Inductive approach**

My research process followed an inductive approach, meaning that as I began gathering and reviewing media texts, reviewing childhood journals, I also began sorting through academic literature, theories, ideas, etc. The themes I used to guide my analysis were influenced by Angela McRobbie’s (2011) postfeminist analysis, Morgan Blue’s (2016) analysis of tween girlhood on Disney Channel, Judith Butler’s (1990) performativity, and Adrienne Rich’s (1980) compulsory heterosexuality and as I encountered my texts from these perspectives, I arrived at the frameworks of gender & false female empowerment, sexuality, and emotion & mental health that organize my analysis in the following pages. Once I determined my themes, the project became easier. This approach allowed for a more streamline way to integrate scholarship and discussion into my analysis of media texts as they shaped my childhood experience.

Another key part of my research process was learning how to perform autoethnography and what to include in my narratives. I had never previously engaged in this method; therefore, I struggled to push my work beyond just my own experience to include a rich set of connections to cultural patterns and the insights of other scholars. Once I realized that it was meant to represent a well-rounded conversation between my past self, current self, and the insight of scholars, my work became more purposeful.

In my process of performing textual analysis and autoethnography, I began re-watching the films, listening to the soundtracks, and taking notes to reflect on how my present self was reacting to these nostalgic texts. I was careful to make note of songs and scenes from the films that stood out to me either because they had the greatest impact on me growing up, or they depicted stereotypical gender roles, which I now realized provided scripts for young viewers on how to act. From here, I still had an overwhelming amount of songs and scenes to analyze. I had to narrow the material down. This is when I determined my themes which were influenced by the literature on postfeminist girlhood, compulsory heterosexuality, and a personal interest in anxiety and the display of emotions in DCOM movies.

## **RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS**

### **INTERLUDE**

*The summer of 2007 was a long summer. The adventures were endless, but they were very contained—I stayed in my backyard most summers, and I spent most of my time with my sister and my two best friends at the time—two sisters, Rachel and Jane. We did everything together, including watching the Disney Channel. Camp Rock, High School Musical (1, 2, & 3),*

*and The Cheetah Girls (1&2). They became the best soundtracks of our young-lives and felt like constant discussion-topics.*

*We had plenty to talk about those days between all of the Disney Channel female artists coming out with music like Miley Cyrus, her alter-ego Hannah Montana, Demi Lovato, Selena Gomez, etc. We were also driven in conversation by the tween magazines like J-14 and Tigerbeat. They kept us entertained because we loved being invited into the “private lives” of these stars. We loved that they were ‘good girls’ like us. An image was put out in the magazines that these girls (distinctly girls rather than women) were perfect. Looking at images of them taken by professional photographers, reading about them in articles written by professional writers, and watching them wear clothes selected by professional stylists, we saw them as girls that sang, looked good, had good fashion, and were helpful people. They loved their fans, they did community service, they sometimes struggled in school like us. They were relatable.*

*Looking back now, I realize that our obsession with Disney Channel was pretty unhealthy. It was relaying an unattainable message, and also pretending that these girls were perfect. They had achieved post-feminist utopia. They were doing it all. They had struggled to arrive as they were now. Glossy, smart, stylish, pretty, and successful (their faces were in every magazine). Even if we were not aware of it at the time, this was telling us that as girls, we should ‘have it all’ too. We shouldn’t just be pretty, we should be smart and pretty and do it all with a smile on our face. We were gluing this mental image in our head of the stars we liked (like Gabriella—played by Vanessa Hudgens— or Mitchie—played by Demi Lovato—from Camp Rock) to remember what they looked like and try to emulate their performances ourselves.*

*Of course, we had other hobbies too. We all loved to read, we would swim in my pool and pretended to be mermaids, or we would push each other down the hill in my backyard playing*

*'extreme wagon-riding'. But these interests didn't come packaged with the style, energy and marketing savvy of a multinational corporation. Our love for Disney Channel was constantly being reinforced and perpetuated (it was a cycle) by the smattering of pictures of the same girls that were placed everywhere in our environment—from our TV screens, to the 'meet-the-star' magazines we collected which had interviews and features on the family backgrounds of the young stars of our day. The carefully crafted stories branded the girls with loving parents, down-to-earth families, and even some families who struggled or were divorced (which made them more relatable). We also saw these faces on the tween tabloids that we bought as special 'treats' at Target, and even the CDs we collected in our bedrooms. Their faces were everywhere, and as observant and detail-oriented kids, they stuck with us. I can still picture all of these girls' outfits from the film in my head because of how 'beautiful' they looked in the films, and because I wanted to emulate their looks. It was also just a matter of repetition that helped me memorize these outfits. Seeing them on the TV screen, in music videos (just clips from the movie that would play on Disney Channel between commercials), or in the CD booklets.*

*This obsession is concerning to me, while looking at it now through a feminist critical lens because it obviously was a complete override of my environment, and I was taught that I should have this beautiful, squeaky-clean image. More than that, I was invited to model the ways I performed my own femininity on young women who were styled and presented to me for the purpose of branding – selling a cultural product. I had very few alternative media influences or even images to deflate, or even add nuance, to this narrative. Although I read many books and started listening to some alternative music once iTunes became a thing in my middle-school days, these were not very visual media interactions. My 'image' of a girl was only seen through the glossy and ultra-manicured pictures and stars of Disney Channel. These beautified images*

*implied that girls should never be fat, or 'unkempt' or have messy make-up. Furthermore, females should not present themselves with too much masculinity. They should adhere to the "heterosexual matrix" that rules our culture (Butler, 1990). They should also not be disabled. In turn, when these idealized expectations are not matched in real life (and of course the ideal is designed to always remain out of reach) we feel like we're not good enough. It was very one-dimensional and one-sided.*

Disney Channel was like a safe-haven for me and my friends. It was a place where we would not be challenged because they presented narratives that reflected our reality—white, middle-class girls. The middle-class, white 'pop princesses' promised us that in the status quo of our world we were special and recognized and did not ever need to challenge any of the structures/systems around us. More to the point, it was against our regal interest. All we had to do was be our neoliberal selves and make sure we knew the right products to fit in, and then we would never have to ask what we might have lost in this bargain. The films became something that we all connected over – markers around which we structured a sense of belonging and identity. We all loved singing and dancing, so this helped us bond. We created emotional connections over these songs because they made us feel heard and seen since we were shy girls. We occasionally thought of ourselves as outsiders in the classroom or in other social groups. We weren't 'cool' – except by the fairy godmother magic reflecting from the Disney world that gathered us around itself. Also, since the actors and actresses were older than us we watched the films with great anticipation and eager eyes. The trailers always prepped us with new larger-than-life productions of music and dance being the main focus of the films. They were aspirational; offering a vision of our future selves we could long for and work for.

Besides that, there were recognizable actors from other Disney Channel movies, other pretty girls and attractive boys who we would “fall in love with”. Appearance ruled the screen, and we thought that if we acted like these people, we would be more like them, and in turn—become part of them, part of this group of amazingly talented people who seem so happy, who know what to say and do (while left on my own I am uncertain and feel awkward) – people who are literally celebrated in the way they are presented in these media texts. We wanted the same kind of ‘luminous’ persona that we saw these girls have on-screen (Blue, 2016; McRobbie, 2011). We also wanted boys to fall in love with us, like they did with the girls in the movie.

Since my friends and I were shy and not part of the “cool crowd” at school, I think that we saw performing as these characters along with the given narratives as our escape to be more outgoing and take on the personas of these girls who modeled what it looked like to be successful women in our eyes. The more dominant kids at school (the cool kids) seemed to prescribe to a different narrative than us of girlhood and the right way to act. Maybe it was influence by an alternative narrative of girlhood, usually saved for more mature women—the heightened sexuality and objectification of females. Some of the girls in my elementary school classes dyed their hair, wore lots of accessories, and acted out for male attention. Disney’s version of objectification, I now realize, was more of a commodified style of objectification. We were still asked to craft our identity for boys, but rather than being offered the illusion of sexual power over boys, we were expected to conform ourselves to the expectations of boys—getting a boyfriend by being pretty, supportive, etc.

My friends and I had a more conservative upbringing based on preserving innocence and being “good” as is reflected in the DCOM movies. The “good girls” are always the protagonists. When we obsessed over the DCOM songs and movies, our experience and upbringing were

validated. We might not have been part of the ‘in-crowd’ at school, but we did liken ourselves to the “cool-kids” in these movies such as *The Cheetah Girls*, *High School Musical*, and *Camp Rock*.

### **Situating my feminist identity**

Since I clearly saw so much good in these films and considered them ‘treasures’ from my childhood, it was initially confusing for me to realize that I had to seriously critique them. However, I realized that I must apply the tools and analyzing skills I learned from my feminist, critical, and cultural media scholarship to better understand these media texts and why I still felt restricted in aspects of my femininity, sexuality, and emotions. I had been blinded to this before, but it became clear that in addition to minimizing aspects of my identity these films reinforced and instilled other inequalities in a generation by erasing and perpetuating stratification and the invisibility of different unrepresented identities.

Here is just a short list of groups that did not get represented to give you an idea: individuals with disabilities, queer individuals (including lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersex, transgender, asexual individuals, etc.), and individuals experiencing mental health difficulties. Clearly, Disney is not interested in representing all groups of people (Collins, 2019). They are most interested in making money by continuing to market and commodify “a universal girlhood that can continually be accessed again via consumption” (Heatwole, 2016).

