

Kiser: Hello, and welcome to the Thought-Provoking podcast. I'm Shelly Kiser and I'm the communications manager for the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Kennesaw State University in Kennesaw, Georgia. Our college is the largest college at KSU with over 400 faculty members and over 7,000 students. It houses 11 departments and schools with more than 80 programs of study. Our show features the amazing researchers in our college and their amazing and thought-provoking research. Today we have with us one of our researchers here at Kennesaw State University. She's the assistant director of the media and entertainment program here at KSU and she's also professor of communication. She's here today to talk about her fascinating research on the Disney Princess phenomenon and its links to eating disorders. Welcome, Erin Ryan, and thank you for being with us today.

Ryan: Hi! Thanks for having me.

Kiser: So this is some really interesting research. I really enjoyed reading your paper. Can you tell us first of all, What is the Disney Princess Phenomenon?

Ryan: It's kind of hard to encapsulate, and it has certainly changed over the years. But if we were going to boil it down, it's the princess myth that comes hand-in-hand with Disney princesses. Unfortunately a lot of the old school princesses - you think about Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White - we have that sort of stereotypical representation, usually a very weak character who needs someone to save them. They're waiting for the prince to come save them. So helpless. Very physically stereotypical. Most of them are built the same. If you look at their figures - very, very thin and big eyes.

Kiser: Very tiny waist. Impossibly tiny waist.

Ryan: Exactly. Impossible standards. Very thin and very beautiful. I'd like to give props to Disney where props are deserved. We've got some princesses like Mulan who's very strong, Moana most recently and Princess Tiana. They don't quite fit that same bill. But, by and large, when you think Disney princess and you look at their line of toys, clothes and backpacks - all the things available to young, very young, children, starting in preschool - we are looking at that stereotype of the princess who doesn't have a lot of agency.

Kiser: Your research connects the Disney Princess Phenomenon with eating disorders. How did you conduct research like this?

Ryan: It actually came up in a class with one of my students years ago. I was teaching a class about media effects. This particular student - her name is Stephanie - she's one of my absolute favorites. We ended up doing research together because of this discussion. She was also doing the minor in gender and women studies and said they'd been having these discussions in some of her other courses. She brought it up one day in class and said, Did you know that there are people online using Twitter and Instagram, primarily, not so much Facebook, who are looking for thinspo? And I said, Say that again? Spell that for me?

Kiser: I saw that word in there and I wondered, What is thinspo?

Ryan: Yes, she had to explain: it's thinspiration, looking for inspiration to be thin. I thought, What's wrong with that? People are looking to get healthy, or maybe looking for recipes or workouts. But she said, Oh no, no, no, no, no. That this takes it many steps further. So she actually pulled up some Twitter profiles to show me. I had no idea that there were so many people, mostly young women, who are using social media as a platform to build communities around their eating disorders. Before social media, if you wanted to reach out to a couple of friends at school and ask them, I'm trying to lose weight; give me your tips and tricks. That's one thing. Now we have social media where we're building these communities of young people who are essentially putting up a how-to guide about maintaining an anorexic lifestyle or a bulimic lifestyle.

Kiser: You use the term pro-ana in your paper. Is that what you're talking about? Those social media sites that promote anorexia?

Ryan: Yes. They use that term as well: pro-ana or pro-anorexic. You can search for the hashtag if you really want to go down the rabbit hole. These communities support each other in their anorexia and in their eating disordered lifestyles. So, they're always looking for inspiration to help each other, which is problematic

Kiser: Definitely. You have written a paper on this, and I'm going to include a link because there's a lot of really fascinating images from your research in the paper. I saw one in particular of Beauty from Beauty and the Beast. She had the thigh gap and was tiny, tiny. She was there as thinspiration.

