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Under a Sea of Anger.
A CDA of Hate Speech in Facebook User Comments on Disney's Representation of Diversity in the USA and Italy

Abstract: This study explores social media discourses surrounding Disney's recent commitment to cultural diversity. It analyses user comments from the company's official Facebook pages in the United States and Italy, in reaction to the remakes *Lightyear* (2022), *Peter Pan & Wendy* (2023), and *The Little Mermaid* (2023). Using corpus investigation tools, prevailing discourse patterns and trends were identified, categorising contents based on their prevailing stance, theme, and hate speech intensity. Critical discourse analysis was applied to gain insights into the issues and concerns raised by commentators, while multimodal critical discourse analysis guided the examination of visual elements. Findings revealed diverse opinions on Disney's inclusivity initiatives, highlighting their polarising nature. In both countries, through words and images, some praised the diversity efforts, while others criticised them for violating the original 'canon' and as examples of 'wokeism' or forced inclusivity. Some netizens exhibited toxic fan behaviour and even explicit discriminatory attitudes.

Keywords: *critical discourse analysis*, *corpus assisted discourse studies*, *multimodal critical discourse analysis*, *fandom*, *social media discourse*, *hate speech*

1. Introduction

1.1 *Disney and 'Wokeism' in the USA and Italy*

The year 2023 marked the centenary of Disney, a pioneer and leader in the animation industry.[1] Since its founding in California, the Walt Disney Company has evolved into a multinational mass media and entertainment conglomerate. Its portfolio includes theme parks and resorts, and it has recently expanded its reach through acquisitions such as Marvel, Star Wars, Pixar, Avatar, Alien, The Muppets, and The Simpsons. In 2019, Disney launched its streaming service Disney+. In 2023, the company ranked 87th on the Forbes Global 2000 list and is recognised among Forbes World's Most Valuable Brands, achieving the 7th position in 2020.[2]

Disney has played a profound role in shaping international popular culture. Its classic movies have influenced the imagination, behaviour, and values of children worldwide. Disney princesses, with their well-defined physical, behavioural, and linguistic features, have not only captivated audiences but also shaped societal norms, codifying traditional models and dreams of romantic relationships, masculinity, and femininity.[3] This impact is so pervasive that the term 'Disneyfication' was coined to indicate "the process of changing something so that it entertains or is attractive in a safe and controlled way".[4] However, alongside its celebrated legacy, the company faced substantial criticism for perpetuating outdated and bigoted viewpoints, particularly for reinforcing gender and cultural stereotypes, especially

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[1] D23: The Official Disney Fan Club, "Disney History", *D23* (2023), www.d23.com/disney-history.
[2] Forbes, "Profile: Walt Disney", *Forbes* (2023), www.forbes.com/companies/walt-disney.
[3] Douglas Brode, *Multiculturalism and the Mouse: Race and Sex in Disney Entertainment* (Austin, Texas: U. of Texas P., 2005).
[4] Cambridge U.P. & Assessment, "Disneyfication", *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus* (2024), www.dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/disneyfication.

through its portrayal of women as subordinate and its reliance on white, Western, cisgender, and male-dominated perspectives.[5]

In response to increasing demand, Disney's animation industry has undergone significant evolution over the years, reflecting broader societal shifts toward greater diversity and representation. The company has taken steps to depict different behaviours and values, notably through independent heroines who prioritise fairness and personal fulfilment over romance[6] and through storylines that tackle social issues and promote solidarity. Disney has chosen to showcase a range of stories and amplify minority voices, featuring characters with diverse physical traits, ethnicities, geographic origins, and genders. This commitment to cultural diversity that overcomes stereotypes is evident in movies like *Moana*, *Coco*, and *Soul*.[7] As part of its *Stories Matter* initiative, Disney also addressed its historical racism and sexism by adding disclaimers to older films with negative and stereotyped portrayals of people and cultures and other problematic scenes such as non-consensual kisses. Moreover, it made announcements in its theme parks more inclusive.[8]

Disney's new direction has not been universally welcomed, often leading to considerable disapproval, a controversy that highlights the broader challenge of achieving widespread inclusivity in the media and, by extension, in society. The present study specifically focuses on the reception of Disney's diversity efforts in two distinct regional contexts: the United States of America, where Disney is headquartered, and Italy, where the company has long enjoyed great popularity.[9] Disney's global presence provides a valuable opportunity to compare how the same inclusive initiatives are perceived across different cultural contexts, each shaped by distinct historical and contemporary issues related to diversity, representation, and human rights. According to Amnesty International's most recent reports,[10] both the United States and Italy experience troubling levels of intolerance, hate speech, and hate crimes. In the USA, significant concerns include discrimination and violence against women and based on gender identity. Legislative measures, purportedly justified under the guise of religious freedom, have curtailed or effectively eliminated LGBTQI+ rights. Additionally, refugees and migrants are frequently targeted by violence and racism, with antisemitic and Islamophobic incidents reported. The disproportionate use of police force against Black communities further underscores the persistent human rights challenges.[11] Similarly, in Italy, gender-based violence remains alarmingly high and anti-discrimination safeguards for LGBTQI+ individuals are inadequate. The country also grapples with racist hate speech and discriminatory political discourse, accompanied by a proliferation of racially motivated and antisemitic hate incidents and the mistreatment of ethnic minorities and migrants.[12] In

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[5] Mia A. Towbin et al., "Images of Gender, Race, Age, and Sexual Orientation in Disney Feature-Length Animated Films", *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, 15.4 (2004), 19-44; John Wills, *Disney Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers U.P., 2017).

[6] Eleonora Federici et al., "Disney is a Gendered World: How a Little Mermaid Becomes a Sirenetta", *Ocula*, 20 (2019), 1-25; Emanuela Ammendola, "Gender Revolution in The Princess and The Frog Prince Charming? No, Thank You!", *I-LanD Journal*, 2 (2020), 51-69.

[7] Minjeong Kim and Rachelle J. Brunn-Bevel, "No Face, No Race? Racial Politics of Voice Actor Casting in Popular Animated Films", *Sociological Forum*, 38.2 (2023), 510-531.

[8] Steve Rose, "Cotton Plantations and Non-Consensual Kisses: How Disney Became Embroiled in the Culture Wars", *The Guardian,* Wednesday 16 June 2021, www.theguardian.com/film/2021/jun/16/how-disney-became-embroiled-in-the-culture-wars, accessed 30 April 2024; The Walt Disney Company, "Stories Matter", *The Walt Disney Company* (2023), www.storiesmatter.thewaltdisneycompany.com.

[9] Fulvia Caprara, "Walt Disney e l'Italia", *La Stampa,* Thursday 01 February 2014, www.lastampa.it, accessed 30 April 2024.

[10] Amnesty International, "United States of America 2023", *Amnesty International* (2023), www.amnesty.org/en/location/americas/north-america/united-states-of-america/report-united-states-of-america; Amnesty International, "Italy 2023", *Amnesty International* (2023), www.amnesty.org

[11] Amnesty International, "United States of America 2023".

[12] Amnesty International, "Italy 2023".

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such contexts, the deployment of popular media to promote the full implementation of human rights has the potential to generate support but may also trigger a backlash against multicultural change.[13]

In both countries, Disney's representation strategies have been perceived by some as forced and insincere, part of a corporate agenda to impose progressive viewpoints. Critics have argued that Disney's moves towards inclusivity are driven by political correctness, accusing the company of pandering to contemporary social trends at the expense of traditional values and cultural heritage.[14] Some have described these changes, such as the inclusion of non-Caucasian or LGBTQI+ characters, as attempts at racial replacement or inappropriate sexualisation of children. This has alienated some consumers, with certain conservative and Christian families choosing or threatening to stop purchasing Disney products and services.[15]

Right-wing politicians and activists have labelled Disney as 'woke'.[16] The word originally referred to being alert to social injustice and inequality, particularly concerning race. However, its meaning has evolved, and it is now often used by conservatives as a pejorative label to criticise those who, in their view, extremise the fight for racial and social justice. The term denotes someone who professes progressive values but may exhibit an intolerant or dogmatic attitude towards differing perspectives.[17] In 2021, this English word even found its way into the Italian dictionary, where it is listed with both meanings.[18] Disney's inclusivity efforts have become a battleground in 'culture wars',[19] fuelling strong disagreements and polarisation of opinions between progressives and conservatives. The company has also faced criticism for participating in 'cancel culture',[20] which involves withdrawing support for people deemed objectionable. In Italy, the expression mainly signifies the removal of anachronistic and potentially offensive representations, for instance, about patriarchal culture, racial discrimination, and gender differences, therefore often coinciding with the English concept of 'wokeism'.[21]

Republican politicians in the USA have exerted pressure on Disney through actions extending beyond mere rhetoric and boycotts. Ron DeSantis, Governor of Florida and former Republican candidate in the 2024 USA presidential election, has embarked on a crusade against wokeism, with Disney

[13] Joanna Batt and Michael Lee Joseph, "Part of Whose World? The Little Mermaid, Fantasy Media, and Casting Backlashes as Racial Projects for Social Studies Classrooms", *Social Studies Research and Practice*, 19.1 (2024), 34-50.

[14] Ryan Faughnder, "Inside the Right's 'Moral War Against Disney' as Florida Culture Conflict Intensifies", *Los Angeles Times,* Friday 15 April 2022, www.latimes.com, accessed 30 April 2024; Armando Fumagalli, "Ideologie, creatività, politica, finanza: la favola Disney affronta la crisi", *Avvenire*, Wednesday 14 February 2024, www.avvenire.it/opinioni/pagine/appena-chiuso-il-centenario-uno-dei-marchi-di-cul, accessed April 20, 2024.

[15] Kevin Breuninger, "DeSantis Claims That Disney Sexualizes Children Are 'Preposterous,' CEO Bob Iger Says", *CNBC,* Thursday 13 July 2023, www.cnbc.com/2023/07/13/desantis-attacks-on-disney-are-preposterous-ceo-bob-iger-says.html, accessed April 20, 2024; Barbara Berti, "Pro Vita e Famiglia contro la Disney: 'Non andate a vedere *Lightyear'*", *Luce!*, Thursday 23 June 2022, www.luce.lanazione.it/attualita/pro-vita-e-famiglia-contro-la-disney-non-andate-a-vedere-lightyear-y9uxsayj, accessed April 30, 2024.

[16] Ryan Smith, "Nikki Haley, Ron DeSantis Go to War Over 'Woke' Disney", *Newsweek*, Thursday 11 January 2024, www.newsweek.com/nikki-haley-ron-desantis-disney-iowa-debate-donald-trump-election-1859767, accessed 30 April 2024.

[17] Denise Filmer and Gianmarco Vignozzi, "'Don't Call me Woke!': Tracing the Pragmatic and Emotive Trajectory of the Word of Our Era", *I-LanD Journal*, 1 (2022), 8-30; Merriam-Webster, "Woke", *Merriam Webster Dictionary* (2024), www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/woke.

[18] Treccani, "Woke", *Vocabolario Treccani* (2024), www.treccani.it/vocabolario/woke_(Neologismi)/?search=woke.