The simplified, commodified vision of femininity I found in Disney Channel movies had in fact been *designed* to appeal to me and my friends. Disney crafted an extremely lucrative money-making opportunity in a new demographic— ‘tween’ girls, or females aged 9-14 and sometimes even 6-14 (Blue, 2017). Disney capitalized on and greatly expanded the market for

this group of consumers by introducing TV shows, movies, world tours, record labels, books, etc. with the re-branding of Disney Channel in the 1990s (Blue, 2017; Bickford, 2012). Disney chose safe representation. They chose heterosexual gender scripts that would bring them the most money because it would create a cyclical nature in its viewing audience (Blue, 2016). Pop star personas create predictable characters and themes, and also re-sellable and re-producible content. The content they create is meant to be performed, and is easily picked up by young girls—becoming part of their gender identity as Butler (1990) argues in her theory of performativity, “gender is a stylized repetition of acts...a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment...[that] the actors themselves come to believe.” The aftermath comes when the girls who dedicated their viewing lives to these franchises grow up.

For Disney, there is a new batch of young girls ready to start consuming this data, but for the girls who have grown up while watching the portrayal of this fit-inside-the-box woman, they are now shaped a certain way. Although this might not be the experience for all viewers, I realize that this media influenced my individual growth, in which I was unknowingly confined to certain ideas of ‘proper’ gender performance, ‘proper’ sexual exploration, and even a stunted sense of personal agency through the narratives this media. For example, the DCOM characters did not exhibit much agency in their narratives. In the films I studied, the characters did not discuss future plans or career goals besides the want to become pop stars (in the case of The Cheetah Girls and Mitchie from *Camp Rock*) or being sad because they could not stay with their boyfriends after high school (in the case of Gabriella from *High School Musical*). They let other people dictate their actions, what happened to them, etc. They were rarely agents of change in their own lives, as I will discuss in my research, and even if they were—it was usually to impress

a guy, or justified through the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) because they earned a male's desire through their brilliance.

Since I was a passionate consumer of these shows, made-for-TV movies, and the songs that came out of them, I feel connected to Heatwole's (2016) observation that women acculturated by Disney princesses (and representations in comparable media texts) face challenges when they become women; "After she has begun to move out, to expand, to raise her sights—she discovers that the rules have changed and she will no longer be rewarded for her compliance, as she has been, systematically, since she was a little girl."

Through the lens of feminist and critical scholars like Heatwole, I began to realize the consequences of my self-perceived failure to live up to Disney messages about performing gender the 'right' way, like the 'camp' that came with the ultra-hyperfemininity displayed in Disney Channel shows and movies (Blue, 2016), having a boyfriend, or relentlessly exuding confidence. I see instances in my life where I do not have the amount of agency that I want to have in my actions and decision because I am worried about what other people will think of me, or how it will impact my 'value,' in the eyes of others. These aspects of feminine identity reflected in and amplified by Disney Channel movies are of course re-iterations of longstanding cultural expectations of femininity. Zaslow and Schoenberg (2012) point out that girls lack confidence when compared to boys:

Girls experience fears and inhibition about social acceptance more strongly...girls still feel like they have to measure up to the unwritten rules of what it means to be 'feminine' and feel the pressure to conform to traditional 'female' behaviors like being nice, quiet, polite, agreeable, and liked by all. (p. 102)

I have felt this way in social situations, parties, or even deciding where to go to college, I have struggled with expressing myself and making independent decisions.

Transitioning from girlhood to adulthood has been another challenge to navigate, just like Disney Channel stars like Miley Cyrus faced when they were trying to strip themselves of their innocent ‘Disney’ image. Cyrus began on Disney Channel in 2006 as a 12-year-old, so her “squeaky-clean image” (Gonzales, 2019) was tarnished when her “Can’t Be Tamed” music video was released in 2010. The video showed her dressed in “a low-cut black leather bodysuit dancing provocatively inside a cage as onlookers gather around” (Blue, 2017, p. 1). Blue compiled a list of the published complaints against Miley Cyrus: “One Huffington Post headline questioned whether the video was ‘Too Sexy, Or Age Appropriate?’ while CBS News compared it to Cyrus’s ‘earlier more wholesome videos’” (p. 1). Cyrus’s transition into becoming a woman and shedding her ‘innocence’ is an example of the complicated territory that females face when they transition from idealized girlhood to other versions of themselves.

### **Family ties**

Besides my own memories associated with DCOM movies, I was also initially hesitant to critique Disney because of my family’s deep connection with the place. (We always thought of ‘Disney’ as a place, not really a company.) The deep emotional connection we have with Disney started when my mom grew up going to Disney every-other year with her family, including her late father. It is there where she made some of her best memories with her family. Since her father passed away shortly after my sister and I were born, relatively early in my mom’s life, and before my sister and I got to know him, Disney has become one of the places where my mom feels most connected to her father and in turn, we do too. Therefore, it is a place tied with deep

nostalgia and family memories for my mom and myself (and my dad and my sister). In fact, my mom could be the exact person that Hiaasen (1998), refers to when he writes:

Disney World is the most visited vacation destination on the planet; kids who went there in the 1970s are bringing their own kids today, perpetuating a brilliantly conceived cycle of acculturation. Every youngster who loves a Disney theme park...represents a potential lifetime consumer of all things Disney. (p. 6)

We are now members of Disney Vacation Club, and for my whole life, we have traveled there from Connecticut every year. I also have stock in Disney. Every few months, I get a check from the Walt Disney Company; therefore, I even profit from enjoying in Disney's products. This research, however, has called on me to question Disney's products and its responsibility in helping to create a one-dimensional image of girlhood for many millions of children, and even the whole world's perceptions of female identity and gender performance.

When I was little, I didn't know that some people couldn't afford to go to Disney once a year; that even though we stayed at the 'value' hotel and drove down instead of flying, that my family was making an economic sacrifice to go to Disney each year. My mom is big on saving money, so the trip was definitely more about making memories for her, and not spending money or making purchases; still, I never ever felt like I wanted more or was in need of anything when I was there, or even when I was at home. My family was taken care of, and so I was happy (looking back, I was complacent).

\*\*\*

*Disney felt like 'my' place. Taking my friends to Disney and running around the parks when it was dark out during "After Magic Hours" are some of my best memories. We felt like we*

*owned the place. It was opulent and frenetic and thousands of people were there, but we felt like it was uniquely ours, probably because it was so embedded in our lives.*

*When I watched Disney Channel at home, it made me feel a little bit like I was still there. Like the magic never disappeared. My mom would make ‘countdowns’ a month before we were to go back again for that year’s April vacation and we would color in each square as the day came closer to leaving. We were so excited. It was like seeing a little bit of Pixie Dust every time we colored in another square. The fireworks erupted in our eyes. I imagined myself going down one of the hills on Big Thunder Mountain (one of the rides in Magic Kingdom) with my hands up in the air, a huge smile on my face. I saw the Fort Wilderness Cabins in front of me and imagined myself climbing up the wooden ladder to the top bunk, or putting on my bathing suit on to get ready for Blizzard Beach, Disney’s waterpark.*

*Each memory brings me a thrill of excitement and I can’t wait to go back, to not think about school and the scary things that await there—the mean girls and assignments that I don’t understand, or the scary teachers who I’m afraid to tell that I need help with something because I don’t understand it. My biggest fear is getting something wrong and crying in class, which I’d done a few times when I was younger. All of these thoughts and anxieties pretty much disappear when we’re running through the theme parks, eating popcorn from Magic Kingdom, running through the sand on the Fort Wilderness beaches, or getting dressed up in Hawaiian dresses for the Luau at the Polynesian Resort. It is all so much fun, and so perfect. It makes me forget about reality.*

Looking back, I realize that this was an invitation to relocate myself in a fantasy realm. There was an erasure of agency here, in that I focused my attention away from the reality of everyday life...the place where I actually did have power and ability to make choices and seek

change. I guess that is what these shows and TV movies were trying to do too—let us forget about reality for a little bit. Think about the good things, and celebrate the highs of friendship, love, family—and also teach some lessons along the way, but make them easily fixable, or not too hard to overcome. These are the guiding principles of a DCOM, so there is plenty of room for fault or misguidance for young children watching. How do you mix a dose of magic and reality into an 80 to 100-minute movie? It's pretty impossible...and that's why I am here to reexamine these media and experiences, and to try to understand some of the harmful effects of the ultra-positive, reinforcing narratives that consumed my childhood, along with those of others, due to the pervasive effect that Disney has/had on my generation.

When I was young, I didn't realize that it was a privilege to have TV and to be able to go to a private Catholic school for my elementary school experience. I didn't know that having a pool was special...I took all of my privileges as being normal. I didn't know there was another side to all of this; that there were people living very hard lives. Some people weren't able to feed their families, some people were dealing with a disability, or maybe dealing with a sexuality that was not accepted by their families, etc. I lived a very privileged life, and I didn't realize that the world had problems and inequities that occurred around me.

