

ROMANTICALLY THEMED MEDIA AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN'S  
UNDERSTANDING OF LOVE

by

Tiffani Noelle Isaacson

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## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my work to my mom, Shauna, for her faith and unwavering support, my dad, Steve, for our long talks and my brother, Dustin, for all the laughs. Life wouldn't be as colorful without you.

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the influence of romantically themed media on children's understanding of love and romantic relationships. By reviewing literature on relevant media influence theories, learning theories, and the consequences of learning through media, I review how children gain understandings of their world through the media. I then argue that as children identify and internalize meanings through exposure to romantically themed media, such as iconic Disney films, understandings of romantic relationships are shaped. By engaging in qualitative interviews of young children, this thesis investigates whether children can identify iconic Disney images and explores the ways children explain what it means to be in love. The findings of this study reveal that children ages 4 to 5 not only overwhelmingly identify iconic Disney images but discussed love in terms of closeness, commitment, affection, attractiveness, and amiable personality traits. Additionally, girls' and boys' responses about love differed in the areas of affection and commitment. Gaining insight into how children understand romantic love is essential for recognizing how relational meanings are being developed among young children, and the findings of this study may encourage scholars of media effects to study children in the Pre-Operational phase and to consider more fully how girls and boys identify and internalize meanings in different ways.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
ABSTRACT .....	vi
LIST OF TABLES .....	ix
CHAPTER 1: ‘ROMANTICALLY THEMED MEDIA, LOVE’, FOLKLORE, AND CHILDREN’S DISNEY FILMS .....	1
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	8
Cultivation Theory .....	9
Social Cognitive Theory .....	10
Consequences of Learning through Media .....	12
Media and Children’s Cognitive Development .....	15
Children and Visual Learning.....	17
Social Action Theory: The Effect of Mediated Messages and Behavior.....	19
Social Action Theory and the Influence of Emotion on Behavior.....	24
Summary and Research Questions.....	26
CHAPTER 3: METHODS .....	29
Qualitative Research .....	29
Research Site and Participants .....	31
Interview Procedures .....	32
Data Analysis .....	35

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS.....	38
Emergent Themes .....	38
Theme One: Physical Closeness .....	39
Theme Two: Commitment.....	40
Theme Three: Physical Affection .....	40
Theme Four: Physical Attractiveness of Partner .....	40
Theme Five: Positive Personality Traits .....	41
Girls' and Boys' Responses.....	43
Theme One: Physical Closeness .....	44
Theme Two: Commitment.....	44
Theme Three: Physical Affection .....	45
Theme Four: Physical Attractiveness .....	46
Theme Five: Positive Personality Traits .....	46
Summary of Findings.....	46
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION.....	48
Contributions to the Literature.....	48
Children's Relationship Expectations by Gender .....	55
Potential Implications .....	60
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION .....	64
REFERENCES .....	67
APPENDIX.....	73
IRB Approval Letter .....	73

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.	Themes and Definitions .....	39
Table 2.	Girls' and Boys' Responses .....	44

## CHAPTER 1: 'ROMANTICALLY THEMED MEDIA, LOVE', FOLKLORE, AND CHILDREN'S DISNEY FILMS

Modernity opted for love and romance; a combination most usually expressed in Western culture as romantic love... it became part of the normative structure of society to assume that people would "fall in love," and that being "in love" would provide the necessary and absolute legitimation for the construction (or destruction) of relationships. 'Love at first sight,' 'true love,' 'endless love' defined the aspirations of many individuals. (Evans, 1998, p. 268)

The assumption that everyone will fall in love and has an equal opportunity for romance has evolved to become an expected part of contemporary western culture.

Authors such as Evans (1998) even claim that romantic love defines the aspirations of western culture. According to Greenfield (1965) western culture developed the notion that romance is an option for all because of society's exposure to various forms of media stating, "most of what we know of love comes from poets, dramatics, novelists, and philosophers" (p. 361). However, Greenfield argues that most of these writers, actors, and thinkers did little for the understanding of the subject because, "it's so variable, idiosyncratic, and full of contradictions" (p. 361).

These early writings about love and romance have contributed to 'contemporary understandings of how modern media shapes understandings of relationships. Shumway (2003) states, "print fiction and films of the first half of the century were typically told in the discourse of romance, focusing on courtship leading to marriage" (p. 157). As such, romantically themed media helps shape understandings of love and romance. As our exposure to media begins at an early age, the ways children come to know romantic love becomes intriguing. Children are creating meanings when exposed to romantically

themed media and this will affect how children see their world. This thesis explores the importance of how children are affected by this media, how these meanings are internalized and finally how children express ideas of romantic love when prompted by images of popular movies.

Understanding how children express ideas of love is important as it provides insights into how modern media shapes understandings of future love expectations. For instance, consider the notion of “love at first sight” as prominent but unrealistic. “Love at first sight” is a theme of many classic love and romance tales, however, is there any actual basis for this experience? More likely, this notion is a cultivated cultural idea adopted and accepted over time as a way to describe the initial excitement that you feel when you meet someone new. According to Cohen (2013), the notion of “love at first sight” should be considered a, “misnomer”, stating that, “merely seeing someone does not afford a sufficient window into the nature of the person seen” (p. 1). While Cohen claims that the feelings that individuals have come to understand as love at first sight actually stem from feelings of infatuation and sexual attraction rather than feelings of, “true love” and “endless love”, the notion of love at first sight is still a prominent way of understanding and conceptualizing the first encounter with a romantic love interest. Further, if “love at first sight” is a common way of knowing romance, how did this idea get established and become meaningful? Does this mean that the poets, dramatics, novelists, and philosophers, as Greenfield (1965) categorizes them, established particular meanings and ways of understanding love? Did these media representations of love create what Cohen (2013) describes as “the mystical experience of unity that accompanies the mere sight of the beloved for the first time” (p. 225)? If so, then might the enduring

stories of love maintained in contemporary society, such as *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, be contributing to a particular way of understanding ideas of romantic love?

These iconic tales of romance started as traditional cultural folklore, but have been reinvented in contemporary society with unique Hollywood flare. In particular, the reinvention has been augmented with the western cultural notion of love. Friedmeyer (2003) explains that these familiar fairytales that originated with Hans Christian Anderson and Brothers Grimm have been transformed from their original, “roots and purpose, i.e. preparing adolescents for adulthood, and created a whole new mythology” (p. 5). The prince in *Sleeping Beauty* is different from the prince in *Snow White* because *Sleeping Beauty*'s prince is not seeking just any princess; he is seeking his one true love. According to Friedmeyer, this change in focus in the story alters the meaning found in earlier folklore to an interest in love. Folklore did not deal with the concept of true love as much as concepts of morality as a teaching tool, yet these modern Disney versions of classic folklore bring to the table the notion of “romantic love.” Friedmeyer (2003) argues that the Brothers Grimm's prince represents all princes in the traditional telling of folklore because the prince follows the traditional path of being married off to the appropriate princess (p. 7). Yet Disney's revision of the tradition is to present the prince figure as being motivated by romance and true love rather than duty and honor. Friedmeyer claims that this is a new archetype for children to learn from and model, traditional folklore would have *Sleeping Beauty* wake up to her adulthood, while the Disney version of the story has her wakening to her one true love (Friedmeyer, 2003).

If the stories we tell our children shape the values they take with them, then augmenting these stories with a focus on romantic love and love at first sight is meaningful. In particular, they have the potential to inform children how to interpret and understand love. While the developers of contemporary children's books and films may have found inspiration for their stories from earlier folklore, they changed the meanings with the interjection of contemporary notions of love. Parsons (2004) claims that contemporary fairy tales have been skewed and are thus not a representation of original folklore genre. Specifically, Parsons argues that early folklore stories were, "culturally specific and evolve according to the shifting values of a society" (p. 137). Not only do the shifting values of society now include notions of romantic love and love at first sight, but contemporary fairytales have also become embedded with other social meanings. For instance, changing the notion of the prince depicts women as weak, submissive, and dependent on men. Referencing back to Greenfield (1965), if early literature was meant to reflect the popular cannon of the time and guide society to socially acceptable behavior, the ways the social and moral lessons transform into unrealistic representations of love and romance becomes interesting.

To examine the transformation from traditional folklore to a modern day understanding of romance, we need to look back at the original stories and compare them to contemporary Disney films. For instance, consider the classic story of *Snow White*. In the original Brothers Grimm, *Snow White*, the princess is in a deep coma and lying in a glass coffin where her prince finds her. Grimm's story follows with *Snow White* waking up and marrying the prince, however, the story departs from the Disney version from there. At the wedding the evil step mother is forced to wear red hot shoes and dance until

she dies as a consequence for poisoning her step daughter to fulfill her own vanity. In the Disney version the princess is found and saved by the prince's kiss. In defense of the amount of material Disney revised for the feature film Friedmeyer (2003) states, "Walt Disney's source was a six-page story that needed to be stretched to fill a space of nearly two hours" (p. 4). With Disney's animated film's primarily targeting pre-adolescent children, the violence found in the Grimm's version would not be allowed, thus, negating the original moral lesson of the consequences of vanity and aggression. However, Sayers (1965) contended that the Disney revision of the original folktale not only destroys the intended moral purpose but also destroys "the proportion in folktales, folklore is a universal form, a great symbolic literature which represents the folk; it is something that came from the masses, not something that is put over on the masses" (p. 602). Sayers contends that because folklore is built up by a population and passed on through generations that it becomes representative of the culture's thinking and belief system.

Disney's iconic romantically-themed versions of traditional folklore like *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Aladdin*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, carry similar themes. Sandlin and Garlen (2016) state that the, "values most prevalent included...innocence, romance and happiness" (p. 7). These films have come to represent the cultural belief system about romantic expectations. Typically, the films follow a familiar pattern of romance with the idea of love and first sight that results in the commitment of marriage. Physical affection between the partners includes a triumphant kiss when the individuals meet for the first time that instigates the romantic love.

Sayers (1965) continues to defend the notion that the main purpose of folklore as a vehicle to teach children and Disney's transformation of meaning has distorted what

children know about themselves and their cultural values. He explains that through folklore children learn about, “one’s role in life... [and] the tragic dilemma of life...between weak and strong” (p. 602) and he explains that “there is a curious distortion of all these qualities in Disney’s folk tale” (p. 602). Sayers believes that Disney “sweetens” the story for children and manipulates the intended message, thus creating false archetype examples. He accuses Disney of transforming folklore into a medium that, “shows scant respect for the integrity of the original creations of authors” (p. 603) because the, “treatment of folklore is without regard for its anthropological, spiritual, or psychological truths” (Sayers, 1965, p. 603). In essence Disney has taken culturally significant literature whose original intention was to teach children about how to conduct their lives and watered the meaning down to entertain rather than teach. Sayer’s supposition is that in the end Disney diminishes the true meaning of folklore by reducing moral lessons to contemporary themes about romantic love, love at first sight, and women’s self-worth depending upon a man’s rescue. The story becomes less of Anderson’s and Grimm’s journey through the treacherous learning curves of life and more about contemporary notions of abbreviated and convenient love.