[19] Zack Stanton, "How the 'Culture War' Could Break Democracy", *Politico*, Wednesday 5 May 2021, www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/05/20/culture-war-politics-2021-democracy-analysis-489900, accessed 30 April 2024; Cambridge U.P. & Assessment, "Culture War", *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus* (2024), www.dictionary.cambridge.org/it/dizionario/inglese/culture-war.

[20] Merriam-Webster, "What It Means to Get 'Canceled'", *Merriam Webster Arts & Culture* (2023), www.merriam-webster.com; Britannica, "Cancel Culture – Top 3 Pros and Cons", *Britannica ProCon.org* (8 August 2023), www.procon.org.

[21] Beatrice Cristalli, "Non si può più dire niente", *Treccani,* Thursday 7 October 2021, www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua_italiana/articoli/scritto_e_parlato/cancel_culture1.html, accessed 20 April 2024; Treccani, "Cancel Culture", *Vocabolario Treccani* (2023), www.treccani.it/vocabolario/cancel-culture_%28Neologismi%29.

emerging as a prominent symbol of this broader cultural conflict. He recently enacted legislation aimed at curtailing specific topics of discussion, including the *Parental Rights in Education* Act, dubbed *Don't say gay*, which prohibits public schools from engaging in "classroom discussion" or "instruction" about sexual orientation or gender identity.[22] Additionally, the *Individual Freedom* Act, or *Stop Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees – Stop WOKE*, prohibits teaching that people share responsibility for others' past actions based on their race, sex, or national origin.[23] Disney's public disapproval of DeSantis's legislative actions, especially from former CEO Bob Chapek,[24] led to repercussions, as the governor attempted to curtail Disney's administrative privileges in its Florida park and dissolve Florida Reedy Creek Improvement District established in 1967. By state law, the Walt Disney Co. possesses extraordinary powers over the 25,000-acre area near Orlando, including the ability to issue bonds and provide its own utilities and emergency services. This legal framework facilitated Disney's establishment of its Florida theme park, contributing to its growth as the state's largest taxpayer and private employer. Dismantling the district would transfer financial burdens and commitments to local municipalities and citizens. DeSantis passed legislation to revoke Disney's self-governing authority, replacing its controlling board with handpicked Republican allies. Prior to the transition, Disney supporters on the board signed agreements granting the company more control over some aspects of Disney World, prompting a lawsuit from the district. DeSantis even threatened to construct a prison or a rival amusement park nearby. In response to the legal action, Disney countersued DeSantis, alleging "a targeted campaign of government retaliation".[25] DeSantis's stance was viewed as anti-business not only by Disney's CEO Robert A. Iger but even by his Republican allies, leading to tensions that undermined DeSantis's popularity. In March 2024, allies of DeSantis and Disney reached a settlement agreement regarding the governance of Walt Disney World, marking a resolution to their contentious dispute, while the *Parental Rights in Education* act was overturned.[26]

Disney has also faced criticism in Italy, where the company has long exerted a significant cultural influence. Involved in various initiatives focused on corporate social responsibility and inclusivity within the country,[27] the entertainment giant has encountered resistance akin to that experienced in the United States. Notably, Italian far-right politicians, including Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni, have opposed Disney's progressive stance. To advance their propaganda agenda, they exploited specific controversies, such as the speculation surrounding the potential revelation of princess Elsa from *Frozen* as being lesbian[28] and the debates over the depiction of non-consensual kisses in stories like *Snow*

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[22] The Florida Senate, "House Bill 1557: Parental Rights in Education", *The Florida Senate,* Friday 1 July 2022, www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2022/1557/BillText/er/PDF, accessed 30 April 2024.

[23] The Florida Senate, "House Bill 7: Individual Freedom", *The Florida Senate,* Friday 1 July 2022, www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2022/7/BillText/er/PDF, accessed 30 April 2024.

[24] Bob Chapek, "Statement on Disney's Support for the LGBTQ+ Community", *The Walt Disney Company,* Friday 11 March 2022, www.thewaltdisneycompany.com/statement-on-disneys-support-for-the-lgbtq-community, accessed 30 April 2024.

[25] Ryan Faughnder, "How the Gay Rights Showdown Threatens Disney's Unprecedented Self-Rule in Florida", *Los Angeles Times,* Wednesday 20 April 2022, www.latimes.com, accessed 20 April 2024; Charles Homans, "Man vs. Mouse: Ron DeSantis Finds Taking On Disney Is a Dicey Business", *The New York Times,* Tuesday 26 April 2023, www.nytimes.com, accessed 30 April 2024; Brooks Barnes, "Disney Sued by Florida for Control of Theme Park's Expansion", *The New York Times*, Tuesday 2 May 2023, www.nytimes.com, accessed 30 April 2024.

[26] BBC, "Disney and DeSantis Allies End Legal Dispute over Control of Theme Park", *BBC News,* Monday 27 March 2024, www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-68675795, accessed 30 April 2024.

[27] Matteo Sportelli, "Creatività lunga un secolo. Gli obiettivi di Disney Italia a quasi 100 anni dalla fondazione", *Forbes*, Tuesday 18 October 2022, www.forbes.it/2022/10/28/come-walt-disney-italia-avvicina-centenario-fondazione, accessed 30 April 2024.

[28] Antonella De Gregorio, "Salvini: 'Elsa di *Frozen* lesbica? Vogliono il mondo all'incontrario'", *Corriere della Sera*, Friday 2 March 2012, www.corriere.it, accessed 20 April 2024.

White.[29] These issues have been used to promote ideals centred around traditional imagery of fairy tales, romantic relationships, and family.

1.2 *Polarisation, Reactionary Fandom, and Hate Speech in Social Media*

Disney boasts a large, dedicated global fanbase, characterised by "[a] collective identity based on a shared enthusiasm for some aspect of mass culture and regular participation in group activities arising from this".[30] Fans tend to display their loyalty through behaviours such as intense affective investment, enjoyment of related content, collective meaning-making and appropriation, a strong sense of community, social interaction, and identity performance.[31] In the digital age, companies that are the object of fandom, like Disney, can leverage computer-mediated communication, particularly social media, to enhance public engagement and reputation, promptly address customer concerns, and identify emerging needs.[32] These corporate digital media channels also provide a space for audiences to engage and voice their opinions, thus democratising access to media expression. Participatory cultures around media texts have flourished through web-based tools, with social media acting as modern-day letter columns where fans can easily find, discuss, and organise their favourite topics and shows, often aggregating around hashtags.[33]

Nevertheless, online fandom is subject to the drawbacks of digital communication. Users often equate visibility and popularity with legitimacy, overlooking the importance of credibility and relevance.[34] Social media structure creates stance-rich environments,[35] driven by the distribution of likes and dislikes, fostering affiliation[36] but also amplifying negative speech.[37] The (pseudo)anonymity and physical distance provided by these platforms can lead to disinhibition and deindividuation, facilitating the spread of abusive language.[38] Furthermore, the adoption of a conformist mob mentality can deepen the polarisation of positions,[39] while algorithms that control content visibility can amplify misinformation and harmful rhetoric.[40] Hate speech remains a key concern, defined as expression that promotes violence, hatred, or discrimination against a person or group of individuals based on their personal "protected characteristics",[41] including "race, colour, language, religion, nationality, national

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[29] Il Messaggero, "Biancaneve, bufera sulla Disney: 'bacio rubato senza consenso, lei dormiva'", *Il Messaggero,* Wednesday 5 May 2021, http://www.ilmessaggero.it/, accessed 30 April 2025.

[30] Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday, *A Dictionary of Social Media* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2016).

[31] Renee Barnes, *Fandom and Polarization in Online Political Discussion: From Pop Culture to Politics* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2022), 51.

[32] Michael B. Goodman and Peter B. Hirsh, "Electronic Media in Professional Communication", in Vijay K. Bhatia and Stephen Bremner, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Professional Communication* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2014), 129-146.

[33] Meredith L. Pruden, "A Journal of Impossible Things Tweeted Discourses of Gendered Digital Fandom on the Thirteenth Doctor and #NotMyDoctor Hashtag", in Majid KhosraviNik, ed., *Social Media and Society Integrating the Digital with the Social in Digital Discourse* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2023), 187-208.

[34] Majid KhosraviNik, "Social Media Techno-Discursive Design, Affective Communication and Contemporary Politics", *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 11 (2018), 427-442.

[35] David Barton and Carmen Lee, *Language Online: Investigating Digital Texts and Practices* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

[36] Michele Zappavigna, *Discourse of Twitter and Social Media: How We Use Language to Create Affiliation on the Web* (London and New York: Continuum, 2012).

[37] Sergio Andrés Castao-Pulgarín et al., "Internet, Social Media and Online Hate Speech: Systematic Review", *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 58 (2021), 101608.

[38] John Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect", *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 7.3 (2004), 321-326.

[39] Crispin Thurlow et al., *Computer Mediated Communication: Social Interaction and the Internet* (London: Sage, 2009).

[40] Karen Hao, "How Facebook Got Addicted to Spreading Misinformation", *MIT Technology Review,* Thursday 11 March 2021, www.technologyreview.com/2021/03/11/1020600/facebook-responsible-ai-misinformation, accessed 30 April 2024.

[41] Meta, "Hard Questions: Who Should Decide What Is Hate Speech in an Online Global Community?", *Meta,* Tuesday 27 June 2017, www.about.fb.com/news/2017/06/hard-questions-hate-speech, accessed 20 April 2024.

or ethnic origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation".[42] This concept is often contrasted with freedom of speech, which, while essential, must be subject to restrictions to protect people's safety, reputation, and rights.[43] Online hate speech encompasses various forms, such as cyberbullying, bashing, and defamation,[44] and remains challenging to detect and regulate.[45]

The present study specifically examines user comments on Disney's Facebook pages. The social media platform implements policies for hate speech prevention and moderation, while simultaneously defending self-expression. Nonetheless, the site acknowledges that identifying hateful content may be difficult and often unsuccessful, as it requires contextualisation and an understanding of the original intent.[46]

Popular culture has become a central arena in the ongoing culture wars. Digital fan practices, similar to political discussions, frequently involve partisan and cultural polarisation. The recent efforts towards inclusion, especially in film and television franchises, have received mixed reactions from fans, audiences, and critics.[47] Such conflicts can also result in harmful behaviours, including anti-fandom, reactionary fandom, and toxic fan practices. Anti-fandom refers to individuals engaging in discussions or creating alternative versions of original media, often driven by antagonistic sentiments.[48] Reactionary fandom is characterised by strong opposition to changes or developments within a particular media franchise, typically motivated by a desire to preserve traditional or 'original' elements. These fans resist perceived alterations to core aspects of the object, such as character portrayals, storylines, or themes, often when these modifications involve inclusive elements, like diversity in casting or updates to reflect modern values.[49] Toxic fan practices encompass negative and harmful behaviours, such as organising boycott campaigns in response to creative decisions.[50] In this context, other concerning phenomena are also evident, such as gatekeeping those not considered 'true' fans, review bombing, hate-watching, shitposting, trolling, doxing, and harassment.[51] Studies have focused on the overlap between toxic fandom and trolling,[52] highlighting fan efforts to create disruption and exacerbate conflict, in order to upset and provoke an emotional response from a targeted group. Phillips observed that trolls are often motivated by 'lulz', a form of "unsympathetic, ambiguous laughter".[53] More extreme actions highlight the darker side of free speech, which is frequently invoked to justify hateful behaviour towards

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[42] Council of Europe, "Recommendation CM/Rec (2022) 16 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on Combating Hate Speech", *Council of Europe* (20 May 2022), www.search.coe.int.

