
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Changing Feminism and Political Correctness in Disney's *The Little Mermaid* Film Series

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ABSTRACT

Disney produced both animation films and live-action adaptations of classic fairytales which reflect transforming gender representations. The purpose of this article is to conduct a comparative analysis of gender representations and political correctness in Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and the live-action adaptation, *The Little Mermaid* (2023). In the light of feminism, the 1989 animation film is to be critically re-examined by comparing it with the original fairytale authored by Hans Christian Andersen and by paying attention to the gender representation and the role of Princess Ariel. Although gender stereotypes are observable in animation films, this research also sheds light on feminist elements in animated films. Moreover, this article seeks to substantiate that the production of the 2023 live-action remake was influenced by feminist philosophy and political correctness by investigating the changing gender norms and racial diversity facilitated by Disney as a major media company that has influenced the global media culture in the world.

KEYWORDS

Ariel, Disney princess, feminism, gender, *The Little Mermaid*, political correctness, racial diversity

ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

The Little Mermaid (1989) is an American animated musical fantasy film produced by Walt Disney (IMDb, 1990-2025a). The production of Disney's 1989 animated film was inspired by *The Little Mermaid* (1837) as an internationally famous Danish fairytale authored by Hans Christian Andersen (Hans Christian Andersen Center, 2019). Still, Disney modified the original fairytale storyline and the character beyond recognition (Tattoli, 2014), and therefore, it is appropriate to describe that Disney loosely relied on the original fairytale rather than entirely based on the original storyline (Myers, 2023). Significantly, the Disney Renaissance (1989-1999) began with the production and release of this 1989 animation film, and Walt Disney consecutively produced other internationally famous and commercially successful animation films, such as *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), *Pocahontas* (1995), *The Hunchback of Notre Dam* (1996), *Hercules* (1997), *Mulan* (1998), and *Tarzan* (1999) (Pallant, 2011). In this sense, the production and release of *The Little Mermaid* (1989) should be regarded as a turning point in the history of Walt Disney as well as that of the animated filmmaking culture.

The Little Mermaid (1989) was so successful that it received high evaluations in the media immediately after the release. Roger Ebert, as a film critic of *The Chicago Sun-Times* who won the Pulitzer Prize for distinguished criticism, commented that "Walt Disney's 'The Little Mermaid' is a jolly and inventive animated fantasy - a movie that's so creative and so much fun it deserves comparison with the best Disney work of the past... Ariel is a fully realized female character who thinks and acts independently, even rebelliously, instead of hanging around passively while the fates decide her destiny" (Ebert, 1989). After the re-release of the film in 1997, Hal Hinson reviewed it in *The Washington Post* as "Walt Disney's likably unspectacular adaptation of the Hans Christian Andersen classic", which has "enough to please any kid" (Hinson, 1997). Thus, the 1989 animation film received highly positive reviews on mass media, but at the same time, the film was not necessarily popular among feminists, as reviewed that "the story won't win any

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prizes from the women's liberation movement" (Siskel, 2021). Despite all these praises, why is Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989) unpopular among the feminists and activists for women's liberation movement? In 2023, Walt Disney released a live-action remake of *The Little Mermaid*, but does it overcome the previous limitations criticized by the feminists?

The purpose of this article is to attempt to answer these key research questions in the light of gender studies as well as political correctness. To this end, it conducts an interdisciplinary analysis of *The Little Mermaid* (1989), and its film series, including *The Little Mermaid II: Return to the Sea* (2000) (IMDb. 1990-2025b) and *The Little Mermaid III: Ariel's Beginning* (2008) (IMDb. 1990-2025c). In particular, this article scrutinizes a feminist critique of the film series, yet it seeks to clarify feminist elements and messages encapsulated in the gender representations. Finally, this research investigates how and to what extent the 2023 live-action remake overcomes the criticisms by feminists and critics in terms of gender stereotypes and feminism as well as racial diversity and political correctness. Through the careful re-examination of the film series, this research contributes to the study of Walt Disney's policy toward diversity, equality, and inclusiveness (DEI) in the changing media culture in the world.