This study explores the potential consequences of these contemporary folk stories by examining how children understand the concept of love. If the original aim of folklore was to teach children moral lessons about their lives Disney’s revision of these moral lessons can affect the ways children learn how they should navigate their lives. Children are identifying with these iconic Disney images of the prince and princess love tradition with as much dedication as they did with the folklore moral lessons. Disney is the new propagator of folklore and moral lessons that children taking away to create meaning

about their lives. Gaining insight into how children use the revised moral lessons of Disney to build an understanding about romantic love is essential to understanding the new meanings that are being developed. This insight would prove exceedingly useful in identifying children's expectations about the meaning of romantic love and how two individuals model that love.

In the following chapter I explain how children gain understandings of love through romantically themed media by reviewing literature on relevant media influence theories, learning theories, and consequences of learning through media. In chapter three I review the methods I used to explore children's constructed meanings of romantic love through the use of semi-structured interviews. In chapter four, I present the findings from the interviews and reveal the varied ways children understand the notion of romantic love. Finally, in chapter five I discuss these findings and consider their potential implications. Overall, I hope these research findings inspire continued exploration of the meaning development of romantic love in children and its potential effects post adolescence.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The aim of this thesis is to explore the ways children understand romantic love and consider the influence contemporary romantically-themed media has on the construction of children's meanings about love. In order to accomplish this aim, I first ground this study in the relevant literature on passive media influence theory, active learning theories, and the potential consequences of learning through media. Specifically, in this chapter I review Cultivation Theory as a starting point to gain an understanding of how media participants are passively influenced by unrealistic media portrayals of romantic love. To build on Cultivation Theory's passive approach to media affects I then discuss Social Cognitive Theory to provide insight into the ways people actively internalize media messages, engage in the meaning making process and outline how viewer's consumption influences their social interactions. I then discuss research regarding the consequences of learning through media and the effects on social interactions. Understanding the stages of cognitive development provides insight into the earliest stage at which a child is able to internalize media messages and create meaning. This research provides the foundation to analyze how children model Social Action Theory by attaching meaning to messages and using those meanings to interact with their world. Social Cognitive Theory focuses on how internalized mediated messages effect cognitive development. Combined, the meaning making of Social Action Theory with the internalization of Social Cognitive Theory provides an understanding how romantically

themed media influences children's cognitive development, and provides a foundation from which to investigate how children understand romantic love.

### **Cultivation Theory**

Cultivation Theory in its most basic form suggests that, "television is responsible for shaping or 'cultivating' viewers' conceptions of social reality" (Gerbner, 2004, p. 1). According to Cultivation Theory, individuals exposed over a prolonged period of time to portrayals of reality, defined by television, develop perceptions that are consistent with the portrayals. Holmes (2007) suggests that, "television's themes and images serve to cultivate in viewers beliefs and attitudes about their social environment that echo the cultural norms such themes prescribe" (p. 118). These false portrayals of reality, Signorielli (1997) argues, may produce content-specific effects such as expectations about love relationships.

Galician (2007) compliments Cultivation Theory by also claiming that, "higher usage of television is related to unrealistic expectations about coupleship, and these unrealistic expectations are also related to dissatisfaction in real-life romantic relationships" (p. 5). Both Gerbner (2004) and Galician (2007) claim that a prolonged period or higher usage of media exposure is a significant element in expectation development. The authors correlate a higher likelihood of media participants modeling what they see in the media if they participate in higher than average viewing activity.

To build on Galician's argument, Perse, Ferguson, and McLeod (1994) claim that specific attitudes, such as romantic expectations, come from consumption of specific genres of television. Consequently, one could assume that a participant with a higher viewing activity of a romantically themed genre would cultivate attitudes and opinions

related to that genre and develop expectations about romantic love from the media. Thus, Cultivation Theory suggests viewer's behavior in social environments inevitably references back to cultivated media messages viewed in a passive approach over time. The passive nature of Cultivation Theory suggests that the viewer need only to view the mediated message to be effected. The longer the viewer engages in media viewing the more likely the viewer is to cultivate the attitudes of the chosen media content.

However, Cultivation Theory's passive approach does not account for how the media message is internalized and subsequently lacks an explanation for how meaning is created from the message. Social Cognitive Theory offers an explanation by using a more active approach which provides a avenue to understand how media messages are incorporated into the development of expectations.

### **Social Cognitive Theory**

Social Cognitive Theory sees media viewers as active participants in the consumption of media influence (Bandura, 1986). The theory suggests that viewers actively internalize the meanings presented through media and use this information to create expectations about the message being observed. Social Cognitive Theory postulates that the influence of media may be aided by the viewers own limited social environment (Bandura, 1986). In other words, not only are media viewer's expectations of day to day social situations influenced by the meanings presented in the media, but without the daily interactions to alter or correct these meanings, the ways the media presents them are maintained. For instance, consider when children are active participants in viewing romantically themed media. In this case, children create meaning and expectations about the mediated message, however, because of their age and lack of

engagement in romantic relationships their expectations of love cannot be validated in practice.

Social Cognitive Theory suggests that we shape understandings and expectations of love through active consumption of media. Segrin and Nabi (2002) argue that it is not the amount of romantically-themed media individuals are exposed to that determines their overall relationship expectations, but that the amount of exposure is a positive predictor of what the individual expects of future intimate relationships. However, Rehkoff (2005) concluded that it is, “feasible to think the more true to life people perceive TV’s portrayals of romantic relationships to be, the more romantic expectations they will develop” (p. 3). Thus, children who are exposed to portrayals of romantic relationships in the media, according to Rehkoff (2005); Segrin and Nabi (2002), would find the portrayals to be realistic and accurate and something that they could achieve for themselves. The authors agree that there is a positive correlation between exposure to romantically-themed media and unrealistic relationship expectations, expectations that are originate from something written and produced to serve a specific story line and audience. Social Cognitive Theory explains Rehkoff, Segrin and Nabi’s findings by suggesting that media exposure is actively internalized resulting in the development of expectations. Rehkoff (2005) further claims that the more viewers identify with the media model, the easier it will be to shape the expectation as an attainable concept within in the viewer’s social interactions.

As a result of Social Cognitive Theory being a more active internalizing approach to media viewing then Cultivation Theory which argues that simple exposure influences expectations; it would follow Rehkoff’s (2005) claim that the more a participant has

exposure to romantically themed media that results in a stronger internalization of the given message, the more those expectations would be internalized. Social Cognitive Theory picks up where Cultivation Theory stops, which is just short of how the participant expresses the romantic messages that they have been exposed to, and in turn how those messages influence the participant in their everyday interactions.

### **Consequences of Learning through Media**

Cultivation and Social Cognitive Theories provide a lens to analyze viewer's experiences with media and how it influences the creation of meaning. Connections between media and subsequent understandings are evident in research such as Carter's (2006) study of college students' perceptions of love and romance on television finds evidence that men were more likely to think that sex on television was portrayed realistically and women felt that love on television was portrayed realistically. Eggermont's (2004) research argues that even cross-culturally, a moderate amount of romantically themed television exposure had a positive effect on the importance of physical attractiveness. In addition, individuals who strongly endorsed unrealistic beliefs about intimate relationships scored higher on a measure of exposure romantic media than subjects who did not (Carter, 2006; Shapiro & Kroeger, 1991; Westman, Lynch, Lewandowski & Hunt-Carter, 2003). Carter's previously mentioned study also indicated that married women who were exposed to romantically themed television were less satisfied in their current relationships (p. 3).

In another study by Bachen and Illouz (1996) the authors examined children's media exposure through, "visual and event schemata, and the meanings associated with these structures that form children's cultural models, or what they think of as typical and

ideal in romance” (p. 279). Their study demonstrates that, “long before it translates into actual behavior, children’s romantic imagination is shaped by the content and forms the romance assumes in the postmodern nexus of media and the market” (p. 279). Bachen and Illouz contend that children’s media does influence what children think is typical for an ideal romantic relationship. Galician’s (2007) study found that, “children who perceived themselves to be highly influenced by the mass media held more unrealistic beliefs about romance” (p. 90). Further, Galician (2007) found a connection between, “what the media has promised them and their growing understanding of love” (p. 279). What Galician’s as well as Bachen and Illouz’s (1996) studies demonstrate is how participants’ experiences are shaped by cultivating media messages. The authors argue that typical romantic relationships, as portrayed by children's media, are influencing their understanding about love. The authors agree, however, that children are capable of developing meanings about love long before they have the ability to model the expectation in their behavior. These studies are an example of expectations developed through Cultivation Theory and internalized through Social Cognitive Theory’s active process of the participant translating that passive exposure.

Based on this type of research, it is evident that habitual media exposure (specifically in the area of relationships, romance, and love expectations) has a significant effect on the development of prototypes and foundations of romantic relationships. The studies cited show that media viewing cultivates idealistic ideas of romance among college students, possibly contributing to future assumptions about what it means to participate in romantic relationships.

However, none of the authors are consistent in their view of how much media exposure is needed in order to develop these expectations for relationships. In their investigation into this question, Rideout, Vandewater, and Wartella (2003) found that, “There do not appear to be notable differences in how much time, boys and girls at the youngest ages spend watching television” (p. 63). For example, Bradford, Rhodes, and Edison (2005) study focuses on the connection between the habitual viewing of romantically themed media with unrealistic portrayals of relationships and the extent at which this affects the developing ideas and expectations of relationships in adolescent viewers. The authors report a positive correlation between habitual romantically-themed television viewing and idealistic ideas of relationships, suggesting that unrealistic media representations contribute to the development of idealistic expectations in relationships for adolescents.

In an effort to determine the length of viewing time necessary to develop skewed relationship constructs, previous research conducted by Fletcher and Simpson (1999) demonstrated that even small amounts of romantically-themed media exposure had an impact on the time it took to access constructs. This research suggests that high levels of exposure to romantically themed media may not be necessary, as Bradford et al. (2005) believed, in the cultivation of meaning in children about love relationships. Instead, consistency seems to be the determining factor in the development of expectations. Sergin and Nabi (2002) compared their findings with that of Fletcher and Simpson (1999) and discovered that, “the habitual use of romantic and relationship themed media is related to idealistic relationship expectations” (Sergin & Nabi 2002, p. 248).

Additional research done by Westman et al. (2003) found a relationship between habitual viewing of romantically themed media and expectation development similar to the Bradford et al. (2005) study. However, Westman et al. (2003) focused on romantically-themed media and its effect on children. Their study found that if children indicated their parent's marriage was happy they were more likely to attribute their ideas of romantic relationships to television and dramas for realistic ideas. Westman et al. (2003) findings indicated a possible connection to the social reinforcement of children's cultivated expectations of love. If children observe their parents engaging in physical affection and amiable actions towards each other that reinforces their media expectations then this could possibly add credence to the media message and assist in Social Cognitive Theories claim of internalization of media messages.

