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## The Little Mermaid: Equality of Race and Skin Color to Criticism of Disney Film Fans on Twitter

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**Abstract:** The animated film *The Little Mermaid*, adapted by Walt Disney in 1989, is a heartwarming tale about a mermaid named Ariel who falls in love with a prince. Social media users, mainly young adults, have noticed that the film touches on issues related to race and ethnicity. This study utilizes a content analysis method with a qualitative approach to explore the messages of equality that Disney conveys through the film. By examining fan comments, scenes, dialogue, and various forms of media such as images and text, we tried to uncover how Disney promotes equality in *The Little Mermaid*. Based on findings, Disney enthusiasts expressed disappointment with the company's failure to meet their expectations, particularly about Princess Ariel's depiction of dark skin. Detractors went so far as to make disparaging remarks, suggesting that black individuals were viewed as inferior and unequal to their white counterparts. Consequently, Disney's attempt to promote messages of fairness and equality was met with controversy among its devoted fan base.

**Keywords:** Equality of Race, Skin Color, Twitter, Fans, *The Little Mermaid*

### INTRODUCTION

Every nation worldwide has unique fairy tales, folk, and legends, including Western countries. They have, for example, the legend of the Mermaid Princess, the fairy tale of Cinderella and a prince on a white horse, and the fairy tale about sleeping beauty. Most of us are familiar with these fairy tales from story books or cartoon films. Disney is one of the animation and film studios that popularized these fairy tales worldwide.

According to the official Walt Disney website, the Disney Company started the business by producing the film *Alice in Wonderland* (Alice Comedy) on October 16, 1923. This company was originally known as the Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio, founded by Walt Disney and his brother Roy as partners. But eventually, it changed its name to Walt Disney (Walt Disney, n.d.). This studio house, which is identical to the character of Mickey Mouse, is popular with animated films about fairy tales from various parts of the world. The folklore legend of mermaids is no exception. Disney made an animated film entitled *The Little Mermaid* in 1989. Reporting from the CNBC.com site, in 2023, Disney made a live-action version of

The Little Mermaid, which was estimated to make a profit of 95.5 million U.S. dollars in North America

Mermaids or sirens in Western literature, Homer, once depicted as half-woman and half-bird, are dangerous creatures who love to sing beautifully to attract the attention of men. In the story of the Odyssey, witches warn explorers in the Mediterranean about very dangerous creatures, mermaids. Everyone hypnotized by the mermaid will stay where they are and refuse to return. On the other hand, according to myths and classical literature, creatures have a strange appearance. Half of them look like humans, but the other half are animals. Mermaids, sphinxes, and harpies are women who are always associated with negative things like seducers of men (Garrido, 2023). The myth written by the Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen in 1837, "The Little Mermaid", does not end with a happy ending different from the older version. The little mermaid is illustrated as a beautiful woman who falls in love with a prince. And to meet him, he had to cut out his tongue and sacrifice it to a witch to get a pair of legs. Unfortunately, instead of falling in love with the little mermaid, the prince fell in love with another girl. Hans Andersen closes the story of this essay with the transformation of the Little Mermaid into a foam bubble that lives forever. Thanks to good treatment and sincere love, this fairy tale is considered to teach about sacrifice without expecting anything in return. Unlike the original story, the animated film entitled *The Little Mermaid*, adapted by Walt Disney in 1989, has a happy story. A mermaid named Ariel is said to have fallen in love with a prince. Even though the prince had to sacrifice his voice to get a pair of legs, at the end of the story, he managed to marry the prince and live happily (Bhakti & Setijowati, 2023).

In the animated movie *The Little Mermaid*, Walt Disney removed many parts or shifted the original story to allow the animated film to be enjoyed by all ages. The Disney lovers on Twitter, dominated by young adults, consider *The Little Mermaid* by Walt Disney a big concern about race and ethnic diversities. Since 1980, in the U.S., issues about race and ethnicity have become a more serious concern. Racism, which is still not considered as not a human rights violence, needs a solution, especially in the U.S. Even many of the U.S. policies are considered not to put respect on human rights. The increased number of immigrants to the U.S., the significant population growth, the domination of the young age in communities proportion, and the increase of demographic trigger the increasing number of minority group, so that the black is estimated to exceed the number of the white before the middle century (Colby & Ortman, 2014).