Ryan: Yes. Very often the thinspo images are of real people, like supermodels and the thigh gap. They do Thigh Gap Thursday where they post their thigh gap pictures with captions like, here's the thigh gap I'm looking for in my life but I know I'll never get there. But to start using animated characters as your inspiration: this is a real problem. We very often hear about mediated characters who have been photoshopped or airbrushed in magazines. It's still unrealistic body image wise. But now you have characters that are drawn. They've been animated on purpose to look obviously human but not at all realistic. So these girls are really setting themselves up for failure from the outset.

Kiser: So you call this a dangerous model for young women. Why are you saying this is a dangerous model? Are we seeing it affect our culture?

Ryan: Yes, and this is everywhere. It's ubiquitous. Advertising aimed, particularly at young women, through traditional ads but also through film and television. You're kind of being groomed from the time you are a toddler to see certain images of what women quote-unquote "should look like." Again, very dangerous misogynistic images that encourage young people to engage in eating disordered lifestyles to attain these unrealistic standards of beauty. The next layer of that is adding the princess myth, this phenomenon of comparing your physical body to the body of someone who has been drawn or animated. It's beyond unrealistic and really

problematic, because there is no way to diet yourself into looking like Ariel from the Little Mermaid.

Kiser: True. And how does social media really amplify this problem?

Ryan: Social media is about community building, which is usually a good thing. But here you have people who have come together by perhaps searching for hashtags like pro-ana, like Thigh Gap Thursday, like any one of these things that they are kind of celebrating, and they find each other. Unfortunately when they find each, they're not looking to help each other out of a disordered eating lifestyle. They are encouraging each other to do it even more. Parents very often don't know that their children are on Twitter and in these communities and are visiting these pro-ana websites, where they have the ana creed and it's almost become a religion to them. They pray to the goddess Ana. If you ever want to take a deep dive - you've got to do some deep breathing when you read through some of these articles and websites. This is how these communities find each other and build upon each other. With the availability of social media to kids who are younger and younger, little kids who are 5 and 6 years old are talking about having to go on a diet. And that's where it starts. They're bombarded by media characters that have these unrealistic body styles. Then they put two and two together and join these communities online. It can be really, really dangerous. A lot of these girls end up hospitalized on feeding tubes. But even then, sometimes, they're still tweeting it as success. "Look, I'm so anorexic they made me get a feeding tube." There's a sense of pride there.

Kiser: That's scary.

Ryan: Yeah, it's really sad.

Kiser: You talk in your paper about identity messages. Can you tell us more about what those are and how that works with the Disney franchise?

Ryan: In a lot of the work that I do looking at media effects, we look at how people either form their identities or have their identities influenced by media messages. This is why I'm a big proponent of parental mediation. When children are young and they're looking for ways to model behavior - things as simple as, How should I wear my hair today? What kind of clothes should I wear? What looks cool? That's probably okay. But parents need to be aware of the kind of messages their children are receiving from all kinds of mass media and social media, because you tend to start tying your identity to the messages that you see. Some of these are aspirational. For example, if you're an athlete who's following other athletes on Instagram and thinking, "Okay, if I can just get my workouts up and get my speed faster," - or whatever it is that you're working on - that's great. That's great inspiration. You can give yourself something to work toward. But, again, if you're in one of these communities that we're talking about, that is unhealthy, you can start to tie your identity to the kind of messages that you're receiving through the mass media you're consuming. Then adding in the social media aspect in these communities that are cheering you on, then that's when it becomes pretty dangerous.

Kiser: Yes, that does sound like a problem. So, you think that media exposure in general is really affecting the way we look at our bodies and creating body dissatisfaction. Body dissatisfaction is, as I think all of us are very aware, a big problem right now. One of the things I saw in your paper - and I hope our listeners go and look at your paper because it's fascinating and there are lots of images in there - a picture of Ariel, the Little Mermaid and it said, Ever seen a fat Disney princess? Me neither. That's exactly what you're talking about, right?

