

Like most young girls, I grew up watching Disney Princesses...

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How many times have you watched a movie and noticed that all the women are thin or are showing a lot of skin? These women are seen as “beautiful” in our eyes, thanks to our media-driven society. Women grow up seeing this constant ideal, and as a result, become pressured to look a certain way in order to be considered beautiful. We are influenced to fit into this mold of “flawless” so that not only our looks have to change, but our behavior as well. Women have been influenced to emulate this idea of beauty with plastic surgery, airbrushing, or even simply makeup; women are no longer accepted in their natural state of beauty.

Like most young girls, I grew up watching Disney Princesses and it definitely shaped my view of beauty. There are about nine Disney Princesses, including Cinderella, Snow White, Belle, Aurora, Ariel, Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan, and Tiana, who was added in 2009. There are only three princesses of color: Jasmine, Pocahontas, and Tiana, who aren’t among the most well-known or popular princesses. If you see advertisements for Disney Princess items, they are normally for Cinderella, Snow White, Belle, or Aurora. Each of these princesses has the same characteristics: thin, light skin, and light-colored eyes. Aside from Snow White, they have medium to long hair as well. What do you think a child learns from such images? The book *Our Bodies, Ourselves, A New Edition for a New Era*, by the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective states, “Researchers have found that ongoing exposure to certain ideas can shape and distort our images of reality” (10). That’s exactly what happens to everyone, including children; with something as simple and harmless as Disney Princesses, our image of reality becomes distorted and our vision of beauty is redefined.

Realistically, women cannot be as thin as a Disney Princess or other women shown in the media. The women in films, music videos, and advertisements are all altered to appear a certain way: “It’s not surprising that in our media-driven culture, our views of what women should look like are warped. Real women with pubic hair and breasts that aren’t perfect round orbs begin to

seem unnatural compared to the altered images we see in the media” (Boston Women’s 10). Every imperfection is hidden and true beauty is covered or even replaced. It is amazing to see the lengths actresses and models will go through just to be seen as perfect. In *Our Bodies Ourselves*, Eugenia Suhee Kim, an average woman, tells a brief story about her sister, a Korean woman who had her eyelids “done” just because everybody was doing it for the exaggerated crease, to make eyes look bigger. Kim believes her sister sold out for the “Western notion of beauty.” Later on, Kim had to have her eyes done to correct a droopy eyelid; however, after her surgery she didn’t recognize herself when she looked in the mirror and found herself trying to cover the crease that had formed (Boston Women’s 9).

Many film producers have made it a point to have the women in their films appear flawless, giving society a perception of how women should look as well as act. In films, women are often submissive and unintelligent and their sex appeal is exaggerated. Films like *The House Bunny* and *Legally Blonde* are good examples of this. In *The House Bunny*, the main character, Shelly, played by Anna Farris, is a Playboy bunny who is kicked out of the Playboy mansion and forced to live on her own for the very first time. Shelly finds herself at the front steps of a sorority, Zeta Alpha Zeta, that is about to lose their house because the girls are socially clueless. Shelly, a “dumb blonde” who wears outfits that show her legs, midriff, and cleavage and is covered in pink sparkles or glitter, decides to give the sorority girls a makeover. Shelley is the definition of the “dumb blonde” stereotype. According to Aaron Devor, Dean of Social Sciences at the University of Victoria and author of “Gender Role Behaviors and Attitudes,” our society believes each gender has these roles to maintain. A female should be feminine, meaning she should be passive and submissive (Devor 672).

In *Legally Blonde*, Elle Woods, played by Reese Witherspoon, is a sorority girl who is dumped by her boyfriend, so she tries to get into Harvard Law School to get him back. Elle Woods is the “dumb blonde” who wears similar outfits to Shelly in *House Bunny*. For her application to Harvard, she makes a video that involves her in a swimming pool wearing a sparkly bikini. Woods gets into Harvard Law, surprising many of its students. She fights to prove people wrong throughout the film because people assume she is unintelligent for the simple fact that she is blonde. Both films have the typical stereotype of the “dumb blonde,” which sends the wrong message to young girls, that as long as you’re attractive, it doesn’t matter how dumb you are and this message can influence their actions as well as their appearance. These films support the dependent and submissive woman as a “natural role” (Devor 673). At least Elle stands up for herself and attempts to break the “dumb blonde” image.

When films attempt to give women a more masculine role, like the fairly new Disney/Pixar film *Brave*, controversy occurs. The main character, Princess Merida, has some masculine behavior and characteristics: she has wild, untamed red curls, hates girly outfits, and enjoys archery. Her voice is slightly deep and she does not walk or eat like the typical Disney Princess. In addition, Princess Merida is independent and is a better archer than all the males in the film. A critic from *Entertainment Weekly*, Adam Markovitz, states, “Her love of unprincess-like hobbies, including archery and rock-climbing, is sure to strike a chord with gay viewers who felt similarly ‘not like the other kids’ growing up” (1). So, because this character prefers archery, fights like the boys, and is not the usual submissive princess, she may be a lesbian? According to Devor, “Persons who perform the activities considered appropriate for another gender will be expected to perform them more poorly; if they succeed adequately, or even well, at their endeavors, they may be rewarded with ridicule or scorn for blurring the gender dividing line” (673). Certainly, Princess Merida challenged these “gender roles” that other films have developed and continue to preserve in our society.

Linguist Deborah Tannen, a UCLA professor who studies gender differences, is the author of “Marked Women, Unmarked Men.” She explains that there are many details in the appearance of females that draw more attention and makes them “marked” (Tannen 392). Famous pop star, Pink, was interviewed by *Cosmopolitan* magazine and said, “Magazines have told me in the past, ‘We don’t want you on the cover. You’re not pretty enough’” (Prato 49). Pink herself is “marked.” She has over twenty tattoos, various piercings, bold, shaved bleached-blond hair, and is very athletic. This doesn’t make her any less beautiful; in fact, it makes her unique and even more beautiful. These gender markers are also seen in films. Female characters are put into skimpy outfits to show off their bodies, yet they are always well put together. Apparently, we’re supposed to care about how we look every second of every day. “A woman whose hair has no particular style is perceived as not caring about how she looks” (Tannen 393). When Shelly, in *The House Bunny*, gives the sorority girls make-overs, she focuses on one girl in particular, Natalie, played by Emma Stone. Natalie, an intelligent red-head with shoulder-length straight hair, is a social outcast and can be described as a “Plain Jane.” Shelley quickly changes that. She gives Natalie hair volume, makeup, and outfits to show off her body. Natalie then receives attention from everyone. She even begins to act dumb so the males will like her. This shows how films tell women that they have to choose between being pretty or intelligent and that they should probably pick looks because that’s obviously more important.



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Gender markers tell us we are supposed to look a certain way all the time and gender roles tell us to act a certain way, so our image of beauty has become altered and distorted. Natural beauty is true beauty: women with little-to-no makeup, no plastic surgery, a few blemishes, and different body types. The film industry has put this pressure on women to make them fit an ideal that is unrealistic without the hazards of plastic surgery or pounds of make-up. More real women should be shown on television and in films so that young girls can develop the confidence to embrace their natural beauty.

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