The controversial issues of racism addressed to the black mermaid got the attention of *The Little Mermaid* fans once the movie was released. Some Twitter accounts mentioned that the character of Ariel in the Live-Action version ruined their expectation. Disney used to illustrate the character of Ariel as a white mermaid with bright red hair. Walt Disney Company responded to those critiques that Hans, the author of "The Little Mermaid," is from Denmark, meaning that Princess Ariel is a Danish with black skin and red hair (Madjid, 2023). Consequently, the controversy does not only emerge among whites but also colored skin (Budiartie, 2019).

Live-action "The Little Mermaid" movie is controversial because it illustrates Ariel as a black mermaid. It is considered a phenomenon to equate the black and white races through movies. The perception of equality emerged as most fans believed that the mermaid was white. Meanwhile, the live-action movie describes Ariel as a black mermaid with ginger red. The phenomena intrinsically show that Disney wants to deliver an equality message in *The Little Mermaid Live Action* movie. The message is expressed through the shift of Ariel from the animation version to the live-action version. In this case, the animation version of the character Ariel is illustrated as a white race, while in the live-action version, it is black. The illustration shows equality between white and black races from Disney, which aims to show audiences that the mermaid can also be black and represent equality (Madjid, 2023).

The character of Ariel in the Live-action movie is played by Halle Bailey who is a singer from Atlanta, US. Halle Bailey is a singer and song writer who is well known for the dual music group of Chloe X Halle. Halle built a dual with her sibling, Chloe Baley. She was born on March 27, 2000, a black race from This actress, born March 27, 2000, is a black woman from Georgia who is of African-American descent. She has long curly hair with braids. It raised controversy because audiences had known Ariel as a girl with white skin and red long hair, while Halle had a contrasting appearance. Cited from Indonesian CNN (2023), Rob Marshall, the sutradara, stated that Halle had been the priority to play the role of Princess Ariel. She had a good combination of great vocal and personal character spirit. In overcoming the controversy of the different looks of Ariel, Rob Marshal stated that choosing a black woman as the main character is not a mistake. He also mentioned that it indicates an ancient paradigm in viewing the world.

In this study, the researchers collected data from Twitter. There, several users commented on the Little Mermaid movie and were involved in the controversy. According to Hadi in Anugratami et al. (2014), Twitter is a site that allows someone to send a message in 140 characters maximum, through SMS, email, or quick message sender. It is a written-based application that allows users to write up to 140 characters. Twitter is a social media. Social media is connected online so that users can participate, share, and create social networking and forums in the virtual world easily (Anugratami et al., 2014). Twitter is an online-based media, which requires an internet connection as a link.

This study revealed that some accounts on Twitter protested the shift of the character of Ariel. Even the controversies of racism and racial equality had occurred long before the movie was shown. Therefore, the researcher was interested in investigating the equality message delivered by Disney by analyzing the content through a qualitative approach to analyze controversial comments from fans on Twitter. The analysis also aimed to study the messages of gender equality delivered through dialogues and documents including pictures and text presented in The Little Mermaid movie.

Problems regarding race continue in the 21st century. All skin types have the possibility of experiencing racial discrimination. Race is a socially constructed and politicized phenomenon. The main cause is not that certain skin colors are vulnerable to discrimination, but white people always try to gain privilege to continue to dominate. This is explained in a journal entitled "Race as a Social Construct: Analysis of Race Issues in America Through Movie Crash". The black race was discriminated against as they were not allowed to attend white schools, had to eat in different places and go to different toilets, were looked down upon, and were considered outcasts and second-class society. Even after gaining social and political rights, they are still discriminated against. This film analysis aims to support the idea that race is not a biological phenomenon but rather a created ideology (AĞACAN, 2022).