Ryan: Yes. For the average person, they can just enjoy these characters for who they are. They're animated characters that are fun. I want to pretend to be Princess Elsa, and I'm going to sing the Frozen soundtrack every day. But that's not the case for everyone. If you are someone who is already dissatisfied with the way that you look and you are looking for inspiration, then you can get a warped sense of what you're supposed to look like from some of these beloved characters. It really takes parents, teachers, peers even, to help you become a little more media literate and understand that this is an animated character. It may be based on a real person, but certainly real people don't look like this. It reminds me of the Barbie study that was done that showed that if you actually had the same body type and measurements of Barbie, you wouldn't be able to stand up. You would topple over. So unrealistic.

Kiser: Your body would be - not beautiful - but dysfunctional.

Ryan: Exactly. But still you see women who are trying to diet or plastic surgery their way into looking like Barbie and cannot be dissuaded. This is certainly an issue, not as widespread as the general body dissatisfaction from comparing yourself to characters you see on TV because, by and large, they all have the same body type. Thankfully, we are seeing more diversity in media representation of body type. And in animation we're seeing more of that, too - different skin colors, different ethnicities, tall and short, people who have different skill-sets. Princesses like Merida who is a great marksman and she can ride horses.

Kiser: They can save everyone else; they don't need saved.

Ryan: Exactly. Hopefully we are seeing a bit of a change in the way we think about what a princess is. In real life, we have Meghan Markle who got a lot of press for being the new people's princess and not traditionally what you think of when the word princess pops in your head.

Kiser: In your paper one of the things I found interesting was that she related to one of the fairly-recent princesses: Princess Elsa from Frozen. Why do you think she felt a connection with that princess in particular?

Ryan: That is actually her avatar, as well, on Twitter with the tagline: Conceal, don't feel. That is what I considered a throwaway line from a song from Frozen. But this seems to be her mantra. Unfortunately, this particular girl conceals all of her hurt, body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem. She also harms herself; she's a cutter. She cuts her skin to conceal a lot of her own

emotions by hurting herself. I think that's why it resonated with her, the character Elsa, in particular.

Kiser: I saw that she cuts herself and was fascinated that she even kind of incorporated Disney princesses in her cutting.

Ryan: Yes. She's done a couple of things. Pictures on her Twitter profile - one of Snow White and another of Ariel - where she has used Photoshop or whatever to draw lines on their arms to make it look like they were also cutters. She also keeps all of her cutting tools, like her blades, in a little Tinker Bell box that she proudly displays. She has a picture of that on Twitter, as well. The connection is, if I can just hurt myself enough, if I just diet enough I can also be a Disney princess.

Kiser: Another photo showed that she had even cut a crown into her leg. So even making that connection there.

Ryan: To remind herself that maybe one day she can be a princess.

Kiser: This person, obviously, has some psychiatrist issues. She has an eating disorder, she has depression, she cuts herself - self-injury. Are you saying the Disney princesses phenomenon made these problems worse, and if so, how do you think that happened?

Ryan: I don't know that it made it worse. This was, unfortunately, a young woman who was trying to latch onto something that, maybe, reminded her of her childhood, that is a beloved character like Elsa, who she comes back to time and time again. There's something about those characters that makes her feel good. Perhaps she is linking those two things together to just make it through the day. She's constantly looking for more Disney thinspo or fitspo. She asks other people if they have more of these kinds of images. There's a picture of Mulan working out and another princess doing yoga - she's constantly looking for those kinds of things. So maybe that's just a touchstone for her. The Twitter feed for this particular girl was about 11 months long and then very abruptly stopped. Her feed is anonymous, but I think there were enough clues there for someone to figure out who she was. I certainly hope that somebody - maybe a parent or teacher - saw this and realized how much help she really needed and that she ended up getting that help. Because, obviously, just reading through her content, she is suffering.

Kiser: Yeah, definitely. Thinking about people with mental health problems, do you think they are more susceptible to the bad aspects of having that obsession with Disney princesses?

Ryan: That's a good question. I'm honestly not sure. I think Disney is so ubiquitous. It's everywhere and it's easily accessible. I think these are, many times, characters we grew up with that make us feel safe. Speaking for myself, my whole childhood I can relate back to different Disney movies and going to Disney World.