### **Media and Children's Cognitive Development**

How romantically themed media messages affects children cannot be explored without addressing which stage of a child's cognitive development is the most vulnerable to content-specific media. Kirkorian, Wartella, and Anderson (2008) contended that, "what children watch is at least as important as how much they watch" (p. 40). The author argued that children as young as three years old have already demonstrated the ability to be active users of media.

Piaget (1964) identified four stages of cognitive development of which the Pre-Operational Stage, ages two – seven years of age, are likely the earliest stages at which children's cognitive development is manipulated by content-specific media. According to Piaget there are two sub categories to the Pre-Operational child, the first is the Pre-Operational phase, and the second is the Intuitive Phase. The Pre-Operational children

have difficulty understanding the difference between fantasy and reality because children's concept of reality is not considered firm during this developmental phase. To children in Pre-Operational phase, animated characters are as real as their family members or friends at school. These children do not have a concept of "pretend" and cannot grasp that the characters do not actually live down the street. Between the ages of 4-5 children start to understand that the media messages they are viewing have meaning that differs from reality, however, they still hold the conviction that these characters are true to life and could come through their living room door at any moment. The confusion between fantasy and reality is important because children do not understand that the images being presented are unrealistic. This confusion is best illustrated by Gusé-Moyer and Riddle's (2009) demonstration that when a toy doll comes to life through animation and talk and cry in a commercial, children in the Pre-Operational phase will think this can occur in reality and indicates that Pre-Operational children are more vulnerable to susceptible to influence. Also due to their developmental limitations, a Pre-Operational child will focus on the characters physical actions as the basis for their understanding of meaning rather than on a character's personality, morals, or ethics (Gusé -Moyer, Riddle, 2009).

The concern regarding media influence for the Pre-Operational child centers on the idea that while going through this stage of cognitive development the child is particularly vulnerable to the fantasy genera; lacking the ability to appropriately distinguish between a character of fantasy and reality. Bachen and Illouz (1996) argued, "before it translates into actual behavior, children's romantic imagination is shaped by the content and forms the romance assumes in the postmodern nexus of media and the

market” (p. 279). The Pre-Operational child assigns imaginary character traits to their real social circle were the authors claimed the child connects the mediated promises of love and romance to their cognitive level of understanding of romantic relationships. This connection could also have long standing consequences not only for the child’s future romantic encounters but in the child’s peer social encounters because Pre-Operational children are shown to be more impressionable to influence.

### **Children and Visual Learning**

As more attention is paid to children’s cognitive abilities, particularly during the Pre-Operational stage when children have difficulty discerning between fantasy and reality. The research illustrates a correlation between higher levels of content specific media exposure and the influence this accessibility has on the development of unrealistic expectations of love. The accessibility provided to young children provides a platform to learn from the media messages rather than the child’s social experiences.

According to Rich (2006), who promotes limited viewing time for children, media exposure impacts children differently depending on age and children need and claims, “active and responsive interaction with their environment, which is best provided by people, not screens” (p. 1). Rich argues that children are better served by interacting with people in their social environment rather than modeling their meanings after fantasy characters. Thus, Social Cognitive Theory indicates that as a consequence higher exposure to media models has become a positive predictor of influence on social interaction for children; suggesting that the meaning created by children from the media affects their social interactions. Appropriate peer and adult interaction would provide

children with a real life model which would equip them with a comparison of reality versus imaginary.

Despite the American Academy of Pediatrics (2007) recommendation that pre-school aged children should not be exposed to television or film, research compiled by Calvert and Wilson (2010) found that from infancy through the age of six children's television viewing increases. Reeves and Nass (1996) confirm that by pre-school when children are in the Pre-Operational stage of cognitive development, they "begin to react to screen media with social ideas and expectations" (p. 2). This finding would indicate that by the time children enter school and have the opportunity to expand their social world they have already cultivated expectations of love relationships from romantically themed media. However, at this stage of cognitive development children lack the ability to act on these cultivated meanings.

Social Cognitive Theory provides an explanation for early childhood reactions to screen models. One core concept of Social Cognitive Theory is observational learning, the idea that individuals including young children can learn through observation which is further detailed in Bandura's (2002) symbolic model of observational learning. Observational Learning Theory suggests that learning through media is an active process, through which individuals observe actions and behaviors and learn what is valued or deemed appropriate in society and thereby internalize beliefs, expectations, and ideals. In observational learning, children witness and attend to the experiences and responses of others rather than learning through the consequences of their own actions only (Bandura, 2002). However, early work in child cognitive developmental stages, following the stages proposed by Piaget (1964), contends that if what children see performed on the

screen is within their physical capability, children as young as twelve to twenty-four months of age are able to internalize what they see, imitate it on request, and retain this capability for as long as twenty-four hours after the initial exposure (Meltzoff, 1988). Thus, comprehension of what is represented physically on the screen begins quite early.

When considering the cognitive development of children in the Pre-Operational stage, researchers cannot ignore the correlation between the accessibility of media specifically targeted to children in the home and the concern that how internalization of unrealistic expectations are creating a social foundation for children rather than their own peers and families. Meltzoff (1988) implies that children as young twelve to twenty-four months of age have the ability to internalize messages and replicate the observed behavior if they are physically capable. Parents, guardians and caregivers are encouraged to observe their child's developmental capabilities and the consequences of high levels of exposure to content specific media on their child's romantic expectations and behavior.

### **Social Action Theory: The Effect of Mediated Messages and Behavior**

Social Action Theory focuses on behaviors influenced by media. According to Renckstorf (2004), research on the impact of mediated messages suggests a "shift in perspective" is needed to move from the long standing view of the "effects of mediated messages on the behavior of audiences" (p. 5) to examining the "consequences audiences take after having perceived, thematized and diagnosed mediated material" (p. 58). The authors' make the claim that humans are "action oriented beings" with the ability to attach meaning to the objects or messages they observe, and these meanings "constitute their world" by providing a framework for interacting with their environment (p. 58). Anderson and Meyer (1988) explain Social Action Theory in terms of how media

viewers “participate enthusiastically in mediated communication; constructing meanings from the content they perceive.” According to Social Action Theory, the communication medium is not responsible for merely delivering the messages but constructing their meaning. Johnson and Johnson (2009) found that the “intentions of the producer, the contents conventions, and the receiver’s interpretation” (p. 293) need to be examined to understand the effect the media has on receivers’ behavior choices.

In order to study the resulting behavior, Renckstorf (2004) suggests that interpretive research is needed to examine the meaning of media messages as understood by the viewer. The interpretive approach requires the researcher to put him or herself in the position of the person or audience to examine the meaning or framework that could contribute to the construction of the social behavior or consequences. Denzin’s (2001) interpretive interactionism advocates the idea that media consumers actually have no direct access to reality. Denzin states, “reality is mediated by symbolic representations...televsual and cinemativ structures that stand between the person and the so-called real world” (p. 70). Both Renckstorf’s (2004) theory of attaching meaning to mediated messages and Denzin’s (2001) interpretive interactionism that relies on the use of mediated symbolic representations to interpret reality support the argument that individuals are not merely exposed to media messages but that audiences are viewing, interpreting, and using media messages to form their reality and choose their social actions.

Because Social Action Theory directs the researcher to attend to resulting behaviors constructed from exposure to media messages, an interpretive approach would illustrate the complicated nature of the effects of media on meaning making. Valkenburg

(2004), argues that previous media effect studies have been too simplistic, stating, “few researchers still believe that media has a uniform effect on the public” (p. 7). Valkenburg acknowledges that the effect of media on the audience is dependent on, “the viewer, and the content and context of the media” (p. 7). Klapper’s (1960) work states that past media research was limited by the media’s “selective exposure to the public, how the viewer interprets that message, selective perception, and the viewers memory” (p. 298).

Valkenburg (2004) agrees with Klapper’s (1960) argument that it is unrealistic for researchers to think that every individual will interpret a media message the same way. However, Renckstorf (2004) interpretive research approach to individuals understanding of media messages follows Valkenburg and Klapper’s (1960) theory and would provide a way to investigate the differing interpretations that would arise from interviews with the media audience. Renckstorf (2004) adds that the media viewer’s social environment is affected, “through the conscious elaboration of the actors”, which is influenced by other, “actors, human artifacts, social situations, cultural and symbol systems” (p. 87). The authors’ research highlights the idea that media is not the only factor that influences individuals in cultivating meaning. The media participant may cultivate and internalize meanings from the message until the opportunity arises for that individual to model those expectations in their social world the next step would be for individuals to receive feedback from their social interactions on their expectations.

Children in the Pre-Operational stage of cognitive development would be neglected from this research having no opportunity to engage in adult social situations that would provide feedback on those expectations. However, Cohen (2001) argues that, “self-identity is related to our perception of others and how they view us, media images

are linked to self-identity and by identifying with media it allows individuals to experience social reality from other perspectives and shapes the development of self-identity and social attitudes” (p. 246). Cohen's argument relates to Renckstorf's conclusion that external factors like other actors and social situations influence to the development of the media viewers self-identity. Cohen's (2001) claim follows that of Social Cognitive Theory in that individuals are active participants in media viewing and as such internalize media messages for meaning making that leads to Social Action Theory's approach of modeling those expectations through behavior. In regards to children and the idea of the uniform effect of the media, Valkenburg (2004) argues that the uniform effect of media messages on participants is an important distinction made in the research so far.

The assumption found that in children's research there has been the assumption that all children who are exposed to the same mediated messages would develop the same expectations related to the message. Valkenburg's (2004) claim aligns with Social Action Theory in that the expectation development is dependent on, as Johnson and Johnson (2009) found, the “intentions of the producer, the contents conventions, and the receiver's interpretation” (p. 293). The claim made by Renckstorf's that interpretive research is needed to understand the possible variety of expectations constructed is important to understand meaning and not a quantitative measurement of occurrence. Social Action Theory gives the researcher the opportunity to account for participant's ability to attach individual meaning to internalized messages and how this results in the influenced behavior and the evolution of a participant's self-identity (Renckstorf, 2004).

However, Cohen (2001) argues that research on Social Action Theory has also fallen short in the past because of the failure to address what forms of engagement is happening between the media characters and the audience, and what responses the audience has after identification with the media characters. For example, Cohen (2001) reviews earlier research that found children who identify with the media's presentations of heroes not only have a psychological experience with good triumphing over evil but also learn that being morally upstanding is beneficial when participating in their social world. According to Cohen, identification with media characters and messages leads the individual to engage an imaginative experience that allows the viewer to interact with the world from another point of view. However, the length and intensity of the media influence, according to Cohen (2001), is actor dependent, meaning that it is up to the viewer how much he or she chooses to adopt the message that is given. Cohen's argument parallels other research finding that identification with media messages likely requires repetitive internalization of the alternative identities and messages, and that if repetitiveness occurs there may be long term effects on the individual's social nature.