[43] The United States of America, *Constitution of The United States of America, as Amended* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2007); Council of Europe, *European Convention on Human Rights* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2020).

[44] Nancy E. Willard, *Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats: Responding to the Challenge of Online Social Aggression, Threats, and Distress* (Champaign, Ill.: Research Press, 2007).

[45] Michael Herz and Peter Molnar, *The Content and Context of Hate Speech: Rethinking Regulation and Responses* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2012); Paula Fortuna and Sérgio Nunes, "A Survey on Automatic Detection of Hate Speech in Text", *ACM Computing Surveys*, 51.4 (2018), 1-30.

[46] Meta, "Hard Questions".

[47] William Proctor and Bridget Kies, "On Toxic Fan Practices and the New Culture Wars", *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 15.1 (2018), 127-142.

[48] Melissa A. Click, "Introduction: Haters Gonna Hate", in Melissa A. Click, ed., *Anti- Fandom: Dislike and Hate in the Digital Age* (New York: New York U.P., 2019), 1-22.

[49] Mel Stanfill, "Introduction: The Reactionary in the Fan and the Fan in the Reactionary", *Television & New Media*, 21.2 (2020), 123-134.

[50] Proctor and Kies, "On Toxic Fan Practices and the New Culture Wars".

[51] Hayden Buckfire, "'Review Bombing' Reveals Social Media's Cruelty", *The Michigan Daily*, Monday 11 March 2024, www.michigandaily.com/opinion/review-bombing-reveals-social-medias-cruelty, accessed 30 April 2024.

[52] Suzanne Scott, "Towards a Theory of Producer/Fan Trolling", *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 15.1 (2018), 143-159.

[53] Whitney Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015), 24.

marginalised groups and identities. This logic makes it difficult to differentiate between "playful (if antisocial) irony, satire, and parody and 'earnest' racism"[54], sexism, or homophobia.

Hate can be as potent a motivator as admiration, serving to unify and sustain communities around shared negative sentiments toward a text. As noted, "[h]ate or dislike of a text can be just as powerful as can a strong and admiring, affective relationship with a text, and they can produce just as much activity, identification, and meaning, and 'effects' or serve just as powerfully to unite and sustain a community or subculture".[55] These negative discursive practices have real-life impacts, as the repeated condemnation of an object by members of the same community can effectively position it as despicable, or "disgusting",[56] influencing public opinion and behaviour.

2. Aims and Purposes

The present investigation explores the reception of Disney's recent inclusivity efforts by analysing user-generated discourses to understand public perceptions and attitudes, examining both supportive and hostile reactions. Social media platforms serve as valuable data sources, being key sites where public opinion is formed and expressed. Building on prior research into social media discussions of polarising issues in popular culture,[57] this analysis focuses specifically on written and visual instances of hate speech in Facebook comments. By assessing the nature and extent of negative reactions, the study aims to uncover the dynamics of online disapproval and the underlying sentiments driving such hostility.

The research seeks to offer a novel contribution to the field by examining comments on recently released films through a comparative approach, assessing how cultural contexts in the United States and Italy influence public responses to inclusivity efforts in popular media. Investigating hate speech in social media discourses is crucial to understanding online resistance to inclusive representation, comprising reactionary and toxic fandom practices, as these responses may reflect broader trends of political and cultural polarisation and discrimination. The study attempts to contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges and barriers to achieving inclusivity in contemporary entertainment.

3. Corpus and Methods

A review of international online newspaper articles concerning recent Disney media products, along with an inspection of official social media pages, confirmed that several movies had become targets of hate speech, particularly in relation to specific traits of certain characters. Critical areas of dispute included ethnic backgrounds (e.g., African American and mixed ethnicities), gender and sex (e.g., LGBTQI+ individuals and women), and physical attributes (e.g., body-shaming and characters with disabilities). The films *Lightyear*,[58] *Peter Pan & Wendy*,[59] and *The Little Mermaid*[60] were selected as focal points for this study for multiple reasons. They all exemplify the company's recent commitment to diversity and involve reimaginings or updates of iconic animated classics. Additionally, their release

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[54] Ryan M. Milner, "Hacking the Social: Internet Memes, Identity Antagonism, and the Logic of Lulz", *The Fibreculture Journal*, 22 (2013), 61-91, 74.

[55] Jonathan Gray, "Antifandom and the Moral Text: Television Without Pity and Textual Dislike", *American Behavioral Scientist*, 48 (2005), 841.

[56] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[57] Proctor and Kies, "On Toxic Fan Practices and the New Culture Wars"; Thi Gammon and Anh Ngoc Quynh Phan, "Too Black to Be The Little Mermaid? Backlash Against Disney's 2023 *The Little Mermaid* – Continuity of Racism, White Skin Preference and Hate Content in Vietnam", *Feminist Media Studies* (2024), 1-7.

[58] Angus MacLane, *Lightyear*, film (U.S.A.: Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios, 2022).

[59] David Lowery, *Peter Pan & Wendy*, film (U.S.A.: Walt Disney Pictures, 2023).

[60] Robert Doyle Marshall Jr., *The Little Mermaid*, film (U.S.A.: Walt Disney Pictures, 2023).

in the same years (2022-2023) seemed to have generated a unified discourse and interconnected public reactions on Disney's social media platforms.

Lightyear (2022) served as a prequel to the *Toy Story* (1995)[61] saga, functioning as a film within a film, designed as the movie that inspired the Buzz Lightyear toy. The new cartoon featured a lesbian love story and a kiss between Space Ranger Alisha Hawthorne and her wife, Kiko, which ignited controversy and resulted in the film being banned in several Middle Eastern and Asian countries.[62]

The Disney+ home-video movie *Peter Pan & Wendy* (2023), a live-action remake of the animated film *Peter Pan* (1953),[63] stirred various points of contention. Criticism was mostly related to the non-Caucasic physical traits of some characters, resulting in accusations of 'race swapping'. Peter Pan, originally depicted with fair skin and red hair, was portrayed by Alexander Molony, a boy with mixed ancestry and dark-brown hair. Tinker Bell, traditionally rendered as a glowing blonde pixie with fair skin and blue eyes, was played by Yara Shahidi, an Iranian-American/Nigerian actress, with a black complexion, dark-brown hair, and brown eyes. Further objections were raised about the inclusion among the 'Lost Boys' of girls, children from different ethnic backgrounds, and an actor with Down syndrome.[64]

The 2023 live-action remake of *The Little Mermaid* (known as *La Sirenetta* in Italian) also faced substantial scrutiny. Princess Ariel's character, originally illustrated in Disney's animated movie (1989)[65] with fair skin, flaming red hair, and blue eyes, was reinterpreted by Halle Bailey, a black American actress with copper-red dreadlocks and brown eyes.[66]

The present analysis centres on a corpus of user comments extracted from posts promoting the selected Disney movies on the company's official Facebook pages in the United States and Italy. The timeframe spans from 11th December 2020 to 20th October 2023. Disney's original posts included announcements, slogans, quotes, and film reception data, accompanied by pictures, videos, and fan art. By comparing the two contexts, the study seeks to uncover how cultural differences influence the reception of inclusivity efforts in popular media.

Table 1 provides an overview of the corpus, detailing the number of posts dedicated to each movie in the respective countries, along with the number of comments received. Additionally, it shows the token (total number of words) and type (number of distinct words) counts for the comments. It is important to note that only direct comments were considered in the collected corpus, excluding any replies. As evident from the table, a noticeable disparity in engagement levels emerged across the corpus, with *The Little Mermaid* garnering higher interaction rates in both countries, while *Lightyear* received comparatively fewer comments in Italy.

Disney Facebook USA					Disney Facebook Italy				
Topic	N. Posts	N. Com.s	Tokens	Types	Topic	N. Posts	N. Com.s	Tokens	Types
Lightyear	39	8,313	167,090	17,885	*Lightyear*	22	138	2,305	726

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[61] John Lasseter, *Toy Story*, film (U.S.A.: Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios, 1995).

[62] Tim Gallagher, "Lightyear Filmmakers Were Expecting Bans in Countries with 'Backward Beliefs' Says Producer", *Euronews,* Monday 13 June 2022, www.euronews.com, accessed 30 April 2024.

[63] Hamilton Luske et al., *Peter Pan*, film (U.S.A.: Walt Disney, 1953).

[64] Snejana Farberov, "'Peter Pan' Fans Slam Trailer for 'Woke' Remake with Girls Among Lost Boys", *New York Post*, Thursday 2 March 2023, www.nypost.com/2023/03/02/fans-slam-trailer-for-woke-live-action-peter-pan, accessed 30 April 2024.

[65] John Musker and Ron Clements, *The Little Mermaid*, film (U.S.A.: Walt Disney Pictures, 1989).

[66] Kate Ng, "Halle Bailey Speaks About the Importance of Keeping Her Locs While Playing Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*", *The Independent,* Tuesday 23 May 2023, www.independent.co.uk/life-style/halle-bailey-ariel-locs-mermaid-b2344258.html, accessed 30 April 2024.

Peter Pan & Wendy	17	10,098	175,015	20,375	Peter Pan & Wendy	20	529	11,798	2,565
The Little Mermaid	40	42,323	790,192	58,589	La Sirenetta	61	8,577	197,334	17,516
Total	96	60,734	1,138,291	74,207	Total	103	9,244	211,437	18,403

Table 1. Corpus data

The analysis focused on user comments, considering the tendency to express engaged and extreme views in these spaces, also including stereotyping and hateful language. These texts often emphasise negative aspects of perceived adversaries, fostering a sense of community and camaraderie among like-minded individuals.[67]

A mixed-methods approach was employed for the analysis. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)[68] provided a valuable lens to explore the specific issues and concerns voiced by users, particularly to examine the enactment, reproduction, and contestation of discourses related to power, dominance, and inequality within online domains. This approach was especially pertinent when netizens reacted in response to perceived 'otherness' and diverse ideological stances. Critical discourse studies concerning the negative portrayal of social actors and manifestations of social discrimination provided valuable reference.[69] The study also built upon prior critical analyses examining social media discourse[70] and hate speech,[71] with a focus on toxic fan practices.[72] Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis[73] guided the examination of visual elements in comments that overtly or covertly conveyed hate speech. Corpus investigation tools, namely WordSmith Tools 7[74] and SketchEngine,[75] supported the analysis to uncover patterns and trends,[76] identifying linguistic phenomena that might have otherwise remained unnoticed.[77]

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[67] Barnes, *Fandom and Polarization in Online Political Discussion*.

[68] Teun A. Van Dijk, "Ideology and Discourse Analysis", *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 11.2 (2006), 115-140; Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak, "The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA)", in Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, eds., *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*, Third Edition (London: Sage, 2016), 23-61.