2. Analytical Frameworks: Gender, Feminism, and Political Correctness

As a research method, this article is primarily based on a "qualitative data analysis", such as a "content analysis, thematic analysis, textual analysis, and discourse analysis" (Bhandari, 2025), rather than a "quantitative data analysis" especially in application of statistics, which is also effective approach in the study of the social sciences (Maxim, 1999). Academically, a content analysis is defined as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (Krippendorff, 2004: 18). Here, films and film reviews in media could be regarded as "other meaningful matter" in the content analysis as a qualitative data analysis approach. Some earlier studies conducted a "speech act analysis" on *Frozen* as a case study of qualitative analysis in terms of linguistics (Widayanti and Unwidha 2018). In earlier research, for example, a content analysis has been applied to the study of children's animation film characters by paying attention to gender stereotypes (González, Paniagua, Thornborrow, and Jordán, 2020). Understandably, some earlier studies conducted a content analysis of Disney animation films (Lavoie, 2008), and there exists some previous research on Disney animation films from the perspective of hegemony (Arnold, Seidl, and Deloney, 2015), gender representation (Rudloff, 2016), and gender sensitive messages (Mujam, Wulandari, and Ekawati, 2016). Hence, it is possible to conduct a content analysis of Disney's *The Little Mermaid* film series as a case study in academic research. As a research approach of the content analysis, this research mainly focuses on "secondary sources", such as books, journal articles, and film reviews (Harvard Library, 2025a), rather than conversation or songs by main characters in *The Little Mermaid* film series as "primary sources" (Harvard Library, 2025b).

As an analytical framework, this examines "gender representation" and "gender role" in Disney's *The Little Mermaid* Series from the perspective of gender studies. First, "gender" is defined as the "state of being male or female" in *Cambridge Dictionary* (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025a). According to *Oxford Reference*, it is explained that whereas sex is the biological category, gender is the "culturally shaped expression of sexual difference" (Oxford Reference, 2025a). Likewise, other researchers observed that gender is "typically understood in reference to culturally embedded aspects of identity, experience, social interactions, norms, and power dynamics related to femininity and masculinity" (DuBois, Trujillo, and McCarthy, 2025: 7). Meanwhile, Lynne M. Woehrle and Donna Engelmann defined gender studies as "a multifaceted field of inquiry into social structures and social relations that has important implications for the study of violence, peace, and conflict" (Woehrle and Engelmann, 2008: 859). In other words, it is fair to argue that "gender" is a poly-semantic term, and the meaning differs from researcher to researchers. Yet, it can be observed that the "way gender is represented in the media does have an influence on how we perceive gender roles" (Poppa and Gavrilu, 2015: 1200), and hence, it is necessary to analyze "gender representation" and "gender role" in an analysis of Disney films as a case study of gender studies.

Second, "feminism" is one of the important research keywords in gender studies, and Stanford University, for instance, provides a course on feminism as "feminist, gender, and sexuality studies" (Stanford University, 2025). According to *Oxford Reference*, feminism is defined as "the approach to social life, philosophy, and ethics that commits itself to correcting biases leading to the subordination of women or the disparagement of women's particular experience and of the voices women bring to discussion" (Oxford Reference, 2025b). Similarly, *Cambridge Dictionary* defines it as "the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025b). It has to be noted that there are several variants of feminism, such as "liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, socialist feminism, radical feminism, ecofeminism, cultural feminism, black feminism, and postmodern feminism" (Mohajan, 2022: 4), but some types of feminism are overlapped each other. Either way, Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and its series can be and need to be analyzed from the perspective of feminism as well.

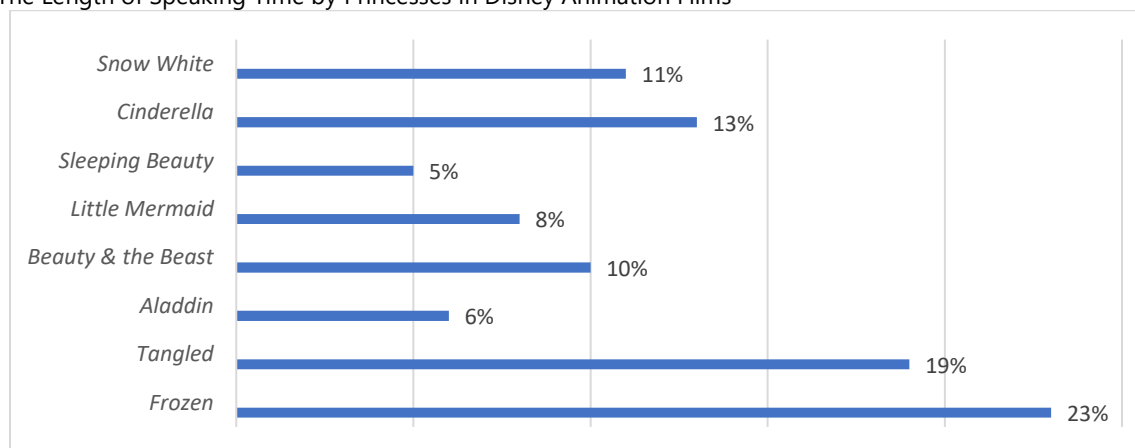
Third, Disney's live-action remake of *The Little Mermaid* (2023) can be re-examined in the light of "political correctness", which is also poly-semantic and controversial terminology (Ely, Meyerson, and Davidson, 2006). According to *Oxford Reference*, political