Racial and ethnic equality is still debated and fought for. Disney conveyed the message of racial equality after more than 80 years of producing many animated series. They are considered to have first conveyed a message of equality in the film "The Princess and The Frog". This film tells the friendship between blacks and whites, namely daughters Tiana and Charlotte. The journal "Ambiguities Reflecting Racism in The Princess and The Frog" explains that Disney tried to depict racism in the film implicitly. Researchers see a lot of ambiguity in depicting black and white so that racist aspects emerge. For example, Tiana is described as similar to a Mammy. In contrast, Mammy in American history was the work of black women who were considered respectful by their circle and unequal by white people. Another ambiguity is that black people are described as lower class because they do not have privileges like whites (Oktarina, 2016).

Racial and ethnic equality has become a serious societal issue in the film industry. Research from the journal "Representation of Black and White Races in the Film "The

Avengers" explains that this film still depicts Nick Fury as a cruel and uncivilized character as a black person. However, researchers also found a shift in black stereotypes, such as changes in the image of blacks regarding leadership. This is probably an imperfect change as the black characters are still depicted as cruel leaders who still need white people's help. Researchers also explained that in terms of social, economic, and intellectual status, the black race remains below the white race (Yufandar, 2016).

The number of films about black and white races is growing. For example, the film Cadillac Records tells how white people treat black people. The research entitled "Representation of Racism in the Film Cadillac Records" explains that the film depicts that black people have no power over themselves. In contrast, white people control everything, including black lives. The film also depicts the trafficking of blacks by whites. Whites were also depicted as having saved blacks from poverty. Therefore, this research explains that whites treat blacks unequally and consider them trading commodities (Pratama, 2016).

Film production that raises themes of oppression and discrimination against the black race triggers the white race to re-clarify their identity as the party that enlightens black people. Therefore, circulating films, such as *The Help*, are considered to redefine white skin to black skin. The research entitled "Redefinition of White Superiority to Blacks in the Film of *The Help*" explains that not all whites discriminate against blacks. It talks about a white character who opposes acts of discrimination and defends black rights through a book published and read by the general public. Apart from that, the researcher stated that the struggle spearheaded by blacks would not have been successful without the help of whites, stating that the phenomenon of white racial superiority brought positive aspects, namely an increase in the economic level and awareness of the potential possessed by blacks. Finally, "*The Help*" redefines white superiority, which does not always negatively impact black lives (Dalimunthe & Saputra, 2021).

## **METHOD**

This study applied a content analysis method with a qualitative approach to analyze fan comments, identifying the content of equality messages in the scenes, dialogue, and documents including images, text, and others. The qualitative approach aims to explain phenomena in depth by collecting data without considering the population and sample sizes. Qualitative research focuses more on the data collection process, not the amount of data obtained (Kriyantono, 2010). The content analysis method explores the information conveyed in a speech medium (Arafat, 2018). It is considered objective if the researcher has successfully studied what is in the text (advertisement) without subjectivity (Eriyanto, 2015).

Data was obtained from Twitter comments and scenes in the Live-Action film *The Little Mermaid*. The message here is equality regarding the change in the cast in the film from the white race to the black race. This provokes pros and cons among viewers of the film *The Little Mermaid*. Some opposed it because they thought the film had shattered audience expectations from animated films. Still, some supported the role change because *The Little Mermaid* exhibition was unrelated to a particular race. Then, data, including documentation of scene images and screenshots of comments, are collected for further classification.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The live-action *The Little Mermaid* was adapted by Walt Disney and premiered exclusively in theaters on May 24, 2023. Directed by Rob Marshall, this musical fantasy film is eagerly awaited by Disney fans. This film tells the story of Ariel, played by Halle Bailey, as a beautiful mermaid curious about the human world. Ariel is the youngest daughter of King Triton, who falls in love with a charming prince. Ariel makes a pact with an evil sea witch named Ursula to achieve her dream of living on land. Halle Bailey is a singer and actress from

the United States; she is the first black woman Disney chose to play the character Ariel in The Little Mermaid Live-action. A long time before the movie was shown, The Little Mermaid attracted the attention of fans, especially Twitter social media users, which can be seen from enthusiastic comments to controversial comments that have filled the timeline for several periods. Some of these comments were ridicule, rejection, and even racist comments directed at The Little Mermaid actor Halle Bailey because she was the first black live-action princess actor.