Since my life was 'normal', and what I saw portrayed on the television in Disney Channel shows and movies pretty much reflected my life, I accepted the gender roles and scripts presented in the film as 'normal', as the truth, and as acceptable language, actions, hopes, dreams, etc. As a result, I let my life be ruled by these theories and scripts that were portrayed on the screen. Like, for example, that girls can have everything we want if we are good and stay true to ourselves, and that girls should want a boyfriend—combine these together and you get the ideal situation: that if we stay pure and true to ourselves, then a good guy will fall in love with

us. I didn't question what I consumed in one bit. It is not until after I encountered feminist literature and critical theory that I became aware of the inequities that are obvious in these films, but which I had been privileged enough to not question or understand. It has been challenging to critique this since renouncing the vision of gender in DCOM movies is comparable to questioning my own gender—my identity has been so tied to Disney. However, I started this research because I was interested in trying to understand and reclaim some of the power that was erased in these movies. I discovered in classes on critical theory the force of narratives to prescribe power/agency, but our power to choose if we will acquiesce or resist. Therefore, I wanted to go back and see what exactly I had been imitating now that I can approach it with theory and analysis.

## **GENDER & FALSE FEMALE EMPOWERMENT**

### **Beauty & Gender identity**

*I always felt 'luminous' / beautiful (Blue, 2016) when I was with my friends, performing as The Cheetah Girls or Gabriella or Mitchie from Camp Rock. The age of the actresses and the subject matter did not match our situations at all. I had never had a boyfriend at the age of 8, but I pretended that I did. As far as women being judged on their appearance, I still definitely see this in my own life. For example, I do not wear make-up often, and I am always thinking about why boys don't need to dress up when girls do—it's such a double standard. I also see the effects of other women around me worrying about their appearances—how they look, if their hair is okay, etc.*

*I imitate these actions as well. For example, feeling weird with glasses on, being upset about my curly/wavy hair, always trying to smooth out my hair, feeling awkward, being worried about my outfits in middle school, etc. These thoughts had effects on my confidence my confidence.*

\*\*\*

This general anxiety about female flaws that I observed in my life resonated when I watched the DCOM movies with their always-perfect looking girls often concerned about their appearance or fashion. In one *High School Musical 3* scene, the cast is singing about getting ready for prom, and the girls are zeroing in on their looks. “Yeah, it's the night of all nights, gotta look just right. Dressing to impress the boys...Should I go movie star glamorous? Sassy or sweet? Don't know, but no one better wear the same dress as me!” (Efron, et. al., 2008, 00:21). Bucciferro (2019), writes that “spectatorship is connected to agency and meaning-making processes, so the type of stories we engage with can impact the way we view ourselves and our world” (p. 1055). By watching this dance number on television, and then singing and performing this song with friends, we engaged in this narrative and literally sang the lyrics as though they were our own, sung as an expression of our own sense of self and our worldview. (I can still sing this song on-demand.)

In a consequential reaction, when we learn how to perform our gender from the media, people also learn how to treat us based the media they consume which reinforces the “matrix of gender relations” that we all come to understand as humans in our American culture (Butler, 1990). Therefore, people treat us based on how we perform our gender because gender grants us our social significance, according to Butler (1990). If you do not perform your gender according to the dominant portrayal that people are used to seeing in the media, you risk be deemed ‘weird’

or ‘deviant’ by others (Foss, Domenico, & Foss, 2013) (Butler, 1990). To absorb these gender expectations yet have a sense that they don’t quite fit, is to also absorb a sense of inadequacy.

\*\*\*

*I have always thought that I perform my female gender in kind of an alternative way. When I perform my feminine gender according to script, it is mostly through my long hair, the clothing I wear, or getting dressed up to go out or for a special occasion. Except even my clothing, it is usually plain and I do not often wear bright colors. In high school, I used to wear my hair up in a ponytail a lot. My twin sister, McKenna, who I naturally am constantly compared to, wears her hair down more, and today still—wears more patterns and accessories than me on a daily basis. She sticks to the fashion trends more than me, and smiles more than me (or so we’ve been told). I’ve been called ‘the serious twin’ by many people.*

*In turn, I believe that these are some of the reasons that people sometimes treat her differently. I think this does affect the way people treat me, and in turn, the way I treat them. As a result, I’m not as comfortable as McKenna making small talk with people. I wear minimal make up and sometimes don’t even wear make-up at all. These are all ways which I communicate my gender—even if I am not being super intentional about it. It affects the way people perceive me.*

### **False female empowerment**

Another important issue with the Disney songs I grew up singing, is that they promise a false sense of empowerment for females. Following the girl power movement that began in the late 90s, *The Cheetah Girls* came out in 2003 with a collection of songs that are meant to empower the young girls listening. In “Together We Can,” the girls sing that they can “shoot the moon, stop the rain, even ride a hurricane...walk into space, [and] save the human race” (The

Cheetah Girls, 2003, 00:38) if they want to. Although this sounds good—like girls can do the unthinkable, this presents a false sense of power because it does not give young girls concrete, real-world steps to make change; it presents them instead with change as a fantasy. Zaslow and Schoenberg (2012) point out this common trend in our society based on consumerism which markets a “neoliberal girl power feminism that marks girls as powerful individuals without offering them skills or strategies to achieve potential power” (p. 99). Skills and strategies may mean educating young girls on social justice issues that impact them as women, informing girls about the political process, etc. No human can actually do the things this song mentions, so upon analysis, it becomes a kind of mockery. It does not present ways that girls can actually make change in their community, or even their own lives.

Part of the illusion comes with the ability of musical tempo and delivery to influence one’s feelings towards music and messaging. As kids, you may feel emotionally attached to these songs because they make you feel good. For example, this song is presented in an up-beat and positive manner, making it sound like a happy, positive, and groundbreaking thing to have a power greater than God and control weather. However, since these aren’t real capabilities in the world, it begs the question, “together we can” ...do what? The songs locate power in the realm of imagination, and frame power as a *feeling*, dislocated from the practical, concrete world of everyday experience. Actual power (the ability to change and influence the things that shape the world of our experience) is completely absent from the world of the song and exchanged for the *feeling* of power relocated now to the realm of dreams. This song of empowerment is literally disempowering.

“Cheetah Sisters” (The Cheetah Girls, 2003) is maybe a little more realistic with its theme of female friendships and staying together through the hard times. “Cause we are sisters,

we stand together. We make up one big family, though we don't look the same” (01:15). While empowerment is still located in the realm of feelings (the *sense* of sisterhood) and safely away from the field of actual action and change, we see a rupture. The song hints at solidarity, and offers a respite from the neoliberal work of making an idealized self. McRobbie (2011) critiques the emphasis of feminine individualization in postfeminist girlhood. “Rather than stressing collectivity or the concerns of women per se, this replaces feminism with competition, ambition, meritocracy, self-help, and the rise of the ‘alpha girl’” (p. 180).

The film, *Camp Rock*, uses similar *feelings* of empowerment in its songs. The film starts with a great example of postfeminist empowerment. Mitchie (Demi Lovato) is dancing around her bedroom to her self-produced song, “Who Will I Be.” She pops the CD into her laptop before she even gets out of her bed in the morning, and then she is dancing around her room to it while she gets ready for school in the morning. In the scene, she is trying on different sunglasses (identities), banging playfully on the keyboard, and riffing on the guitar. In the matter of a few minutes, she is ‘doing it all’. She is literally celebrating the construction of an identity rooted in how she might locate herself as a kind of product structured around her appearance and her appeal to others. This relates to Catherine Driscoll’s (2013) discussion of postfeminist girlhood and the themes that guide girl’s studies towards answering its most important question: “how much agency girls have when orienting themselves in the world” (p. 293). For Mitchie, agency is produced and located in gendered self-presentation and according to the markers of consumer identity; that is, within “the relationship between girls and commodities” (Driscoll, 2013 p. 293).

Although the song comes off as initially positive, it is limiting. “Play guitar, be a movie star” (Lovato, 2008, 00:21) are Mitchie’s number one career choices she has in mind when she says she can “do anything.” It is not very likely that any girl will get to do this, and impossible

without conforming to Disney ideals, so it is just feeding girls back into the cycle crafted by Disney of girls wanting to be like the popstars they see on TV and obsessing over the actresses who already have the “pop star persona” (Blue, 2016). It reproduces gender through a girl’s relationship with commodities.

Every line is actually dripping in seeming empowerment; she sings, “If I decide I’m the girl to change the world I can do it anytime” (01:09). That is, power is being sold as “choice” and its capacity to symbolize a version of self that is crafted for the consumption of others. The point isn’t what she does – how it might help transform the world in a way that is fairer or more just – the point is the consumer choice available in her career options, and the capacity of that choice to structure her identity. It is not giving girls real, actionable plans to engage and change the world. They just want to be movie stars or singers (literally famous and valuable because others/ fans validate them when there are many other useful ways to spend your talents for very important jobs across the world). Even the kind of acting or musical career that uses these skills to present narratives of positive social transformation and justice is outside the framework presented by Disney.