correctness is defined as “careful choice of words in spoken and written communications and actions, intended to avoid giving offense to ethnic, racial, cultural, or sexually oriented groups, disabled persons, and other designated groups that may be stigmatized” (Oxford Reference, 2025c). Likewise, *Cambridge Dictionary* defines the term as “the act of avoiding language and actions that could be offensive to others, especially those relating to sex, gender, and race” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025c). Still, it is important to recognize that there are two types of political correctness: “liberal political correctness” argued by the leftwing and “conservative political correctness” supported by the rightwing (Krugman, 2012). For convenience, political correctness refers to the former throughout this article. In the study of Disney animation and live-action films, more and more researchers tend to pay attention to the influence of political correctness in recent years (Akimoto, 2025). Accordingly, this article seeks to employ these interdisciplinary analytical frameworks (gender, feminism, political correctness) in the analysis of Disney's *The Little Mermaid* film series.

3. A Feminist Critique of Disney's Animated Film *The Little Mermaid* (1989)

It has been reviewed that Disney's animation film, *The Little Mermaid* (1989), is not a feminist film, because it eliminated the “values that affirm femininity in the original story” (Trites, 1991: 145). Critics of the 1989 animation film have argued the film is “embarrassingly retrograde in terms of its gender politics”, because Ariel chooses to lose her voice to be with a man about whom she barely knows (Cruz, 2014). It was pointed out that “sexist language” based on gender stereotype is used in *The Little Mermaid* (1989), and hence, the film contains gender bias which could influence the audience, especially young audience who pick up new phrases by watching the animated film (Begum, 2022). Likewise, the 1989 animation film was critically viewed as “sexist” and “problematic”, because Ariel fell in love with Prince Eric “at first sight” just like other traditional Disney princess animation films. Also, the appearance of Ariel is too showy and thin, and therefore, her body proportion based on lookism could facilitate the “sexualization and fetishization” of young audience. Moreover, King Triton embodies “toxic masculinity” and his kingdom represents white male privilege as well as the patriarchal system (Long, 2022).

Graph 1: The Length of Speaking Time by Princesses in Disney Animation Films



Note: Frozen (2013) includes the talks by both Anna and Elsa (Kamise and Sasaki, 2016: 18).

In terms of gender equality, some researchers analyzed the length of talks by male and female characters in Disney films. As a result, it turned out that Men speak 68 percent of the time in the 1989 animation film, and Ariel loses her voice in order to become a human being for three days (Guo, 2016). From the feminist perspective moreover, the 1989 animation film contains gender stereotypes based on “male gaze” as well as “misogyny”. Indeed, Ariel as a female protagonist is portrayed as a glamorous characteristic as a mermaid. Also, Ariel is expected to be submissive to her father under the sea, and to Prince Eric on the ground (Feminist Film Studies, 2018). In terms of “lookism”, it has been discussed that Ariel is portrayed as if she were a “drag queen through her appearances” (Frohnepfel, 2022). Ariel’s “physical charm” is composed of her “red hair, sharp facial features, and skinny body structure” (Parashar, 2022: 6228). In the film, Ariel is told that “beautiful face and sensuous body convey a lot more than her actual words” (Ibid). Since body images of Disney princesses are influential for the young audience, Ariel’s skinny looking has a potential to cause eating disorders, such as anorexia or bulimia among teenage girls and young women, as pointed out by Erin Ryan, a professor at Kennesaw State University. Ryan added that “It is problematic and beyond unrealistic, because there is no way to diet yourself into looking like Ariel from ‘The Little Mermaid’” (Kennesaw State University, 2020).

