

# Diversifying Disney: Exploring the importance of cultural diversity and representation in children's animated film through *Mulan*, *Moana*, and *Coco*

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## ABSTRACT

Recent dialogue surrounding culture and diversity in the early years has led to emergent policy and framework being developed in Ireland, setting the groundwork for change. Similarly, in the world of children's film, films such as *Mulan* (Cook and Bancroft, 1998) *Moana* (Clements and Musker, 2016), and *Coco* (Molina and Unkrich, 2017), have touched on this topic. However, all in different ways and with different results. This dissertation analyses these results in terms of their impact on young children, recognising their effect on children's identity and belonging, which is prevented by Disney's embedded colonialism and obsession with childhood innocence.

## INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation, I am analysing three films, *Mulan* (Cook and Bancroft, 1998) *Moana* (Clements and Musker, 2016), and *Coco* (Molina and Unkrich, 2017). From this, I hope to gain an understanding into why representation is important, and its effect on children, looking at the accuracy of each portrayal. Film as a medium can be a powerful pedagogical tool and act as a bridge between reality and fantasy to inform children's thinking's and opinions of their world (Doucet, 2005). With the concept of childhood changing over time, film companies such as Disney are expanding their cultural narrative. This expansion can serve as a pedagogical tool to children who consume this media, teaching values, beliefs, and lessons that could lead to a more inclusive environment. This project is influenced greatly and informed by:



and my own values of diversity, inclusion, and equality.



Figure 1. The locations of Disney movies, highlighting Disney's bias towards Western storytelling.

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

This is a qualitative desk-based study. I am using the three named films as primary sources of data collection, using culture studies as a theoretical framework. I am then using books and journal articles to analyse the data collected from the primary materials. This triangulation of data collection methods ensures validity. I am using film because, as a medium, it is growing in popularity and proves a dominant force in children's lives today (Pikkov, 2010). As a contemporary pedagogical tool, it highlights complex societal issues in a relevant and meaningful way for children (Ibid). This research takes inspiration from Edward Said's seminal works on Orientalism and uses his terminology such as "Self" and "Other" when looking at how the Occident views the Orient (Said, 1978). Advantages in this project include film being an accessible and universal source as well as the emergence of Irish policy surrounding the topic of diversity and representation. It is also a relatively unexplored area and so it proves an excellent source for further study. Limitations include there being a lack of secondary data on the topic, as well as a distinct lack of research on how these representations effect children.

## FINDINGS/ RESULTS

Throughout the research process, three themes have become apparent when looking at *Mulan* (Cook and Bancroft, 1998), *Moana* (Clements and Musker, 2016), and *Coco* (Molina and Unkrich, 2017). These themes are "Childhood Innocence," "Identity and Belonging" and "Colonialism". These themes not only express the importance of cultural diversity and representation in children's film but outline the implications the portrayals can have on children and the barriers to an accurate portrayal.

### Childhood Innocence

- Strong emphasis placed on childhood innocence in films.
- Universally agreed that children's rights are paramount, however, portraying diverse cultures in children's film does not impinge on children's innocence.
- Characters in primary works are not typically "innocent".
- Disney portraying characters in this way yet continuing the narrative that portraying diverse cultures in their films would take away from childhood innocence means their primary focus is really on producing white, hegemonic films.
- Appropriation masked as societal concern.
- Society must stop pushing label of "innocent" onto children as excuse not to make relevant, meaningful, needed pieces of film.

### Identity and Belonging

- Positive, accurate portrayal of a culture is intrinsically linked to the development of children's identity and belonging.
- Seeing somebody like them on the screen can help children feel recognised, valued, respected, understood, and appreciated.
- Media plays active role in identity formation and if identity is portrayed based on inequalities and bias, children will have negative view of self.
- Identities start being based on other people's perceptions of their culture and background, rather than their understanding of themselves.
- Children would eventually distance themselves from people they see as "Other".

### Colonialism

- The films that Disney produce for children show a lack of diversity, and when diversity is attempted, character's accents, costume, and appearance are either widely inaccurate or whitewashed beyond recognition.
- This homogenisation of children's film consequently impacts children's journey of self-hood and creates unhealthy views on their identity (Spivak, 1990).
- Robs children of their voice, reinforces oppression and spreads epistemic violence through these harmful media depictions.
- that people who are not the culture being portrayed cannot speak for or act on behalf of them (Baldonado, 1996).
- Resolvable in an Irish context thanks to Irish policy but must extend to larger corporations such as Disney for powerful impact.

## DISCUSSION

- Film is an appropriate pedagogical tool that, when used correctly, can bring understanding, empathy, and an important sense of curiosity to children who engage with it.
- Freedom of film making also brings with it the risk of unregulated content.
- Disney as a pedagogical powerhouse has a responsibility to challenge outdated stereotypical depictions of cultures other than their own.
- They should look to start representing diverse cultures rather than "re-presenting" them (Pickering and Kara, 2017).
- Disney should hire a team of native actors and crew to make authentic film that people of all cultures deserve, giving the characters true native features, costume, and accents rather than whitewashing them.
- Disney are turning children into consumers and stripping them of their identity and innocence in the process.
- Look to emergent policy surrounding diversity and inclusion such as the previously named Irish policies and frameworks.

## CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, *Mulan* (Cook and Bancroft, 1998) *Moana* (Clements and Musker, 2016), and *Coco* (Molina and Unkrich, 2017) are pioneering films that are shaping the way young children view culture. We are late to the game in terms of recognising the importance of cultural diversity and representation and have much work to do, but we are on the road to change.

## KEY REFERENCES

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