Cohen (2001) claims that Social Action Theory's failure to address the exchange that is taking place between the participant and the media that influences the message, again, calls for the need for interpretive research that engages the participant in identifying their constructed meaning about the mediated messages. Investigating what the participant's reaction is to scripted media situations is essential to Social Action Theory and to the understanding of the behavioral outcome. Cohen (2001), Bandura (1986), and Valkenburg (2004), make clear that exposure to mediated messages will create expectations influencing behavioral choices. However, additional research is

needed to determine what types of “influences” are being created. How are researchers to fully understand that a participant is engaging in a behavior influenced by media if the influence that was created is not identified? Interpretive research that aims at understanding the meaning that is created by the internalization of media messages is necessary in understanding the behavior that is the end result.

### **Social Action Theory and the Influence of Emotion on Behavior**

Cultivation Theory explains how media participants build expectations of the world by passively viewing media, Social Cognitive Theory indicates that these expectations become internalized and Social Action Theory then explains how internalized meanings influence behaviors. However, according to Barbalet (2001) who uses a macro sociological approach to examining social action, emotional experiences account for an individual’s course of action. Barbalet found that, “structural properties of social interactions determine emotional experiences, and that particular emotional experiences determine inclinations to certain courses of action” (p. 27). Barbalet (2001) argued that without accounting for emotional influence in the outcome of social action the conduct of the actor cannot be fully explained, “it is through the subject’s active exchange with others that emotional experiences are both stimulated in the actor and orientating of their conduct” (p. 27). Both Cultivation Theory and Social Cognitive Theory neglect to define the concept of love as an emotion whose influence on actions is a consequence of viewing media that presents love as being a fluid process that is effortless, and without conflict. Barbalet seems to indicate that individuals that engage in a social interaction, good or bad, will determine the feeling that results from the

interaction. Reversely if a participant has developed an emotional expectation prior to a social interaction through the media the emotion will influence the interaction.

Other scholars have explored the issue of media and emotions. Jasper's (1998) past research also indicated that emotions facilitate an actor's learning and orientation to the given environment. Jasper's argument stated, "emotions...permeating our ideas, identities, and interests" (p. 399). Keltner and Kring's (1998) work on the social function of emotions parallels Jasper's (1998) work by arguing that emotional responses actually serve two distinct social functions, the first being that emotions that originate from the appraisal process, "inform the individual about specific social events or conditions, typically needing to be acted upon and changed" (p. 5). Keltner and Kring (1998) second claim that emotions serve a social function stated that, "emotion related physiological and cognitive processes", prepare the actor to better assess negative or positive outcomes that could occur from the social encounter (p. 6). Keltner and Kring provide examples of how anger influences social action by providing an evaluation of fairness or the event experienced by the individual. For instance, the use of brain imaging has shown that facial expressions of anger influence an actor's social action response. More specifically, for Keltner and Kring (1998), love and happiness inform the actor of commitment to others and replicate potential of social actions. Keltner and Kring explain how emotion and facial recognition work with children and their parents has found that emotional reactions from parents and other caregivers close to the child, are the most meaningful guides for shaping children's moral understandings of their social world. Thus, emotions such as love can be learned through the media before children know what the emotion is. Referencing back to Westman et al. (2003) study that found if children indicated their

parent's marriage was happy they were more likely to attribute their ideas of romantic relationships to the media. This connection that a realistic love relationship model reinforces what the child sees in the media bridges Social Cognitive Theory and Social Action Theory. While parents may act as the child's initial experience with the social world, children in the Pre-Operational age still cannot fully engage in the adult behavior to validate their expectation. However, the child's expectations could still be reinforced by their parents' example in the child's social world.

### **Summary and Research Questions**

The need to study romantic expectations in children combined with this research provides a compelling case to interpret how children create meaning of romantic love. Cultivation Theory establishes a base of research for the passive approach to media consumption, but Social Cognitive Theory points to the active process by which mediated message are internalized by participants and used to create meaning. Further, Social Action Theory focuses on investigating the participants' resulting behavior. Combined these theories provide insights into understanding media influences on children. According to Piaget (1964) children in the Pre-Operational stage of cognitive development, ages 4-5, are just beginning to understand that the media messages they are exposed to have meaning. However, children in this stage of cognitive development lack the ability to fully disseminate between fantasy and reality causing the child to create unrealistic expectations about concepts such as love. Thus, because Pre-Operational children lack the concept of, "pretend", they believe that even animated characters are as real as those in their social circle of friends and family. The consequences of learning through media and at the Pre-Operational stage of cognitive development are that

children develop attention to specific objects and, again, have not developed the cognitive ability to understand the difference between fantasy and reality.

A secondary consequence to learning through media is that children utilize these false expectations to develop meaning about what a typical romantic relationship is, creating a false reference for future behavior (Bachen & Illouz, 1996). Media exposure creates, “visual and event schemata, and the meanings associated with these structures that form children’s cultural models, or what they think of as typical and ideal in romance” (p. 279). The argument being that the expectations are formed before the behavior can ever be carried out and corrected by reality. The larger picture that is built from these theories is how individuals model their media influence in their lives. Moving from Cultivation Theory to Social Action Theory and how the participant uses what they have been influenced by to attach meaning to people, experiences and objects that gives the individual the ability to create a schema about their lives.

Social Action Theory gives a basis for investigating how these expectations turn into behaviors for the participant. This theory states that the participants construct their meaning from the mediated communication and, according to Johnson and Johnson (2009), follow a three step process of “intentions of the producer, the contents conventions, and the receiver’s interpretation” (p. 293), the participant can then model their interpretations of the message in behavior. In order to study how children create meaning from the media messages interpretive research is needed to understand what children’s expectations are regarding romantic love. The interpretive approach requires the researcher to employ qualitative methods to examine the meaning or framework that

contributes to the construction of expectations of romantic love and what those mean to the child.

Consequently, for this research study, I am interested in romantically themed media that is specifically targeted to children of four to five years of age. Specifically, I ask children to identify the main characters in enduring Disney stories such as *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Aladdin* and then ask the same children to explain their understandings of romantic love. These iconic stories have been taken from their original folklore whose purpose was to teach children moral lessons, thus, creating a new mythology (Friedmeyer, 2003, p. 5). Using these classic, yet contemporary modified, fairytales as the media message I then engage in a qualitative study that includes brief interviews with children asking about how they understand love. The aim of this study is to provide insight into how these iconic images have influenced children's expectations about love. As such, this research project is guided by the following research question: How do children describe the concept of love after seeing iconic Disney images?

Responding to this question will provide insights into the expectations children have about love and its meaning. Further, this research will contribute to the concept of how media affects the cognitive understandings of young children and consequently lends itself to opportunities for future research into romantically themed media and its effects on children's behavior in the social world. In the next chapter I review the research methods used in this study to investigate this guiding question.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Qualitative research methods offer a useful approach to studying the cultivated meanings about romantic love children have developed through media influence. Qualitative methods allow for a flexible technique to understanding meaning making that is often limited by structured interviews or research with the intent of gathering and analyzing statistical data. Further, because the aim of this study focuses on children, qualitative methods are especially useful when investigating children's meanings, because children often lack the robust verbal and written skills, thus interpretation is important to understanding children's meanings about the world. In this chapter I review the qualitative research methods employed for this study. Specifically, I offer a background to qualitative research, discuss the site and participants for this study, and review the specific steps I employed to conduct the interviews and engage in the qualitative analysis of children's understandings of romantic love. Throughout this chapter, I offer consideration of the unique challenges of engaging in a qualitative study of children. Overall, these methods provided a useful way to gain insights to children's recognition of iconic Disney films and understandings of romantic love.

### **Qualitative Research**

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005) qualitative research offers an "emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency" (p. 8). With regards to data gathering, qualitative research focuses more on

the individual participant and their interpretation of their world, for example, how these interpretations affect the individuals' social world and creation of meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The benefits of qualitative research are that the design grants the researcher the occasion to determine any recognizable patterns in participant responses and use thematic analysis to organize these responses to evaluate overall meaning.

Furthermore, qualitative research is especially useful when investigating the ways children understand the world. How children in the preadolescence stages of learning develop meaning about the world around them has been undervalued by mainstream research. Einarsdóttir (2007) explores the methodological challenges of engaging in research with children and explains that because children lack the necessary verbal and written language skills at an early age to engage in quantitative based research that involves surveys, online questionnaires, and structured techniques children's, "competences to participate in research and express their opinions have been doubted for a long time" (p. 199). Einarsdóttir claims that methodologies grounded in qualitative research allow children to express their opinions and views about their world and recommends using smaller participant groups, unstructured interviews, and non-statistical data to uncover underlying meanings behind the child's responses. With an understanding of Piaget's Pre-Operational Stage of cognitive development and recognizing children ages two to seven years of age are in a transitional stage for children moving from magical thinking to more concrete understanding of the world around them, the purpose of this research will be to use Cultivation Theory as a basis for exploring how children in the Pre-Operational stage are influenced by romantically themed media that is strictly

marketed towards children contributes to the development of the expectations of romantic relationships.

### **Research Site and Participants**

The child participants for this study were recruited through the assistance of the Boise State University Children's Center. The center's location was specifically chosen based on the close proximity to Boise State University and the parents' familiarity with university studies and the need for access to unique populations of participants. The center is operated as a daycare with a preschool format, and thus provides a unique opportunity to gain access to a protected population. Four classrooms agreed to participate and granted full access to the enrolled children. Each classroom offered an open floor plan which allowed each participant to be constantly observed by their teacher during interviews eliminating the need to pursue additional IRB approval to remove the participant to a separate interview space.

Because children are a protected, vulnerable population it was necessary to acquire parent participation to participate in a brief interview. Parent/guardian consent forms were approved by Boise State University's Institutional Review Board and reviewed by participating instructors. Prior to initiating this study, I received consent from the parents of children in four classrooms at the children's center.

The Children's Center provided an open environment and opportunities to personally introduce the study's purpose to parents which proved to be essential in gaining trust. Assuring that parents had a clear understanding of the goal of the study, what their child would be asked during the brief interview, and that their child would be supervised by their teacher and would not leave the classroom were important factors in

many parents agreeing to allow their children to participate in the study. Parents also seemed encouraged to offer consent because of the absence of visual recording for the study meant the child's physical likeness would not be required for data analysis.

Overall, I received parental consent forms from the parents of 45 children enrolled in one of four pre-school classes participating in this study. The few children who did not receive parental consent were not included in this study.