Some critics and celebrities, including Keira Knightly and Mindy Kaling, claim the plot of *The Little Mermaid* (1989) contains sexism, and some parents consider that “I don’t want my child to see ‘The Little Mermaid’ because I don’t want them to chase after a man” (Lemoncelli, 2019). Paloma Faith also joined the “chorus of celebrities banning their children from seeing *The Little Mermaid* after

determining that the Disney film sets a bad example for young girls" (Aspinall, 2023). Faith commented that "As a mother of girls, I don't want my kids to think it's ok to give up your entire voice and your powers to love a man" (Ibid). As shown in Graph 1, the length of speaking time by Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* (1989) is only 8 percent, which is as worse as Aurora of *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) who falls asleep and Princess Jasmine of *Aladdin* (1992) who is not a protagonist.

In short, Ariel is depicted as an icon of woman's condition in the patriarchal society (Tseelon, 1995). For those who criticize the Disney mermaid film, the message of the film is anything but feminist. A critic of the 1989 film put it: "Ariel must learn to channel her sexual desires and suffer for a man before she can win him as a prize... Ariel's curiosity and desire to be part of another world almost causes her death as well as her father's; the prince saves Ariel by piercing the witch with the phallic bow of his ship; thanks to him Ariel is transformed from mermaid into a beautiful bride" (Borges, 2007). Thus, the issue of the lookism of Ariel and the anti-feminist storyline have been critically discussed in earlier research and in media as well.

4. Disney's Animated Film *The Little Mermaid* (1989) as a Feminist Film

On the other hand, some critics have contended that Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989) can be viewed as a feminist film. In comparison with the three classical Disney princesses, Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora, Ariel is portrayed as a more active and independent female protagonist. Ariel goes to adventure and literally chases a prince, overcoming the passivity classical Disney princesses exhibited (Ogiue, 2014: 123). In this sense, *The Little Mermaid* (1989) became a turning-point for Disney princess movies as shown in Table 1. Notably, Ariel herself can be seen as a feminist because of "the insane amount of confidence ingrained in her and standing her ground in what she perceives right" (Melody, 2020). Compared to the classical Disney princesses, Ariel as an empowered heroine is a "rebel, unapologetic about pursuing her own dreams and desires" (Watkins, 2019). Moreover, Ursula as a villain tries to assure Ariel that "human men prefer their women to be silent", but that is the other way around, and "Ariel's voice is the reason Eric fell in love with her" (Ibid). The storyline implies that this female protagonist is expected to speak and sing so that her opinion and feelings could be understood. Although her father expects Ariel to stay under the sea, Ariel desires to explore the forbidden world above the ocean. The three classical Disney princesses are not as adventurous or courageous as Ariel is. Therefore, Disney's 1989 animated film is not a "feminist's worst nightmare" (Watkins, 2014). In this sense, the storyline and the character of Ariel could be seen as feminist elements, and an analysis by Erica Scharrer at the University of Massachusetts and Chyng Feng Sun at New York University demonstrates the existence of college students' resistance to criticism of *The Little Mermaid* (1989) (Sun and Scharrer, 2004).

Table 1: Chronology of Disney Princess Animation Films from *Snow White* (1939) to *Frozen* (2013)

Name of Film	Year	Name of Princess	Gender Representation
<i>Snow White</i>	1939	Snow White	Being saved by a prince
<i>Cinderella</i>	1950	Cinderella	Being saved by a prince
<i>Sleeping Beauty</i>	1959	Aurora	Being saved by a prince
<i>The Little Mermaid</i>	1989	Ariel	Saves and chases a prince
<i>Beauty & the Beast</i>	1991	Belle	Saves a prince and loves him gradually
<i>Aladdin</i>	1992	Jasmine	Not interested in arranged marriages
<i>Tangled</i>	2010	Rapunzel	Saves a male protagonist with magic
<i>Frozen</i>	2013	Anna	Prioritizes her sister over a prince
		Elsa	Shows no romantic interest in a prince

Note: Created by the author based on the Disney princess films.

In an interview with *Hello Giggles* on February 8, 2019, Jodi Benson, the voice of Ariel, explained about why *The Little Mermaid* (1989) is more feminist than people think. Benson firmly contended that the 1989 animation film is a feminist movie with positive messages to the audience. In particular, Benson pointed out that Ariel possesses positive qualities as she is "tenacious, strong-willed, determined, and motivated" (Entenman, 2019). Benson moreover added her opinion on the feminism of the 1989 animation film as follows:

I know there are celebrities that have banned their children from watching it... I think we have to take into consideration that we [made the film] in 1989... To expect an '89 film to leap to 2019 as far as feminism goes, I think it's asking a lot. I'm not defending it; my job is not to get in the middle of the debate. I think my job is to make people aware that we did the best film that we felt we could do with integrity and character (Ibid).