Kiser: Me, too. It's part of the American culture.

Ryan: Exactly. So, if you are searching for something, it's easy to find what you're looking for in one of these characters. There's nothing inherently wrong with any of these characters, but I think it's certainly easy for you to latch onto one if you need something that's sort of a touchstone.

Kiser: In your paper you show some images from the Twitter feed that were pictures, not of a whole person, but just different body parts that were terribly emaciated. How does chopping a person into pieces impact people?

Ryan: There's been a lot of really good work done about how women in magazines and film have been chopped into pieces like that. Jean Kilbourne has a great documentary called "Killing Us Softly" where she talks about advertising images of women. I just wrote a book chapter about advertising misogyny and talked about this as well. We're chopping women into their parts - only showing their legs, their arms, or, in America, usually their breasts. Or just a waistline with something written across it. These images dehumanize women. It makes women who are already susceptible to body image dysmorphia more zoomed in on one thing, like you were talking about the thigh gaps. People who are obsessed with their waistline or maybe just their weight. Looking just at their parts stops you from looking at a woman as a whole human being who has hopes and dreams and intellects.

Kiser: Who is more than just her legs, right?

Ryan: But, unfortunately, if you look back at film, television and advertising, it's pretty rampant that we use women's bodies to sell things: to sell ideas, clothing, makeup, plastic surgery or whatever it is.

Kiser: Even cars to men.

Ryan: Yes. My big thing, because I work in the media and entertainment side of things, is to get more women behind the camera, to get more women in the room to make decisions about advertising, so we can stop chopping women up into body parts to sell things.

Kiser: Even if it's only visually, right?

Ryan: Right.

Kiser: I know that most girls don't get eating disorders from loving Disney princesses or I'd probably have an eating disorder from my childhood. But I know that your research suggests that it might have negative effects even if you don't go to the extent of getting an eating disorder. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Ryan: Sure. This goes back to that princess myth. I'm really encouraged because I see a lot of little girls whose parents have videoed them talking about this on social media, saying things

like, Why does she even need a prince? Why does she need to get saved? One little girl talks about Aladdin and Jasmine and says, "Why does Jasmine need Aladdin to see the world? She can go do it by herself." That encourages me a lot because the traditional princess myth is waiting around for someone to come save you. It's, again, promoting weakness and vulnerability. Instead, what we want to see is girls who are strong and independent, using their intellect, making decisions and having agency. We as parents and educators - or anyone who's around little kids - need to make sure they understand. It's fine if they love princesses. They're pretty. They wear pretty dresses and they have crowns. It's okay. I'm not saying down with princesses! We need to get rid of them! We need to make sure that you know we are mediating that experience for them, saying things like, "You know you don't have to wait around for someone to come save you from the castle. You can be the savior yourself."

Kiser: That was one of the questions I was going to ask you. I'm sure our listeners are thinking, Should I forbid my children from ever watching a Disney movie and throw all the Mulan and Cinderella stuff in the trash? But, you're not saying that. You're saying we need to make sure there are positive messages?

Ryan: Correct. Parental mediation is the key here and really in any media message. Your kids are consuming so much media, and it's hard to stay on top of what your kids are watching and consuming all the time. But if you are in the room and you see something that they're watching that seems questionable, say something. Have a conversation about it. Because they're going to look to you for what's right and what's wrong, what to believe and what not to believe. Use those opportunities as they come up.

Kiser: This has been fascinating, and, again, I'm going to put the link to your paper in our notes because I hope that people go there and look at some of the very interesting images you have in your paper and read about it a little further. Thank you, Erin, for joining us today.

Ryan: You bet. Thanks!

Kiser: Can you teach students to become sustainably-minded citizens. We'll find out next month. And we'll also hear how a geography of clothing class led a group of motivated students to start one of the most active community outreach and sustainability education programs here at Kennesaw State University. Thought-Provoking is a production of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Kennesaw State University. This is Shelly Kiser and I'll be back next month with another episode. Talk to you then.