How the lion groomed the lamb: 
The effects of media on young girls 
by Brianne Bertram

Growing up in North America, girls are bombarded by messages about how they should behave. This process starts at a young age with little girls watching Disney Princess movies and learning they need to be submissive, quiet, and pretty. As they grow up, contemporary vampire fiction takes the reins and teaches girls that the ideal romance is one where they are isolated, physically weak, victimized, and afraid. In both, their purity is fetishized, and they are expected to give up everything for their male partner. This article explores both ideas throughout the span of an adolescent girl's life and then compares them to a YouTube trend “Am I pretty or ugly?” This trend has young girls who seek validation make videos that ask the internet to judge their appearance for a boost in their self-esteem. Instead, they are met with malicious comments that reinforce the ideas they were taught in the popular culture discussed above. Overall, my findings are that these messages, often created by adult men, are grooming young girls to be submissive housewives who are taught that their value as a woman is tied to a specific concept of purity, and that one’s partner being physically threatening is a sign of love.

Media plays a central role in shaping children in the twenty-first century; as a result, young girls are being raised under the influence of misogynistic television and film with little study regarding the consequences. In this paper, I will analyze three scholarly articles that critically examine three very different styles of video media targeting different age groups with similar effects: Disney Princesses, contemporary vampire fiction, and YouTube videos. First, I will look at “Happily (n)ever after: the cruel optimism of Disney’s romantic ideal” by Julie C. Garlen and Jennifer A. Sandlin (2017), which addresses Disney Princess films. Second, I will consider “‘The lion fell in love with the lamb’: gender, violence, and vampires” by Renae Franiuk and Samantha Scherr (2013), which focuses on teenage vampire fiction.

Finally, I will also look at Amanda Rossie’s (2015) “Moving beyond ‘am I pretty or ugly?’: disciplining girls through YouTube feedback,” which examines YouTube's effect on the young girls targeted by certain videos on the platform. These works consider the first eighteen years of a modern girl’s life where she is the target of gender stereotypes, eroticized aggression, heteronormativity, and the belief that her happiness is dependent upon her ability to find and fix a man. By evaluating the effects of media on girls, we can see the real-world applications of the issues presented in the three articles, particularly the damage to girls’ self-esteem. These articles argue that the media grooms girls to believe in cruel notions of love and romance, which potentially leaves them vulnerable to domestic abuse relationships.

Brianne Bertram is a MA Student at the University of Alberta (Department of Anthropology, 13-15 Tory Building, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 2H4 [bbertram@ualberta.ca]).
Imperfectly Perfect Princes: Disney’s Cruel Optimism

In “Happily (n)ever after: the cruel optimism of Disney’s romantic ideal,” the authors look at the influence Disney has over young children and the cruel optimism it teaches young girls. Garlen and Sandlin (2017) define cruel optimism from Berlant’s definition, the unrealistic expectations set by Disney “in which we become attached to fantasies of happiness and fulfillment that are unsustainable and detrimental” (957). Disney has become synonymous with happiness due to the successful branding campaign in which they use the slogan “the Happiest Place on Earth” to describe their theme parks (Garlen and Sandlin 2017:959). Disney uses this association to teach girls about happiness and how to achieve it, which according to their films is through heterosexual romantic love (Garlen and Sandlin 2017:959). Disney uses this guise of happiness to sell its products and to cause its viewers to overlook the underlying messages within its stories.

In Disney’s Princess narratives, the women never know true happiness until they have met their prince charming, who will sweep them off their feet and marry them (Garlen and Sandlin 2017:961). This teaches girls that as they grow up, they should focus on doing things that will help them attain a husband and therefore ultimate happiness. This learned heterosexual behaviour can be seen in children even before they reach kindergarten. Growing up, kids learn to “play house” and imagine themselves in stereotypical husband and wife gender roles. By teaching girls that love at first sight is how they will meet their partner, a girl learns that her looks are more important than her personality (Garlen and Sandlin 2017:963). Disney ingrains the idea that being pretty and following gender roles will help a girl find a prince and therefore be happy, but the “cruel optimism” of this happiness is the unrealistic expectation Disney has created.