[69] Theo van Leeuwen, "The Representation of Social Actors', in Carmen Caldas-Coulthard and Malcolm Coulthard, eds., *Texts and Practices: Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), 32-70; Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, *Discourse and Discrimination: Rhetorics of Racism and Antisemitism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

[70] Majid KhosraviNik and Johann W. Unger, "Critical Discourse Studies and Social Media: Power, Resistance and Critique in Changing Media Ecologies", in Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, eds., *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*, Third Edition (London: Sage, 2016), 205-233; Rodney H. Jones, "Social Media and Discourse Analysis", in Michael Handford and James Paul Gee, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, Second Edition (London: Routledge, 2023), 427-440.

[71] Giuseppe Balirano and Bronwen Hughes, "Fat Chance! Digital Critical Discourse Studies on Discrimination Against Fat People", in Giuseppe Balirano and Bronwen Hughes, eds., *Homing in on Hate: Critical Discourse Studies of Hate Speech, Discrimination and Inequality in the Digital Age* (Naples: Paolo Loffredo Editore, 2020), 3-50; Eleonora Esposito and Sole Alba Zollo, "How Dare You Call Her a Pig, I Know Several Pigs Who Would Be Upset if They Knew: A Multimodal Critical Discursive Approach to Online Misogyny against UK MPs on YouTube", *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict*, 9.1 (2021), 47-75; Magdalena Jaszczyk-Grzyb et al., "A Corpus-Assisted Critical Discourse Analysis of Hate Speech in German and Polish Social Media Posts", *Moderna Språk*, 117.1 (2023), 44-71.

[72] Proctor and Kies, "On Toxic Fan Practices and the New Culture Wars".

[73] David Machin and Andrea Mayr, *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis: A Multimodal Approach* (London: Sage, 2012); Maria Grazia Sindoni, "Direct Hate Speech vs. Indirect Fear Speech: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of The Sun's Editorial '1 in 5 Brit Muslims' Sympathy for Jihadis'", *Lingue e Linguaggi*, 28 (2018), 267-292.

[74] Mike Scott, *WordSmith Tools 7.0*, software (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2019).

[75] Lexical Computing CZ s.r.o., "SketchEngine", *SketchEngine*, software (2023), www.sketchengine.eu.

[76] Paul Baker, *Using Corpora in Discourse Analysis* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006); Paul Baker et al., *Discourse Analysis and Media Attitudes: The Representation of Islam in the British Press* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2013); Gerlinde Mautner, "Checks and Balances: How Corpus Linguistics Can Contribute to CDA", in Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, eds., *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*, Third Edition (London: Sage, 2016), 154-179.

[77] Lexical Computing CZ s.r.o., "SketchEngine".

Several previous studies were particularly relevant for this analysis. Gammon and Phan[78] examined the reception of *The Little Mermaid* (2023) in Vietnam, where the casting of a black actress as Ariel provoked significant online criticism and calls for boycotts. Their research explored cultural factors involved, such as racism, white supremacy, resistance to inclusivity, beauty standards, and hate speech. Using an intersectional approach, incorporating the concept of "misogynoir",[79] the authors interpreted the negative responses to Bailey as reflective of the dual pressures faced by black women: racism, through the preference for white skin, and sexism, with an excessive focus on female appearance. Nevertheless, it has been noted that disputes over casting decisions and the preservation of canonical texts have long been part of fan communities. Since the early 2000s, the rising prominence of fan cultures has introduced new opportunities and tools, alongside increased media attention on ideological and discursive conflicts within these communities, notably in user-generated communication.[80] Proctor[81] argued that journalists often 'cherry-pick' negative statements from social media, manufacturing controversy about rising toxicity, which may be simplistically attributed to certain subsets of fans. The scholar has conducted several discourse studies on toxic fandom, including the hashtag campaign "#blackstormtrooper" during the Disney era of *Star Wars*, specifically in relation to J.J Abrams' *The Force Awakens* (2015).[82] Such initiative emerged as potential evidence of a racially-fuelled backlash against the casting of black actor John Boyega as a Stormtrooper. Proctor highlighted that many comments did not reveal overt racism but rather concerns over "canonical fidelity",[83] referring to adherence to the established narrative in the fictional world. Yet, it has also been contended that framing fan opposition as defence of the original artform can be misleading, as much of the discontent likely stems from a "fear of not seeing their whiteness reflected on the screen".[84]

Building on this context of fan disputes and critiques, the present study focused on identifying and analysing hate speech within user discourses. Forms of hate speech in text and images were classified into broad categories based on their intensity. Initial indicators of hate speech included expressions of disagreement, encompassing the articulation of opposing viewpoints and the framing of situations in terms of an 'us' versus 'them' dynamics. More intense forms of hate speech involved negative characterisation, with derogatory remarks and insults directed at the 'out-group'. At a higher intensity, hate speech could be manifested as dehumanisation and demonisation, associating individuals or groups to sub-human or non-human forms, such as garbage or monsters.[85]

For the present analysis, multiword sequences were extracted from user comments with the SketchEngine N-grams tool as a sampling indicator of trends. The lexical bundles obtained for each of the three movies in both countries were categorised based on opinion, topic, and hate speech intensity, and some representative examples were discussed.

Hashtags, a distinctive tool in online conversation, were also examined as part of the polarising trend in social media communication. Typically consisting of words, phrases, or clauses written as a single

[78] Gammon and Phan, "Too Black to Be The Little Mermaid?".

[79] Moya Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance* (New York: New York U.P., 2021).

[80] Proctor and Kies, "On Toxic Fan Practices and the New Culture Wars".

[81] William Proctor, "'I've Seen a Lot of Talk about the #blackstormtrooper Outrage, but Not a Single Example of Anyone Complaining': The Force Awakens, Canonical Fidelity and Non-Toxic Fan Practices", *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 15.1 (2018); Proctor and Kies, "On Toxic Fan Practices and the New Culture Wars".

[82] Jeffrey Jacob Abrams, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, film (U.S.A.: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2015).

[83] Proctor, "'I've Seen a Lot of Talk about the #blackstormtrooper Outrage'".

[84] Adam Serwer, "Fear of a Black Hobbit", *The Atlantic,* Wednesday 14 September 2022, www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/09/lord-of-the-rings-rings-of-power-fantasy-sci-fi-racist-criticism/671421 cit. in Nell Geraets, "#NotMyAriel: Why Everyone Is Arguing About The Little Mermaid Reboot", *The Sidney Morning Herald,* Thursday 15 September 2022, *www.smh.com.au,* accessed 30 April 2024.

[85] Babak Bahador, "Monitoring Hate Speech and the Limits of Current Definition", in Christian Strippel et al., eds., *Challenges and Perspectives of Hate Speech Research* (Berlin: Digital Communication Research, 2023), 291-298.

word and preceded by the # sign, hashtags can be inserted in messages to indicate participation in trending practices and affiliations. They can be utilised to increase the visibility of specific issues, marking a topic and categorising posts to reach targeted users. Hashtags can convey a stance and reinforce the collective identity of supporters of a particular cause within online discourse.[86] In the present study, hashtags extracted from the entire USA and Italian subcorpora were analysed to identify possible patterns in evaluative language and attitudinal alignment.

Additionally, images included in the user comments were considered, recognising that visual elements significantly contribute to the spread of hate. As noted by the United Nations, "[h]ate speech can be conveyed through any form of expression, including images, cartoons, memes, objects, gestures and symbols".[87] Facebook provides an array of expressive tools, including emojis, stickers, GIFs, images and videos (referred to as "graphicons").[88] Emojis, small digital images or icons, are employed to represent ideas, emotions, or objects. Similar to emojis, stickers are newer graphical elements designed to portray emotional state, attitude, and opinion, often featuring character illustrations.[89] GIF is a file format that simulates an animation by cycling through a sequence of static images. Within Facebook messages, users can incorporate pre-made GIFs sourced from third-party services by searching for tags or keywords defining their topic. In this study, visual elements integrated into the comments, specifically those manifesting or suggesting hate speech, especially recurrent ones, were identified through an ad hoc Python script.[90] They were categorised by theme and hate speech intensity, exemplified, and analysed. Among the visual media, particular attention was placed on GIFs, primarily due to their higher propensity to create Internet memes, which repurpose pieces of media to convey a cultural, social, or political expression, often through humour.[91] The exact counts of the GIFs identified in the corpus are detailed in Table 2. As anticipated from the varying sizes of the corpus components, comments about *The Little Mermaid* featured the greatest number of GIFs, mainly in the USA section.

Disney Facebook USA		Disney Facebook Italy	
Topic	N. GIFs	Topic	N. GIFs
Lightyear	394	*Lightyear*	5
Peter Pan & Wendy	589	*Peter Pan & Wendy*	26
The Little Mermaid	2,095	*La Sirenetta*	403
Total	3,078	Total	434

Table 2. GIFs in the corpus

4. Analysis

The following paragraphs provide an analysis of select textual and visual elements in user comments. Relevant data are collected in tables, including the number of raw occurrences, indicated in parentheses. In the excerpts, any original spelling and punctuation errors were preserved. Translations from Italian

[86] Krista Bunskoek, "3 Key Hashtag Strategies: How to Market Your Business & Content", *Wishpond* (2014). www.blog.wishpond.com/post/62253333766/3-keyhashtag-strategies-how-to-market-your-business; Michele Zappavigna, "Searchable Talk: The Linguistic Functions of Hashtags", *Social Semiotics*, 25.3 (2015), 274-291.

[87] United Nations, "Understanding Hate Speech", *United Nations* (2023), www.un.org.

[88] Susan C. Herring and Ashley Dainas, "'Nice Picture Comment!': Graphicons in Facebook Comment Threads", *Proceedings of the Fiftieth Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* (2017), 2185-2194.

[89] Artie Konrad et al., "Sticker and Emoji Use in Facebook Messenger: Implications for Graphicon Change", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 25.3 (2020), 217-235.

[90] Dino Aiezza, *Most Frequent Similar Images*, software (2024).

[91] Alexis Benveniste, "The Meaning and History of Memes", *The New York Times,* Wednesday 26 January 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/01/26/crosswords/what-is-a-meme.html, accessed 30 April 2024.

were provided by the author of this paper. When quoted within the main text, Italian expressions are presented in their English translation.

4.1 *Lexical Bundles*

Through SketchEngine, N-grams containing from 3 to 6 words were extracted from Facebook user comments about each of the three movies in both countries (*Lightyear* USA and ITA, *Peter Pan & Wendy* USA and ITA, and *The Little Mermaid* USA and *La Sirenetta* ITA). The 500 most frequent bundles in each subset were further examined, concordanced, and categorised based on prevailing stance, thematic content, and hate speech intensity.[92] N-grams were classified under five broad groups of expressions: in favour of the movie; against it; against Disney remakes in general; against cast or voice cast choices; against wokeism and cancel culture. Tables from 3 to 7 display the most frequent lexical sequences within the categories. For some films, not all themes are represented in the tables, as frequent N-grams may not have been identified. Comments featuring some of the most significant bundles (underlined in the quotations) were exemplified, accompanied by commentary discussing the associated discourses and motifs. It is important to note that, in some instances, thematic groupings may overlap within these examples.