Many negative comments from viewers were addressed to Halle Bailey. They think Disney has destroyed their expectations by casting this woman as Ariel. Halle Bailey, as the main character, is considered inappropriate to portray the film's main character in the animated version, released decades ago. In the animated film version, the main character, Ariel, is depicted as a white woman with long, flowing red hair. Meanwhile, in the live-action version, Ariel's character is visualized as a black woman with golden-orange dreadlocks. This significant difference in the depiction of the characters immediately provoked many objections from the audience. Especially among those who have been loyal Disney viewers since they were children, many are disappointed with Disney because they chose Halle Bailey as Ariel. This is considered inconsistent with their childhood expectations.

A number of controversial opinions then gave rise to a phenomenon that contains several questions. Are the comments, actions, and reactions of the audience simply because they are disappointed with the replacement of the main character or because there are other elements, such as issues of racism? Racism is the differential treatment of individuals based on skin color, ethnicity, race, and background, and this limits or violates individual rights and freedoms. (Amnesty, 2021). Many comments circulating on Twitter contain racist sentences such as the following.



Figure 1 Comment (Source: Twitter)

@rapeeps commented on the character Ariel, Halle Bailey, in the film The Little Mermaid, that she was not worthy of playing the main character because she was ugly, black, and not beautiful. This insulting comment was responded to by 127 comments, retweeted 151 times, and liked by 727 people. We found many similar opinions that perceived the character Ariel as not meeting their expectations.



Figure 2 Comment (Source: Twitter)

Racist comments were also found on the @boredsaurus account, which said, "The Little Mermaid doesn't need to use a black actor, haha". This comment received one comment, was

retweeted six times, and received 69 likes. Insulting comments referring to the skin color of Ariel in *The Little Mermaid Live-action* have been viewed by 4,585 people. The @boredsaurus account thinks that Princess Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* should be white and black actors should not play Princess Ariel in the live-action film *The Little Mermaid*. This harsh criticism is one of racism against black people. This comment also emphasizes that black people are lower class because they do not have privileges like whites. (Oktarina, 2016). This is a real implication of white supremacy, which believes that the white race is superior to other races (Jenkins, 2023).

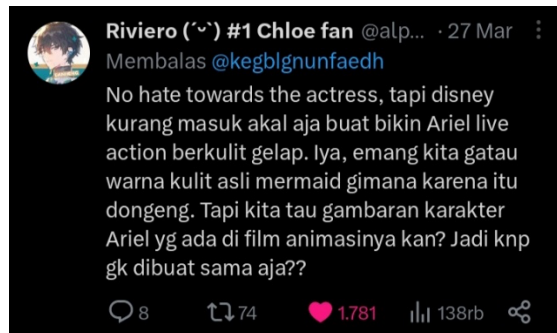


Figure 3 Comment (Source: Twitter)

The next comment came from the @alpenliben account, criticizing the racism towards Princess Ariel in *The Little Mermaid Live-action*. This comment received eight responses with 74 retweets and was liked by 1,781 people. The comments contain harsh criticism of Princess Ariel's skin color, which, according to the @alpenliben account, makes no sense because Princess Ariel has black skin because Ariel's white skin has been embedded in their memory. Disney's live-action depiction was deemed inconsistent with the animated version. Audiences hope that Disney presents what they present in animation and does not need to change Princess Ariel's skin color to black.



Figure 4 Comment (Source: Twitter)

On the other hand, the @awisawii account questioned why the actor Ariel's hair in the film was dreadlocks. The comment, accompanied by a crying emoji, invited other accounts to respond. A sarcastic response from the @martiniblw account said that Ariel never combed her hair when she was in the sea. According to BBC News U.K., dreadlocks are a typical hairstyle and the second most common after the afro hairstyle by black ethnicities (Jahangir, 2015). So, the dreadlock hairstyle represents the black race. The question from the @awisawii account is a form of criticism as to why a black person must play Ariel. Another comment from

@resturagilpamungkas said that the mermaid Ariel comes from the Caribbean, emphasizing that the mermaid Ariel is black.

