

Disney's Approach to Racial Representation: Superficial Changes or Genuine Cultural Engagement?

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Abstract: This paper explores Disney's approach to racial representation in its films, focusing on whether changes are superficial or reflect genuine cultural engagement. Using Stuart Hall's theory of encoding and decoding, this study examines the impact of character changes in "The Little Mermaid" (2023) on cultural representation.

Keywords: Racial Representation, Cultural Engagement, Disney, The Little Mermaid, Encoding and Decoding.

1. Introduction

As societal demands for diversity and equality continue to grow, some parents believe that children of color struggle to find representations of themselves in the media[4]. Disney has made apparent strides in representing racial diversity in its films that uphold the values of individualistic American identity [3]. The decision to have individuals of color assume significant roles in Disney movies demonstrates the commitment to reflecting social diversity and promoting the values of equality. This decision serves as a direct response to the lack of representation in Hollywood, particularly concerning the underrepresentation of the Black community in the film industry. The outward shift aims to actively contribute to societal change by presenting more authentic and diverse images in popular culture to foster a transformation in societal values. However, Disney's practices often exhibit shortcomings, maintaining a facade of progress while sidestepping critical issues and inadvertently reinforcing subtle forms of racism[3]. How do shifts in "The Little Mermaid" (2023) movie's characters' skin tones, as part of Disney's strategies for racial representation, impact the portrayal of different cultural elements? This study applies Stuart Hall's theory of encoding and decoding, suggesting that media texts carry messages from producers and are then decoded by audiences[6]. The representation of the work greatly depends on the context and therefore making the media re-presentation to be a vital part of the social norm. By employing this theoretical framework, this study aims to analyze these changes, exploring the motivations and consequences within the media landscape.

Research Methodology:

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to analyze Disney's approach to racial representation, combining qualitative content analysis with quantitative data analysis. First, a qualitative content analysis is conducted on Disney films, specifically focusing on "The Little Mermaid" (2023), to identify recurring themes and patterns in the portrayal of characters of different races. This involves analyzing dialogues, visual elements, and narrative structures to understand how racial representation is encoded in the films. Additionally, a survey is administered to a diverse group of viewers to gather their perceptions and interpretations of racial representation in Disney films. The survey includes questions about viewers' engagement with the characters, perceived authenticity of cultural representation, and overall

satisfaction with the films. The data collected from the survey is then subjected to statistical analysis to identify trends and correlations. This mixed-methods approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of both the production and reception of racial representation in Disney films, providing insights into how these representations impact cultural perceptions and societal norms.

2. Subtle Racism in Disney Films

"The Little Mermaid" (2023) subtly illustrates the ongoing presence of racism in Disney's narratives. The recurring theme in Disney films often involves changing the skin color of the main characters without substantively altering the storyline or deepening the understanding of the cultures they represent. This pattern is evident in the initial scenes of the movie, where the white characters attempting to capture and harm the mermaid set the visual foundation for discussions about discrimination and bias. Deliberate use of such imagery may imply historical or fictional conflicts between different groups or races, sparking exploration of societal challenges. Furthermore, the film portrays a black queen dressed in European attire within a European-style palace, highlighting Disney's approach to racial representation. The image of the black queen in a European-style palace introduces themes of assimilation, colonial influences, and the impact of Eurocentric ideals on multiculturalism. However, these themes remain surface-level discussions, lacking the depth needed to understand the complex cultural dynamics they represent. The theory of multimodality suggests that while Disney employs various forms of representation to address racial issues in its films, this approach may be more superficial than transformative[1]. Despite Disney's efforts in visual changes and narrative choices symbolizing a commitment to diversity, these endeavors may be perceived as addressing symptoms rather than root causes.

3. Selective Cultural Narrative

Disney's narrative selectively represents the black mermaid Ariel, adhering to mainstream cultural perspectives. The chosen narrative is adapted from Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid," overlooking the rich cultural symbolic meanings of mermaids in African traditions and mythology, such as Mami Wata. This water goddess symbolizes luck, wealth, and healing, representing an important cultural element overlooked in Disney's Eurocentric folklore about

mermaids[2]. This indicates that the film selectively ignores diversity in presenting characters, aligning them more with the mainstream viewpoints of white culture. While the act of changing the character to be black may seem to promote diversity, it inadvertently perpetuates a white-centered cultural perspective.