As shown in Table 3, particularly in the entire USA component and for *The Little Mermaid* in both countries, a portion of the most frequent expressions showed support for the movie, with compliments on the actors, excitement, and eagerness to watch it (e.g., "can't wait") with family and friends, often as a bonding experience for women (e.g., "take the girls"). Many praised the casting of a black person as Ariel, applauding Disney's steps towards greater diversity. This film stands as one of the rare instances in which a Disney princess has been played by a black lead actress, thereby underscoring the importance of representation. Specifically, many netizens from the USA commenting on *The Little Mermaid* linked their support to the joyful and heartwarming reactions from young black girls upon learning about the casting choice, echoing similar reactions appeared on social media:[93]

> Aww my daughter said she looks just like me can't wait too take her (*The Little Mermaid* USA)

In Italy, a considerable part of positive texts also defended the movie against detractors, responding to the racist backlash regarding the protagonist's skin colour:

> Io lo vedrò e non me me frega nulla di tutti sti commenti pietosi e stupidi che razza di persone siete giudicare in base al colore della pelle ... si la sirenetta che anche io da piccola vedevo era capelli rossi e pelle bianca...embe dove sta sto problema ... lei è bellissima ed bravissima [I will watch it and I don't care at all about all these pitiful and stupid comments what kind of people are you judging based on skin colour ... yes the little mermaid I also used to watch as a child was red hair and white skin...so what's the problem ... she is very beautiful and very talented] (*La Sirenetta* ITA)

American commentators appeared to demonstrate their familiarity as Disney fans by incorporating movie quotes such as "To the infinity and beyond" from *Toy Story* or "Part of your world" from *The Little Mermaid*. Users also remarked that the movie held a special place for them, as "(one of) my favourite" Disney cartoon. Consequently, their endorsement of the remakes suggested that others might also recognise their merit.

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[92] Bahador, "Monitoring Hate Speech".
[93] Remy Tumin, "A New Ariel Inspires Joy for Young Black Girls: 'She Looks Like Me'", *The New York Times*, Thursday 15 September 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/09/14/arts/little-mermaid-trailer-halle-bailey.html, accessed 30 April 2024.

Lightyear USA
to infinity and beyond (37), can't wait to see (24), going to be (22), for this movie (18), we have to (17), to go see (16), have to take (15), take the kids (15), we should take (13), looking forward to (12), it comes out (10), can't wait for this (9), I wanna see (8), I wonder if (8), Toy Story universe (8), based off of (7), give it a (7), I will be (7)
Lightyear ITA
di Toy Story [of Toy Story] (2)
Peter Pan & Wendy USA
can't wait (110), excited for this (19), a good movie (12), movie was great (10), she was great (8), she was so (8), excited to watch (7), I watched it (7), one of my favorite (7), her as Tink (6), her as Tinker Bell (6), I enjoyed it (6), last night and (6), loved the movie (6), love the diversity (6), movie was good (6)
Peter Pan & Wendy ITA
non vedo l'ora [I can't wait] (7), a me è piaciuto [I did like it] (4), di colore e [of colour and] (3)
The Little Mermaid USA
can't wait (1,487), going to be (231), excited for this (184), to watch this (169), looking forward to (130), her voice is (118), this movie is (112), so excited for (110), want to see (110), I love the (108), so excited to (106), my favorite Disney (94), don't care (85), to see this movie (83), we have to (81), we need to (76), I loved it (62), one of my (60), it comes out (57), Halle Bailey is (55), looks so good (55), going to watch (54), Melissa McCarthy as Ursula (53), Part of your world (53), take the girls (53), a beautiful voice (52), you don't (52), better than the (50), on Disney plus (49), Melissa McCarthy is (48), can we go (44), it was a (44), when I was (44), I love her (43), I think it (43), have to go (42), forward to seeing (41), want to watch (39), for this one (38), Awkwafina as Scuttle (37), it was so (37), at the end (36), she has a (36), this looks amazing (35)
La Sirenetta ITA
colore della pelle [skin colour] (72), a me è piaciuto [I did like it] (31), non vedo l'ora di vederlo [I can't wait to watch it] (27), è piaciuto molto [liked it very much] (26), visto ieri sera [watched it last night] (24), andiamo a vederlo [let's go and watch it] (19), devo dire che [I have to say that] (19), andrò a vederlo [I'm going to watch it] (16), è piaciuto tanto [liked it a lot] (16), mio cartone preferito [my favourite cartoon] (16), è piaciuto tantissimo [liked it a lot] (15), lo andrò a vedere [I'm going to watch it] (14), un bel film [a nice film] (14), con mia figlia [with my daughter] (13), uguale al cartone [same as the cartoon] (13), la mia principessa preferita [my favourite princess] (10), visto al cinema [watched at the cinema] (9), personaggio di fantasia [fictional character] (9), ha una voce [she has a voice] (9), è più bella [she is more beautiful] (9)

Table 3. N-grams: Support for the movie

Another group of clusters, instead, conveyed strong disapproval and refusal to watch the movie (see Table 4). In some instances, the outright rejection was not even accompanied by an explanation. Demeaning sarcasm was frequently employed in both countries, with categorical expressions such as "no thank you" or "how about no" and "I can't wait to miss it". In other cases, opposition was linked to motivations that could be purely ideological or related to personal preferences (which will be further explored in subsequent tables and examples).

Lightyear USA
I will not (18), no thank you (18), don't care (17), don't want (17), won't be watching (17), I will never (13), don't have (10), don't think (10), on this one (10), pass on this (9), don't need (8), will not watch (8)
Peter Pan & Wendy USA
won't be (19)
The Little Mermaid USA
no thank you (57), not going to (49), I won't (47), won't be (47), of the movie (44)

La Sirenetta ITA
ma anche no [how about no] (53), non vedo l'ora di perdermelo [I can't wait to miss it] (34), non mi è piaciuto [I didn't like it] (21), non lo vedrò [I won't see it] (18), non lo guarderò [I won't watch it] (14), ma per favore [oh please] (13), neanche/nemmeno/manco se mi pagano [not if they paid me] (12), aspetta e spera [wait and hope] (11), non andrò a vederlo [I won't go to see it] (9), sarà un flop [it will be a flop] (9)

Table 4. N-grams: Disagreement with the movie

In particular, notably for *Peter Pan & Wendy* USA and for *The Little Mermaid* in both countries, netizens' opposition was framed not around casting choices but rather against the trend of producing remakes instead of novel stories. Commentators urged Disney to "come up with something new" and criticised the adaptations, especially the live-action films (also including, e.g., "Beauty and the Beast"), as unoriginal, useless, and pejorative (see Table 5).

Peter Pan & Wendy USA
the live action (21), a live action (20), stop with the (20), don't care (19), live action remakes (19), is going to (17), come up with (14), over and over (14), live action remake (13), another Peter Pan (12), don't need (10), how many Peter (10), make new movies (8), these live action (8), out of ideas (7), the original story (7), they need to (7), a new movie (6), Beauty and the Beast (6), come on Disney (6), need to stop (6)
The Little Mermaid USA
the live action (142), live action remakes (109), a live action (94), come up with (53), live action remake (52), the animated version (38)
La Sirenetta ITA
il live action [the live action] (29), la Bella e la Bestia [Beauty and the Beast] (28), i live action [the live actions] (26), il Re Leone [the Lion King] (24), un live action [a live action] (22), live action di [live action of] (16), qualcosa di nuovo [something new] (14), questo live action [this live action] (12), live action Disney [Disney live action] (10), non capisco perché [I don't understand why] (9), problema non è [problem is not] (9)

Table 5. N-grams: Disagreement with and negative characterisation of Disney remakes

Another significant N-gram category expressed disapproval of the casting choices in the live-action movies and voice cast in the animated movie and Italian dubbing (see Table 6). Comments criticised what was perceived as a disruption of the pre-established canon and continuity, highlighting frustration with the creative liberties taken by filmmakers.[94] In the USA, one notable issue was the replacement of Republican actor Tim Allen as Buzz Lightyear's voice (e.g., "no/without Tim Allen"), which sparked an outcry, especially among conservative *Toy Story* enthusiasts who perceived the decision as part of a woke agenda:

> Eh Hard pass, don't need Disney indoctrinating kids and it says it all that Tim Allen isn't the voice of Buzz. This is going to be a big dud. (*Lightyear* USA)

In both countries, the cast looks and their adherence to established models were compared to previous versions. *Peter Pan & Wendy* was contrasted not only with the Disney classic animated movie but also with the popular film *Hook* (1991),[95] starring a brilliant Robin Williams, and *Peter Pan* (2003),[96] featuring Jeremy Sumpter, remembered as a teen idol of the time. Commentators conveyed their love and attachment to these imageries and actors through exclusive, absolute expressions such as "will always be" and "the only one/Peter Pan". Such phrases eliminated the potential for alternative

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[94] Proctor, "'I've Seen a Lot of Talk about the #blackstormtrooper Outrage'".
[95] Steven Spielberg, *Hook*, film (U.S.A.: Amblin Entertainment, 1991).
[96] Paul John Hogan, *Peter Pan*, film (U.S.A.: Universal Pictures, 2003).

interpretations or adaptations, reinforcing a rigid adherence to the original canon, while marginalising diverse representations.

Some users went so far as to normatively define how the characters should or should not appear, rejecting the recent multicultural choices, with varying targets and degrees of emphasis, criticism, and sarcasm. In both nations, Peter Pan's looks became a subject of ridicule. Referring to the mixed heritage of actor Alexander Molony playing the protagonist, many drew comparisons to other culturally diverse Disney heroes such as Aladdin, Mowgli from *The Jungle Book*, or Tarzan, and wrote of a "Mexican" or "Indian" Peter Pan:

> Bollywood <u>version of Peter Pan</u> eh it'll be a good comedy (*Peter Pan & Wendy* USA)

> Ah hanno rifatto il <u>libro della giungla</u> ? [Oh have they remade the <u>jungle book</u> ?] (*Peter Pan & Wendy* ITA)

Especially in the USA, commentators also exhibited strong resistance to altering the fairy's ethnicity:

> <u>Tinker Bell is</u> white not BLACK ! (*Peter Pan & Wendy* USA)

The use of the simple present in expressions like "Tinker Bell is" reflected an assertion of general, unchangeable truths, emphasising the writer's perception of an immutable racial identity for the character. By pairing this tense with the copula "be", writers framed their argument as a factual statement. The stark opposition created through contrast underscored a defence of white supremacy, by emphasising a dichotomy between what was perceived as right ("white") and wrong ("black").

