



ETHICS OF REPRESENTING STOCKHOLM SYNDROME IN BEAUTY AND THE BEAST (2017): THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE AND ITS CULTURAL IMPACT ON THE EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE YOUNGER GENERATION

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study employs a literature review approach to critically examine the ethical representation of Stockholm Syndrome in *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) and the role of language in shaping its cultural impact on the emotional development of younger viewers. The research investigates how the film's portrayal of Belle and the Beast's evolving relationship marked by captivity, violence, and eventual romantic connection mirrors Stockholm Syndrome dynamics, which may inadvertently normalize harmful behaviors as a basis for love. Key findings reveal ethical concerns, including the blurred lines between trauma bonding and genuine empathy, potentially reinforcing gender stereotypes and fostering acceptance of relational violence among young audiences. Cultural influences, such as patriarchal values and prevalent media consumption patterns, exacerbate risks such as emotional immaturity and insecure attachments. The study concludes that while the film promotes empathy, its problematic narrative calls for media literacy interventions to foster healthier understandings of relationships. It suggests adopting more diverse storytelling methods to mitigate potential long-term psychological effects.

Keywords: Stockholm Syndrome, Ethical Representation, Language and Cultural Impact, Emotional Development, Media Literacy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Films, as powerful cultural tools, significantly shape societal values, worldviews, and behaviors. One such film, *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), directed by Bill Condon and produced by Disney, has attracted considerable attention. The evolving relationship between Belle and the Beast is often viewed through the lens of Stockholm Syndrome, a psychological condition in which a victim forms an emotional attachment to their abuser as a survival mechanism. This depiction has been critically explored in various media studies. Andriani (2020) noted that the romanticization of unequal relationships in fantasy films can foster positive views of dominant perpetrators. Similarly, SarI and Rukmini (2022) pointed out that the film portrays a complex power dynamic

blending obedience, dependence, and emotional acceptance, ultimately interpreted as love.

The 2017 live-action remake is a reimagining of Disney's 1991 animated classic, portraying Belle, a young woman caught in a relationship with the Beast, a once-violent character transformed into a prince through love. The ethical issues surrounding their relationship stem from its resemblance to Stockholm Syndrome, where the victim forms an emotional bond with their captor. Although Belle is portrayed as innovative and independent, and the film uses advanced CGI to appeal to the digital generation, controversy arises from interpreting their connection as Stockholm Syndrome, in which the victim forms emotional attachment to the abuser as a defense mechanism (Atmasari et al., 2023;

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Boardman et al., 2024). For young audiences, especially the primary demographic for Disney films, repeated exposure to this narrative may influence their understanding of relationships, possibly suggesting that violence is a necessary aspect of romantic development. This portrayal raises concerns about normalizing emotional and physical conflict as parts of true love.

The social implications of such portrayals are substantial, as media plays a significant role in shaping societal norms around romantic relationships. Depictions that romanticize aggression may increase tolerance for abusive behaviors in real-life relationships (Lee et al., 2018; Aprillianny & Hermiati, 2021). In Indonesia, the growing consumption of media with similar themes has been linked to increased aggression among adolescents (Berutu, 2024; Yodi & Prasetyo, 2021). This is particularly relevant for younger generations, still developing their emotional identities. Research has shown that victims of dating violence may come to perceive their partner's aggression as a sign of love, influenced by media messages (Asikin et al., 2021; Jaya et al., 2025). Conversely, positive media portrayals that emphasize empathy can encourage healthier emotional development when moral messages are clearly conveyed (Li et al., 2023; Fadilah et al., 2023). Despite Belle's portrayal as an independent character, feminist critiques argue that the film perpetuates the notion that women must 'save' troubled men through love (Johnson, 2018), aligning with findings that Disney films often normalize emotional sacrifice as an inherent aspect of romantic love (Rahmawati & Hidayat, 2022).

Stockholm Syndrome, first identified during a bank robbery in Stockholm in 1973, is a psychological condition where hostages develop empathy or romantic feelings for their captors. Such representations in popular culture, especially in media aimed at children and adolescents, are problematic (Ariswela, 2024; Alfianto et al., 2024). The emotional bond between the victim and the captor, formed during captivity despite the trauma and danger, reflects the paradoxical nature of the syndrome,

where the victim's feelings contrast with the fear or hatred others may feel toward the captor.