### **Innocent maiden vs. sinister witch**

Another way that gender is reproduced in these films is by presenting girls with a binary choice for imitation: 1) the “innocent maiden,” or 2) the “sinister witch” (Roberts, 2010). And the texts leave no doubt that viewers should prefer the “innocent maiden.” The “good” Disney Channel characters are successful, nice, outgoing, heteronormative, and they follow the rules and do not question authority. Although these aren’t negative qualities, they become negative when they are the only acceptable defining characteristics of a woman and erase other dimensions of

human interaction. While there are some models of progressive behavior that rupture the gender norms, the female characters are usually restricted to traditional female roles and marginalized in their one-dimensional talents and identities when there are endless opportunities for greater diversity in characters, appearances, struggles, roles, gender expression, and sexuality (Blue, 2016, 2017).

Instead, Disney chose to reproduce images of the ‘idealized girl’ which creates unrealistic expectations and standards for young girls to follow (Blue, 2016). This idealized girl checks off the boxes of a successful postfeminist women; “the young woman is addressed as a potential subject of great ‘capacity’ ... [and] this becomes a subtle process of marketization, whereby the potential of young women comes to be attached to a new form of consumer citizenship” (McRobbie, 2011, p. 181). Disney is making money by setting girls up for quiet lives where they follow heteronormative and binary-based gender rules because they will keep coming back to Disney for feelings of empowerment and connection if they do.

Disney Channel invests so much money in girl popstars that it calls into question the “powerful economic forces at work in Disney’s ongoing investment in girl performers and representations of girlhood” (Blue, 2017, p. 1), and how the company is shaping its viewer’s assessment and judgements of girls and most importantly, coming-of-age girls who are taught that their changing bodies should be perfect and protected, god-forbid they reveal skin and cross-over into a ‘sexy’ version of themselves. Disney reinforces the “fixed dichotomies that continue to frame girlhood as either sexual or innocent, based on taboos about childhood sexuality and female desire” (Blue, 2017, p. 1) by sticking to the strictly innocent side for their female lead ‘role-model’ characters and inserting sexualized secondary characters who are presented as the ‘mean girls.’

### **Performing ‘the innocent maiden’**

The most prominent example of this stereotyped character is Gabriella in the *High School Musical* franchise. Gabriella is a very submissive, pleasing character. She shows no masculine traits, except for being interested in science (a big part of the first movie), and the moments where she does take charge are few and far between. I did not realize this about Gabriella until watching the film back as an adult and with a critical eye, so I felt angry when I realized how insignificant the character that I idolized was. I spent a lot of time in my head when I was a young girl imagining that I was Gabriella and performing the songs that she sings in the films. Even when I was in high school myself, I found satisfaction in my likeness to her now that my life was beginning to overlap with her experiences in the films. I was not fully aware that I was comparing myself to someone with such an old-fashioned, oppressed idealization of feminine gender and imitating that sense of gender by singing and dancing to her songs – and therein performing my own femininity in conformity with that ideology (Butler 1990).

Gabriella’s boyfriend, Troy, adds to Gabriella’s subjugation. He is the real protagonist of this film, despite the illusion of equality among the six main characters that are marketed in all of the promotional photographs for the film. The preferred-read of Troy’s character (and the one I accepted before critical analysis) is that he promotes equality, uplifts women, and breaks social norms. For example, he is equally kind to everyone in the high school, he is a loving, uplifting boyfriend, and he is breaking expectations of hegemonic masculinity by becoming a theater nerd despite his popular status as the captain of the school’s basketball team. Troy typically garners all of the admiration, empowerment, and credit in the film instead of Gabriella, even though viewers might think initially that Gabriella does. She does get a handful of attention in the film, but it is mainly through Troy’s male gaze.

Heatwole (2016) says, “in the postfeminist girl idea, the personal quests of these princesses are closely entangled with heterosexual romance that refers the story back to ideals of female beauty and virtue. They are perhaps less girls that can have it all than girls that must do it all.” This is how Gabriella’s “quest” can be described too. She is a very talented girl—she can sing, she is a known academic and helps her team win the science decathlon, and she demonstrates leadership by convincing all their friends to partake in the musical in the second and third movies. Yet, since she is tied to Troy, there is stronger emphasis given to her beauty, innocence, and kindness. This is reflected in the other DCOM movies as well. Female power is established vicariously by the approval of their male counterparts.

Troy’s decision to go after Gabriella (the ‘innocent maiden’—the smart, kind, and sensitive girl), rather than Sharpay (the ‘sinister witch’/hot girl who threw herself at him), is supposed to be something good about Troy too. Troy’s decision can be seen as one exemplary way to create a normative heterosexual pairing, composed of a dominant male and a submissive female. Sharpay is outspoken, and therefore subverts the feminine gender roles. Therefore, Troy’s dislike for her and his obsession with Gabriella works to “police gender” (Butler, 1990) by conditioning girls to act a certain way in a relationship.

As far as Gabriella’s recognition, I think that one of the only times she received true praise was during the final film, *High School Musical 3*, when Troy is speaking during the “graduation” portion of the spring musical. He addresses the audience and says that he has decided where he wants to go to college. He chose the location based on “the person who inspires my heart, which is why I picked a school that is exactly 32.7 miles from you,” (Ortega, 2008, 01:42:33) he says while turning to look at Gabriella. He motions for her to stand next to him, and he introduces her to the audience: “Miss Gabriella Montez, Stanford University, pre-

law” (01:42:43). The crowd goes bananas for appreciation of Gabriella, but she is only looking at Troy the whole time with loving eyes. It makes me mad that all the other characters in the musical spoke for themselves, but Gabriella had to be introduced by Troy.

\*\*\*

*Standing on the stage at my own high school graduation, I had a similar experience. I and the rest of the class’s ‘Top 10’ stood on the stage and had our names called. We got to hear our friend’s and family’s applause. It was a moment I was so excited for I was SO proud. Still, this didn’t stop me from wishing that I had a boyfriend to share in the experience with, or someone to be proud of me like Troy was of Gabriella. To me, this was a prime example that I had not “done it all” like the postfeminist idealizations of girlhood. I was smart, nice, pretty (or so I tried to be)—and yet I still did not have a boyfriend, so in my mind, I did not have it all. I did not measure up to the ideal girl that was created, depicted on film, and marketed to me and my generation.*

### **Male vs. female reactions**

Before this happy ending, when Troy and Gabriella were still weeks away from graduation, Gabriella had an opportunity to leave high school early and start at Stanford. Even though this puts Gabriella at an ‘advantage’, it is still weird that the writers would even write this into the plot. While it could be understood as an affirmation of Gabriella, her leaving early and being ‘taken away’ from the Wildcats due to her success primarily works to add drama for Troy. It puts the spotlight on his decision about his life, what’s really important to him; will he follow the ‘innocent maiden’ or move on to another phase of his life?

Before Troy is forced to contemplate his decision, the film shows Gabriella struggling to decide what to do with her future as well. She considers declining her early acceptance to Stanford in order to wait until she is ready. She doesn't want to leave Troy and her friends behind. She wants everything to "slow down." It was frustrating to watch this back, because she is truly acting like she has nothing exciting left in her life now that she is going to be apart from Troy, despite the fact that she's going to Stanford—a very competitive university. It makes me sad to watch back because she is belittling herself by not celebrating her accomplishment. Ultimately, she does accept the early acceptance and walks away from high school abruptly—before the end of senior year. She thinks that making a big deal out of goodbyes would be too painful.

As she is leaving she sings, "Walk Away," and it is a sad, yet somehow empowering song. There is an off-screen choir featured echoing her, "Walk, walk, walk awayyyy" (Hudgens, 2008). There is an R&B beat to this song, and I remember 'grooving and dancing' to it as a little girl. I actually enjoyed singing it and remember feeling empowered, which is misleading since it is just a song about a girl being sad...not making any real power move.

Troy's response to Gabriella's departure and him not knowing what to do with himself is a lot different. In "Scream," Troy gets to be mad. Compared to Gabriella's 'sad' scene where she sings "Walk Away" with lit-candles lining the shelves in her bedroom (reinforcing the idea that girls must be sad and soft), he punches at basketballs that are dramatically flying out of the sky in his school gym. "Put the balls in my hands...I'm fighting," (Efron, 2008, 01:11) he sings. His frantic dancing takes him out in the hallways where there is a huge banner with his face on it. He tears it down dramatically. His song includes action and anger, indicating that he reacts with anger and destruction. He is not just going to "walk away" and be sad about it like Gabriella.

Troy displays a lot more power in this scene than Gabriella, who just looked plain-old powerless as she was driven away in her mom's minivan. As a male, it is expected that Troy will have the power in this relationship. Furthermore, he is marked as masculine, establishing his credentials enough to leave room for him to adapt for Gabriella, not as a concession to her, but as a heroic act of generosity for himself. He stays in focus, centered, the whole time.

After he is done throwing his temper-tantrum, he realizes that his theater teacher, Mrs. Darbus is in the school after hours too. (Starting in the gym, he has now ended his musical sequence at the stage.) She doesn't discipline him for his outburst, although Troy seems embarrassed that she's seen him. Instead, she offers him life advice. "Trust [your] instincts, and that takes courage," (Ortega, 2008, 01:19:30) says Mrs. Darbus. Troy's college decision is being relocated from being a decision *for* Gabriella, to being safely relocated as an internal act of personal integrity. It also important to note that while Troy is being told to trust his instincts and that they can't be wrong—Gabriella's instincts of leaving are 'wrong,' as will be shown below.