Besides criticism about Peter Pan and Tinker Bell, casting objections in both countries were also directed at the 'politically correct' forced inclusion of girls and black children among the Lost Boys:

> facciamo <u>Peter Pan indiano</u>, Trilly nera e ci aggiungiamo qualche bimbo sperduto afro? Poi sulla sessualità di qualche personaggio ci lavoriamo con calma. [let's make <u>Peter Pan Indian</u>, Tinker Bell black, and add some African lost boys? Then we can work on the sexuality of some of the characters later.] (*Peter Pan & Wendy* ITA)

Some USA citizens openly supported DeSantis's fight against Disney to counter what they saw as part of a larger woke drift, which they wished to halt:

> Of course ...they changed tinkerbell and added girls to <u>the lost boys</u> . Glad Desantis did what he did. Obviously not enough. (*Peter Pan & Wendy* USA)

The decision to cast Ariel as a character of different ethnic and physical characteristics from Disney's *The Little Mermaid* from 1989 was met with considerable criticism in both countries. The opposition to Bailey as Ariel was largely based on the perceived failure to faithfully replicate the original animation, which held significant nostalgic value for audiences. Critics emphasised that she "doesn't look" like Ariel, citing missing features they deemed essential, including a white complexion and wishing "her hair was red". However, many acknowledged the actress's talent, 'despite' her appearance:

> I'm expecting that Ariel skin was white and <u>her hair was</u> red like in the Cartoon Movie that I watched before when I was a kid , but I think this is good tho because of her voice (The Little Mermaid USA)

When commenting on the casting of black actresses, users framed their arguments not only around accusations of 'blackwashing', but also in relation to physical traits. As noted by Gammon and Phan[97], the previous portrayal of *The Little Mermaid* adhered to typical Western beauty standards and was considered a sex symbol. Bailey was instead viewed as unattractive, not fitting the princess archetype, and some showed a preference for Jessica Alexander, the white supporting actress playing Vanessa (the villain Ursula's human alter-ego and Ariel's romantic rival), to be the protagonist, as she aligned more closely with beauty canons and the established imagery of Ariel (see also Paragraph 4.3).

Among the USA N-grams, the phrase "a drag queen" emerged, used as a criticism targeting Disney, this time to advocate for a more inclusive and representative casting choice than actress Melissa McCarthy portraying Ursula. Many voiced a desire to see a queer artist in the role, paying homage to the drag queen performer who had inspired the original Disney rendition.[98]

Lexical clusters in the Italian comments about *La Sirenetta* frequently contained an overt rejection, in the form of a protest, using expressions like "she is not Ariel/The Little Mermaid" and criticised Bailey's appearance on the basis that "she has nothing to do with", is not "the true Ariel" or "faithful to the original" drawing. This strong negation reflected a reactionary stance, sometimes explicitly linked to her non-Western traits, particularly her black skin (e.g., "Little Mermaid of colour", "Ariel's skin", "dark skin"). A peculiar racist motif emerged in Italy, associating black individuals with alien immigrants, employing an 'actionalisation' strategy:[99]

> La sirenetta nera <u>non è la</u> sirenetta originale perché voler con messaggi subliminali farci accettare i clandestini? E non solo nei film! [The black little mermaid <u>is not the</u> original little mermaid why do they want to make us accept illegal immigrants through subliminal messages? And not just in movies!] (*La Sirenetta* ITA)

Connecting casting choices to the alleged agenda of promoting illegal immigration is not only unfounded but perpetuates conspiracy theories and harmful stereotypes.

Downplaying white privilege and racial prejudice were evident, conveyed overtly or covertly. For instance, Italian comments framed the casting of a black actress as a discrimination against redheads, while also highlighting the inappropriateness of dreadlocks, a hairstyle closely associated to Black culture:

> Io ho <u>i capelli rossi</u> . Mi sento discriminato. Anche quelli rossi di capelli sono una minoranza… perché eliminare la sirenetta con <u>i capelli rossi</u> e mettere questa(che per me è brava) con i rasta, senza senso. [I have <u>red hair</u> . I feel discriminated against . Those with red hair are also a minority... why eliminate the <u>red-haired</u> little mermaid and put this one(who I think is good) with dreadlocks, nonsense.] (*La Sirenetta* ITA)

In Italy, the theme song "Under the sea" was exploited in wordplay by many commentators for various antagonistic/toxic purposes: to wish the film would sink at the box office; to elaborate on the absurdity of having a black (albeit fictional, a mermaid) character living in a place where one cannot get a tan; and to criticise the Italian rendition. Another point of contention in Italy was indeed dubbing, with a well-known target of scrutiny being Italian-Egyptian singer Mahmood, who voiced Sebastian the crab. He was considered as the "ruin of the film", and his ethnic background was even used to mock shipwrecked migrants and rescuers through poor black humour:

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[97] Gammon and Phan, "Too Black to Be The Little Mermaid?".
[98] Elaina Patton, "How an Outrageous Drag Queen Found Mainstream Fame in 'The Little Mermaid'", *NBC News*, Thursday 26 May 2023, www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-pop-culture/outrageous-drag-queen-found-mainstream-fame-little-mermaid-rcna86421, accessed 30 April 2024.
[99] Wodak and Meyer, *Discourse and Discrimination*, 52.

Già il doppiaggio italiano di Sebastian è la rovina del film. Come si fa a definire un capolavoro? [The Italian dubbing of Sebastian is already the ruin of the film. How can you call it a masterpiece?] (*La Sirenetta* ITA)

Un nordafricano che canta in fondo al mar.. Immaginate solo per un attimo le Rakete de noaltri come reagiranno!!! [A North African singing under the sea.. Just imagine for a moment how our local Rakete will react!!!] (*La Sirenetta* ITA)

Lightyear USA
no Tim Allen (58), without Tim Allen (29), Buzz Lightyear of Star Command (27), the voice of Buzz (21), Tim Allen isn't (19), Tim Allen is Buzz (18), in Toy Story (14), is Buzz Lightyear (13), not Buzz Lightyear (13), the movie Andy (13),why does he look (13), Buzz Lightyear movie (10), in this movie (10), the same without (10), is the only (9), not the same (9), not without Tim (9), Tim Allen as Buzz (9), should have been (8), would have been (8), what happened to (7)
Peter Pan & Wendy USA
the Lost Boys (63), Peter Pan is (30), Tinker Bell is (24), she was a (21), will always be (21), Pan and Wendy (19), doesn't look (13), Once Upon a Time (11), Peter and Wendy (11), version of Peter Pan (11), original Peter Pan (10), Hook with Robin Williams (9), Hook will always be (8), Captain Hook and (7), the only one (7), I think the (6), she looks so (6), was the best (6), the original characters (6), Tinkerbell is black (6), to be white (6)
Peter Pan & Wendy ITA
isola che non c'è [Neverland] (11), film su Peter Pan [film about Peter Pan] (6), l'ho trovato [I found it] (5), Peter Pan indiano [Indian Peter Pan] (5), unico Peter Pan [only Peter Pan] (5), Peter Pan messicano [Mexican Peter Pan] (4), attore che interpreta Peter Pan [actor playing Peter Pan] (3), con gli occhi [with eyes] (3), Libro della Giungla [Jungle Book] (3)
The Little Mermaid USA
don't know (81), doesn't look (57), her hair was (53), they don't (51), to the original (49), no es Ariel [Spanish: is not Ariel] (47), wish her hair (47), about this movie (46), a drag queen (46), don't think (46), the red hair (45), bright red hair (44), in this movie (44), it was a (44), should have been (43), supposed to be (42), it doesn't (40), the only thing (39), of the original (36)
La Sirenetta ITA
non è Ariel [she's not Ariel] (72), non è la [she's not the] (40), i capelli rossi [red hair] (67), In fondo al mar [Under the sea] (50), gli occhi azzurri [blue eyes] (29), non c'entra [has nothing to do] (27), la vera Ariel [the true Ariel] (24), l'unica cosa [the only thing] (23), il cartone animato [the cartoon] (20), il fatto che [the fact that] (20), in lingua originale [in the original language] (19), del cartone animato [the cartoon] (18), in fondo al mare [under the sea] (18), fedele all'originale [faithful to the original] (15), nel cartone animato [in the cartoon] (15), Pirati dei Caraibi [Pirates of the Caribbean] (15), attrice che interpreta [actress playing] (14), Sirenetta di colore [Little Mermaid of colour] (14), il doppiaggio di [the dubbing of] (13), personaggio di Ariel [character of Ariel] (12), quella del cartone [the one from the cartoon] (12), con i rasta [with dreadlocks] (11), il doppiaggio italiano [the Italian dubbing] (11), la voce di Sebastian [Sebastian's voice] (11), me la ricordavo [I remembered her] (11), scelta dell'attrice [actress choice] (11), al cartone animato [to the cartoon] (10), Ariel del cartone [Ariel from the cartoon], coi capelli rossi [with red hair] (10), dai capelli rossi [with red hair] (10), la pelle di Ariel [Ariel's skin] (10), la pelle scura [dark skin] (10), niente/nulla a che vedere [nothing to do] (10), sarebbe stata perfetta [she would have been perfect] (10), un cartone animato [a cartoon] (10)

Table 6. N-grams: Disagreement with and negative characterisation of (voice) cast

A set of bundles in the corpus was categorised as articulating opposition to what was seen as wokeism and cancel culture. These expressions often entailed threats of boycotting the company and hopes for its financial downfall, also invoking the slogan "Go woke, go broke" to suggest that embracing progressive values would lead to economic losses. In particular, the inclusion of a lesbian love story in *Lightyear*

sparked backlash from some segments of the USA Facebook audience. They condemned Disney (e.g., "shame on you") for allegedly catering to the wealthy elite while abandoning traditional values and denounced what they perceived as a dangerous promotion of homosexuality. Netizens sarcastically reiterated the phrase reflecting gender essentialism, "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls", in response to Disney's discontinued use of this formula in theme park announcements in favour of more inclusive greetings:

> Congratulations on your worldwide bomb how's those stocks <u>go woke go broke</u> . (*Lightyear* USA)

> Disney sucks!!! Another corporation that bows down to the 1%! Guess I'll even have more money as I won't be buying anything Disney! And there are a lot!! Our families mean more then Mickey! Keep pushing this narrative.... Americans push back! Thank you <u>ladies and gentlemen</u> , <u>boys and girls</u>! (*Lightyear* USA)

> We cannot allow our children to watch your stupidity and encouraging homosexuality.... <u>shame on you</u> . The first thing I did I deleted all Disney channel's from my channels list. <u>Shame on you</u> (*Lightyear* USA)

As previously observed, several comments regarding *Peter Pan & Wendy* in the Italian component described the film as lacking imaginative or novel elements and merely conforming to the trend "of political correctness":

> Immagino era proprio così urgente e necessario l'ennesimo remake, tra l'altro non solo il solito live-action freddo e forzato, ma pure un film in voga con il minestrone <u>di politicamente corretto</u> da regalare al pubblico. Fantasia ne abbiamo? [I guess yet another remake was really so urgent and necessary, and not just the usual cold and forced live-action, but also a film in trend with the mishmash <u>of political correctness</u> to present to the public. Any imagination left?] (*Peter Pan & Wendy* ITA)

Comments to *Peter Pan & Wendy* USA and *The Little Mermaid* in both countries contained references to Disney animated movie *The Princess and the Frog*,[100] whose heroine is an African-American girl. Users provocatively asked for a film inspired by it where the cast would be "all white" or the actress "albino":

> When they make the <u>princess and the frog</u> movie they better do an all white cast just saying (*The Little Mermaid* USA)

> Aspetterò con ansia il film di " <u>La principessa e il ranocchio</u> " mi raccomando la principessa deve essere "albina" altrimenti mi arrabbio! [I will eagerly await the movie of " The <u>Princess and the Frog</u> " but remember the princess must be "albino" or else I'll get angry!] (*La Sirenetta* ITA)

Hyperbolic language was employed to critique what some fans perceived as excessive political correctness and extremism, also suggesting that "at this point" they expected Disney to make even more unreasonable casting choices. This attitude seemed to reflect a reactionary stance against efforts to diversify media representation and a denial of the white privilege long enjoyed in popular media:

