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From Damsel in Distress to Heroine: Disney's Influence on the Construction of Womanhood.

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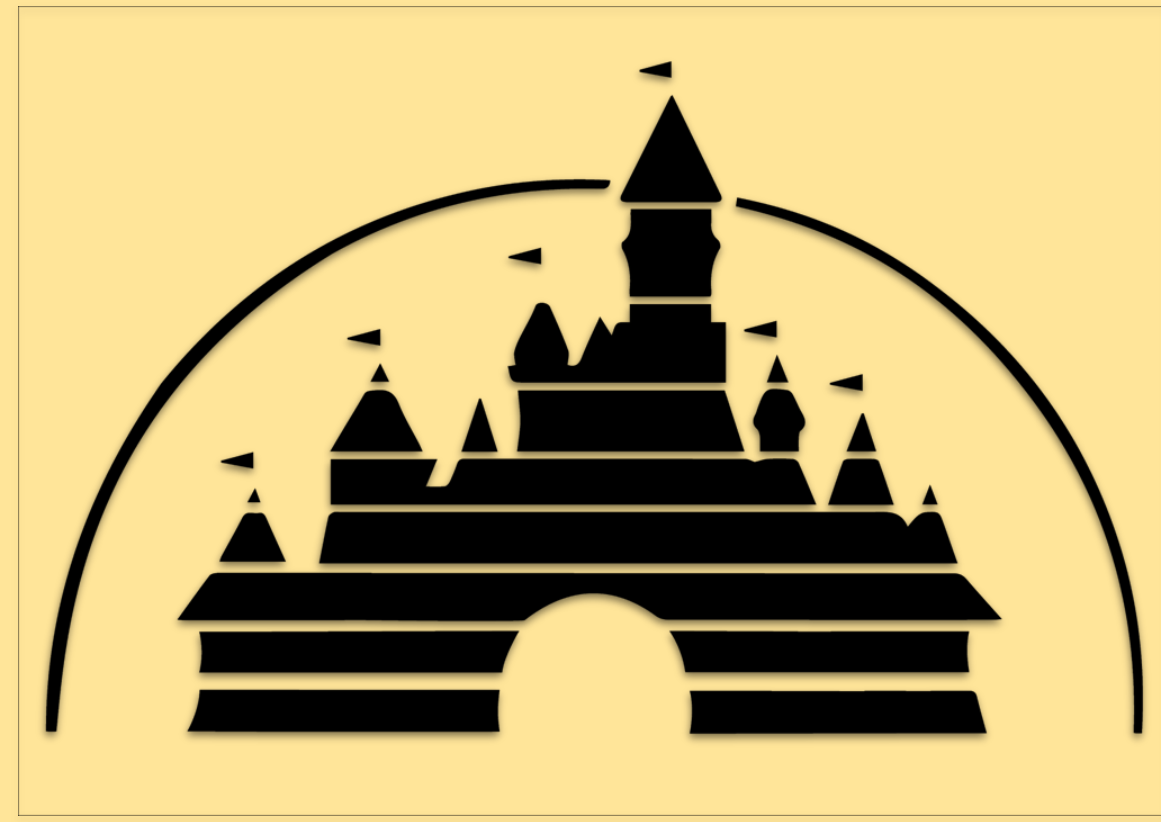
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From Damsel in Distress to Heroine: Disney's Influence



on the Construction of Womanhood

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Introduction

Research¹ has found that from a very early age one of the main factors that contributes to the construction of a person's perception of gender and their gender roles is the media. One of the most popular and influential corporations that produces cultural artifacts targeted to children is Disney Studios². Critics and viewers have divided the films starred by Disney's famous "princesses" into two generations: those released before the 90's (Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Cinderella) and those released after the 90's (Mulan, Pocahontas, Aladdin). It has been widely recognized that the female characters in these movies perform different roles in the narrative, evolving from the "damsel in distress" trope to a more active role.