Once Gabriella is at Stanford, she talks to Troy over the phone. "I love you, Wildcat, but I have to stay right where I am" (Ortega, 2008, 01:22:32). After she says this, Troy drives 1,000 miles from Albuquerque, NM to Stanford to bring her back to their high school to be in their final spring musical together. This is kind of stalker-ish, and it is again a representation of the boy not listening to the girl (Beck, J., 2018), but it is condoned as romantic and an ultimate gesture of commitment. Gabriella doesn't even get mad. You can see surprise flicker on her face for a second when she sees his truck, but it disappears and she's happy. When I viewed this as a young girl, I thought this was a man being selfless and romantic and that all men should be like that, but I was not aware that Troy was not listening to Gabriella's wishes. Besides not respecting the woman's request, this narrative reinforces the idea that an 'innocent maiden' has to be saved.

### **Mitchie finds power in a relationship**

Like Gabriella, Mitchie's status as a character in *Camp Rock* is elevated by her relationship with a male—the love-interest, Shane Gray, an attractive popstar who is also at the singing camp that summer. Like Gabriella and Troy's relationship, this supports Heatwole's (2016) statement that the postfeminist girl's "personal quest...[is] entangled with heterosexual romance." Although Mitchie is the protagonist of the film, she does not appear to find true agency and happiness within herself. She does not find this until she is paired with Shane; a normative heterosexual pairing that tells young girls—female empowerment is as easy as finding a man. Driscoll (2013) says that the most important question girl's studies seeks to answer is how much agency girls have; therefore, this is very problematic because Mitchie is placing the relationship at the root of her agency, not herself. It reinforces objectification of women and our tendency to find value in others. Mitchie originally finds herself lacking agency and confidence when she comes to the campus because she is caught up in lies of pretending to be someone that she is not, just so that she can fit in with the rich kids. However, once she connects with Shane, she is a completely different and confident self. While Troy only had to look within himself to be authentic, Mitchie has to look to Shane.

The final scene shared between these two characters reveals the powerful change that this relationship made in Mitchie's agency, self-acceptance, and identity. It happens during the dramatic final performance of the camp's talent show, and the song she performs is literally titled, "This Is Me." Although she starts off her performance singing timidly, she eventually hits her stride and sings with confidence: "Now I've found who I am, there's no way to hold it in. No more hiding who I want to be, this is me," (Lovato & Jonas, 2008, 00:41) she sings.

It turns out that Mitchie's song is the one that Shane has been looking for after overhearing a mysterious girl singing it one day. It reminded him of the type of music he wrote before he became a popstar. In a surprise twist, Shane joins Mitchie on-stage and turns the song into a duet. The song he's written, "Gotta Find You" pairs exactly with Mitchie's; "You're the voice I hear inside my head, the reason that I'm singing. I need to find you, I gotta find you" (Lovato & Jonas, 2008, 01:51). While they are singing, they walk up to each other and sing closely to one another, almost unaware of the entire audience that is watching them. "I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be now," (Lovato & Jonas, 2008, 02:20) they sing in unison. Mitchie has tears in her eyes during this scene, showing extreme emotional involvement. They even grab hands while they are singing, and they finish to a huge applause from the audience for this idealized moment of heterosexual romance. Yet, they are only staring into each other's eyes. Everyone is cheering crazily, and they're just staring at each other.

This narrative implies that they complete one another—as if they've saved each other. While this may be seen as progressive because Mitchie had a hand in saving Shane and not just the other way around, it still uses a heterosexual pairing just to make the plot more valid, traditional, and/or presumably enjoyable to viewers. It is a classic example of compulsory heterosexuality, which implies that heterosexuality is the sole option in partnerships (Rich, 1980).

## **SEXUALITY**

All of these movies have no direct references to sex, and some scholars have claimed that this erases sexuality, but Lugo-Lugo & Bloodworth-Lugo (2009) argue that this just makes the compulsory heterosexuality glaring. It is not erasing sexuality, it is enforcing *heterosexuality*:

Children's films do not function very differently from adult-centered Hollywood films which find a way to work a [heterosexual] love story into almost any plot. But unlike adults, whose sexualities have already been soundly established (it would appear), children are still learning the societal lessons of [hetero]sexuality—that heterosexuality is the 'normal' sexuality and the desired outcome for 'any healthy child.' (pg. 173)

Since Disney is a company, its main goal is to make money. This turns every person on the planet into a potential consumer. It is not surprising then that Disney tends toward representations that line up with hegemonic ideologies. Althusser (1971) notes, "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (p. 153). To the degree that Disney narratives offer ways to imagine gender that are never explicit and always remain rooted in prevailing, mainstream social expectations and practice, these ideologies tend to remain unnoticed, as did for me. Narratives that promote compulsory heterosexuality are likely to seem neutral in the sense that their ideology gets lost against the background of the cultural presumptions they reiterate. These narratives become self-reinforcing and normalize heterosexuality, as they are constantly repeated we only see one type of reality. Other types of sexuality or relationships, like queer relationships and even friendships are pushed to the side and rendered invisible.

Stern (2013) points out the aggressive heterosexual narrative in American media that does not leave any room for young women to question their sexuality. "Diamond (1998, 2000, 2007) has argued that the paucity of media representations of healthy, non-deviant same-sex desire has contributed to young women's decision to not explore same-sex intimacy" (p. 424). In popular western culture, we are living with near erasure of LGBTQ+ relationships in popular media. Especially in conservative media like the Disney Channel, which aims to please the

largest group of people possible, queer relationships were none existent until just recently with the creation of the show *Andi Mack* and the Disney+ original, *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series* (Rude, 2019). Still, compulsory heterosexuality is the ‘norm’ and we are socialized to believe that the only acceptable outcomes for romantic relationships involve a male and a female.

### **Compulsory heterosexuality (Childhood crushes)**

*My friends and I would often recreate scenes from the movie together, more so when we were younger, around age 6, we would always recreate the performance of “Cheetah Sister” which occurs during the final scene where Toto, Galleria’s dog, gets stuck in a manhole in NYC. The Cheetah Girls celebrate his rescue by breaking into a song and dance sequence which is viewed by the whole city. It is a huge production with dramatic dance moves and camera angles. I remember recreating this by jumping around wildly in my yellow and blue flower-themed bedroom.*

*Looking back now, I realize that I loved re-creating this scene so much because we would make our boy neighbors do it with us. Luke and Peter were my first guy friends. Luke was a year older than me and my twin sister, and Peter was a year younger. It was fun to pretend that Luke and Peter were our ‘boyfriends’, like Derek and his sidekick are in *The Cheetah Girls* movie. We re-enacted what the movie presented, and we grew feelings out of thin air because the movie told us to. I had the hugest crush on the oldest boy, and I was only 5 or 6 years old.*

*Another way to look at this is through group identity. We wanted to be like the girls and the ‘us’ that was depicted in this dance scene with the two ‘cool’ groups of people joining up and being ‘cool’ together. We began to re-enact and ‘perform’ the femininity that we saw on the*

screen, reflecting a powerful ideology presented by Judith Butler (1990), performativity. Performativity says that rather than emerging from biology or some internal sense, gender (along with its corollaries like heterosexual attraction) is constructed through a person's repetitive performance of gender (Butler, 1990).

Furthermore, this feeling that I 'needed' a boy to like me, or that I should have a boy liking me has followed me all throughout my life. Having a boyfriend has always been on the top of my wish-list. Even in one of my old journals, I can see that I was writing about Luke on my 13<sup>th</sup> birthday, probably about 7 to 8 years after we re-created the Cheetah Girls scenes in my bedroom. We weren't as close with Luke and Peter anymore, but I loved the idea of being paired with someone...of being desired. This is a learned desire. I was taught at a young age by my environment that it was deemed 'valuable' to be desired. Starting from when I five-years-old, dancing around my bedroom with the neighborhood boys, my environment consisted of mainly of my parents, the media I consumed, my friends, and even my babysitters who were all older girls. They all taught me that this was an important 'want'.

\*\*\*

As a reflection of our male-dominated, patriarchal society ever since the advent agriculture, women have traditionally had less power than men. Since we live in a patriarchal culture which for centuries has been structured by 'the male gaze', women are constantly being sexualized in all forms of media. This becomes a complicated and special *problem* when the subjects of the media are young girls. "Girlhood is understood as naturally directed towards sexuality and yet categorically to be protected from sexuality" (Driscoll, 2013, p. 291). At the opposite end of the spectrum are women who are sexual without that sexuality being constructed—as primarily a passive response to male sexual desire. In other words, in this framework women

(especially girls) should not be sexual. They should be the *object* of sexuality. One manifestation of the way this is often portrayed negatively is in the guise of ‘the sinister witch’, since “representations of women are governed by genre conventions” (Watkins, & Emerson, 2000, p. 155). Otherwise, in media made for young children, sexuality is usually scrubbed out of the movie.

### **Performing ‘the sinister witch’**

Tess, the bully from *Camp Rock*, is a perfect example of ‘the sinister witch’. She wears the best clothing, and uses her clout at the camp to boss other people around and constantly bring others down to make herself look better. Her character is written to be judgmental, manipulative, and sexualized. Unlike the other campers, she wears sparkly dresses during her performances and she and her back-up dancers move with sexualized dance moves. They all have on either gold or silver sequin outfits with fitted bodices, tank-top sleeves, and high-heel booties. Tess is put on the ‘pedestal’ here as the lead singer. There’s a whole troupe of girls, and they’re totally uniform and slip into the background except for the one star, indicating that there’s only one real winner and the other girls are worthless when you’re playing this game. She is portrayed as bad, so she and the nameless backup dancers are sexualized, suggesting that being sexy is bad.