As Benson pointed out, the feminism of the 1980s is different from that of the 2020s. However, it is fair to consider that the 1989 animation film reflected the philosophy of feminism to a certain extent. In the classical Disney princess films, the three princesses are kissed and rescued by men, but the case of Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* is opposite, because the princess rescues the prince and seeks to kiss him. Thus, feminists denounced the “true love’s kiss” in the classical Disney princess stories, and *The Little Mermaid* (1989) overcame the feminist critique in the first place.

Furthermore, it is important to note that Walt Disney changed the storyline of Andersen’s mermaid fairytale. In Andersen’s original story, the little mermaid as a protagonist “does not marry the handsome prince and this sad story of unrequited or unfulfilled heterosexual love has been linked to Andersen’s own personal life” (Shimmer Analysis, 2021). Hence, it can be observed that the 1989 animation film was already a “feminist film” and the people forget how progressive the animated protagonist was back in 1989. In a way, those who regard the 1989 animated film as an “anti-feminist film” could be categorized as “girlboss feminists” and their characteristics could be categorized as the similar ones that Ursula exhibits in the film (Strong, 2023).

5. The Live-Action Remake *The Little Mermaid* (2023) as Feminist Revision

Walt Disney released a live-action adaptation of *The Little Mermaid* in 2023 (IMDb, 1990-2025d). Feminist critics expressed their expectation that the live-action remake of *The Little Mermaid* should not be as anti-feminist or sexist as the 1989 animation version (Long, 2022). In the face of the feminist critique, the 2023 live-action remake of *The Little Mermaid* underwent feminist revision just like other live-action adaptations of Disney princess films. In particular, Prince Eric is depicted as helpless at the mercy of the overwhelming power of Ursula in the live-action remake. Unlike the 1989 animation version in which Eric saves Ariel in the end, Ariel rescues Eric by resorting to violence to crack down on the violent power of Ursula at the climax of the live-action film. It was reviewed that “Never in all of Disney’s live actions or animations has a princess committed this type of violence”, although Disney princesses in animation films, such as Mulan at war and Rapunzel for self-defense, occasionally resort to violence (Adetunji, 2023). At the end of this film, Ariel does not marry Eric and they instead “leave to explore uncharted waters together, demonstrating that a woman does not have to choose between her dreams and romance” (Ibid).

In essence, the 2023 live-action remake of *The Little Mermaid* “definitely changed that perspective of just her wanting to leave the ocean for a boy” as an added feminist twist, as explained by Halle Bailey, an African-American singer-songwriter, who played the role of Ariel in the 2023 film. Bailey continued that “It’s way bigger than that. It’s about herself, her purpose, her freedom, her life and what she wants... As women we are amazing, we are independent, we are modern, we are everything and above. And I’m glad that Disney is updating some of those themes” (Dodge, 2023). Importantly, Bailey admitted that the 1989 animation film was not feminist and modern enough, and stressed that “So [now] it’s more about Ariel finding freedom for herself because of this world that she’s obsessed with. [Prince Eric] is a cherry on top. But it’s not all about him” (Bentz, 2023). Thus, it is fair to argue that the 2023 live-action remake of *The Little Mermaid* places more emphasis on self-growth and freedom of Ariel rather than romance and elopement.

Ariel in the 2023 live-action remake sing a song, “For the First Time” after she turns into a human being as a result of the deal with Ursula as follows: “Squeeze in the shoes and the corset, it’s tight. And the seams are bursting. Some women choose this, I guess it’s alright. Are my dreams adjusting” (Disney Fandom, 2025a). The lyrics show how Ariel feels about standing on her own two feet on land, and the term “corset” is a symbol of a beauty standard in the patriarchal society from the feminist perspective (Jokic, 2023). More importantly, the lyrics of the song “Kiss the Girl” were revised and it indicates that the kiss between Ariel and Eric necessitates consent. In the original song, the lyrics go: “Possible she wants you too. There is one way to ask her. It don’t [sic] take a word. Not a single word. Go on and kiss the girl...” (Ariana, 2023). Yet, the 2023 lyrics go as follows: “Possible she want [sic] you too. Use your words, boy, and ask her. If the time is right and the time is tonight. Go on and kiss the girl...” (Disney Fandom, 2025b). The lyrics of the song represent that it is necessary to have a consent to kiss someone, and this is Disney’s answer to the previous criticism against the true love’s kiss without a consent in the classical Disney princess films. With these feminist revisions, the 2023 live-action remake of *The Little Mermaid* updated feminist images of the storyline as well as the main characters in the film.