Stockholm Syndrome is a complex psychological phenomenon involving emotional defense mechanisms like trauma bonding or identification with the aggressor. When portrayed in media, particularly in films, it raises ethical and psychological concerns. Romanticized portrayals of such dynamics may normalize abusive behaviors and influence young viewers' understanding of healthy relationships versus manipulation (Nandi, 2016).

The primary objective of this qualitative research is to critically evaluate the ethics of representing Stockholm Syndrome in *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) and analyze the role of language in this portrayal, alongside its cultural impact on the emotional development of younger generations. The study will assess whether the representation of Belle and the Beast's relationship is ethically appropriate and how it shapes young viewers' emotions, perceptions, and behaviors. The research emphasizes that media portrayals, particularly in influential films like Disney's live-action remake, serve as powerful cultural artifacts that impact societal norms, ethical frameworks, and individual psychological growth.

2. METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a literature review to explore cultural and ethical representations in media, particularly focusing on Stockholm Syndrome in *Beauty and the Beast* (2017). This method, ideal for interdisciplinary topics, provides an in-depth analysis of how media representations influence societal norms and individual perceptions without the need for primary data. As Creswell (2013) defines, qualitative research seeks to understand subjective meanings embedded in cultural artifacts like films. The approach allows for a nuanced examination of ethical dilemmas, cultural impacts, and psychological effects using secondary data, enabling the identification of themes and patterns that may not emerge from isolated case studies. Kusumastuti and Khoiron (2019) highlight the

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flexibility of qualitative methods in adapting to media studies, where subjective interpretations can uncover biases and cultural resonances. The study relies on secondary sources, including academic journals, scholarly articles, and analyses of *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), accessed through databases like PubMed, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, focusing on publications from 2010 to 2023 to capture contemporary insights into media ethics and youth psychology. This multidisciplinary approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION***A. Ethics of Representation: Stockholm Syndrom.***

The portrayal of Stockholm Syndrome in *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), where Belle and the Beast's relationship transitions from initial violence to a form of true love, mirrors real-life situations such as the 1973 Stockholm bank robbery. Key elements like Belle's captivity, physical threats, and isolation within the Beast's castle resemble aspects of this psychological phenomenon. Analyzing pivotal scenes, such as the Beast's initial imprisonment of Belle out of anger, followed by moments of emotional connection through shared experiences like dinner and dancing, triggers sympathy from Belle. This dynamic illustrates trauma bonding, a psychological survival mechanism where victims begin to emotionally align with their captors to cope (Wahyuningrat et al., 2024).

Such portrayals raise significant ethical concerns, particularly around cognitive distortions in abusive relationships, where victims, under threat, begin to deny the violence and instead believe that by giving more love and attention to the aggressor, the violence will stop. This rationalization is common in real-life abusive dynamics, where victims may see the abuser's behavior as a "temporary mistake" that can be corrected through emotional sacrifice.

Although trauma bonding serves as a psychological defense mechanism, it can

perpetuate the cycle of abuse, blurring the line between manipulation and authentic empathy. This may leave victims stuck in unhealthy relational patterns (Graham, 2016). From an ethical standpoint, the narrative risks normalizing abusive dynamics as a foundation for love, conflicting with media ethics that prioritize social responsibility in shaping cultural values. The depiction of the Beast as a "wounded" figure, redeemable through Belle's love, minimizes his accountability for his violent actions. This narrative mirrors the Patty Hearst case, where coercion and dependency were wrongly interpreted as romantic redemption (Money, 1986).

Feminist critiques argue that while Belle is depicted as independent and intelligent, her agency is ultimately constrained by patriarchal narratives that portray women as emotional caretakers, responsible for rehabilitating men. As observed by Revilliano et al. (2023, in Kurniasih et al., 2024), patriarchal culture continues to shape and limit the roles of women in many areas of life.