Disney Princess films show perfect women with few flaws, but the expectation is that a man is a “Fixer Upper,” as demonstrated in the song with this title from one of Disney’s largest box office successes, the 2013 film Frozen. In this song, the rock trolls sing to Anna to show her that her love interest Kristoff is flawed and that that is okay. This idea is the opposite of the standard to which women in films are held. The film's heroines are princesses, and even queens, who are beautiful and proper, and even when they begin the story as normal citizens, they are unable to fit into the community, which, as we later see, was not the station or class they were meant to be in. We see this again in the film Beauty and the Beast, where the heroine believes she can fix the Beast who is frequently violent and has a short fuse. This teaches young girls that it is their job to help and stay with men who are quick to anger and aggression because they can fix them (Garlen and Sandlin 2017:965). In turn, this idea perpetuates abuser behaviour. If a man lashes out, he will not do it again as long as the girl does not leave because she is meant to fix him with her love and turn him into a prince. Beauty and the Beast demonstrates this most directly through Adam transforming from an aggressive beast into a perfect gentleman. He is upper class, handsome, and kind, all because Belle stayed with him when he was the opposite, a literal beast. Young girls begin believing that love is “painful, controlling, obsessive and contribute[s] to self-destructive behaviours” (Garlen and Sandlin 2017:965). While Belle is not initially a princess or of high status, she is introduced as a beautiful but strange girl who does not fit in with the poor town she was raised in. Additionally, her initial heroism is done without knowledge of the Beast’s past;
however, she decides to stay with him and stop trying to escape after learning the truth of his curse, only returning home to save her father. The opposite side of this spectrum is also problematic for young girls. For example, the prince in Cinderella comes and sweeps her off her feet with marriage and life in a palace as a princess. This teaches little girls that a prince will shower them with affection, praise, and gifts. We only see the beginnings of these royals’ lives in the films and are left to assume that the prince continues to worship the princess and the two live happily ever after as the end title suggests. This can be a dangerous mentality to portray to impressionable young girls because it is a common technique among abusers to sweep a woman off her feet this way and cause her to fall in love before he shows her the beast within him. Now in love, the woman believes that it is her job to fix this prince like Disney had taught her, to turn him back into a prince.

One of Disney’s more recent official Disney Princess films, the 2016 film Moana, does not feature a love interest. Moana explores feelings of isolation, not fitting in within her village and the desire for change. The goal of this movie is to teach children about self-doubt and to persevere in what feels right. This is not the first of Disney’s movies to try and turn away from their traditional princess narrative by leaving the romantic aspect out of the movie. However, Moana’s status as an upper-class and beautiful girl within the village sets the tone of the film by letting the viewer know the reason Moana does not fit in is purely her desire for the sea, not touching on other alienating factors. The most recent Disney Princess movies, while not focusing necessarily on a romantic narrative, do not undo the potential damages of its other films.

Disney builds a relationship between happiness and trust with their viewers, and the ideals Disney normalizes in its films are the warning signs of an abusive relationship. By normalizing these behaviours, Disney is performing a type of grooming. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, or NSPCC (2020), explains grooming as “when someone builds a relationship, trust and emotional connection with a child or young person so they can manipulate, exploit and abuse them.”. Grooming happens during the formative years of a child’s life and can have lasting effects well into adulthood. It provides an opportunity for men to take advantage of women using techniques that Disney taught them was acceptable and a sign of love, and therefore would lead to happiness. By creating a relationship with young girls and teaching them that abuser techniques are signs of love, Disney is grooming them to accept abusive relationships rather than see the warning signs before it is too late. Overall, Garlen and Sandlin’s (2017) paper demonstrates how Disney uses its media to teach young girls how to find love that will bring them happiness, and as a result, they have outlined common grooming behaviours within its films. Even films not covered by Garlen and Sandlin, such as Frozen and Moana, show viewers that while love may not always be the only solution, ideas of isolation, beauty standards, and normalizing potentially dangerous behaviours are still present. Having examined the harmful media targeting young girls, I will now move onto media which targets a teenage audience to a similar effect, contemporary vampire fiction.