After permission forms had been collected from the four participating classrooms, participants consisted of 45 children currently enrolled at Boise State University Children's Center pre-school program. In order to gain background information, the consent form also asked parents to indicate their child's age, gender, and indicate their current relationship status. The 45 participants of this study include 21 girls' and 24 boys'. Additionally, the marital status of parents of the girls included: 13 married, 5 single, 1 engaged, 2 divorced, and 1 life partners. Similarly, the marital status of parents of the boys included: 14 married, 4 single, 1 engaged, 4 divorced, and 1 dating.

### **Interview Procedures**

After the participants were identified and parental permission was attained, interview times were scheduled over four days with four different instructors at the Boise State University Children's Center. Each classroom was comprised of students who attend school on two different schedules; Monday, Wednesday, Friday schedule or a Tuesday, Thursday schedule. During scheduled days, I would check in at the front desk and report which classroom was scheduled for interviews. After checking in with the teacher I was given a small table at which to sit and I set up my interview materials. The teacher was able to send the participants who were given consent over randomly and at

their convenience. Each child was given a participant number at the time of their interview to both ensure participant confidentiality and data organization. If a student happened to be absent the day of his or her classes scheduled interview a time was found after all other interviews had been completed to reschedule with the teacher. As such, I was able to interview all 45 students over the course of four days.

The interviews were scheduled around each student's designated free time. This was done so that participants were not taken away from lunch, or scheduled activities. Additionally, Graue and Walsh (1998) explain that the timing of interviewing children is an important factor in the interviewing process. Specifically, I chose free time to align with their claim that interviewing children during 'down time' or 'quiet time' works well because the kids are more interested in sitting and talking quietly (p. 116). The duration of each interview took no longer than five minutes and was constantly observed by the teacher, and children were never taken out of the classroom at any time during the interview.

Using Einarsdóttir (2007) suggested semi-structured interview style each interview consisted of presenting to each child one of four enlarged photographs of a Disney "prince" and "princess". Each photo was 5x7 and mounted on foam board to make them stiff enough for children to hold without damaging them. This gave the participants something to focus on that they could also hold in their hands and examine while the interview was taking place. The use of photos for interviewee guidance is supported by Graue and Walsh's (1998) who explain that when using props such as photos, "children's attention can be sustained more easily when they have something concrete to focus on, for example, pictures can be very useful for getting at children's

understanding of social interactions” (p. 116). I used photos from iconic Disney children’s movies to focus children’s attention on contemporary folktales of romance and love. After the child was shown one of the four iconic Disney images, I asked the following three interview questions:

- Have you seen this movie?
- Are these two people in love?
- What does being in love mean?

If the child correctly identified the photograph and that the movie had been seen, exposure to the theme content was established. The next questions were specifically written to allow for unrestricted responses to determine the meaning the participants had developed about the concept of love and what being in love meant. By allowing open ended responses participants could communicate their thoughts in free flow format that would disclose a broader range of thoughts. As the children answered the questions, I took notes on each of their responses and attempted to capture their exact words. These notes became the primary source of data analyzed for this study.

The use of audio recording during interviews for the purposes of transcription was modified to hand written notes of the participants’ verbal responses. The choice to use only hand written notes to capture interview responses was made to overcome a concern with the possibility of participant distraction from the interview questions. Graue and Walsh (1998) believe that, at a minimum, two-fold recording methods are necessary because, “with young children, one may soon end up playing the game of listening to children talk into the tape recorder and playing back what they say, one may learn what young children find funny but little else” (p. 117). Interviewers need to have the child’s

total attention as the recorder will not listen for you. Einarsdóttir (2007) observes that children are better able to reconstruct knowledge with unstructured interviews than with direct questions such as ones used in questionnaires. Banks (2007) suggest qualitative methods combining visual and verbal language can be useful when studying children in a younger age range who may not have fully developed language skills. As such, I chose qualitative research methods because quantitative research methods usually include questionnaires, a focus on statistical data, and a lack in interest in the insights and trends in a population, would be less useful for uncovering children's construction of meaning in the pre-operational stage of cognitive development. Consequently, the data for this study consisted of my transcribed notes of the children's responses to the questions posed.

### **Data Analysis**

After interviews were completed, I transcribed my notes on each child's responses to the questions and conducted a thematic analysis on each transcription. Boyatzis (1998) argues for the use of thematic analysis in qualitative research is useful because it provides an encoding method for data. According to Shields and Twycross (2008) conducting a thematic analysis using the children's transcribed interview data allows the researcher to "make inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics or messages" (p. 38). The authors demonstrate that thematic analysis is often used to analyze data such as information collected from interviews and observational field notes. O'Reilly, Ronzoni, and Dogra, (2013) argue that thematic analysis offers a unique opportunity to engage in a flexible method, "free from theory which gives a broad applicability" (p. 225). The authors explain that this type of analysis provides researchers

with the ability to bring attention to unexpected information and to examine their data in such a way that it becomes applicable to broader audiences. With this in mind, thematic analysis was selected for its flexibility and ability to provide the option to highlight similarities in children's limited responses through the analysis of specific words and phrases.

In order to conduct thematic analysis, I first entered the participants' transcribed responses into a spreadsheet, and organized each response by participant number, sex, age, and parents' marital status. The interview responses were also organized by which Disney image was shown and whether or not the participant could identify the film from the image shown during the interview. I then reviewed the responses to the two interview questions and began to interpret the participants' statements, looking for any emergent themes.

Specifically, I examined these interview responses for recurrence and repetition, and color coded any emergent themes. I used Owens' (1984) two criteria process of recurrence and repetition to code potentially emergent themes and find the salient meanings embedded in the participants' interview responses. The first criterion, recurrence, occurs when at least two aspects of an interview have a similar meaning. The second criterion, repetition, looks specifically at exact words and phrases that interviews have in common. As such, recurrence might identify dissimilar words that share the same meaning; repetition seeks to identify how often each word or phrase occurs in an interview. After identifying initial themes across the interview responses, I recoded the responses sorting for the gender of the participants. Upon this additional analysis some intriguing differences between the girls' and boys' responses emerged. The following

chapter reviews these emergent themes and differences in findings among the girls and boys.

## CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS

After interpreting the responses from the child participants and looking for recurrent and repetitive meanings about love from the responses to the interview questions, five themes emerged: commitment, physical closeness, physical affection, physical attractiveness, and positive personality traits. Furthermore, after analyzing these themes I recoded the responses based on the gender of the participant to reveal differences in meaning development between girls' and boys'. In this chapter I will review the five emergent themes and present the unique findings that materialized while analyzing these themes based on the gender of the children.

### **Emergent Themes**

When interviewed participant described their expectations of what being in love means. Interviews consisted of presenting a card with an iconic image of a Disney film and then asking each child the following three questions: (1) Have you seen this movie? (2) Are these two people in love?, and (3) What does being in love mean? When responding to the first question "Have you seen this movie", 40 of the 42 children indicated that they had seen the film. Responses to the second question, "Are these two people in love?" 41 of the 42 participants responded positively that these two people are in love. Finally, when responding to the final question "What does being in love mean?" the responses were much more varied. Analyzing the responses to the final question based on using recurrence and repetition (Owen, 1984), five themes were identified and

defined, each being listed by highest response occurrence to least. The sections below discuss each of the five themes reflecting the children’s meanings of love.

**Table 1. Themes and Definitions**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Definition</b>
1. Physical Closeness	Individuals who participate in activities together or spend time together.
2. Physical Attractiveness of partner	When one or both individuals are considered to have appealing or admirable physical characteristics.
3. Positive Personality Traits	Distinguishable qualities that describe an individual’s demeanor as being amiable.
4. Commitment	Individuals, who are married, cohabitating or have children together.
5. Physical Affection	Physical contact or touch between partners in a positive manner.

### **Theme One: Physical Closeness**

Of the five identified themes, physical closeness ranked the highest in both recurrence and repetition and appears to be the most salient understanding of love among the children participants. Physical closeness was defined by participant’s responses that indicated being in love was demonstrated by two people who participated in activities together or spent time together that involved being next to the other. The children’s responses to the question “what does being in love mean?” included, “sit together”, “dance”, “do stuff together”, “go to dinner”, “walk”, “stay beside each other”, “play with each other”, “like to be with each other”, “dance”, “each lunch together”, “go to the park”, “go home together”, “talk to each other”, and “spend time together.” This theme

indicates children understand love in terms of physical proximity; especially when spending time together or engaged in activities.

### **Theme Two: Commitment**

The theme of commitment emerged as the second most prevalent understanding of love for participants. Commitment was defined from participant responses as individuals who are married, cohabitation, or having children together. For instance, participant responses to the question “what does being in love mean?” categorized under the theme commitment included: “Get married,” “boy girl love”, “they get married to each other”, “spend their lives together”, “stick together”, “share things/private things”, “have babies”, “are together”, “they stay together”, and “live together.” This theme indicates children understand love in terms of some form of obligation to each other.

### **Theme Three: Physical Affection**

The third most salient theme that occurred was physical affection. Physical affection was identified in statements about physical contact or touch between partners. Common responses from the participants indicating physical affection included: “kissing”, “hug”, and “holding hands.” And physical affection was differentiated from physical proximity by the respondents focus on physical touch rather than being close together. This theme of physical affection indicates that children understand that those in a love relationship will engage in romantic physical contact.

### **Theme Four: Physical Attractiveness of Partner**

The fourth theme that emerged from the interviews was physical attractiveness. This theme suggests that one or both of the individuals in a couple are considered to have appealing or admirable physical characteristics. Physical attractiveness was identified

from participant responses directly related to the Disney character's physical features. Examples of participant responses include: "princess is pretty," "wear fancy cloths", "they are beautiful", "she is beautiful", and "prince thinks the princess is beautiful", and "the dad thinks that his daughter is beautiful and she should marry the prince." This theme reveals the children's expectation that those in love find each other physically attractive.

### **Theme Five: Positive Personality Traits**

The theme of positive personality traits had the lowest number of mentions among the participants. This theme was identified in participant responses that by the reference to distinguishable qualities that describe an individual's demeanor as being amiable. Examples of participant responses include: "being nice to each other," "helping each other", "help clean up", and "smile", "not mean", and "friends." These statements from the children's responses relate to the positive personality trait theme because they reflect a sense of being amiable. Amiable is defined as demonstrating pleasant or good-natured personal qualities. This theme reveals children's understanding of love requires the individuals to help and be amiable towards one another.

Overall, these five themes indicate children's understandings of love relationships. The results demonstrate where four to five year old children are in their level of understanding of love and romantic expectations. In particular, children understand that people in love are physically close to each other, committed and responsible to each other, show physical affection, are attracted to each other, and are kind to each other. These emerging themes of the children's expectations of romantic love reaffirm the meanings embedded in Disney films.