6. Political Correctness in the Live-Action Remake *The Little Mermaid* (2023)

In the filmmaking process of the 2023 live-action remake, a pre-release controversy occurred over the casting of Ariel. It was reported that when Halle Bailey was selected to play the role of Ariel, the global backlash against the casting happened because Ariel in the 1989 animation film is a White princess (Bero, 2023). The wave of racist backlashes on the casting escalated into a movement of sharing a hashtag, “#NotMyAriel”, on social media around the globe. The trailer on Youtube ended up with more than 1.5 million “dislikes” with racist comments (Willingham, 2022). Still, such racist backlashes against the casting of the film was “extremely predictable”, because those who are against the casting may well claim that the adaptation based on the racial diversity would weaken the “faithfulness to the original story” (Romano, 2022). Some critics went too far as to describe that the 2023 live-

action remake ignores the fact that slavery used to exist on this planet, and that the film should have explored the slavery system as well (Burton, 2023).

The similar backlashes against the casting of Bailey as Ariel occurred in Asia as well. Chinese state media condemned the casting because Bailey as a Black does not resemble the White protagonist in the 1989 animation film and the 1837 Andersen fairytale. *The Global Times*, a nationalistic Chinese tabloid, accused Disney of turning "classic tales into 'sacrificial lambs' for political correctness" by casting non-White actors in the film (Hale, 2023). As a result of the backlash against the casting of Ariel in China, the 2023 live-action remake had grossed "a mere \$3.6 million in its first 10 days of release in China, by far the worst showing among Disney's live-action adaptations" in the country (Macclintock and Brzeski, 2023). Similar backlashes against the Ariel casting of the 2023 live-action remake generated in Japan and South Korea too. In Japan, the criticism against the casting was not that fierce, but some Disney fan made negative comments on an online forum, noting "Don't trample on my cherished childhood memories and the image of Ariel" (Toh, Zhu, and Bae, 2023). In South Korea, a Disney fan commented on Instagram that the film had been "ruined" because of the racially diverse casting, adding "#NotMyAriel" on social media (Ibid).

In response to the global backlash against the casting, Halle Bailey responded with a comment that "As a Black person, you just expect it and it's not really a shock anymore... I know people are like, 'It's not about race'. But now that I'm her... People don't understand that when you're Black there's this whole other community. It's so important for us to see ourselves" (Gardner, 2023). Regarding the racist backlash regarding a Black Ariel, Rob Marshall as Director of the 2023 live-action remake commented that "To the people who don't agree with our casting, it feels so small-minded, and that's what the film is about - to not be afraid of someone who is not like you" (Chi, 2023). The Director moreover continued that "I have to say that it feels so archaic. Like, really? We are [sic] still discussing racism in this era? Being different, it's very timely, especially when you see how divided the world has become. My hope is that this beautiful tale of a mermaid can remind us all that we are all one" (Ibid). Thus, the comments of Bailey and Marshal represent that the production of the 2023 live-action adaptation based on racial diversity matters for racial equity in the filmmaking culture and freedom of representation in media.

On the significance of the casting of a Black Ariel, Sherri Hope Culver, an expert in children's media, an associate professor in media studies and production and director of the Center for Media and Information Literacy at Temple University, argued that the 2023 live-action film would influence the audience, especially young girls, regarding the recognition of diversity on Disney princesses, and pointed out that "to have a popular Disney character as a person of color leaves a strong, positive mark on their minds, especially when they see that character change from white to Black. If Disney can do it, everybody can do it" (Klecko, 2023). Similarly, Roland Williams, a professor and department chair of English with expertise in African American literature and Hollywood cinema, explains the impact and importance of racial diversity in films and Hollywood, regarding Disney's decision on the casting of a Black Ariel. Professor Williams stressed the positive influence of the film, noting that "This version of *The Little Mermaid* is great for young people because it allows them to better appreciate diversity and gain a better sense of the world. Diversity and inclusion in film and TV can attract a larger audience and is seen as more authentic and enjoyable" (Ibid). Thus, it can be argued that the 2023 live-action remake of *The Little Mermaid* became one of the critical turning-points for facilitating racial diversity in the filmmaking and media culture in the world.