Gaston's behavior toward Belle, which can be seen as a defense mechanism against her differing perspective, further emphasizes the narrative's problematic nature. He manipulates the community to view Belle as irrational and dangerous, particularly when she shows compassion for the Beast. By labeling her as "enchanted" and in need of restraint, Gaston contributes to her imprisonment alongside Maurice. This illustrates how emotional manipulation and social pressure can suppress female autonomy and reinforce gendered power structures. Therefore, the ethical representation in this narrative is problematic, as it blurs the boundaries between violence and empathy, encouraging audiences to view emotional manipulation as legitimate love and perpetuating gender stereotypes and harmful relational patterns.

B. Cultural Impact on Emotional Development and the Role of Language

Longitudinal studies reveal that consistent exposure to media romanticizing violence in relationships, such as the

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transformation from conflict to love in Disney films, is directly linked to a 15% decrease in emotional self-efficacy and an increased susceptibility to unhealthy relationships. In these relationships, individuals may fail to recognize signs of manipulation due to repeated exposure to such patterns (Lee et al., 2018). A Pew Research survey found that 45% of teenagers believe that a "bad" person can change through love, reflecting the normalization of aggressive behaviors in these narratives. This belief leads young people to view initial violence as part of a romantic process that can be resolved (Pew Research, 2021). While Disney films may foster empathy through stories of forgiveness and transformation, they also contribute to an increased tolerance for imbalanced relationships and emotional manipulation. Young viewers may learn to accept dynamics where one partner dominates the other (Anderson, 2020).

From feminist and queer theory perspectives, the Beast is often seen as a queer-coded figure, blurring the lines between emotional vulnerability and violence. This ambiguity in language and characterization may confuse young audiences about the proper expression of emotional identity, making it difficult to distinguish between genuine self-expression and harmful behavior (GLAAD, 2022).

While these films convey values like empathy and acceptance that can positively influence teenage development, their long-term impact risks normalizing abusive relational dynamics. Therefore, media literacy interventions are crucial in strengthening teenagers' ability to differentiate healthy affection from emotional manipulation, ultimately preventing psychological risks such as trauma bonding and promoting healthier relationship models in the digital age (UNESCO, 2021).

Stockholm Syndrome is not confined to extreme hostage situations but also emerges in romantic relationships, where trauma bonding forms through cycles of violence and reconciliation. Research on victims of dating violence shows that adolescents often

rationalize abusive behavior as love or a "temporary mistake" that can be fixed through self-sacrifice, leading them to remain in harmful emotional relationships (Ratri & Setiawati, 2020). This occurs due to emotional immaturity, peer pressure, and cultural scripts that promote the idea that love must be fought for, even at the cost of pain. The National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan) report (2023) highlights that dating violence is one of the most prevalent forms of gender-based violence, with many adolescents showing patterns of emotional dependence on their perpetrators. The term "buzzed" serves as a metaphor in this context, illustrating the emotional impact of love, akin to the effects of alcohol or drugs, which complicates the distinction between healthy and harmful emotions in relationships.

C. Influence on the Younger Generation

Findings from research on children's media indicate that *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) has a dual influence on the emotional development of young generations, with the potential to build empathy but also the risk of normalizing violence in relationships. Scenes where Belle shows empathy toward Beast can help children learn about forgiveness and emotional transformation, in line with the findings, which show that exposure to prosocial content influences the increase in affective empathy and prosocial behavior in children (Lee et al., 2023). However, the Belle-Beast relationship dynamics that begin with detention and aggression can blur the boundaries between care and control, and teenagers exposed to narratives romanticizing aggression are more tolerant of violence in relationships (Lee et al., 2018).

This representation of the relationship shape blurs emotional norms of teenagers who are still developing the concept of healthy love. When love is depicted as something that must "save" or "change" an aggressive partner, teenagers may tolerate gaslighting, jealousy, and threats as forms of emotional closeness. This is evident in the research by Asikin et al. (2021) on victims of dating violence among Indonesian teenagers, which shows that victims

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often rationalize their partner's rough behavior as proof of love or commitment, making toxic relationships difficult to end.