Mitchie is made to look miserable because she is supposed to be the ‘innocent maiden’. This clearly equates Tess’s sexualized actions, swinging her hips, shimmying her shoulders, etc. with something ‘bad.’ Furthermore, Tess is obsessed with herself (aligning with the presumed selfishness of a woman who actually expresses her own sexuality). Rather than being inclusive, which is actually a prized behavior in DCOMs. She is the star of this performance, in which she sings the song, “Too Cool.”

The lyrics are jarring compared to Mitchie's "Who Will I Be" from the opening scene of the film. Instead of promoting the narrative that girls can do anything, this song limits that ability to only a few 'select' girls who make the cut: "You see some are born with beauty, brains, and talent and they got it all. While others simply try all their lives, still they never get the call". The singer says she is better than everyone, "I'm the real deal", she sings, "That's the difference between you and me, obviously" (Martin, 2008, 02:08).

The lead singer and dancers end in sexualized positions and then everyone walks off stage in unison, swinging their hips. This just goes to show how these films give a little bit of progressivism (women owning their sexuality), and then take it all back by shaming that sexual expression with an utterly old-fashioned and out-of-date character. Tess seems like she's a beauty queen from the 50s, just wearing more modern clothes. Tess is clearly meant to be hated; meant to be an opposition to Mitchie, like one of Cinderella's evil step sisters, and women are still only presented as having two options—good, or bad.

The binary, being *either* Tess or Mitchie, erases the possibility of anything in between. There is no image of young women negotiating a sexuality that is self-possessed and self-satisfying, yet also kind and loving and profoundly mutual. In the Disney world, female sexuality is meant to be a hidden mystery powerful only as virginal, untapped potential – a reward for women and men who play by the social rules. What it might mean to fully own one's own sexuality as something for one's self, and as an expression of intimacy is never imagined, replace instead with female sexuality as a means of power over men that can be used well and demurely by good girls, and badly by slutty girls. And if sex is about the flow of power between women and men, there can be no surprise at the absence of LGBTQ sexuality.

Tess shares obsession with appearance that is universally associated with Disney female characters; she obsessively cares about what people think about her, a common trait in young females (Zaslow & Schoenberg, 2012). Mitchie (the main character and arguably the ‘innocent maiden’) constantly cares what other people think about her too, making this a universal issue for female roles portrayed on Disney Channel.

Another female character worth considering is Sharpay from *HSM*. Boys stop and stare in the school hallways as she walks by and ‘flaunts herself’ by wearing heels and short skirts. Of course, Sharpay who *has* sexuality and is not just an *object of* sexual desire, is framed as bad. By inviting girls to view, engage with, and perform narratives that only offer two types of identities, “innocent maiden” vs. “sinister witch,” or nice girl vs. mean girl, they are invited to this same disempowered, objectivized notion of their own developing sexuality. This framing reinforces stereotypes like “slut” and shames girls and warns them away from trusting and exploring their own sexuality. It creates a very limited world-view for women.

### **Rejection of female sexuality**

*I get together with my friend, Olivia. We’re 10 years old. She has an older cousin who teaches us a dance routine on the trampoline outside while our parents are celebrating someone’s fortieth birthday outside the netting of the trampoline. She teaches us ‘sexy’ dance moves with our hips swinging and our arms out. She puts a little too much ‘oomph’ into it, and my mom notices.*

*My mom comes over to the trampoline. “What are you guys doing?” she asks us.*

*The sexualized dancing and the crop top and booty shorts that this already-developed thirteen-year-old is showing us does not sit well with my mom. "I think you should do another type of dance," my mom says.*

*I'm embarrassed and my sister and I sheepishly look at the older cousin and our friend Olivia. I don't know why she's being this way, we try to signal with our eyes. But it's no use---the shame is already sitting on us like a blanket, and Olivia and her cousin seem mad. "Well," they say, "What else should we do?"*

*This is one example of a moment that was consistent in my childhood, where displaying sexuality was highly disapproved of. I don't think I even knew what 'sex' was, or that it was even a thing until I was in fifth grade or middle school. It just was never discussed in my household and it was very much a 'taboo'. Therefore, this led me to being much older than my peers before I started to express any interest in exploring my sexuality or even talking about it really. It's was always an 'awkward' topic for me and still is.*

*These restrictions around sexuality are clearly mirrored in the media that I was allowed watch as a kid, which was pretty much only the Disney Channel. There is no mention of sexuality at all and even with the relationships, besides 'gazing' at each other, flirting through giggles, and the occasional kiss, which is built up to be like the most exciting part of the movie!*

*This made kissing seem like a huge deal, so I felt a lot of pressure to make my first kiss super special/a big deal in reality. What is weird about the anticipated kisses, is that there is not even really a discussion about these couple's relationships. It just 'happens'. This is very unrealistic and continues to place females in a subordinate position where they must just wait for a man to magically come around and show interest in them and sweep them away to a 'happily ever after' (Heatwole, 2016; Griffin, Harding, & Learmonth, 2017).*

\*\*\*

Since female characters are de-sexualized, this means that they can't even have desire. Their desire is displaced with romance; yet further still, they do not even have agency over their own romance. These women are subjected to the will of a man. This is seen in all of the DCOM movies reviewed in this paper. Galleria, Gabriella, and Mitchie are all pursued by their male suitors. Sexuality is de-centered from the girl as agent, and it is located as a mysterious force over which she has no power, and therefore a lack of self-control.

Like Disney princesses before them, these girls have no say in who they 'fall' for (Heatwole, 2016). It was the boy's decision when he randomly finds himself attracted to her (usually it is a meet-cute scene where the girl is remotely different from the other girls in the film and shows some shyness or vulnerability, and then the guy falls in love. The message is the men are attracted to weakness and passivity. "Workless woman in need of rescuing by male saviors" (Griffin, Harding, & Learmonth, 2017). 'The male suitor' is turned into someone who promotes a girl's social standing. They are necessary 'arm-candy.' Sexuality as the physical, embodied expression of intimacy between two people is erased. It becomes embodied by symbolic markers like abstract gestures of devotion by the guy. This is valued because of the social capital of 'having the right guy,' not so much because of the expression of a relationship.

### **The Cheetah Girls - Limited sexuality, compulsory heterosexuality**

For example, in *The Cheetah Girls*, Galleria has a random love interest. One day, when she is sad and has broken up with her girl group, he walks into the auditorium. Galleria is playing the piano, singing a ballad, and he tells her it's 'actually' good, not like the other pop music she sings with her girl group. He tells her, "Welcome to the world of a true artist," sometimes you

have to “walk-alone” (Scott, 2003, 01:14:19). He is critical of her usual ‘pop-fluff’ which he says doesn’t sound like anything. This reinforces the neoliberal idea of artist as entrepreneur, rather than focusing on the actual collaboration of art that real-world art requires. Neoliberalism demonstrates a favoring of individualistic and free-market movements. Yet, the value of her work isn’t self-validated – it’s validated by a guy.

The extent of their ‘physicality’ is summed up in an awkward hand-grab. Despite the small (cringe-worthy) touching, Galleria is visibly freaked out by it. She’s flattered that he likes her, but you can tell that she is nervous, maybe even shocked that he likes her. She’s bashful and giggling, unlike when she’s with her friends. He puts his arms around her and she brushes him off and says sassily, “Wait a second, you aren’t just saying that cause now you can win the talent show?” (Scott, 2003, 1:14:29) but then she falls under his gaze again. They exchange looks back and forth until the end of the scene.

### **Boyfriend blues**

*I have not had any past relationships and that is something that I have allowed to make me feel small. I feel less than other women, girls, and teenagers because I have never had a boyfriend. I have never had another man treasure me and hold my hand in the school hallway or introduce me to his friends and his sports team, or wear his letterman jacket in the hallway. Half of me was too gumptious to ever let this happen. PDA grossed the heck out of me. I thought a lot of things were way to cheesy. I remember watching the Disney Channel shows with my parents, especially Hannah Montana and being second-hand mortified for Miley Stewart and her fifteen-year-old boy shenanigans. Her on-screen kisses in front of my parents would make me squirm on the inside. That is why the lack of PDA in these DCOM movies maybe suited me more? Troy and*

*Gabriella, the main couple of HSM2 don't even kiss until the very end of the movie. It is probably as de-sexualized as a TV program can get.*

*However, that does not mean that I did not privately yearn for a boyfriend. I can still call to mind all of the crushes that I had in middle school and high school. Some of them were my science partners, jocks, or my friends' older brothers. A lot of them were quiet and I thought they were sweet...maybe even a little weird. But they were all cool, and that is what I was taught to like, based on my media consumption. In HSM, Gabriella is smart, quiet, and kind of geeky, but the most popular boy in school falls for her. Thinking back, it's a shame that the media we consumed didn't allow girls to fall for the 'nerdy' or 'nice-but-not-super-hot' guys. "That's So Raven" and "Lizzie McGuire" saw the female leads have short-lived romances with their (kind of nerdy) guy best friends, but it was always an afterthought or a subplot. Mainly, the boys were in love with the girls, but the girls always yearned after the most attractive guys in school. The effect was to romanticize the unobtainable and structure the most desirable romantic partner as someone the character would be lucky to get, rather than a friend – a relationship marked by power imbalance rather than mutuality.*