For example, the theme of physical closeness is seen across these iconic Disney films. In *Sleeping Beauty*, her prince comes to visit her in the woods several times before they are married and in *Aladdin* the prince attempts to court the princess by participating with her in several activities outside of the palace. Additionally, the theme of commitment appears in *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Aladdin*. In particular, all these story lines culminate with the commitment of marriage. Furthermore, the theme of physical affection is seen throughout the four films as a kiss culminates in the marriage. In *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty* a kiss from the prince saves the princess's life by awakening her from a cursed sleep. In *Aladdin* the prince and princess travel the world on their magic carpet while engaging in hugging and hand holding to model affection towards each other. In *Cinderella* the couple dances, hugs and kiss during their first meeting. The theme of physical attractiveness is most explicitly seen in *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*. *Snow White* is described as the fairest in the land with beauty comparable to no one, and *Sleeping Beauty* is given a veritable list of appealing physical attributes as an infant and was described, as an adult, as the most beautiful women that had ever lived. The theme of positive personality traits is seen in *Cinderella* when she is described as being kind, positive thinking, and exemplifying gratitude. Additionally, this theme is modeled by *Snow White*'s compassion, helpfulness, and gratitude towards the dwarfs for providing her with shelter and protection. In *Sleeping Beauty* the princess is beloved for her kindness towards any living thing that comes into contact with her, and *Aladdin* models kindness towards the princess which encourages her to engage with him and get married.

The themes of romantic love relationships in these iconic Disney films are mirrored in the responses of what love means offered by the children in this study. As such, these findings show that children understand love in much the same way as love is portrayed in these Disney films. Children are demonstrating the ability to cultivate and internalize meanings about adult concepts despite lacking the ability at the Pre-Operational age to engage in confirming behavior of the cultivated meaning of love. While these findings are insightful and provide an indication of how children's expectations of love relationships are shaped by romantically-themed media, the more intriguing findings emerged when organizing the themes in terms of the gender of the children.

### **Girls' and Boys' Responses**

When organizing each theme by frequency and commonality of responses, I noticed some differences in responses between girls and boys. Thus, I coded the responses by the gender of the respondents and a second finding materialized. Some themes were articulated similarly by both the girls and boys in the study; however, particular differences between the girls' and boys' responses emerged among a few of the themes. The following reexamines each theme in light of the similarities and differences in responses offered by the girls and boys.

**Table 2. Girls' and Boys' Responses**

Theme	Percent Response	
	Girls (21)	Boys (24)
Physical Closeness	46%	45%
Commitment	26%	23%
Physical Affection	8%	17%
Physical Attractiveness	8%	6%
Positive Personality Traits	8%	6%

### **Theme One: Physical Closeness**

The girls and boys both made a clear distinction between partners participating in activities together and physical affection of partners. 46% of girls' and 45% of boys' responses relate to this theme. The girls' and boys' responses included the following: "Dance," "go to dinner," "go to the ball together", "play with each other", "date", "go out with each other", "go to restaurants", "swim", "sing", "talk to each other", "visit places", "picnic", and "make food together", "eat lunch together", "go home together", "sit together", "walk together", "stay close to each other", and "spend time together." Most responses include the word "together," others imply both partners taking part in an activity. As such the findings of this study reveal similar understandings of love relationships in terms of physical proximity among the girls and the boys.

### **Theme Two: Commitment**

The theme of commitment, however, was primarily accounted for by girls' responses. Of the forty-five total participants 26% of the girls identified with the theme of commitment and only 23% of boys' responses related to this theme. While these

percentages are relatively close what is intriguing is the word choice the children used to describe the type of commitment. Of the boys who expressed love in terms of commitment 36% of them strictly responded with, “get married”, where only 5% of the girls responded with the specific, “get married” verbiage. Furthermore, when interviewed, the words categorized under the commitment theme often were one word answers with little elaboration. Boys were firm in their answers; for example saying simply, “they get married.” However, the girls' responses exhibited more variation. For example, girls indicated “they spend their lives together,” or “they get married to each other.” These findings are intriguing because boys seem to define commitment more in terms of institution of marriage where girls have a broader understanding of long term dedication.

### **Theme Three: Physical Affection**

In a similar way, the theme of physical affection was articulated more frequently by the boys in the study. Specifically, 17% of boys discussed physical attractiveness compared to 8% of girls. While both the girls' and boys' responses included: “kiss,” “kiss each other”, “hug”, and “holding hands”, the girls responded higher to kissing as an indicator of love in terms of physical affection with a 42% occurrence when compared to boys who indicated kissing in only 28% of their responses. However, boys more frequently indicated love in terms of giving a hug to someone you love with a 28% of statements indicating hugging when compared to 14% among girls' responses. An interesting development is the high percentage of boys who indicated the importance of hand holding. Specifically, boys used the words holding hands 42% of times asked and the girls had no mention of hand holding in their responses.

#### **Theme Four: Physical Attractiveness**

Understanding love in terms of physical attractiveness of a partner was relatively balanced among the girls and boys. There was a slightly higher occurrence of terms related to attractiveness in the interview responses among girls with 8% of the girls stating love in terms of physical attractiveness and 6% among the boys. Recorded responses were as follows: “Princess is pretty,” “wear fancy cloths”, “they are beautiful”, “she is beautiful”, and “prince thinks the princess is beautiful”, and “the dad thinks that his daughter is beautiful and she should marry the prince”. Overall, both girls and boys discussed physical attractiveness as an important aspect of love relationships.

#### **Theme Five: Positive Personality Traits**

Of the five themes identified, the theme of positive personality traits occurred with the least frequency among all participants; however it was still relatively balanced. 8% of girls responded with this theme and 6% of the boys discussed love in terms of this theme. Both girls and boys explained love as: “being nice to each other,” “helping each other”, “help clean up”, and “smile”, “not mean”, and “friends.” The balance between girls’ and boys’ responses indicates that both understand love in terms of amiable qualities by describing kindness as a part of a love relationship.

#### **Summary of Findings**

These five themes (physical closeness, commitment, physical affection, physical attractiveness, and positive personality traits) emerged in the children’s interview responses as the children articulated their understanding of what being in love means. These themes serve as an indicator of the extent to which media influences children’s construction of meaning in their social world.

Coding these themes by girls versus boys' responses presented an opportunity to compare differences in the impact of media on cultivated meanings. Girls and boys identified the themes of physical closeness, commitment, physical attractiveness, and positive personality traits with equal importance in love relationships. However, the theme of physical affection was found to be significantly different between the girls and boys. Specifically, boys indicated a 17% higher frequency in describing physical affection in a love relationship than the girls who indicated physical affection in only 8% of their responses. When physical affection was mentioned by girls, kissing was the main physical indicator of love representing at 42% of girls' responses compared to 28% of boys' responses. Boys actually put a higher significance with a 28% occurrence on hugging as an indicator of love where girls only had a 14% occurrence.

In the next chapter I discuss these five themes and their significance to the relevant literature. First, I review how the findings contribute to the literature on children's cognitive development and the construction of meaning in a child's social world. Secondly, I review children's relationship expectations based on the differences in responses among girls and boys.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The intent of this study was to determine how children describe the concept of love after seeing iconic Disney images. To research how these meanings or expectations participants were shown one of four Disney images, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Aladdin*, or *Snow White*. This chapter reviews the emergent themes and discusses them in terms of how they contribute to the literature on child development. In addition, I explain what the gender differences in the themes reveal about children's expectations for love relationships. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the potential implications of this research study.

### **Contributions to the Literature**

Each of the five themes contributes to existing literature related to child development and expectations of romantic love relationships. First, the high level of recurrence and repetition accompanying the theme of physical closeness supports Foot, Chapman, and Smith's (1995) observation that "one clear influence on the likelihood of relationship formation is simple opportunity" (p. 96). The more certain an individual is of future encounters with someone who is desirable to them, the authors argued, "it is plausible to expect that such things as closeness, frequency of interaction, and spatial distance in a romantic partner will be constraints upon or facilitators of children's future relationship choice" (p. 96). To facilitate the commitment that leads to feelings of safety and freedom to express affection, physical closeness must take place between partners (Andersen & Leibowitz, 1978). Consequently, this study reveals how children understand

love in terms of physical proximity. Additionally, the findings illustrate that through cultivated meanings social cognitive theory allows the child media viewer to internalize physical closeness messages and then through recurrence and repetition of encounters the child then forms a love relationship expectation of proximity and frequency.

Second, the theme of commitment relates directly to Walster, Aronson, Abrahams and Rottman (1996) research attributing the development of commitment between partners to four factors, “attitudinal similarity, physical attributes of the target person, positivity of target evaluation of the subject, and social interaction” (p. 509). The themes of this study confirm these factors. While these are all themes identified in this study, these authors argue that individuals judge relationship commitment based on the degree of anticipated success stating, “individuals are generally attracted to and form relationships with those who promise the best outcomes, (i.e. relatively high rewards at low costs)” (p. 509). Consequently, the theme of commitment emerging from this study reveals how children expect a sense of responsibility and obligation among those who are in love. The expectation of obligation and responsibility can be seen in male participant responses, “get married”, with little variation on the verbiage. Girls’ responses included variations, “they spend their lives together,” or “they get married to each other.” Girls’ and boys’ responses were specific in their meaning of commitment in relation to love relationship, demonstrating that children have already learned that commitment that married or spending their lives together is an important factor in a love relationship. Further, Walster et al. argument that individuals judge commitment based on its anticipated level of success would explain the high rates among girls and boys when you consider the media message that iconic Disney images portray for the prince to marry a

princess role; the goal of Disney princesses is to find their prince and get married and Disney male archetypes have the to rescue their princess and marrying her.

In a similar way, the third theme of physical affection relates to Andersen and Leibowitz's (1978) claim that physical contact plays an important role in determining attachment security with children (p. 92). Researchers generally agree that touch plays an important role in the maintenance of close relationships and it promotes physical and psychological intimacy. Hazan and Zeifman (1994) state, "during the initial stage of falling in love escalating levels of intimate touch, leading to sexual behavior in turn may be the "sexual tether" contributing to increasing levels of psychological intimacy and security" (p. 153). The theme of physical contact shows children's expectation of physical touch as a necessary quality of romantic love. The findings indicate that physical affection rates higher among boys than girls. Boys' responses illustrated an understanding of physical affection in a love relationship as hugging, while girls' rate expressed kissing as the main example of physical affection. Anderson and Leibowitz's (1978) claim that physical contact and affection is important when determining security with children, this is important to note when considering that a disproportionate amount of boys, 17% to girls 8%, indicate that physical affection is a positive indicator of a love relationship. This illustrates that boys have developed a much deeper rooted cultivated view on who to physically express love to their partner and consequently indicates that boys also need to receive that same level of physical affection back to promote feelings of security and positive psychological intimacy in a love relationship.