Furthermore, repeated exposure to narratives romanticizing conflict in digital media reinforces the perception that violence is a natural part of teenage relationship dynamics. Media consumption that displays aggression in the context of romantic relationships can increase tolerance and normalization of dangerous behaviors, as identified by Berutu (2024), who found that digital media use is associated with increased interpersonal aggression among Indonesian teenagers. Thus, films like *Beauty and the Beast* are not just entertaining but also serve as a source of emotional learning that requires interpretive accompaniment so that the positive potential for empathy does not turn into justification for violence.

D. The Impact of Culture on the Emotional Development

The cultural impact of representing Stockholm Syndrome in the film *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) goes beyond mere entertainment, as this narrative serves as a mirror and shaper of social values that deeply influence young generations. Young generations, defined as individuals aged 13-25 years according to UNESCO classification, are often intensively exposed to digital media through platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Disney+. Films like *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) are not only consumed as fantasy stories but also used as models for understanding emotions, interpersonal relationships, and power dynamics. The representation where initial oppression (such as Belle's captivity by Beast) transforms into romantic love implicitly depicts elements of Stockholm Syndrome, which can affect their emotional development. This impact is multidimensional, involving psychological, social, and cultural aspects, and has the potential to shape long-term thought patterns about healthy versus abusive relationships (Kirshner & Whitson, 2021; Lenge et al., 2023).

Suryani et al. (2022) in *Identity, Youth and Crisis* explains that adolescents and young

adults are in the stage of "identity vs. role confusion," where they seek self-identity through exploration of values, relationships, and social norms. At this stage, individuals are vulnerable to external influences, including popular media, because their brains are still developing in terms of emotional regulation and social processing. If films like *Beauty and the Beast* show that oppression, such as Beast's verbal and physical violence toward Belle, can turn into love through patience and empathy, this could affect the development of empathy, self-esteem, and the ability to distinguish healthy relationships. For example, young generations might internalize that tolerance toward abuse is a form of "true love," which blurs the ethical boundaries between affection and manipulation.

This theory can be expanded with Piaget and Inhelder (2019), which emphasizes that adolescents in the "formal operational" stage begin to think abstractly and hypothetically. However, exposure to simplified narratives like in this film could hinder this transition, as they may not be critical of representations that romanticize trauma. Research by Linder and Falk-Ross (2024) in *Adolescence* shows that teenagers exposed to media violence or abusive narratives tend to experience an increased risk of emotional disorders, such as anxiety or depression, because they learn to associate violence with positive resolutions. In the context of *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), scenes where Belle gradually "changes" Beast through emotional interactions, although accompanied by light feminist themes, can be interpreted as normalizing that women are responsible for "saving" abusive men, which reinforces gender stereotypes and affects the self-esteem of young women.

Furthermore, Suryani et al. (2022) is relevant here, as young generations forming attachment patterns might view the Belle-Beast relationship as an ideal model. If Stockholm Syndrome is represented as the basis of love, this could trigger insecure attachment, where individuals learn that emotional dependence on an abusive perpetrator is normal. Empirical studies by Collins and Steinberg (2006) on adolescent development show that media plays

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a key role in forming emotional schemas, with stronger impacts on those with less access to critical media education.

E. Specific Analysis of Stockholm Syndrome in Belle and Beast's Relationship

In *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), the representation of Stockholm Syndrome is depicted through the evolving relationship between Belle and the Beast. Initially, the Beast captures Belle as a consequence of her father's actions, creating a power imbalance. Through daily interactions such as sharing meals, dancing, and emotional confessions Belle begins to develop sympathy for the Beast, which eventually leads to love. This progression mirrors elements of Stockholm Syndrome: isolation (the secluded castle), dependence (Belle cannot leave), and emotional manipulation (Beast shows vulnerability to gain sympathy). Although the film does not explicitly reference Stockholm Syndrome, its narrative subtly suggests that trauma bonding can form the basis of romance, which raises ethical concerns by oversimplifying a complex psychological condition.

