

Thai Parents' Attitudes toward Disney Movies

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to find out the attitudes of Thai parents toward Disney movies. The 50 participants were parents who had their children in kindergarten. The instruments were a demographic questionnaire and a set of questions for semi-structured interview. Data collection took place at a kindergarten school on the ground floor in an assembly room to create a relaxed environment and to ensure confidentiality. The results of the data analysis revealed that most parents allowed their children to watch Disney movies. Most parents occasionally watched movies with their children (40.5%). The reason for parents allowing their children to watch Disney movies was that they believed the movies provided opportunities for their children to learn English (30%) and morals (22%). However, some parents indicated that Disney movies contained inappropriate plots (16%), particularly in romantic scenes. It is clear that most parents have negative and positive feelings about Disney movies. Understanding how Disney movies particularly influence young people can help parents and educators identify benefit or risk factors from Disney movies for young children.

Keywords: *Disney movies, young children, Thai parents' attitudes*

1. Introduction

The Walt Disney Company has been recognized as a vigorous economic and cultural influence throughout the United States and the world. It has also been considered an educator and a form of family entertainment in its own right. To Zipes (2006), Disney has become highly successful for his name being associated with such original authors, as Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and Hans Christian Andersen. In particular, Walt Disney is well known as an American genius for his ability to create realism with color, musical scores, character evolution, shape, and size (Maltin, 2000). Disney created the original tales into pretty characters in their beautiful worlds, including singing creatures and beautiful environments. Disney created fairy tales heroines by portraying their attractiveness, passivity, and tolerance (Lockhart, 2000).

To date, very few studies have explored the perspectives of Thai parents on Disney movies. There is no clear-cut evidence indicating when and how Disney movies were first introduced in Thailand. It is currently noted that Disney has become very popular in Thailand as evident in the plan proposed by Siddiwat Cheewarattanaporn, Chairman of Association of Thai Travel Agents on constructing a Disney Theme Park in Thailand. Siddiwat expected that the theme park co-invested in a budget of \$625,000 by the government and private sector could help stimulate the country's economy. Such a project could create jobs for Thai people as well as boost foreign investment and tourism industry in Thailand (Bangkok Post, 2012).

Disney movies are currently influencing the Thai society in many ways, particularly as audio-visual materials for teaching English and family entertainment. Disney films continue to be re-released. Children and grandchildren of parents and grandparents who were once children themselves when movies were first released continue to enjoy watching their films even today. Parents think of their own childhood memories when re-watching a Disney film (Disneythaitown.com, 2005). Disney is popular and its animated films are still deemed positive for children. One reason for this positive point of view is due to the importance of English in education and communication.

In Thailand, proficiency in English is required in the Basic Education Curriculum of the Ministry of Education. As a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Thai government has exerted pressure on Thai people to have English efficiency in support of investment and cooperation from other countries. As a result, Thai people tend to believe that English is necessary for affluence of the country. It is not surprising that most Thai parents find an easy way out by providing their children with Disney movies as good learning opportunities for children to improve their English (Teaching Thailand, 2012). Therefore, Disney movies are perceived by parents as educational tools as well as entertainment sources.

2. Background of the Study

Media today, including magazines, newspapers, television, internet, phones, iPads, or movies, are influencing people's lives (Johnson, & Taylor, 2008). The impact of media is massive and intensified. The influences of media images and messages are clearly vigorous and prevalent. Historically, research on children's relationships with media has been dominated by psychological perspectives. Widely behaviorist studies of media's effects on behavior or attitudes. Violence, gender or body image issues have been critique from scholars (Myers, 2002).

Disney is one of a few companies, which has had enormous and consistent viewer audiences and has influenced many societies. Walt Disney (quoted in Maltin, 2000: 39) said, "We just make the pictures, and let the professors tell us what they mean." Disney Company is well known to children around the world and is a model for the global media system. Aside from its animated films, Disney has also created many products from the movie characters. The Disney Corporation sells numerous items, including dolls, books, tapes, compact discs, videotapes, clothing, toys, and household products. It is not perhaps an exaggeration to say that Disney's popular characters have been embedded in children's minds.

It should be noted that the most influential aspect of the Disney Corporation is the feature-length animated films (Wells, 2002). The main characters in Disney's fairy tales are more fascinating than the plots. Disney's marketing systems take advantage of this point. Today, there are several television and radio networks under the Disney brand. For example, there is a Disney TV network and numerous Disney theme parks worldwide. It is obvious that Disney is a pervading culture; it is prevalent, and unavoidable (Lockhart, 2000).