*I wish this wasn't the common narrative! Growing up, I watched movies that showed strong female leads like, What a Girl Wants starring Amanda Bynes, The Last Song, etc. and I always marveled at the strong, independent-willed women. However, the narrative always included a strong, attractive male love interest. Maybe then girls wouldn't feel like it was such a risk then to date the nerdy boy or their best friend (who could probably bring them the most happiness). Girls always have to be crushed because the hottest guys don't want them. It doesn't make sense number-wise...girls are doomed to be crushed because there's only so many conventionally attractive men. The others need partners too! But we (girls) see that as 'losing.'*

*We didn't get the attractive guy, so we lose. What a shame that is. We should definitely work on switching that narrative.*

\*\*\*

Since young girls are told that they can't buy into sexuality, they are encouraged to buy into other things like consumerism—like the 'female popstar mentality'. It is a commodification of girlhood, really. Girls are made to believe that they should act and perform a certain way so that they can be liked and celebrated by others, rather than embrace an identity as independent, agentic young women with careers to fulfill, dreams to realize, sexuality to develop into, and a society filled with problems that need changing.

'Popstar personas' inhibit young women by teaching them to be asexual beings who do not know how to embrace their own agency. Furthermore, they infantilize women so Disney makes money off of them as long as possible (Bickford, 2015). Disney perpetuates women's innocence because it is good for business, and I know that I have been shaped by this, although it does not make up my whole story.

## **EMOTIONS & MENTAL HEALTH**

*Still, one of the biggest unresolved questions in my childhood has been my random anxiety. I still do not know where it comes from, but I think the biggest thing that sucked about it was that I felt really weird and isolated. I didn't understand where it was coming from, and it left me feeling powerless. I didn't even really talk to my sister or parents about it much. The main person I talked about these struggles with was my mom. We figured some things out together, like going to a child psychologist and switching schools (definitely one of the scariest yet easiest decisions ever—very strange), but we still never really talked about why I was feeling this way. I*

*didn't know why and neither did she. Besides this making me feel isolated, and unsure how to feel about myself, I also didn't see any of this happening in the media. A few of my friends had experienced some episodes like this themselves, but we didn't talk about it.*

*2008, or fifth grade, is when most of these weird flashes of anxiety were happening. Oddly enough, it correlated with a big year in music/media for me. I was obsessed with Taylor Swift's Fearless, The Hannah Montana Movie, High School Musical 3, Camp Rock, and Miley Cyrus's album, Breakout. Looking back, it must have added to my sadness or confusion that none of these forms of media expressed any similar feelings of anxiety or sadness experienced by the girls who created them. There was sadness expressed, but it was usually in relation to breaking up with a boy or missing an ex-boyfriend. This is only a minor example of erasure, but it is still applicable to talk about. The women I watched in Disney Channel Media, specifically these films, did not show signs of emotional distress unless it was at the hand of another girl being mean to them, or because they thought that their love interest didn't like them anymore.*

\*\*\*

Like any human, I experienced a lot of different emotions growing up. However, after reflecting during this research process, I realized that I did not have the same techniques when I was a child I do now for calming myself down and making sense of my emotions whether they reflect sadness, anxiety, or depression. From my teenage years to adulthood, I have developed practices of exercising, listening to music, doing yoga, meditation, etc. when I am feeling low. However, I did not have those techniques as readily available when I was a young child. The media I consumed was not helpful in this management of emotions either. Most of the emotions experienced in these films are due to a value problem...as in the person that gave the girl value, like a friend or love interest, doesn't want to be with them anymore.

This opens up a bigger conversation about female emotions and the pressures we put on ourselves in a postfeminist society, in which we are valued based on our looks and who values *us*. Angela McRobbie (2011) says:

Patriarchal power is stealthily handed over to the self-punishing regime of the fashion and beauty industry, which has the added value of promoting the idea that women self-police and have become their own toughest judges. When this apparatus is combined with a cultural milieu which disparages the feminist as a man-hating harridan, the wind is taken out of the sails of the young woman who wishes somehow to vent her anger. (p. 183)

This relates to any postfeminist media because females are idealized and commodified to be an image of what girls ‘should’ be, just like in the beauty and fashion industry. Therefore, if we have issues or notice inequalities around us (or basically express any emotion besides happiness) we do not know what to do with our emotions and we are punished for this. It is not helpful that films like this tells us that we can only be sad when we are crying about a boy or our friends being mad at us. For example, one of the songs from *High School Musical*, “When There Was Me and You,” is sung by Gabriella. It is a ballad that is performed after she and Troy break-up momentarily in the first movie. Because Gabriella expresses a sad emotion in this song, I recall singing it when I was young and I was feeling melancholy or upset about something. Even if I wasn’t feeling this way, and I decided to sing it—I would start to feel that way.

### **“When There Was Me and You” - Displaced emotions**

“It’s funny when you find yourself, looking from the outside,” (Hudgens, 2006, 00:04), the song begins. Gabriella is singing the ballad in a powerful voice, full of emotion. In this song,

she alludes to emotions such as embarrassment, worthlessness, and complete loss. “Why did I let myself believe miracles could happen...I thought you were my fairytale...But everybody else could tell that I confused my feelings with the truth” (00:20). She also says that her “heart is empty” now. She is putting blame on herself of other people’s actions (Troy’s) and even questioning her own intuition.

It is clear that Gabriella is finding a large part of her value in Troy since she is so torn-up about their break up and what people think of her now. Instead of continuing the narrative that females should find value in other people and be hurt if that person does not share the same feelings, we should be teaching our young girls self-reliance. This goes back to Driscoll’s (2013) main objective for girls studies—figuring out how much agency girls have when orienting themselves in the world. Females need more agency. Teach us how to handle our emotions from a young age. No more objectifying ourselves just because we are sad or don’t know where our value stands. Finally, females should not have to care so much about what other people think of them (Zaslow & Schoenberg, 2012), we should not question our confidence.

This is not a good go-to song for a young girl to sing when she is sad, because everything relates back to Judith Butler’s (1990) argument of performativity—if young girls repeat these actions, they will slowly but surely construct their own gender identity by learning how a female should act from Gabriella. Children’s movies should incorporate more real emotions and life experiences into them to provides kids with examples and tools when they are obsessively watching these in order to teach them how to deal with obstacles in real life. If every ‘sad’ song relates back to a relationship, a child will continue to see their worth tied to another person rather than coming from themselves.

## Conclusion

This has been a very transformational project for me, and I hope that it has been clear through this research that I have had the privilege to further develop my feminist identity. With the transformation of thought that I experienced, this is a clear example of feminist research due to its ability to inspire social change in myself through the increased awareness of the limiting expectations of postfeminist girlhood and the commodification of young women as showcased through the media we consume. Like Stern (2013), I found that “through writing, reflecting, and rewriting, I have connected to a stronger self” (p. 430).

Part of this research was about raising awareness for thoughtless consumption of media. In a global media system that is structurally exploitive, but especially on the Disney Channel, the viewers and actresses are the “laborers” of the media production companies (Blue, 2017) because it is through their gender performances and reliance of the cyclical nature of the “pop star persona” (Blue, 2016) that the company will continue to make money. This process was challenging because I had to unlearn some of the thought patterns I had associated with Disney in order to critique it, and I had to be able to give myself, my parents, and even Disney some grace for our acceptance of such a narrow representation of women because in the end, we do live in an economical system that fosters this exploitation as the norm (the expected, the normal), and this is how people have been making money for centuries now. It is not something that will change overnight.

The unique part about doing feminist research is that by reading up on counter-narratives and unveiling the power dynamics within these media texts, I feel that I have developed a slow-grade kryptonite for myself to use against these invasive media practices. Before this, I did not realize how much “our minds are for sale,” which they are in this mediascape, unless we actively

acknowledge this reality and defend ourselves against it. I had not necessarily been doing this before, and this research caused me to take a hard look at my media consumption— past and present—and what kind of stereotypes the media I engage with is reinforcing or where it is lacking representation of more than just heteronormative individuals. I feel that I learned something truly valuable in this process. Even if I still enjoy these media options in the future, I can be more aware of and mindful of the story lines and how they present gender identity: how assertive the characters are, and if they are androgynous or not (how masculine/feminine are they are). I can decide if I subscribe to their ‘happy endings’, or not, for myself.

If I were to further develop my research on this topic, I would start with a deeper analysis of the *High School Musical* franchise and consider its three films more in-depth. In this project, it was challenging and overwhelming to consider all three franchises (*The Cheetah Girls*, *High School Musical*, and *Camp Rock*) and the amount of narratives, stand-out scenes, and songs that I had to choose from. A more focused read of these texts may bring about clearer analysis and findings.

Although I focused on my individual gender identity in this research through the use of autoethnography, in future research it would be interesting to consider how these films influenced the gender identities of other people my age. Specifically, I would be interested in interviewing my childhood friends from the friend-group that I used to perform all of these DCOM songs with.