Love Bites: Eroticized Violence in Vampire Fiction

In Franiuk and Scherr’s 2013 “‘The lion fell in love with the lamb’: gender, violence, and vampires,” they explain the messages being taught to teenage girls in contemporary vampire fiction. They show that this fiction has traditional
heteronormative gender roles that render women as weak and submissive and men as strong and dominant (Franiuk and Scherr 2013:14). One example of this is in Stephanie Meyer’s (2005) Twilight. The lead character is dominated by the vampire, not only physically, but also socially. Edward, the primary love interest and vampire, lurks in the corner of Bella’s room at night to watch her, and when he later admits this to Bella, he talks about the power she has over him (Twilight 2005). This action would normally be depicted as being that of a dangerous stalker, but instead, the novel paints it to be a sign of Edward’s protective love for her. Contemporary vampire stories reinforce traditional gender roles where the women are meant to be dominated and protected by the vampire men who have superhuman strength compared to their human female counterparts. These stories also show the violence within the vampire/human relationship. These franchises normalize and eroticize violence perpetrated by men towards women (Franiuk and Scherr 2013:18). In these texts, the vampire is seen explaining that he is dangerous to the woman, but she is determined that her love will overcome the dangers of their interspecies relationship. In the 2009–2017 television series The Vampire Diaries, Stefan (a vampire) tells Elena (a human) that he is a danger to her and cannot control himself. He lunges at Elena, and in response, she apologizes to him since he has convinced her it is her fault that he is behaving this way (Season 1 Episode 6). The man in this scene is aggressive and assertive, often slamming the woman against walls or grabbing her by the neck; this both shows his power over her as well as alludes to his desire to dominate her (Franiuk and Scherr 2013:19). The vampires then blame the leading female for their actions because it is her blood that set them off; the girls apologize, and the abusive cycle is repeated (Franiuk and Scherr 2013:20). It is important to mention that oftentimes the vampires we see in these scenarios are the “good” ones. These are the vampires who are often considered vegetarian in their eating habits as they avoid human blood in favour of animals. This implies there are many vampires out there who do not make such choices and are therefore more dangerous because they will not hold back the way these leading men do. These interactions, which closely mimic domestic abuse, are viewed as erotic because the vampire’s lust for her is overpowering. We see this again when the vampires drink blood from the leading female character. The vampire is biting and hurting the woman, but she moans in pleasure to show she enjoys the actions and in turn eroticizes the vampire penetrating her neck (Franiuk and Scherr 2013:23). All of these examples show the media normalizing domestic violence for their target audience, teenage girls.

Unlike Disney, these vampire fictions target girls during puberty, showing them images of sex and violence until they begin to associate the two as interchangeable. This association again demonstrates a type of grooming, teaching girls to view signs of domestic violence as attraction. The girls in these films are harmed by the vampire after he is sent into a frenzied state caused by her blood. This portrays the vampire’s violence against the woman as her fault rather than his own, and as a result, we often see the girl apologize to the vampire for tempting him (Franiuk and Scherr 2013:20). Franiuk and Scherr (2013) explain that “[t]he pairing of sex and violence in any genre not only has the potential to cultivate a dangerous sexual reality for women but also may lead to an automatic association between sex and violence for men” (23). Men learn from these films to treat women with aggression and force, and that when she denies him, she is playing hard to get. This teaches men
that crossing boundaries is okay. Meanwhile, women are also learning that a man doing these things is not abuse, but a way for him to show her his love.