Ethical critiques of this portrayal focus on the potential glorification of abuse. For instance, scenes where Beast displays anger and destroys objects, while Belle remains patient, promote the idea that women's patience can "change" troubled men. This aligns with traditional Disney tropes, but in the 2017 remake, the inclusion of sensual elements such as costumes and music makes the narrative more appealing to younger audiences, who may interpret it as a model for romantic relationships. Johnson's (2018) analysis in *Feminist Media Studies* argues that the film maintains a subtle patriarchal narrative where women are cast as "emotional heroes." This narrative may influence emotional development by instilling the expectation that love requires sacrifice and the transformation of the abuser.

The role of language in these interactions significantly impacts empathy development. The language used in the film, particularly when the victim (Belle) expresses empathy toward the perpetrator (Beast), might lead

young audiences to believe that empathy should be extended unconditionally, even in abusive situations. This could hinder their ability to distinguish healthy relationships from harmful ones, affecting their social interactions. The language of love and sacrifice might also influence self-esteem: young women may internalize the belief that their worth lies in their ability to "change" their partners, while young men might feel valued based on their capacity to "change" their partners. Studies by Twenge and Campbell (2009) show that exposure to such narratives increases the risk of self-esteem issues, particularly among adolescent girls.

From a mental health perspective, this portrayal may contribute to increased tolerance for violence in relationships. Hooks (1992), in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, discusses how romance narratives often normalize abuse as part of "true love," which could affect young viewers, potentially leading to depression, anxiety, or even real-life abusive experiences. In Indonesia, where surveys by the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (2020) report that one in three female adolescents experiences relationship violence, such portrayals could exacerbate this issue. Young audiences may idealize abusive relationships, making it harder to establish emotional boundaries, as seen in the rise of cyberbullying and toxic relationships on social media.

Culturally, in societies influenced by patriarchal norms like Indonesia, this representation reinforces traditional gender stereotypes. The film suggests that women's role is to "change" men through patience and love, aligning with values that prioritize family harmony through female sacrifice. As *Beauty and the Beast* becomes increasingly popular in Indonesia via Hollywood cinemas and streaming platforms, it could further entrench the expectation that women must tolerate emotional violence. Research by Lestari (2019) indicates that Disney films influence relationship expectations, with female adolescents more likely to accept manipulative behavior as "romantic."

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On a global scale, the film contributes to the “Disneyfication” of culture, a term coined by Anjani (2023) to describe how Disney mainstreams consumerist values and romanticizes trauma. In the digital era, young audiences—often referred to as “digital natives” (Prawiradilaga, 2025)—consume such films through interactive platforms, where comments and memes on YouTube or TikTok reinforce positive interpretations of the narrative. This amplification extends the impact, as viewers don’t just watch but also discuss and adapt the story into their own lives, through fanfiction or cosplay, for example.

The emotional impacts of such portrayals can manifest in real-world behaviors, such as idealizing abusive relationships or struggling to establish emotional boundaries. A Pew Research Center survey (2018) shows that adolescents exposed to antisocial behavior are more likely to experience mental health issues. In Indonesia, where 80% of adolescents are active online (APJII, 2022), *Beauty and the Beast* could spark discussions that normalize abuse, further influencing long-term emotional development, including the ability to form healthy identities. The language used in these digital discussions can reinforce these ideas, affecting how adolescents perceive and approach relationships.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the representation of Stockholm Syndrome in *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) raises substantial ethical concerns, especially in how the film romanticizes power imbalances and presents trauma bonding as a pathway to love. The analysis highlights that such portrayals can influence the emotional development of young audiences, potentially blurring the distinction between authentic affection and manipulative or abusive behaviors. From a cultural perspective, these representations reinforce patriarchal norms that cast women as emotional caregivers responsible for rehabilitating aggressive partners, which may contribute to insecure attachment styles and increased tolerance for relational violence.

This research deepens our understanding of how media ethics, language use, psychological development, and cultural values intersect in widely consumed children’s films. The findings emphasize the critical need to strengthen media literacy programs to equip young viewers with the tools to critically evaluate romantic narratives and recognize harmful relationship dynamics. Future research could build on this study by exploring the role of language in shaping perceptions of romance and abuse, conducting empirical studies with adolescent viewers, examining cross-cultural interpretations of the film, or analyzing similar depictions of coercive relationships in contemporary media to inform more effective educational and intervention strategies.

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