It would also be very valuable to bring in voices that are often marginalized. How do women of color experience DCOM media in ways that are similar and different? What impact does class have on the experience of these texts? How do various disabilities shape the experience of the ableism of these texts? How might lesbian identity re-structure the experience

of the relentless heterosexism of DCOM media. How does the femininity expressed in these media texts intersect with trans women and others who encounter these texts from a less cis-gendered perspective than my own experience? The methodological restraints of this study invite further reflections on these questions and point to the potential value of more autoethnographic work on these texts.

Nonetheless, the autoethnographic work on gender identity in this study, paired with my own development and journey through reading the feminist and critical theory literature and textual analysis of these DCOM media texts have point to the continued powerful force of Disney in shaping feminine identity.

## References

- Althusser, L. (1971). Ideology and ideological state apparatuses. In *Lenin and philosophy and other essays*. pp. 121–176. Translated from the French by Ben Brewster.
- Beck, J. (2018, Jan. 17). *When pop culture sells dangerous myths about romance*. The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/01/when-pop-culture-sells-dangerous-myths-about-romance/549749/>.
- Bickford, T. (2012). The new ‘tween’ music industry: The Disney Channel, Kidz Bop and an emerging childhood counterpublic. *Popular Music*, 31(3), 417-436.
- Bickford, T. (2015). Tween intimacy and the problem of public life in children’s media: ‘Having it all’ on the Disney Channel’s Hannah Montana. *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 43(1&2), 66-82.
- Blue, M. (2017). *Girlhood on Disney Channel: Branding, Celebrity, and Femininity*. Routledge.
- Blue, M. (2016). Performing pop girlhood on Disney Channel. In J. Warwick & A. Adrian (Eds.), *Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music: Performance, Authority, Authenticity* (pp. 171-190). Routledge.
- Bochner, A.P. & Ellis, C. (2016). *Evocative autoethnography: Writing lives and telling stories*. Routledge.
- Boylorn, R. (2008). As seen on TV: An autoethnographic reflection on race and reality television. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25(4), 413-433.
- Boylorn, R. M. & Orbe, M.P. (2014). *Critical autoethnography: Intersecting cultural identities in everyday life*. Left Coast Press, Inc.
- Bucciferro, C. (2019). Women and Netflix: Disrupting traditional boundaries between television and film. *Feminist Media Studies*. 19(7), 1053-1056.

- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Caulfield, K. (2016, Jan. 20). 'High School Musical' was a chart-topping phenomenon 10 years ago. Billboard. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-beat/6851107/high-school-musical-chart-topping-success-2006>.
- Chmielewski, D. (2008, Feb. 6). *Disney profits from cable*. Los Angeles Times. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2008-feb-06-fi-disney6-story.html>.
- Collins, K. A. (2019, Dec. 20). *Are we really going to pretend that gay kiss in The Rise of Skywalker matters?* Vanity Fair. <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2019/12/are-we-really-going-to-pretend-the-gay-kiss-in-the-rise-of-skywalker-matters>.
- Cox, N. & DeCarvalho, L. (2016). The 'Sexism of Sons': A feminist critique of FX's Sons of Anarchy. *Journal of Communications Media Studies*. 8(1), 9-23.
- Dempsey, J. (2008, August 25). *Disney's 'Cheetah Girls' claws to top*. Variety. <https://variety.com/2008/scene/news/disney-s-cheetah-girls-claws-to-top-1117991103/>.
- Diamond, M. (Director). (2008). *Camp rock* [TV Movie]. United States: Disney Channel.
- Driscoll, C. (2013). The mystique of the young girl. *Feminist Theory*. 14(3), 285–294.
- Duvall, S. (2012). "Textual analysis." In M. E. Kosut (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of gender in media* (pp. 388-390).
- Efron, Z., Hudgens, V., Tisdale, A., Grabeel, L., Bleu, C., Coleman, M., Warren, C., Rulin, O., Sanborn, R., & Stroh, K. (2008). A night to remember [Song]. *High school musical 3: Senior year* [Album]. Walt Disney Records.
- Efron, Z. (2008). Scream [Song]. *High school musical 3: Senior year* [Album]. Walt Disney Records.

- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Historical Social Research* 36(4), 273–90.
- England, D., Descartes, L., & Collier-Meek, M. (2011). Gender role portrayal and the Disney princesses. *Sex Roles*. 64, 555-567.
- Foss, S. K., Domenico, M. E., & Foss, K. A. (2013). Dramatic fiction: The social construction of reality. In S. K. Foss, M. E. Domenico, & K. A. Foss (Eds.), *Gender stories: Negotiating identity in a binary world* (pp. 31-50). Waveland Press, Inc.
- Gonzales, E. (2019, July 12). *Miley Cyrus says having sex made her feel 'weird' about playing Hannah Montana*. Harper's Bazaar.  
<https://www.harpersbazaar.com/celebrity/latest/a28379870/miley-cyrus-sex-hannah-montana-growing-up/>.
- Heatwole, A. (2016). Disney girlhood: Princess generations and Once Upon a Time. *Studies in the Humanities*, 43(1-2), 1-VII.
- Hesse-Biber, S. (2014). A re-invitation to feminist research. In S. Hesse-Biber (Ed.), *Feminist research practice: A primer* (2nd ed., pp. 1-13). Sage.
- Hine, B., Ivanovic, K., & England, D., (2018). From the sleeping princess to the world-saving daughter of the chief: Examining young children's perceptions of 'old' versus 'new' Disney princess characters. *Social Sciences*, 7, 161-176.
- Hudgens, V. (2008). Walk away [Song]. *High school musical 3: Senior year* [Album]. Walt Disney Records.
- Hudgens, V. (2006). When there was me and you [Song]. *High school musical* [Album]. Walt Disney Records.

Littleton, C. (2008, June 21). 'Camp' ratings rock for Disney. *Variety*.

<https://variety.com/2008/tv/news/camp-ratings-rock-for-disney-1117987897/>.

Lovato, D., & Jonas, J. (2008). This is me [Song]. *Camp rock* [Album]. Walt Disney Records.

Lovato, D. (2008). Who will I be [Song]. *Camp rock* [Album]. Walt Disney Records.

Lugo-Lugo, C. R. & Bloodsworth-Lugo, M. K. (2009). "Look out new world, here were come?":

Race, racialization, and sexuality in four children's animated films by Disney, Pixar, and DreamWorks. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 9(2), 166-178.

Martin, M. (2008). Too cool [Song]. *Camp rock* [Album]. Walt Disney Records.

McKee, A. (2001). Beginner's guide to textual analysis. *Metro Magazine*, 138-149.

McRobbie, A. (2011). Beyond post-feminism. (Report). *Public Policy Research*, 18(3), 179-183.

Meyerhoff, M. (2015). Gender performativity. *The International Encyclopedia of Human*

*Sexuality*.

Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen* 16(3), 6-18.

Ortega, K. (Director). (2006). *High school musical* [TV Movie]. United States: Disney Channel.

Ortega, K. (Director). (2007). *High school musical 2* [TV Movie]. United States: Disney Channel.

Ortega, K. (Director). (2008). *High school musical 3: Senior year* [Motion Picture]. United States: Walt Disney Studios.

*Premiere of 'High School Musical 2' breaks ratings record*. (2007, August 17). New York

Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/18/arts/television/18cnd-disney.html>.

Rich, A. (1980). Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. (5)4, 631-660.

Rude, M. (2019, Nov. 12). *Where are all the gays on Disney+? Out.*

<https://www.out.com/television/2019/11/12/where-are-all-gays-disney>

Scott, O. (Director). (2003). *The cheetah girls* [TV Movie]. United States: Disney Channel.

Stern, D. (2013). My So-Called Felicity and the City: Coming of age with and through feminist media studies. *Sexuality & Culture* 17, 417-433.

Sterngold, J. (1997, July 27). *After 14 years, one network for children refocuses.* New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/07/27/arts/after-14-years-one-network-for-children-refocuses.html?auth=login-email&login=email>.

The Cheetah Girls. (2003). Cheetah sisters [Song]. *The cheetah girls* [Album]. Walt Disney Records & Columbia Records.

The Cheetah Girls. (2003). Together we can [Song]. *The cheetah girls* [Album]. Walt Disney Records & Columbia Records.

Watkins, S., & Emerson, R. (2000). Feminist media criticism and feminist media practices. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 571, 151-166.

Wohlwend, Karen E. (2009). Damsels in discourse: Girls consuming and producing identity texts through Disney Princess play. (Report). *Reading Research Quarterly*, 44(1), 57-83.

Zaslow, E., & Schoenberg, J. (2012). Stumping to girls through pop culture: Feminist interventions to shape future political leaders. *Women and Language*, 35(1), 97-116.

Zeitchik, S. (2018, May 30). *Disney doesn't want to offend anyone. But it's getting caught in the culture wars.* The Washington Post.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/disney-doesnt-want-to-offend-anyone-but-its-getting-caught-in-the-culture-wars/2018/05/30/27e9c99e-6456-11e8-b166-fea8410bcded\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/disney-doesnt-want-to-offend-anyone-but-its-getting-caught-in-the-culture-wars/2018/05/30/27e9c99e-6456-11e8-b166-fea8410bcded_story.html).