> Woke Disney. Every character should just be not white <u>at this point</u>. (*Peter Pan & Wendy* USA)

> <u>A questo punto</u> troverei politicamente corretto che se in futuro faranno un live action di Pocahontas venisse interpreta da un attrice svedese o Finlandese [<u>At this point</u> I would find it politically correct that if in the

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[100] John Musker and Ron Clements, *The Princess and the Frog*, film (U.S.A.: Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2009).

future they made a live action of Pocahontas it would be played by a Swedish or Finnish actress] (*La Sirenetta* ITA)

Additionally, under posts on *Lightyear* USA, the commenting function was exploited to express opinions on the dispute between Disney and actor Johnny Depp, renowned for his portrayal of Jack Sparrow in *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Depp stated that, during the legal battle with his ex-wife Amber Heard, who accused him of domestic violence, he had been removed from his role in the Disney's saga, leading him to feel a victim of cancel culture.[101] Consequently, his fans in the USA demanded apologies (e.g., "apologize to Johnny", "public apology to") from the animation giant and called for his reintegration:

> The most important question. After winning the court case against Amber, will Disney apologize to Johnny Deep for removing him from the movie " Pirates of the Caribbean "? (*Lightyear* USA)

Lightyear USA
apologize to Johnny (73), boys and girls (22), go woke go broke (21), you don't (20), the box office (19), ladies and gentlemen (17), shame on you (16), public apology to (15), Pirates of the Caribbean (14), in his grave (13), supposed to be (12), a movie about (10), this is not (10), a Disney movie (8), no longer be (8), of our children (8), that Disney is (7), the end of (7)
Peter Pan & Wendy USA
The Little Mermaid (29), Princess and the Frog (18), at this point (10), if you want (10), what a joke (6)
Peter Pan & Wendy ITA
del politicamente corretto [of the politically correct] (4), di politicamente corretto [of politically correct] (3), il politically correct [the politically correct] (3)
The Little Mermaid USA
Princess and the Frog (52)
La Sirenetta ITA
il politically correct [the politically correct] (29), a questo punto [at this point] (22), il politicamente corretto [the politically correct] (19), Principessa e il Ranocchio [Princess and the Frog] (18), del politically correct [of the politically correct] (13)

Table 7. N-grams: Disagreement with and negative characterisation of Disney as woke and engaging in cancel culture

4.2 *Hashtags*

Hashtags were extracted from the entire USA and Italian subcorpora and categorised primarily as indicators of a topic or markers of stance. Each of the two subcorpora was analysed as a whole due to the limited amount of data available. Nevertheless, this approach offered meaningful insights into emerging trends within the two contexts.

   A viral hashtag in the USA was "#NotMyAriel"[102] and similar variations (see Table 8), which were primarily inserted without additional commentary and constituted a strong protest against casting a black actress as Ariel. The use of negation and first-person singular possessive adjective portrayed the character as not aligning with the fan's traditional rendition, depicting her as unaccepted, unrepresentative, unwanted. Moreover, this collective portrayal positioned her as not belonging to the same group as 'us', but rather as the 'other'. Hashtags also marked opposition to other casting (e.g., "#NotMyUrsula" and "#notmypeterpan") and voice casting (e.g., "#TimAllen") choices. Some hashtags

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[101] Carly Mayberry, "Johnny Depp, Amber Heard and the Dangers of Cancel Culture", *Newsweek,* Monday 02 May 2022, www.newsweek.com/johnny-depp-amber-heard-dangers-cancel-culture-1701880, accessed 30 April 2024.
[102] Geraets, "#NotMyAriel".

conveyed disagreement with the company's perceived progressive agenda, with some including predictions or desires for failure regarding Disney's projects (e.g., #BoycottDisney", "#gowokegobroke"). Disney itself was sometimes referred to as "#WokeDisney". Additionally, support was expressed for Johnny Depp (with hashtags like "#justiceforjohnnydepp").

Topic
#Disney (23), #TheLittleMermaid (11), #Lightyear (6), #disney100 (2), #disneyworld (2), #MelissaMcCarthy (2), #TheLittleMermaid2023 (2)
Support for the movie
#excited (2)
Disagreement with/negative characterisation of cast
#NotMyAriel (93), #notmylittlemermaid (6), #HalleyBaileysucks (4), #nomyariel (4), #sheisnotmyariel (4), #notmymermaid (3), #NotMyUrsula (3), #shesnotAriel (3), #notmypeterpan (2), #justsaying (2), #terrycrews (2), #TimAllen (2),
Disagreement with/negative characterisation of Disney as woke
#BoycottDisney (11), #gowokegobroke (9), #GetWokeGoBroke (6), #WokeDisney (4), #fail (3), #flop (3), #boicotdisney (2), #BoycottWOKEDisney (2), #donewithDisney (2), #FireChapek (2), #no (2), #woke (2)
Disagreement with/negative characterisation of Disney as engaging in cancel culture
#bringbackjack (7), #justiceforjohnnydepp (7), #CancelDisney (5), #justiceforJohnny (5), #JusticeForJohnnyDeep (4), #ApologizeToDepp (3), #JusticeForJohnnyDepp (3), #bringbackjacksparrow (2), #bringbackjohnny (2), #IStandWithJohnnyDepp (2), #JohnnyDepp (2)

Table 8. Hashtags in the USA subcorpus

In the Italian component, although no popular hashtags were identified (see Table 9), the ones that were retrieved reaffirmed the previous analysis, featuring threats to boycott, expressions of rejection, ridicule, and even offensive language. Hashtags may serve as valuable starting points for further explorations. Notably, "#lasiNeretta" ["#theblacklittlemermaid", also circulated in Spanish as "La SiNegrita"] was productive in the extended phrase in the corpus "La SiNeretta" (16 occurrences). This concise label incorporates a derogatory connotation by referring to the protagonist's skin colour through the use of a 'somatonym', a strategy that symbolises a social actor by a physical characteristic, based on a meronymic relationship.[103] Similar to English, in Italian, employing "nero" ["black"] as a noun to identify individuals or groups based on skin colour is indeed considered offensive, as it oversimplifies and generalises a diverse population.[104]

Topic/location
#Sirenetta [#LittleMermaid] (2), #buzzlightyear (1), #disney (1); #Sardegna [#Sardinia] (3), #sardegnafilmcommission [#sardiniafilmcommission] (1), #Sardinia (1)
Disagreement/negative characterisation
#ioboicotto [#iboycott] (2), #arielneranonsipuovedere [#blackarielisunbearable] (1), #barzelletta [#joke] (1), #bellamerda [#sucks] (1), #boicottaggio [#boycott] (1), #BTS (1), #charmed (1), #choc [#shock] (1), #coerenza [#coherence] (1), #comeappizzareunfilm [#howtoruinafilm] (1), #disagio [#awkward] (1), #Ghesboroariel [#Fuckariel] (1), #iostoconursula [#istandwithursula] (1), #lasiNeretta [#theblacklittlemermaid] (1), #lasirenEtnica [#theethniclittlemermaid] (1), #NO (1), #NOGRAZIE [#NOTHANKS] (1), #NotMyAriel (1), #poveretti [#poorthings] (1), #Politicamentecorrettiaveterottoilcazzo [#Politicallycorrectpeopleivefuckinghadit] (1), #stayschiodato [#staydumped] (1), #StopCancelCulture (1)

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103 Wodak and Meyer, *Discourse and Discrimination*, 53.
104 Accademia della Crusca, "Nero, Negro e Di Colore", *Accademia della Crusca,* Friday 12 October 2012, www.accademiadellacrusca.it/it/consulenza/nero-negro-e-di-colore/734, accessed 30 April 2024.

Support for the movie against haters
#fateviunavita [#getalife] (1), #ridicolih [#ridiculoush] (1)

Table 9. Hashtags in the Italian subcorpus

4.3 *Visual Elements*

An initial inquiry of the visual elements included in the comments, with a particular emphasis on GIFs conveying negative sentiments, was conducted and a classification was proposed. Numerous graphic representations conveyed disapproval through various allusions. The compiled categories of hate were based on Bahador's typology[105] and adapted to reflect the trends observed in the visual corpus under study. The groupings identified encompassed: disagreement expressed by original movie characters or Internet memes; disagreement with or negative characterisation of new casting choices, also including oversimplification and stereotyping of the 'out group'; disagreement with or negative characterisation of Disney company, including attacks on the company for being woke or engaging in cancel culture; dehumanisation of the 'out-group', via images of trash, excrement, and vomit. Select examples will be shown and examined, with some related comments reported when available. The raw frequencies in the tables indicate the occurrences of a GIF within a specific movie and country subcorpus, although many were found across multiple components.

Figure 1. GIFs: Disagreement by original movie characters. GIPHY 2024; Tenor 2024

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[105] Bahador, "Monitoring Hate Speech".

Several visuals reproduced cartoons and (voice) actors, often reusing scenes from prior versions which were 'approved' by the commentators. In many GIFs, the traditional characters displayed emotions like sadness, anger, doubt, and rejection. Such sentiments were exploited to convey the fans' dislike, aversion, and disappointment regarding Disney's choices in the remakes, almost as if the 'originals' themselves were also upset with Disney (Fig. 1).

International and local Internet memes were also used to demonstrate refusal, frustration, unease, and embarrassment at the remakes, including scenes from movies and TV shows (Fig. 2). Similar feelings were represented through crying, downcast face, thumbs down, facepalm, or 'see-no-evil' monkey emojis and stickers. Sometimes, the people in the 'disagreeing' GIFs could even share some personal characteristics with the object of rejection, such as the drag queen performer Ru Paul, as part of the LGBTQI+ community (Fig. 2), actor Danny Glover (Fig. 6), or other black characters (Fig. 7).

Lightyear		Peter Pan & Wendy	
(USA 2)	(USA 2)	(USA 4)	(USA 2)
The Little Mermaid/La Sirenetta			
(USA 18; ITA 5)	(USA 18; ITA 3) *No thanks*		

Figure 2. GIFs: Disagreement by Internet memes. GIPHY 2024; Tenor 2024

Some GIFs contrasted the current movie cast with the preferred original versions. Commentators implicitly or explicitly pointed at the former (white) characters as the correct renditions, unfavourably comparing them with the perceived inadequacy of the new choices (Fig. 3).

In discussions concerning *Peter Pan & Wendy*, particular scrutiny was directed towards ethnically diverse casting choices. Comparisons were drawn to characters from previous Disney films, positioning older representations of Pan as the 'real' and beloved versions.

Within the discourses about *The Little Mermaid*, GIFs featuring Ariel from the cartoon and her friends were nostalgically shared, underscoring a preference for the original portrayals, specifically focusing on the princess's appearance. At times, alternative casting suggestions were proposed, often advocating for white-skinned and red-haired actresses, who could better embody Ariel as a sex symbol. Examples included actresses such as Amber Heard (known for playing a marine heroine in Disney's *Aquaman*) or Miriam Leone in Italy. Regrettably, Halle Bailey faced instances of body shaming also

related to other physical attributes, particularly her supposedly wide-set eyes. She was compared to a hammerhead shark or fictional characters with distorted traits such as Sid the sloth from *Ice Age*, or Sloth from *The Goonies*, alongside dehumanising[106] references to monsters like Predator or Alien.