4. Avoidance of Sensitive Historical Topics

Disney employs 'encouraging historical amnesia' to present an image of 'equality.' The film is set against the backdrop of the 18th-century African slave trade era in the Caribbean Sea, portraying scenes of different races of islanders and mermaids coexisting harmoniously. This deliberate avoidance creates an impression that Disney's film has pretended slavery never existed. This approach raises questions about whether Disney evades historical truths and distorts historical facts. By omitting sensitive issues like slavery from the film, Disney may be attempting to create an idealized scenario, emphasizing harmonious coexistence among different races while sidestepping the societal injustices and immorality prevalent during that historical period.

5. Superficial Diversity Engagement

In Disney films, discrimination is often expressed through people's perspectives and opinions [1]. A consistent pattern observed in movie opening scenes reveals a deliberate choice in the surface-level representation of racial diversity—changing the appearance of characters without substantively altering the plot or deepening the understanding of the cultures they represent. This 'colorblind' messaging requires audiences to overlook, to some extent, the black skin color of characters while supporting their personalities and storylines, aiming to align with the ideals or values of the American dream. For instance, Ariel using a fork to transform her messy braids into straight hair can be interpreted as a symbolic representation of cultural change, aligning the texture of black hair with mainstream white aesthetic standards. This aligns with Disney's surface-level cultural adjustments in the film rather than fostering genuine cultural inclusivity. This pattern perpetuates the notion that Disney's engagement with racial and cultural themes prioritizes superficial adjustments in appearance over meaningful and authentic representations, maintaining a tendency toward shallow exploration in its storytelling. Additionally, Ariel transforming her braids into straight hair using a fork indicates conformity to traditional aesthetic standards, implying inherent stereotypical impressions of women's appearance in society[5]. In conclusion, despite presenting a certain level of visual diversity, Disney fails to genuinely address and resolve the deep-rooted issues of discrimination in society.

6. Skepticism and Political Implications of the Audience

The audience's reaction to the transformation of characters, such as the black little mermaid, highlights a desire for genuine cultural engagement rather than mere visual adjustments. In recent years, heightened societal attention to diversity and equality has raised standards for the entertainment industry, with audiences expecting more authentic and profound cultural representations. However, Disney's surface-level changes have sparked skepticism

among audiences regarding the authenticity of its representation, particularly in response to current social movements like 'Black Lives Matter.' Applying Noble's perspective on technological bias can prompt us to consider whether Disney's surface-level changes are merely to align with societal trends rather than a sincere commitment to cultural inclusivity and reflection [7]. As a result, the film's political implications become complex, revealing potential unintended consequences when attempting to address societal issues. Despite the film's attempt to promote multicultural representation through character transformations, it may inadvertently reinforce stereotypes, leaving audiences feeling deceived and eliciting strong opposition. This underscores the need for careful consideration and thoughtful reflection when addressing issues of race and culture, ensuring a genuine reflection of societal diversity.

7. Conclusion

Overall, Disney's measures for racial representation in "The Little Mermaid" (2023) films exhibit a superficial diversity that appears more symbolic of multiculturalism than genuine cultural inclusivity. While altering characters' appearances reflects a semblance of diversity, these changes often remain surface-level, failing to delve into the complexity and depth of different cultural elements. The handling of racial themes in the films tends to focus on changes in skin color without engaging in substantive story developments or a profound understanding of the cultures represented. Additionally, Disney selectively represents the Black mermaid, Ariel, aligning with mainstream cultural perspectives and overlooking the rich cultural symbolism of mermaids in African traditions and myths. This suggests limitations in narrative choices, leaning towards mainstream white cultural viewpoints rather than genuinely reflecting diversity. Audiences' reactions to these superficial changes underscore their expectations for authentic cultural engagement beyond mere cosmetic adjustments. In the current climate of heightened societal attention to diversity and equality, audiences increasingly question the authenticity of Disney's commitment to true cultural inclusivity, particularly during social and political movements. Therefore, Disney's efforts in racial representation, while contributing to a certain extent to the presentation of multiculturalism, are perceived as symbolic responses to societal trends, lacking a profound reflection of societal diversity. In the future, Disney needs to delve deeper into exploring and respecting the richness of diverse cultures to achieve genuine cultural engagement and an authentic reflection of societal diversity.

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