Objective

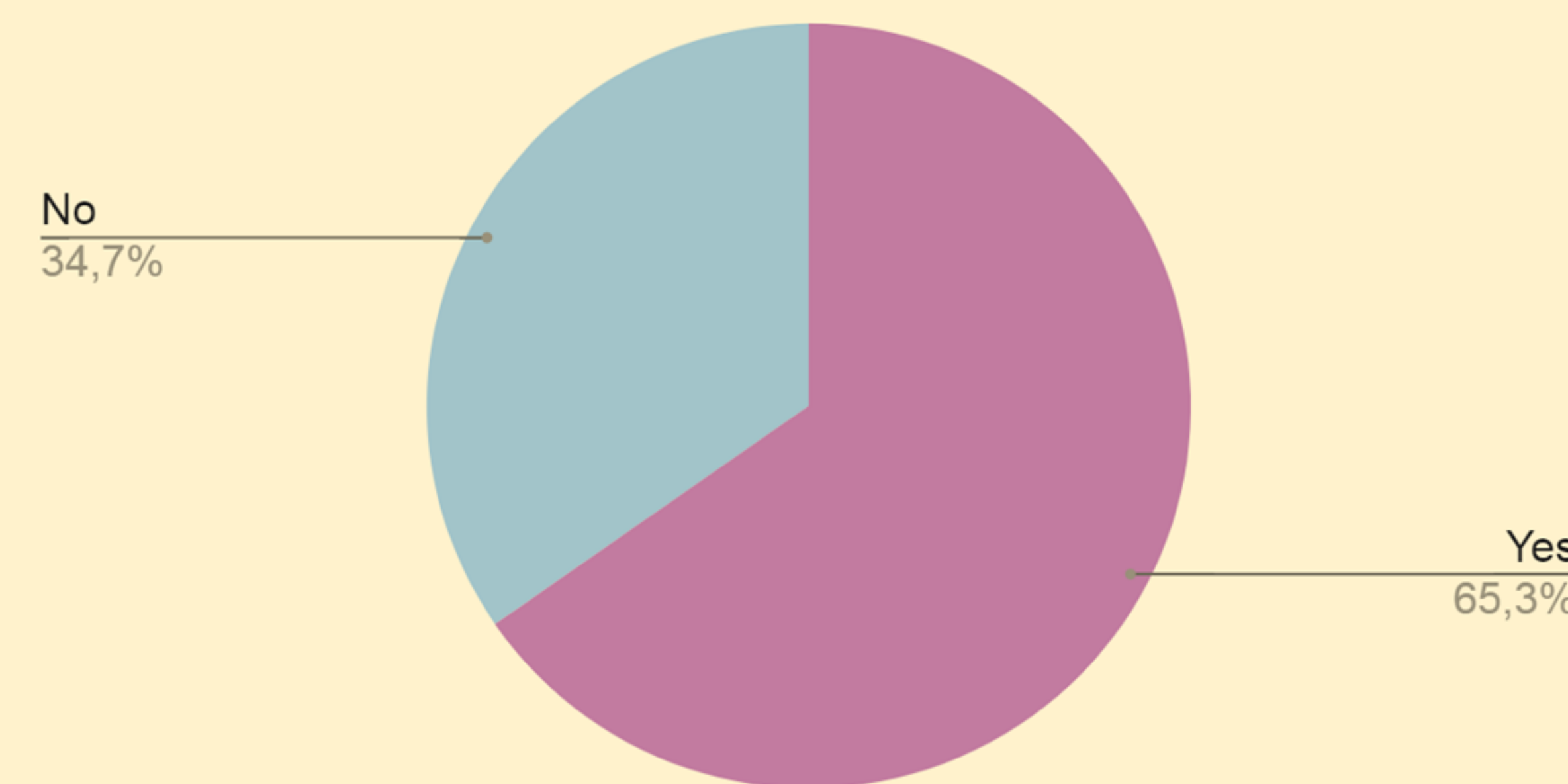
Our interest is to explore, within the theoretical framework of gender studies, whether female viewers perceive there is a difference in the representation of female characters in each generation of princesses. Furthermore, the aim of this research is to analyze whether the portrayals of Disney princesses have had an impact on the construction of womanhood in women exposed to these movies.

Method

In order to analyse such impact we carried out an anonymous survey among 150 middle-class Argentinian women that belong to different age groups. The survey consisted of 20 questions related to their consumption of Disney films, their perception of how the role of women is portrayed and their performance as females in society. Below are some of the most significant findings.

Influence of Disney in the construction of womanhood

When asked if they thought Disney influenced them, women answered:



Results

Among the women that were surveyed, 73 (48%) were younger than 20 years old and 77 (51%) were older than 20 years old; 142 (94%) grew up watching Disney films.

In the age group +20, 20 (25%) women answered that they identified with the characteristics referring to the princesses of the first generation to some degree. However, only 2 (2%) of the -20 group identified with these traits.

Out of the younger women, 63 (86%) answered that they identified with the characteristics assigned to the princesses of the second generation. Furthermore, 50 (64%) of the older women also felt represented with these traits.