Lightyear	*Peter Pan & Wendy*	
(USA 2) *Didn't Disney have a tv show that Buzz Lightyear was already based off of…?*	(USA 10; ITA 5) *L' unico peter pan ♡ [The only peter pan pan ♡]*	(USA 9; ITA 1) *This was my legit first crush growing up.*
The Little Mermaid/La Sirenetta		
(USA 31; ITA 7) *Ice age 4 looking pretty good.*	(USA 22; ITA 8) *This is the Little Mermaid.*	

Figure 3. GIFs: Disagreement with or negative characterisation of cast. GIPHY 2024; Tenor 2024

A group of GIFs was classified as opposing wokeism and cancel culture (Fig. 4). Several included discriminatory content, especially in discussions related to *Lightyear*, with explicit disliking of the Rainbow flag and references to the film ban in numerous Middle Eastern and Asian countries. Additionally, some USA GIFs even propagated the grooming accusation, a harmful stereotype used to demonise LGBTQI+ individuals, alleging paedophilic and manipulative behaviours towards children. Other GIFs expressed dissent towards wokeism, often employing irony or satire. This included, for both countries, the ironic presentation of black individuals as the new versions of characters in Disney movies.

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[106] Bahador, "Monitoring Hate Speech".

Lightyear		Peter Pan & Wendy	
(USA 3) *They're at it again!!!*	(USA 2) *Go Broke*	(USA 2) *Disney version 2022* 🤡	(USA 2)

Figure 4. GIFs: Disagreement with or negative characterisation of Disney as woke. GIPHY 2024; Tenor 2024

Following his removal from the *Pirates of Caribbean* franchise, Johnny Depp allegedly testified under oath that he would not reconsider portraying Captain Jack Sparrow for Disney, not even for 300 million dollars and more than a million alpacas.[107] In a show of solidarity with Depp and in opposition to the company's perceived cancel culture, users flooded Disney's USA Facebook page with emojis and GIFs featuring Depp and alpacas (see Fig. 5).

Lightyear	
(USA 6) *Apologize to Johnny*	(USA 3)

Figure 5. GIFs: Disagreement with or negative characterisation of Disney as engaging in cancel culture. GIPHY 2024; Tenor 2024

In opposition to cast and thematic choices in new Disney movies, derisive and offensive laughter was noted (Fig. 6). The laughing reaction, indicative of toxic and trolling practices,[108] has become a widespread online trend, notably since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemics, as a common means to deride adversaries and their beliefs and convey a lack of empathy.[109] The clown emoji was also employed, suggesting that the company was behaving foolishly and ridiculously with its forcibly inclusive and insincere choices.

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[107] Ryan Smith, "What Do Alpacas Have to Do with Johnny Depp Trial? 'Pirates' Joke Takes Off", *Newsweek*, Friday 20 May 2022, www.newsweek.com/alpacas-johnny-depp-trial-amber-heard-pirates-caribbean-1708495, accessed 30 April 2024.
[108] Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*.
[109] George Driver, "No Laughing Matter: Why It's Time to Cancel Facebook's Haha Reaction", *The Spinoff,* Wednesday 15 December 2021, www.thespinoff.co.nz/media/15-12-2021/no-laughing-matter-why-its-time-to-cancel-facebooks-haha-reaction, accessed 30 April 2024.

Lightyear	Peter Pan & Wendy	
(USA 3)	(USA 6)	(USA 3) *Fake*
The Little Mermaid/La Sirenetta		
(USA 11; ITA 2) *Definitely not my childhood Little Mermaid period* 🧜	(USA 10) *Tanked in china already, lol*	

Figure 6. GIFs: Disagreement with or negative characterisation of Disney's choices through laughter. GIPHY 2024; Tenor 2024

Disney's despised new movies and characters were also metaphorically compared to unpleasant things, resulting in debasing, humiliating, and even dehumanising characterisation.[110] Several GIFs referred to waste and bodily waste, using memes with the word "trash", garbage bins, or depictions of excrement (Fig. 7), which were present as emojis and stickers in both countries. In particular, the dumpster fire GIF was embedded in the USA to describe the movie as a failure,[111] with the image simultaneously conveying a menacing and violent scene of vandalism.

Peter Pan & Wendy		The Little Mermaid	
(USA 4) *Looks like*	(USA 3)	(USA 5)	(USA 5)

Figure 7. GIFs: Negative characterisation of Disney's choices and dehumanisation through trash and excrement. GIPHY 2024; Tenor 2024

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[110] Wodak and Meyer, *Discourse and Discrimination*, 53; Bahador, "Monitoring Hate Speech".
[111] Don and Y F, "Dumpster Fire", *Know Yor Meme* (12 February 2018), *knowyourmeme.com/memes/dumpster-fire*.

Moreover, other GIFs marked the object of the comment, when considered as representing some form of difference, as disgusting. This was achieved by displaying images of vomit or simulations of vomiting through memes (Fig. 8). The puking sticker was also frequently employed in both countries. This use of visceral content was intended to evoke extreme repulsion and disdain, emphasising a strong negative reaction to the perceived deviation from traditional or expected norms.

Peter Pan & Wendy	The Little Mermaid/La Sirenetta	
(USA 3) *Gross*	(USA 4; ITA 4) *Ed ecco come reagiamo noi. [And this is how we react]*	(USA 3; ITA 2)

Figure 8. GIFs: Negative characterisation of Disney's choices and dehumanisation through vomit. GIPHY 2024; Tenor 2024

5. Conclusions

Amidst the backdrop of the so-called 'culture wars', debates and conflicts have arisen on contentious issues such as national identity, cultural diversity, family values, and sexual orientation. Children's culture serves as a space where entertainment and learning intertwine with the construction of identities in society, incorporating elements such as gender, race, and class.[112] In this context, the present study delved into the reception of Disney animation's recent promotion of cultural diversity in the United States and Italy, by examining Facebook posts commenting on select movies serving as remakes of classics.

Preliminary findings suggested a range of opinions and discourses regarding Disney's inclusivity initiatives. In both sampled countries, positive expressions were retrieved, including enjoyment of the new Disney movies, appreciation for the company's efforts, excitement to share viewing experiences with loved ones, and defence against detractors. It was heartening to witness individuals finding joy in seeing themselves represented, and reassuring to observe anti-haters advocating for inclusivity and admonishing other commentators for imposing their reactionary perspectives onto fictional characters.

Conversely, a notable presence of negative sentiment was noted. Many fans expressed dislike and disapproval of remakes and resentment toward forced diversity or exhibited explicit discriminatory attitudes. Netizens exploited the medium availabilities, leveraging various semiotic tools, including words, hashtags, and visuals, to articulate their opinions. They also often circumvented the already weak anti-hate speech policies of Facebook by utilising less regulated content, such as third-party GIFs.[113]

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[112] Henry A. Giroux, "Animating Youth: The Disneyfication of Children's Culture", *Socialist Review*, 24.3 (1995), 23-55.
[113] Rebecca Heilweil, "Antisemitic Content Sneaks onto Facebook Through Gif Feature", *Forbes,* Friday 7 July 2017, www.forbes.com/sites/rebeccaheilweil1/2017/07/07/antisemitic-content-sneaks-onto-facebook-through-gif-feature, accessed 30 April 2024.

These graphics, which may consist of visuals and/or text, could display more explicitly hateful, disrespectful, or discriminatory content or be used with an implicit degrading intent.

The study identified both international and localised targets and trends in hate speech. For instance, anti-LGBTQI+ discourse was more visible in the USA, likely because the news of the lesbian love story in the film *Lightyear* did not gain as much traction in Italy. Racial prejudice sentiments seemed to be more evident in Italian negative comments and sometimes explicitly linked to anti-immigration positions. Although hashtags were not frequently employed, the protest campaign "#NotMyAriel" against casting actress Bailey as Ariel garnered support in the USA. Rejection of the new remakes varied in intensity, ranging from genuine requests for adherence to canonical fidelity to masked or explicit negative sentiments and discrimination. The number of user comments was higher in the USA, resulting in a greater presence of visuals. In contrast, in Italy, only *The Little Mermaid* saw significant interaction and visual engagement. Although the volume was comparatively lower, the negative sentiment in Italy echoed similar themes of contrast, rejection, and disgust towards new films and casts also observed in the USA.

It should be noted that this analysis did not aim to assess the reception of any single Disney movie. Instead, it sought to provide an overview of audience reactions to various forms of diversity represented in recent media products. This exploratory study focused on sampled frequently occurring expressions and visuals in user-generated discourse, with particular attention to hateful content and did not quantify positive versus negative comments. Therefore, the conclusions drawn are to be regarded as indicative of observed trends in the reception of inclusivity in popular culture rather than exhaustive analyses.

This study did not focus on the immediate triggers of hateful language. While campaigns of hate were quite ubiquitous, it appeared evident that images showcasing the pride and centrality of 'others' and 'intruders' were the primary drivers for derision, disdain, rejection, and hate. Nevertheless, it should be added that Disney might somehow even take advantage of culture wars for business purposes, as potentially controversial choices and, consequently, social media posts are likely to stimulate debate, increase engagement, and, thereby, extend the page reach.

In the corpus analysed, hate discourse was not only produced by occasional flamers or spammers but rather appeared as a dominant narrative emerging from the accumulation of derogatory comments. Disney's attempts to diversify its narratives and characters were perceived as a threat, prompting resistance from those feeling their cultural identity was being challenged. This backlash was further fuelled by statements and actions from conservative politicians. Users engaged in a collective practice of chastising the company for its perceived moralising choices and for renouncing white privilege. In this way, commentators also attacked the real or fictional characters involved, targeting their 'protected' characteristics, especially gender and ethnicity. Critical expressions were joined with practical forms of protest, including boycotts, against what they saw as a forcefully progressive political agenda embedded in storytelling. Conspiracy theories, such as allegations of attempts at race-swapping and grooming, were at times propagated by critics. Disney's inclusivity and its minority subjects were unwelcome and viewed as not representative of the traditional values that the animation company had long embodied. Adversaries argued that these changes distorted the company's legacy and alienated its longstanding audience. White cisgender individuals positioned themselves as the 'in-group', delineating their preferences and judgements, dictating norms of acceptability to defend a constructed tradition and morality. Critics voiced discomfort and resistance to the encroachment of outsiders into their own spaces, fearing a loss of cultural hegemony and desiring to maintain the status quo. As a result, these netizens, from behind their screens, framed subjects with different characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, physical features, and gender, as the 'other', dangerous, ugly, and disgusting, thus justifying marginalisation and discrimination.

Contaminating the realm of children's fairy tales, hurtful words and symbols were wielded in adult online practices of signification and evaluation, to deny underrepresented groups their place in the narrative. Online discourse was therefore employed to suppress minorities' right to expression and, ultimately, their existence, not only in fantasy media but in society as a whole.

This study highlights the risks associated with the underregulation of social media and advocates for the implementation of more stringent policies against hate speech. The largely uncontrolled virtual aggression has indeed the potential to normalise discrimination and can serve as a dangerous catalyst and justification for harm in real life.