The theme of physical attractiveness validates, Herbozo, Thompson, Tantleff-Dunn and Gokee-Larose (2004) study of children's videos and books in which they

discovered that messages emphasizing the importance of physical appearance are present in many children's videos, but not nearly as often in the books they read. Similarly, these findings offer support to Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003) examined the content of Brothers Grimm fairy tales and found that the ones that have survived over the years (e.g., *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*) were the ones that placed the greatest emphasis on girls' beauty, whereas those that did not have such an emphasis have become less well-known as time has passed. As such these findings confirm Dion and Berscheid (1974) argument that, "children (3-6 years of age) do not possess the stereotypes of physical attractiveness and it is probably acquired, in part, from adult responses to attractive and unattractive children" (p. 4). The findings of this study suggest that children who are exposed to romantically themed media such as Disney films look to their parents for understanding of adult cues. Dion and Berscheid believe that in the case of physical attractiveness of a partner, children who respond favorably are able to identify these cues from their parents and attach significance to them.

The theme of amiable personality traits seems to support Borke's (1971) finding that children as young as three years old can recognize that others have feelings which vary according to the situation in which the individual finds him/herself. Recognizing others' feelings gives the child the ability to gather information about individuals, such as personality traits. For children, happiness is easier to distinguish than anger, grief, or sadness (Borke, 1971). Brehm (1988) also believes that the ability to interpret others' behavior is essential to interaction as much as they are a basis for assessing the attractiveness of others' personalities. Positive personality illusions may be a romantic necessity (Brickman, 1987). The theme of positive personality traits reveals how children

recognize the allure of a partner's virtues draws intimates into relationships and this creates feelings of hope and security. Borke argues that children as young as three have the ability to recognize feelings in others; the child participant responses are able to confirm the authors claim. Child participants in this study at four or five years of age were able to give specific and varied responses for positive personality traits such as, "being nice to each other," "helping each other", "help clean up", and "smile", "not mean", and "friends", these responses confirm that children of this age are influenced by and have the ability to recognize positive personality traits in their world and use these as a base for evaluating love relationships.

Collectively, these five themes, physical closeness, commitment, physical affection, physical attractiveness, and positive personality traits confirm existing research in a number of ways. For example, child participant responses categorized under the physical closeness theme confirmed Foot, Chapman, and Smith's (1995) research that identified that close physical proximity and frequency of interactions is a positive indicator to children of a love relationship. Additionally, the theme of commitment revealed individuals will pursue love relationships that have a higher degree of anticipated success. The age of the child participants in this study illustrates that their responses are cultivated meanings of marriage found in Disney films that promote a high level of anticipated success in the commitment theme.

These findings provide insight into the ways children internalize meanings and are influenced by romantically themed media. However, most work on Cultivation Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, and Social Action Theory are grounded in studies of adults and do not address Pre-Operational children's cognitive level of understanding of

those media messages. Based on this study, children are internalizing mediated messages of love but on a Pre-Operational level. Thus, they are recognizing and constructing adult concepts of love which, per the theories, leads to identification of romantic expectations in others. However, children are not being guided through the concept of adult romantic love or experiencing romantic relationships. Future research should consider the differences between adult construct of love, based on these theories, and explore how children are constructing meanings in the Pre-Operational stage of cognitive development. Additionally, the findings of this research suggest that Pre-Operational children have already constructed expectations regarding romantic love without participating in it and thus future research grounded in Piaget's (1964) studies of Pre-Operational stage could be conducted with children as young as twenty-four months old.

The internalization of meanings of romantic love can be seen in the higher frequency of definitions of love in terms of physical affection theme among boys. The findings indicate that boys more strongly identify with physical affection as an indicator of a love relationship. While girls did not identify with physical affection as frequently, they specifically identified the act of kissing as opposed to boys who identified hugging as a physical indication of love. The physical affection responses confirm Andersen and Leibowitz's (1978) claim that physical contact plays an important role in determining security with children and expectations of relationships. With little opportunity for a Pre-Operational child to engage in adult physical affection, the child will internalize the romantically themed message of physical affection as a positive indicator of a love relationship but will not have the opportunity to model these meanings, per Social Action Theory, and engage in the resulting behavior. Consequently, future research exploring the

consequences of children's Pre-Operational stage understandings of would provide insights into the consequences of this internalization of meaning.

Similarly, the theme of physical attractiveness was confirmed in additional literature. Herbozo et al. (2004) study of children's videos and books in which they discovered that messages emphasizing the importance of physical appearance are children's videos, but not as often in the books they read. Consequently, the findings indicate that girl participants identified with this theme at a higher rate than boy participants confirming Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003) study that examined the content of Brothers Grimm fairy tales and found that the ones that have survived over the years (e.g. *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*) were the ones that placed the greatest emphasis on female beauty. This finding gives credence to the idea that girls possess a cultivated meaning of the importance of physical attractiveness in a love relationship. It also follows that if these films are directly targeted at children of the participant's age, it would support the findings of the internalized meaning of love in terms of physical attractiveness among Pre-Operational children.

In a similar way, the theme of positive personality traits was the least identified theme among the girls and boys, however both girls and boys articulated love in terms of amiable personality traits. According to Borke (1971), children as young as three years old can recognize that others have feelings of happiness; this is far before children enter the Pre-Operational stage of cognitive development. The findings of this study indicate that participants as young as five years old could already respond with more detailed and varied feedback, "being nice to each other," "helping each other", "help clean up", and "smile", "not mean", and "friends". These findings indicate there is an opportunity to

study younger children before the Pre-Operational cognitive level to reveal internalized meanings of positive love indicators. The ability to appropriately interpret others behavior, according to Brehm (1998), is fundamental to interaction and assessing the attractiveness of personalities. Positive personality traits may be a romantic necessity according to Brickman (1987). Again, children before the Pre-Operational stage are able to identify feelings of happiness and as children age are more capable of identifying amiable traits in others. However, the ability to identify these traits and internalize a meaning still leaves the child with an adult concept of love without the ability to act on the resulting behavior.

These five themes provide insights into the child participants cultivated meanings about love expectations and relationships. However, the gender differences in responses extend the research further. After categorizing responses to the themes the findings provided a unique look at the differences in meaning based on the gender of the participants.

### **Children's Relationship Expectations by Gender**

These themes, and the gender differences between themes, have implications for understanding how girls and boys identify relationship expectations. Through thematic analysis of each interview, findings showed that both girls and boys identified with the themes of physical closeness and commitment as their strongest relationship expectation. However, theme analysis showed that physical closeness seemed to center more on activities that partners do together than actual physical contact between partners. Commitment also varied from commitment through traditional marriage to having children together and cohabitation.

The physical closeness theme found that 46% of girls' and 45% of boys' responses relate to this theme. For example, the findings indicate through participants responses that children, both male and female, responded to the question, "what does being in love mean," with similar levels of importance. In regards to Foot et al. (1995) proximity and frequency argument for the success of a love relationship supports the claim indicating that a love relationship includes, "go to dinner", "each lunch together", "go to the park", "go home together", "play with each other", and "spend time together," these responses indicate that physical closeness includes activities participated in by both girls and boys rather than a physical encounter. The Disney films used in the participant interviews were all G rated, which indicated a lack of physical encounters. Consequently, G rated films that are marketed primarily to children lack models of adult physical behavior and include the characters engaging in activities together. Thus, the cultivated meaning of physical closeness would inherently lack physical encounters and focus on activities. Physical closeness, argued in Footman, Chapman, and Smith's research, and the above mentioned findings, illustrate that physical closeness or proximity is a cultivated meaning amongst girls and boys that will influence children's future relationship development.

The girls' and boys' responses to the theme of commitment found that the boys expressed commitment primarily in terms of marriage, 26% of the girls identified with the theme of commitment and 23% of the boys' responses. Boys' responses were less varied than girls' responses. Boys responded with, "get married", while girls' responses included, "they spend their lives together," or "they get married to each other." Each Disney film used in these interviews encourages successful relationships that take little

time to develop and demonstrate only two of the four commitment development factors: attitudinal similarity and physical attributes. Disney films do not pursue their characters social interaction, but merely facilitates their meeting and marriage. According to Signorielli and Kahlenberg (2010) most televised female characters, “marital status is more likely to be identified compared to male characters, thereby suggesting to the audiences the relative importance of marriage to and for women” (p. 20). This claim would explain the girls’ 26% rate of identification with the commitment theme and boys’ 23% rate of identification with this theme.

Regarding the finding that most of the boys discuss love in terms of physical attraction, Callister and Robinson (2010) found that regarding initiating physical affection in children’s media in the United States there was no evidence of a difference between girls and boys in the categories of, “hugging, kissing, and touching” (p. 272). However, the authors found that when one examined receiving affection that boys received affection at higher rate than girls. Callister and Robinson’s concluded that children’s media promoted boys as the more pertinent recipients of physical affection rather than their counterparts. Considering Calister and Robinson’s findings and the 6% boys’ identification rate and the 8% girls’ identification rate for physical affection we see a parallel with the media's focus on boys' and physical affection and the lack of attention paid to girl characters. The long term psychological effects of this gap could include the formation of stereotypes and self efficacy conflict.

The fourth most prevalent theme of physical attractiveness aligns with Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003) who explain that the average number of times physical attractiveness in children’s literature is referenced varies greatly between genders. The

authors state, “men’s physical appearance ranges from 0 to 35 times per story, where the range for women is 0 to 114”. Labre and Walsh-Childers (2003) concluded that the main media messages that target girls is that being attractive is not merely a good thing, but is a requirement for social acceptance in contemporary American society. The finding that girls’ attractiveness is mentioned seventy-nine times more than boys’ physical attractiveness in media targeted at children holds to this study’s finding that girls identified with physical attractiveness with 8% occurrence rate and only 6% among boys. Cultivation theory would argue that the high reference rate of physical attractiveness regarding gender would influence girls’ identification with this theme.

The fifth identified theme of positive personality traits showed similar responses among girls and boys with an 8% occurrence rate among girls and 6% occurrence rate among boys. These findings relate to Hoffner and Buchanan’s (2005) research that indicates, “viewers evaluate media characters in much the same way they evaluate real people in their social networks” (p. 329). The authors argued that media participant’s appraise the given characters’ personality traits and develop impressions and expectations that they consider to be beneficial in their social reality. Girls’ and boys’ responses align with Hoffner and Buchanan’s argument by not benefiting the child personally but by modeling personality traits that are beneficial to social interactions, “being nice to each other,” “helping each other”, “help clean up”, and “smile”, “not mean”, and “friends.” Hoffner and Buchanan suggested that the viewer takes several factors into consideration while considering personality traits, the first being how the character is treated by others; again this follows girls’ and boys’ responses with a focus on how individuals treat each other in a favorable manner. The authors argue that if the trait is reinforced favorably

then the participant is more likely to express that trait. The authors indicate that admiration and respect are two significant personality traits that should, “serve as a cue regarding the worth or appeal of the characters or their behavior” (p. 329). Hoffner and Buchanan research indicates that identification with media characters can have significant social and psychological consequences. Caughey (1986) reported that audience members made changes in their appearance, attitudes, values, activities, and other characteristics to become more like admired celebrities. Consequently, if children are exposed to large amounts of mediated positive personality traits they may cultivate and internalize unrealistic meanings that could contribute to children altering their personal beliefs and physical appearance to become more appealing in their social world.