Apart from comments regarding the physical appearance of the actor Ariel, Twitter users also commented on one of the photos posted on the Automatic Fanpage (autobase), @memefess, a photo with the caption "What we want" on a photo of a black person and "What we get" on a photo of the actor Ariel ( Halle Bailey) received lots of comments and likes from Twitter users. In the photo, there is a white person who they hope will play Ariel, while comments of disappointment are thrown at the photo with a black person, namely Hailey Bailey or the character Ariel in The Little Mermaid Live-action.



Figure 5 Comment (Source: Twitter)

One of the @Haikaalf accounts replied to the post with a statement agreeing and thinking that the photo was funny. He said that blacks were not suited to films and were better suited to frolicking in cotton fields. This comment refers to the history of slavery of Black Americans who were enslaved on plantations owned by British colonies in North America (Purwati & Soeprapto, 2003). White people are depicted as the controllers of the blacks like black people were bought and sold and became enslaved people for the white people; white people even consider black people as profits in their trade, so they should not be treated equally. (Pratama, 2016). The comments of racism, ridicule, and rejection above explain that before and after the screening of The Little Mermaid Live-action, there were many racist comments towards the character Ariel, played by Halle Bailey.

Even since the beginning of the appearance of The Little Mermaid Live-action, fans via social media Twitter have bombed their hate comments using the hashtag #NotMyAriel; after watching the official trailer by Disney, various comments continue to fill social media. Fans argued that mermaids are from European mythology; thus, they should have white skin. Apart from that, they think that Ariel, who is black in Live-action, destroys childhood expectations and changes Ariel's true character. Finally, they consider The Little Mermaid a fairy tale from Denmark. Therefore, she must have white skin, although the original story does not state which sea the mermaid came from (Willingham, 2022). The changes made by Disney to the character of Ariel in The Little Mermaid Live-action are considered to have damaged fans' expectations regarding the Ariel character that has existed so far, so that the message of equality that Disney wants to convey, that mermaids can also be black and can be a symbol of equality, actually brought controversy which stimulates various racist comments regarding the role of Ariel in the live-action film The Little Mermaid.

## CONCLUSION

The Little Mermaid, one of the famous animated films made by Disney, has won a place in the hearts of its viewers. After its first appearance in 1989 in the animated version, The Little Mermaid has successfully attracted audiences' attention. It is one of the iconic movies which is adopted from well-known legends all over the world. Moreover, Ariel, the main figure is iconic with her red hair making her idolized by the viewers, especially kids. It is one of the iconic movies which is adopted from well-known legends all over the world. Not surprisingly, many viewers are waiting for the live-action version of this film. The attention it receives from the public does not guarantee that this film will be free from controversy. Many objections came from the public criticizing this film. Some of them commented that Ariel in the live-action series is not the one they expected because she comes with black skin. Besides that, the difference of the recess between the Ariel in the animated version and the live-action version led them to assume that Ariel is not the princess illustrated as a beautiful girl and white skin as in the animated movie.

The live-action film The Little Mermaid sparked controversy after the cast of Princess Ariel differed from what Disney depicted in the animation. Disney brought a message of equality by replacing Ariel with a black actor. This received harsh criticism from Disney fans, one of which was on Twitter social media. The hashtag #NotMyAriel gained much attention after the trailer for The Little Mermaid Live-Action Movie appeared. Fans thought that what they expected did not match what Disney showed. This harsh criticism was directed at Princess Ariel's black skin color. The scathing comments made by Disney fans were followed by the explanation that blacks were always considered inferior and not equal to whites. This is a real implication of white supremacy or the assumption that the white race is superior and always receives special rights compared to other races. So, the message of equality that Disney wanted to convey became controversial among fans.

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