**Am I Pretty or Ugly: Disciplining Girls by Damaging Their Self-Esteem**

In Amanda Rossie’s 2015 “Moving beyond ‘am I pretty or ugly?’: disciplining girls through YouTube feedback,” she examines the videos of teenage girls who ask their audience the question, “Am I pretty or ugly?” The author’s focus is postfeminism and the pressures girls face to fit within a heterosexual male standard of sexiness and attraction. Rossie finds that the feedback these creators received on their videos varied. Some of the comments answered the girl’s question in a positive or negative way, but a majority of the feedback strayed from answering the question in favour of either sexualizing the young girls or insulting them; many of these comments “remind girls that beauty is sexiness, defined in service of men” (Rossie 2015:235). The agreed-upon belief is that the girls in these videos post them with the goal of receiving reassurance about their physical appearance in order to raise their self-esteem (Rossie 2015:230). Some of the comments Rossie (2015) looks at insult the girls for needing this reassurance and attack the idea of their inner beauty because they consider the girl to be an “attention whore” (238). The primary content creators that Rossie (2015) looked at were middle-class girls, the same bracket which is targeted by the messages within Disney and contemporary vampire fiction. These girls are vilified for wanting a stranger’s approval, and Rossie (2015) explains that these comments work to discipline girls’ bodies and their sexuality through hate (239).

The girls in these YouTube videos are being judged based upon beauty norms and heterosexual standards of beauty and desire (Rossie 2015:232). By the young girls looking to older men for approval, they reinforce gender roles and tie their self-esteem to the value they are assigned by men (Rossie 2015:232). Rossie (2015) explains this in the context of YouTube videos, arguing “‘Am I pretty or ugly?’ becomes indecipherable if not read through the lens of compulsory heterosexuality and normative femininity” (235). This means that the comments the girls receive, which are often sexual in nature and compare the girls’ bodies to sexual objects, are viewed this way because prettiness has become equated with sexiness (Rossie 2015:235). These girls are being taught they are sexual objects from a young age; this is combined with the other end of this spectrum in which the girls are “slut shamed” for posting this kind of content. The girls in these videos did not ask for the audiences’ feedback on their sexiness but they are called names like “attention whore” and are punished for men sexualizing them without their consent (Rossie 2015:235). The need to be attractive to men is also fostered by Disney films, in which we saw the importance of attraction through the idea of love at first sight. This can lead girls to believe that they need to be pretty enough to ensure their prince falls in love with them at first sight based on their looks alone, as is the case with princesses like Cinderella.

**Conclusion: How The Lion Groomed The Lamb**

Disney establishes a process that contemporary vampire fiction continues, grooming young girls to believe domestic abuse is a sign of romantic love. Disney begins this process by teaching girls that they need romantic love to be happy and that they should be willing to put the work into a man to achieve this. Contemporary vampire fiction continues this narrative, reaffirming the idea that
men are fixer-uppers who should be forgiven for their aggressive actions. They teach girls that the aggressive behaviours they saw in men like the Beast are now erotic signs of love. The articles by Garlen and Sandlin (2017) and by Franiuk and Scherr (2013) both demonstrate the heteronormative gender roles of the weak heroine and the strong dominant hero that teach girls that these stereotypes are desirable and necessary to find love. Their two subjects differ in their targeted age brackets, but they work together to create a long-term effect on young women. Women are being taught to romanticize domestic violence so that by the time they are adults they believe it is what romantic love is meant to look like. By using grooming techniques, this media has created a generation of girls who believe that abuse and love are interchangeable, and that violence is erotic.

Rossie’s (2015) “Moving beyond ‘am I pretty or ugly?’: disciplining girls through YouTube feedback” demonstrates one example of how the messages young girls are receiving through contemporary vampire fiction and Disney films have affected their lives. These girls seek the approval of men on their appearance to ensure they are pretty enough to find their prince with love at first sight. This shows the reality of Disney’s cruel optimism, as the comments made on the YouTube videos degrade the girls in them and can shatter the belief that they are pretty enough to have the perfect princess love story. These girls are also critiqued for asking, both because a princess never seems to know her own beauty, but also because they are sexualized for doing so. The grooming which occurs within Disney and contemporary vampire stories is reinforced by commenters on YouTube videos, but it also has groomed the girls to seek the approval of these men in the first place. Further study on the depths to which this media affects children is needed to learn how to undo it. One step that parents can take is to have hard conversations with their children and point out these flaws in the media and explain them, bringing awareness to these tropes so children learn to recognize and acknowledge them.

References Cited