Overall, the differences in girls’ and boys’ responses indicate that girls perceive physical closeness to be a slightly more important expectation and boys indicate commitment to be only slightly less important than girls. This is also true for the themes of positive personality traits and physical attractiveness of partners where both themes were found to be more important expectations for girls than boys. The only theme where this differs is physical affection; boys indicate physical affection to be a more important expectation than girls.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate the importance of studying how young children, in the Pre-Operational stage, make sense of romantically-themed media, and calls attention to how girls and boys might be influenced differently by media messages. Previous studies have been conducted with older children who had the ability to express their internalized meanings in their social world. However, the Pre-Operational children interviewed in this study have shown that they are cultivating similar meanings to older

children while too young to engage in the resulting behavior. Thus, Social Action Theory does not align with children in the Pre-Operational stage of cognitive learning. Future researcher should consider children in this stage when investigating cultivated meanings because the findings of this study indicate that children in the Pre-Operational phase are capable of communicating their internalized meanings.

Additionally, previous research focuses on children typically combine group of boys and girls, and generally presented findings without separating participants by gender and thus does not analyze them as two distinct groups. The findings of this study indicate that girls and boys are cultivating and articulating meanings about love differently. As such, I would encourage future research embracing Cultivation, Social Cognitive, and Social Action Theories to consider the differences in girls and boys in the Pre-Operational stage of cognitive development.

### **Potential Implications**

The findings of this study are consistent with Bachen and Illouz's (1996) research indicating exposure to romantic images, similar to that of Disney, shape children's romantic imagination and demonstrates a connection between what the media image promises and children's understandings of "love". The participants are identifying with commitment which is a main theme of the Disney films used in this study. The occurrence of commitment themed responses from participants showed that girls' and boys' indicated a similar level of importance for marriage. As such, future research should look back to how children are identifying with characters that embody these themes and the potential differences between how girls and boys identify with these characters. Following Cohen (2001) who states, "self-identity is related to our perception

of others and how they view us; media images are linked to self-identity...identifying with media allows us to experience social reality from other perspectives and shapes the development of self-identity and social attitudes” (p. 246), this study indicates that girls and boys might be developing gendered notions of love through identification with particular characters in the iconic Disney films. When children identify with media messages and characters there is a resulting internalization of the message that assists in the construction of self-identity. Consequently, if these messages promote an unrealistic understanding of the meaning of love, according to Renckstorf (2004) the messages will affect how individuals attach meaning that, “constitutes their world” (p. 58), and ultimately affect what the authors call the framework for interacting in the social world.

This study also illustrates the participants present level of media influence and is consistent with Social Cognitive Theory which argued that, “children can learn social roles and behaviors solely by watching real or fictional models, although not all learned behaviors will necessarily be enacted (modeled) without reinforcement; in other words, many mass media messages offer considerable inducements and rewards related to specific ideas, feelings, and behaviors” (p. 83). Disney offers positive reinforcement with the use of happy endings following marriage, the concept of commitment maybe further reinforced since sixty percent of participant’s parents are married. Social Cognitive Theory also suggests that, “exposure to mediated models of...coupleship should promote related attitudes and feelings and, under certain conditions of reinforcement, related behaviors” (p. 84). However, Bandura does not address how much exposure to media messages is necessary in order to develop social roles. Gerbner’s (2004) study questions this also by looking at the media as a socializing agent and acknowledges this gap stating,

“whether or not television viewers come to believe the television version of reality the more they watch it”. This study established that 97% percent of participants had seen the movie they were presented and is consistent with Social Cognitive Theory and Cultivation Theory. However, this study does not address the relationship between exposure amount and development of expectations. If participants had seen one of the four Disney films multiple times then their responses might answer Gerbner’s hypothesis.

The influence of media on the cognitive development of children has implications not only for relationship expectations, but for learning, education, and parental involvement. Consequences of learning through media according to Ford-Jones, Brant, and Nieman (2003), “watching television takes time away from reading and schoolwork...even 1 to 2 hours of daily unsupervised television viewing by school-aged children has a significant deleterious effect on academic performance, especially reading” (p. 1). Likewise, children spend the majority of their day at school and have more access to electronic learning than ever before. Bandura’s (1986) belief is that children can learn social roles from the media; it would be beneficial to educators to guide children in the appropriate way to interpret and internalize the media meanings. Considering this and that children begin kindergarten during the Pre-Operational stage of cognitive development, teachers could consider the significance of a media literacy education, this could be taught as early as five and six years old.

Also, this study indicates that children are capable of meaning making regarding complex romantically themed messages. I hope that this study might encourage parents to think of romantically-themed media as more than just entertainment for their children. The findings of this study should encourage parents to not dismiss the influence of media

on their children's cognitive development or fail to recognize the idea that children are capable of understanding complicated ideas such as romantic love. Further, these findings should encourage parents to be aware of the gender differences between girls' and boys' understanding of romance. Additionally, the amount of unsupervised television viewing is a concern because a, “child’s developmental level is a critical factor in determining whether the medium will have positive or negative effects” (Ford-Jones, Brant, & Nieman, p. 301). Consequently, I hope parents are encouraged to be involved in their child’s media viewing by using the ratings system as a guideline for age appropriate viewing opportunities and watching media with their children to facilitate open discussion about the messages in which their children are exposed.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Traditional folklore has been reinvented to appeal to a modern society. Classic folklore was written to teach the reader a moral lesson and give guidance in the reader's social life. Duty and honor commonly associated with folklore have been modified to present romance and true love packaged in an unrealistic package. Early literature was meant to reflect the popular cannon of the time and guide society to socially acceptable behavior, the new Disney fairytale formula transforms the traditional folklore into unrealistic representations of love and romance.

Cultivation Theory provides an opportunity to study these reinvented Disney fairytales and how their conceptualization influences and shapes children's new reality. The findings show that iconic Disney images serve as the medium to determine cultivated meanings children have developed about love relationships. The findings contribute to cultivation theory in that children are able to communicate their cultivated meanings about what love means by simply viewing an iconic image of Disney

Social Cognitive Theory takes Cultivation Theory a step further and addresses the gap of the passive approach of cultivation theory. Social cognitive theory argues that the media viewer internalizes the media message to create an expectation of the message. The findings illustrate social cognitive theory in that the child participants have viewed the media messages, internalized its meaning, and are able to respond the question, "what does love mean?", with their expectation of a love relationship.

Social Action Theory adds to Social Cognitive Theory by focusing on the behaviors of individuals after that individual has internalized the media message. Social Action Theory would extend these research findings by encouraging a longitudinal study that examines the child participants media influenced behavior in love relationships. How the children's cultivated meanings affect their interactions with the opposite sex would combine these three theories from passive viewing to social behavior/action.

These findings contribute to future research by providing a research road map to study the formation of meaning in children. Specifically, future research in child development should focus on younger participants to better understand, first, how young a child can be before they are able to cultivate and internalize media messages; research involving younger participants may negate the need to consider so many outside influences to specific media messages. Secondly, engaging in a longitudinal study following those children into pre-adolescents and adulthood would provide a unique opportunity for analyzing how internalized meanings affect the child's romantic relationship choices. With a firm understanding of the earliest age at which children cultivate meaning teachers will be able to tailor electronic educational material and media awareness to fit the child's cognitive level of learning.

Outside of academia parents could utilize this research to better understand the effect themed media exposure has on their child's meaning development and at what age clarification conversations about what their child is seeing should happen in the home. This will in turn prepare the child for these same conversations in their media awareness class which would provide consistency in all the child's social and learning environments.

Consequently, this research illustrates the modernization of the oral tradition of folklore from moral messages of honor and duty meant to teach the lessons that will guide children into adult hood, to the Disney formula of love at first sight leading to romantic love. The augmentation of folklore tales in this way produces a new scope of inquiry to examine the potential influence and consequences Disney films have to inform children's understanding of love relationships. The importance of this study is that it has found that children are creating meanings when exposed to romantically themed media and this influential media effects how children create meaning about their social world. This thesis has described the importance of children being affected by this media, how these meanings are identified and internalized and finally how children are expressing ideas of romantic love.

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APPENDIX

**IRB Approval Letter**



Office of Research Compliance

(Phone) 208.426.5401

Institutional Review Board

HumanSubjects@boisestate.edu

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**Notification of Approval**

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**Principal Investigator:** Tiffani Noelle Isaacson  
**Co-Investigator:** Peter Wollheim  
**Title:** Mass Media and its Affect on Romantic Expectations in Children  
**IRB Approval Number:** 008-09-038  
**Federal Wide Assurance #:** 0000097  
**Review:** Full Board  
**Protocol Annual Expiration Date:** February 26, 2010  
**Protocol Three-Year Expiration Date:** February 26, 2012

Date: February 27, 2009

Dear Ms. Isaacson:

This letter is to officially notify you of the approval of your protocol application by the Boise State University (BSU) Institutional Review Board (IRB). Your protocol is in compliance with this institution's Federal Wide Assurance 0000097 and the DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46), and has been classified as full board.

All forms regarding human subject research are available online. Please submit all forms and relative correspondence for the IRB electronically to the Office of Research Compliance e-mail, HumanSubjects@boisestate.edu.

**Your approved protocol is effective for 12 months.** If your research is not finished within the allotted year, the protocol must be renewed by the annual expiration date indicated above. Under BSU regulations, each protocol has a three-year life cycle and is allowed two annual renewals. If your research is not complete by the three-year expiration date indicated above, a new protocol application must be submitted.

***Modifications/Amendments***

All additions or changes to your protocol once the research has begun must be brought to the attention of the IRB. Complete and submit a "Modification/Amendment Form" indicating any change to your project. Modifications are reviewed by the IRB and must be approved before the changes may occur.

### ***Annual Renewal***

As the principal investigator, you have the primary responsibility to ensure the “Continuing/Annual Form” is submitted in a timely manner. Any problems or adverse events that occurred during the project must also be noted in the annual renewal, with a description of what was done to prevent recurrence.

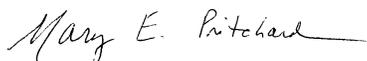
About 60 days prior to the expiration date of the approved protocol, the Office of Research Compliance will send you a renewal reminder notice. **If the annual renewal form is not received by the protocol’s annual expiration date, the protocol will be considered “closed/non-active” and a final report will need to be submitted. To continue the research project after it has closed, a NEW protocol application will need to be submitted for IRB review and approval.**

### ***Final Report***

When your research is complete or discontinued, please submit a “Final Report Form.” An executive summary or other documents with the results of the research may be included.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the Office of Research Compliance, 426-5401 or [HumanSubjects@boisestate.edu](mailto:HumanSubjects@boisestate.edu).

Thank you and good luck with your research.



Dr. Mary E. Pritchard  
Chair, BSU Institutional Review Board