7. Conclusion

This article has conducted a comparative analysis of the gender representations of Disney's animation film *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and its live-action adaptation released in 2023. First, it was confirmed that although Disney created the 1989 animation film based on a fairytale of *The Little Mermaid* (1837) authored by Hans Christian Andersen, the content is quite different from each other, and Disney especially changed the storyline as a typical Disney princess animation film for the sake of "happily ever after". The 1989 animation film has been beloved and watched in the world, but at the same time, it has been critically reviewed by feminists that the film contains anti-feminist and sexist implications for the audience. In order to clarify these arguments, this research thoroughly scrutinized the earlier studies on the 1989 animated film.

Feminist critics actually denounced the 1989 animation film as "problematic" because Ariel loses her voice for a man. The lost voice of Ariel implies that women do not need to speak and just need to follow what men say and decide. Also, Ariel falls in love with Eric at first sight, and it has been a source of feminist criticism for a long time. From the perspective of parents, the scenario in which a 16-years-old girl ends up with the elopement for a forbidden romance with an 18 years-old man is something unacceptable. Moreover, it has been discussed that Ariel has an extremely thin waist and which could cause eating disorders among young female audience, because they tend to admire and perceive Disney princesses as role models. In addition, it has been viewed that the storyline of the 1989 film is based on the patriarchal culture.

At the same time however, this research examined feminist elements and messages in the 1989 animation film. In comparison with classical Disney princesses, such as Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora, Ariel's personality is relatively active and sometimes rebellious against the patriarchal tradition. As Jodi Benson, the voice of Ariel, explained, Ariel was regarded as progressive and proactive at the time of the release of the film back in 1989. Unlike the classical Disney princesses, Ariel does not wait for a prince to come, but she takes action and goes to adventure based on her strong will. Therefore, it was observed that Ariel completely overcame the passivity for which the classical Disney princesses have been criticized. Furthermore, Disney changed the storyline of the original Andersen fairytale for a happy ending. This is a positive message and encouragement for the audience that a goal can be achieved and a woman can be free from the patriarchal family tradition. For these reasons, the 1989 animation film can be seen as a feminist film.

This article has investigated the 2023 live-action remake of *The Little Mermaid* from the perspective of feminism and political correctness. In the 2023 live-action remake, Ariel plays a critical role in defeating Ursula at the climax of the film unlike the 1989 animation film. Whereas Eric is depicted as a helpless prince at the mercy of the magical power of Ursula, Ariel resorts to use of force for collective self-defense against the antagonist. It is unusual for Disney princess to resort to violence in live-action adaptations. Although violence should not be justified in the name of feminism, if it falls under the exercise of the right to collective self-defense against the Disney villain, it can be seen as female empowerment in a feminist manner. The lyrics of the song, "For the First Time" represent the feminist perspective on the corset that is a symbol of gender norm that restrains the freedom of women. The lyrics of another song, "Kiss the Girl" indicate the necessity of consent to kiss which was ignored in the classical Disney princess films. These changes could be regarded as feminist revisions and updates for the women empowerment.

This article moreover paid attention to the influence of political correctness in the casting of the 2023 live-action remake of *The Little Mermaid*. Disney courageously chose Halle Bailey to play a role of Ariel, but racist backlashes against the casting of the Black Ariel occurred not only in the United States but also in Asia and in the world. The opponents to the casting of Bailey provided a plausible logic that Disney should have been true to the original animated version and the image of Ariel was ruined by the casting based on racial diversity. The same sentimental responses to the casting of Bailey as a non-White Ariel happened in China, South Korea, and Japan too. As Bailey herself and Director Rob Marshall responded however, it has been argued that the casting should be regarded as a right decision based on political correctness. Moreover, the casting of Bailey as Black Ariel can be a positive message for the young audience and a change for the racial recognition in the media, as pointed out by Associate Professor Culver and Professor Williams at Temple University. The racial backlashes worldwide demonstrate how the traditional values of the audience have been deconstructed in the changing filmmaking and media culture, and this is how the 1989 animated film and the 2023 live-action remake matter in the light of feminism and political correctness.

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