To date, few studies have explored the perspectives of parents on Disney movies. Disney movies have served as symbols of childhood over the last century. Walt Disney Company has had the biggest market share from 1995 until now and earned hundreds of millions of dollars annually (“Disney Acquires Club Penguin,” 2007). According to Giroux (1995), Disney produced films by focusing more on cultural influence and authenticity, especially when introducing specific roles, esteems, and models than more traditional roles of learning. Many people believe that Disney movies play a role as a teacher of social standards, especially to young people (Myers, 2002). Even though its stories might be understood by the audience as a pure entertainment, it might include other meanings. According to Lockhart (2000), Cinderella had a profound impact on individuals’ beliefs and expectations of love relationship. Damico and Fuller (2007) pointed out girls revealing media images as one of the reasons for wanting to be thin.

Social learning theory emphasizes that children develop and form their ways after they observe the roles in their circumstance as well as the roles they watch on television. (Cohen, 2006). Social learning theory and cultivation theory illustrate how media influences children. It shapes their world, and prompts understanding awareness, and changes perspectives by sending messages and through beautiful characters presented in the media (Frisher, 2010). Being well aware of the impact of Disney media on children’s early conceptualization led by parents, the researcher has found it interesting to study attitudes of Thai parents toward Disney movies.

3. Research Objective

The objective of this study was to find out the attitudes of Thai parents toward Disney movies.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Participants

The researcher recruited the participants by simple random sampling. They were from one local government kindergarten school in Ayutthaya Province, Thailand. The selecting criterion was that the school had children from mixed class backgrounds in Thailand, ranging from families with low to high socio-economic status.

First, the researcher posted the recruitment flyer for participants in the school. There were 71 parents who volunteered to participate but the researcher selected only 50 to have a good proportion in low to high socio-economic status. Then, the researcher gave them a consent form including a description of the study, procedure, and risks and benefits to their participation. The participants had at least 30 minutes to complete the survey questionnaire and the interview. Each participant was given the same instructions in the same manner.

4.2 Instruments

The instruments were (1) a demographic questionnaire and (2) a set of questions for semi-structured interview with a theme focusing on positive or negative attitudes with given reasons. After being content-validated by three specialists in the area of child psychology, the instruments were revised for clarity and appropriateness for the study. The researcher used descriptive statistics for frequency of responses, and percentages for the obtained data.

4.2.1 Demographic data were to provide general information about the participants and parents. Parents completed a demographic survey including items requesting information on hours spent watching Disney movies per week and favorite movies.

4.2.2 The semi-structured interview data were to reveal the parents' perspectives on Disney movies. Their responses were recorded and transcribed for coding in response to the research objectives.

5. Data Collection

Data collection took place at the school on the ground floor in an assembly room to create a relaxed environment and to ensure confidentiality. After finishing the questionnaire, the participants were asked with semi-structured interview questions individually about their attitudes toward Disney movies. Personal notes were taken during the interview as well.

6. Results

Data was collected and analyzed for frequency and percentage as shown below.

6.1 Finding from the Questionnaire

Table 1 Summary of Demographic Variables of Participants (N=50)

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	34	68
Female	16	32
Age		
Less than 30	6	12
31-35	7	14
36-40	28	56
41-45	2	4
46-50	5	10
More than 51	2	4
Owning television		
Yes	50	100
No	0	0
Watching Disney movies		
Yes	42	84.
No	8	16.
Hours in watching/ day		
0	0	0
1-5 hours	40	95
5-10 hours	2	4.8
10-15 hours	0	0

15-20 hours	0	0
20-25 hours	0	0
25+	0	0
Hours in watching/week		
0	0	0
1-5 hours	10	23.8
5-10 hours	28	66.7
10-15 hours	1	2.4
15-20 hours	1	2.4
20-25 hours	2	4.8
25+	0	0
Name of favorite movies		
Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs	29	58
Cinderella	41	82
Tangled	19	38
Mickey Mouse	27	54
Winnie the Pooh	22	44
Sleeping Beauty	33	66
Aladdin	21	42
The Lion King	15	30
Beauty and the Beast	36	72
Others	15	30
Disney Characters		
Cinderella	42	84
Belle	37	74
Rapunzel	27	54
Pooh	22	44
Minnie Mouse	30	60
Snow White	32	64
Others	24	48
Spending Time Watching Movies with Children		
Always	3	7.1
Frequently	13	31
Occasionally	17	40.5
Rarely	9	21.4
Never	0	0
Attitudes		
Positive		
- Learning English	15	30
- Teaching morals	11	22
- Entertainment tool	9	18
- Encouraging creativity	7	14
- Others	4	8
Negative		
- Inappropriate plots	4	16

The number of study participants was 50 parents. Parents completed a demographic survey including items requesting information about parents and children, as shown in Table 1. The information was about time spent watching Disney movies per week, favorite movies and some questions were about descriptive information form. In term of parents’ information, 68% of parents were male, while 32% were female. Of the 50 interviewees, 100% had their own television at home. There were about 40.5% of participants occasionally watched Disney movies with their children, 31% frequently watched movies with their children. About 7.1% always watched movies with their children. Parents revealed that Disney had positive effects to their children; learning English (30%), teaching morals (22%), entertainment tool (18%), encouraging creativity (14%). Only 16% commented that Disney movies had inappropriate plots as shown in sexuality and romantic scenes.