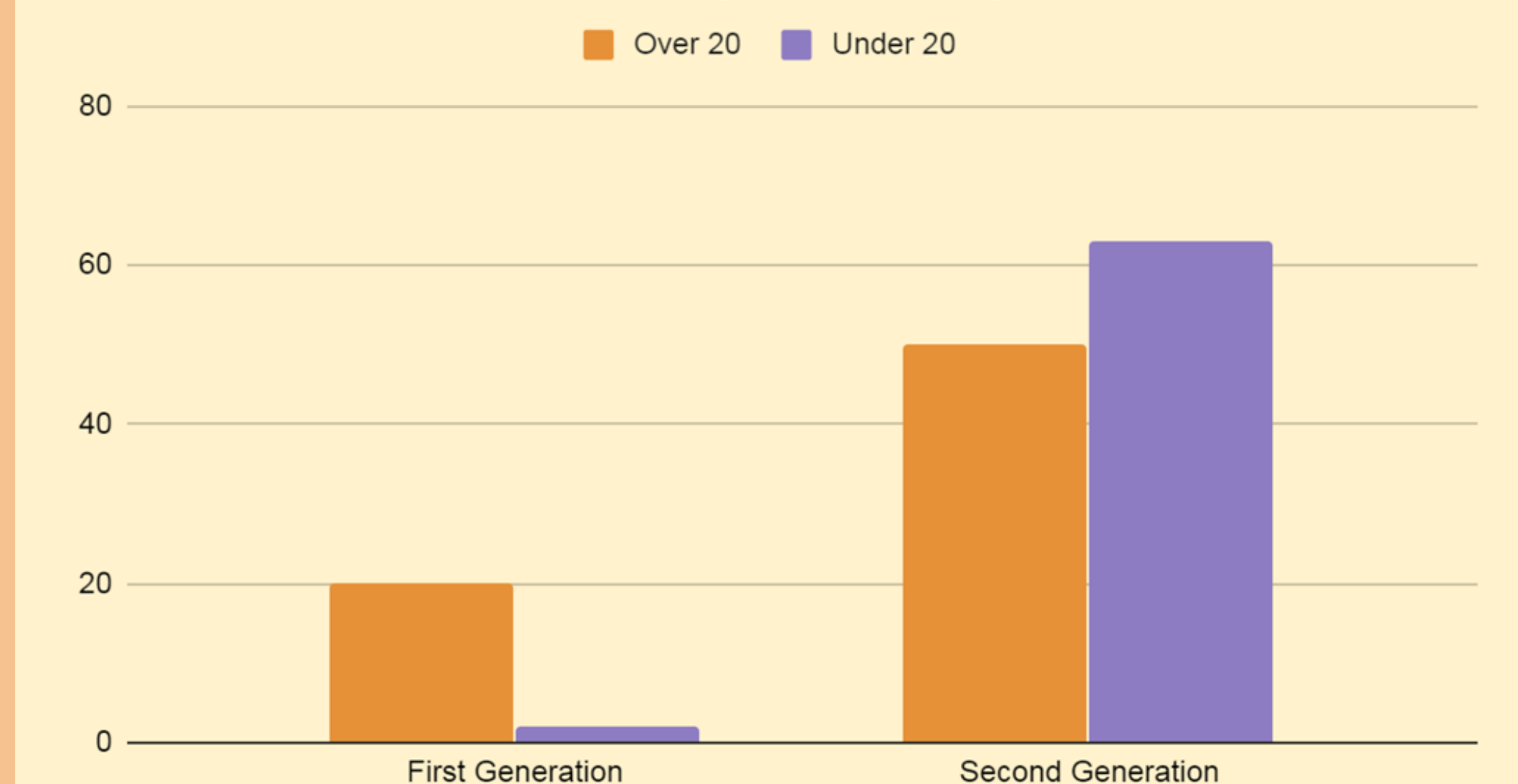
Most of the women agreed that Disney movies influenced their idea of what being a woman entails: 50 (64%) of women +20 and 48 (65%) of women -20.

However, 68 (87%) +20 and 62 (84%) -20 claimed other factors also had an influence on their construction of womanhood.

Women +20 considered 'having a stable relationship' as the most important factor to reach happiness, while women -20 agreed on 'economic independence' as the most important. As the least important for them they mentioned 'having children'.

As to what they thought were the most important factors to achieve what they wanted, 64 (82%) women +20 mentioned external factors such as 'the circumstances they were born in', 'the help of others' and 'luck'. Meanwhile, the same amount of women -20 pondered 'their own will' as the most important factor.

Number of women that identify with Disney Princesses



Words used to describe the princesses



Conclusions

Based on the results of the survey, it can be concluded that there is a change in the portrayal of female characters before and after the 90's, since all women used mostly different adjectives to describe each generation. It was also observed that more women over 20 identified with the first generation than women under 20. Moreover, each group's construction of womanhood differs: women +20 value the relationship with others the most, while younger women value independence. However, it cannot be concluded that this goes hand in hand with the change in the representation of princesses since most women acknowledge other factors as also being influential.

References

- ¹Wolf, N. (1991). The Beauty myth: How images of beauty are used against women. London: Vintage.
- ²England, Dawn E., Descartes, Lara, & Collier-Meek, Melissa A. (2011). Gender role portrayal and the Disney princesses.

