Part of Their World: Gender Identity Found in Disney Princesses, Consumerism, and Performative Play

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Abstract

One way that children explore concepts of gender is through make-believe and performative play. One of the most prevalent presentations of gender that is packaged for children's play is the Disney Princess brand. In 2007 the Walt Disney Princess campaign profited over four billion dollars and expanded to include over 25,000 items for sale. Princess paraphernalia reflects a change in the way that young girls (ages 3-5) engage in imaginary play by creating a whole new paradigm of thought. As these girls project themselves into the role of a certain Princess, typical play transforms into a consumer based theatrical experience. Girls not only identify with the ideas of playing princess, but of being a Princess as well. Judith Butler examines gender as consisting of performative "acts" that are stylized, repeated, and public. Gender identity usually includes aligning one's self with socially accepted definitions of male or female. Using Butler's idea's about gender performance, this thesis looks closely at the Disney Princess brand and how it contributes to the idea of a gender identity through films, live performances at Disneyland, and merchandise designed for enhancing play. As media and consumerism plays an increasingly large role in children's lives, careful attention must be made to the influence of such brands, especially as the Princesses become defining models of the word female.

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Most children start showing their gender identity at around 2-3 years of age. They may do this by choosing certain toys, colours and clothes that seem to appeal more to boys or girls. By the time they reach 3 years old, most children prefer to play games which they think fit their gender, and with other children who are the same sex as them. For example, boys may play together with trucks and girls may play together with dolls. However, children don't start to think of their gender as being fixed, or 'forever', until they reach 6 or 7 years old. Gender roles are influenced both by our genes (a part of our biology) and our environment. Children often copy adult role models such as their parents or teachers. Gender identity is the personal sense of one's own gender. Gender identity can correlate with assigned sex at birth or can differ from it. All societies have a set of gender categories that can serve as the basis of the formation of a person's social identity in relation to
other members of society. In most societies, there is a basic division between gender attributes assigned to males and females, a gender binary to which most people adhere and which includes expectations of masculinity and gender identity and gender role. Gender identity is defined as a personal conception of oneself as male or female (or rarely, both or neither). However, physicians should remember that all individuals possess a gender identity and that the process of becoming aware of it is an important part of the psychosocial development of a child. The gender role can be more stereotypically masculine, with rougher play and a preference for male activities and dress. When a normal Y chromosome with a fully functional SRY locus is found in a patient with dysfunctional androgen receptors, as is the case in androgen insensitivity syndrome, which has an incidence rate of 1 per 20,000 population, virilization of the fetus does not fully take place.