In term of children’s information, eighty-four percent of the children have watched Disney movies before, while only 16% have never watched Disney movies. With regard to the number of hours children spent watching per day, it was split between one to five hours (95.2%) and five to ten hours (4.8%). The participants (66.7%) spent time watching movies five to ten hours per week, while 23.8% watched movies one to five hours per week. *Cinderella* was the favorite movies (82%).

The summary of demographic survey indicated that most parents allowed their children to watch Disney movies. Most parents occasionally watch movies with their children. The reason for parents allowing their children to watch Disney movies was because they believed the movies provided opportunities for their children to learn English and morals. For example, the moral of the story, *Beauty and the Beast* is not to judge people based on their looks and first impressions. Still, some parents have asserted that Disney movies contain inappropriate plots, particularly in romantic scenes.

6.2 Findings from the Interviews

The participants’ responses were coded into two categories: positive attitude and negative attitude, as shown below.

Table 2: Distribution of Text Units

Contents	Text units (Frequencies)	% participants responses
<i>Positive Attitude</i>		
• Educational-Instructional	32	64
• Entertaining	18	36
• Life Skills	20	40
<i>Negative Attitude</i>		
• In appropriate plots	14	28

Note. N = 50. Number of text units does not equal the number of the participants. Some provided more than one response in a particular category. Percentages of participants’ responses vary from category to category

Overall findings from the interview data indicated that Disney movie had positive effects to their children. Sixty-four percent of the participants stated that Disney movies as an educational tool, could teach children English, while 36% said they spent quality time watching Disney movies with children. According to their interview responses, 40% said Disney provided life skills for girls, such as cooking, cleaning and doing house work. However, 28% felt that Disney provided inappropriate plots. The following are examples of quotes and thoughts given by the participants identifying the categories of the positive attitude and negative attitude.

Table 3: Examples of Responses in Positive Attitude Category

Examples of the participants' responses

- Although I'm a mother of my daughter, I like Disney movies. I think it's the best cartoon company in the world. My daughter and I can enjoy it together.
- My husband and I try to build our family as a bilingual family. I speak English to her and I think preparing a good environment to her is very important. I usually use various kinds of media to learn English. Books and Disney cartoons are the best choices for me.
- My daughter and I are Disney fans. I think Disney provides me with a little breathing space. It can help strengthen children's communication, language, and coping skills.

Table 4: Sample of Responses Category Negative Attitude

Examples of the participants' responses

- Many educators said movie is not good for young children. I'm really concerned about negative effects for my kid. Many movies or cartoons are more violent in recent years.
- My husband and I do not allow our kids spend large amounts of time watching movies and YouTube. Movies and other Medias can influence my kids' thought and behaviors.
- Personally, I don't like Disney. I think Disney encourages children to believe in happy ending life and love. It's not good for my kid.

7. Discussion

Overall, the responses of the participating parents indicate a more positive attitude toward Disney movies. Parents regard Disney movies as tools for children to learn-English. Although there is no evidence to indicate when Disney first came to Thailand, it appears that Disney films have played a vital role in the Thai society for a long time. Thus, the parents tend to have positive feelings about Disney movies.

Ethics and morals are also important issues in Thailand. The emphasis on morals in Disney films has convinced many Thai parents to see them as educational sources for their children. According to the results of the study, most parents believe that Disney movies can teach children good morality and ways to be a good person. For example, Disney usually presents bad women as unhappy, and who are punished at the end of the films, while good heroines portray kindness and compassion and are finally rewarded (Disneythaitown.com, 2005).

Although Disney movies include educational and informative contents, parents should be able to supervise their children's viewing or ban them at times. Some children can be affected by violence or inappropriate scenes. Social Learning Theory points to children developing and forming their behaviors after they observe the roles they watch on television. Characters in mass media usually present social norms and roles which children watch and then mimic those certain actions in real life (Cohen, 2006). Young children are still at the age that lacks mental ability to distinguish between reality and fantasy. As discussed in Social Learning Theory, if children idolize some characters in movies, they are more likely to form the attitudes and ideas portrayed in animated movies (Mumme & Fernald, 2003).

8. Conclusion

The results of this study point to parents having positive attitudes toward Disney movies. Although many studies have shown the negative influences of movies by measuring either children's behaviors or responses (Grogan, 2010), Disney movies has still stayed common and influential in today's society. Overall, whether Disney is positive or negative for children, it is still undoubtedly popular and influences children in Thailand. Attracted by cute creatures singing in beautiful environments, most parents tend to choose Disney movies for their children. The Disney Corporation has still reacted to its viewers by refining their films for continued enjoyment.

The limitation of this study appeared to lie in one-sided data from parents of children at the kindergarten level. Studies on other age groups of children can be pursued to better understand children's attitudes towards Disney movies.

9. Acknowledgement

The researcher would like to thank the participating parents in this study.

10. The Author

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