
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Disney's *Moana* and the Media Portrayal of Feminism/Postfeminism and Political Correctness

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| ABSTRACT

The Walt Disney Company created a musical animation film, *Moana* (2016), inspired by the Polynesian culture and history. It was commercially successful, and *Moana II* was released in 2024. This article examines Disney's *Moana* film series with regard to feminism, postfeminism, and political correctness. It begins with the definition and discussion of feminism and postfeminism as analytical frameworks, and confirms the background of feminism and political correctness related to the Walt Disney Company. Moreover, this article comparatively analyzes the feminist critique of *Moana* film series and feminist/postfeminist elements at the same time. Prior research has shed light on aspects of racial and cultural prejudices as well as coloniality of the film series in a critical manner, and these aspects will be reexamined as well. Likewise, a debate on so-called cultural appropriation is to be highlighted in the light of political correctness. This research argues that *Moana* film series has feminist/postfeminist elements and that although there are some racial/cultural prejudices in the film series, it would be an overexaggeration to jump to the conclusion that the film series is based on the coloniality and cultural appropriation.

| KEYWORDS

Cultural appropriation, Disney, feminism, *Moana*, political correctness, Polynesian, postfeminism

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Walt Disney's animation film *Moana*, directed by John Musker and Ron Clements, was released in 2016 (IMDb, 1990-2026a). Simply put, this is a Disney princess movie. Moana is a daughter of the chief of a Polynesian island. The village of the island is under the influence of an ancient curse caused by a demigod named Maui. Moana's father forbids Moana from leaving the island, but she sets out on a journey in an attempt to seek Maui so that they can break the curse and save the village (Clark, 2016). It was commercially successful, and the box office amounted to 248,757,044 U.S. dollars domestically, 394,574,067 U.S. dollars internationally, and 643,331,111 U.S. dollars in total (Box Office Mojo, 2026). Voice casts of the film represent racial diversity and Polynesian backgrounds. The voice of Moana was acted by Auli'i Cravalho, a 15-year-old Native Hawaiian, Puerto Rican, Portuguese, Chinese and Irish ancestry (Wallace, 2016). Maui's voice was acted by Dwayne Johnson who has a Samoan heritage (Fink, 2025). The voice of Moana's grandmother, Tala, was performed by Rachel House who has the Māori heritage as the indigenous Polynesian of New Zealand (Sloss, 2025). The voice of Moana's mother, Sina, was performed by Nicole Scherzinger, a native Hawaiian artist (Shimokawa, 2018). Therefore, it is fair to argue that Disney did research on the Polynesian culture and paid respect for the voice casting as well. In fact, Scherzinger commented that "I'm proud to be of Hawaiian descent so it's an honor to be a part of this beautiful cast and this film... Disney did their research and it really represents our Polynesian people" (Sharpe, 2024).

In spite of the cultural and racial diversity Disney attempted to embody in this film, there is criticism from the feminist and cultural perspectives in academia and journalism. From the perspective of Anthropology, Akira Goto, a professor at Nanzan University,

discussed that although *Moana* (2016) caused global audience to be interested in Oceanic Studies, and seemingly alerted on environmental destruction, Disney has sold plastic commodities related to the film, which would cause negative impacts on the environment in the end (Goto, 2023). Utako Kurihara, a professor at Seinan Gakuin University, moreover pointed out that the use of tattoo of Maui in the film is not appropriate in terms of the Polynesian culture (Kurihara, 2017). Likewise, Ida Yoshinaga, an assistant professor at Georgia Institute of Technology, harshly criticized that the screenplay development process of *Moana* (2016) by Disney reflects a “larger labor management and marketing strategy” to build a “transmedial global empire”, pointing out that there exists colonial aspects in the filmmaking process of the “Pacific princess” story (Yoshinaga, 2019).

Considering the critical argument in earlier studies, the purpose of this article is to re-examine Disney’s *Moana* film series from the perspective of feminism, postfeminism, and political correctness, although it mainly focuses on *Moana* (2016) rather than *Moana II* (2024) or the live action remake to be released in July 2026. To this end, it begins with the definition and discussion on feminism and postfeminism in Disney films, and confirms the background of political correctness and the Walt Disney Company. This article comparatively analyzes feminist critique of *Moana* film series and feminist/postfeminist elements of the film series related to gender norms, such as masculinity and patriarchy. Earlier research has shed light on aspects of racial and cultural prejudices as well as coloniality of the film series in critical manners, and these aspects will be investigated as well. Likewise, a debate on so-called cultural appropriation is to be highlighted in the light of political correctness. In the light of gender studies, this research argues that *Moana* film series has feminist/postfeminist elements and that although there are some racial/cultural prejudices in the film series, it would be an overexaggeration to jump to the conclusion that the film series is based on coloniality and cultural appropriation.

2. Background of Feminism and Feminism/Postfeminism in Disney Films

Disney’s *Moana* film series can be examined from the perspective of feminism as well as postfeminism. While feminism is defined 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, 2026a), postfeminism is a “discourse popularized by the mass media in the 1990s reflecting a reaction against the feminist theories of the 1970s and 1980s, often on the basis that the ‘battle of the sexes’ is over” (Oxford Reference, 2026). According to the Oxford Reference, postfeminism is “characterized by an (essentialist) emphasis on femininity as well as on ‘the career woman’” (Ibid). From the postfeminist perspective, the feminist notion of women as the “passive victims of patriarchy” is rejected, and postfeminist discourse could entail “ecofeminism” and “cyberfeminism” (Ibid). Either way, the notion of postfeminism has been recognized as one of the most important in the lexicon of feminist cultural studies in the light of postfeminist media culture (Gill, 2007 : 147).

For some casual observers, the concept of postfeminism is paradoxical, because it overlaps with other types of feminism (Boyd, 2015: 104). Indeed, it needs to be noted that the third wave feminism and the fourth wave feminism are overlapped with the age of postfeminism (Rivers, 2017), making the concept all the more elusive and esoteric. It is contradictory but gender-based prejudices and harassments, as well as misogynist and patriarchal thinkings and behaviors exist in the age of postfeminism, and hence, it is uncertain whether we can say “it is postfeminism” with conviction (Osawa, 2022). Despite its difficulties in recognition, the term, postfeminism, has been employed as an analytical framework in the examination of media culture, including film studies (Gwynne and Muller, 2013). From the postfeminist perspective, films can be analyzed in the light of the “female gaze” as opposed to the male gaze theory (Corbett, 2025). Feminist and postfeminist frameworks have been employed in the analysis of a variety of research topics, such as “gendered political economy of cinema, the female director as auteur, postfeminist fatherhood, consumer culture, depictions of professional women, transgender, sexuality, gendered violence, and the intersections of gender, race, and ethnic identities” (Radner and Stringer, 2012).

Disney movies can be examined through the lens of both feminism and postfeminism, and previous research has analyzed postfeminist portrayals in Disney animation films. For example, Yvonne Tasker, a professor in media and communication at the University of Leeds, discussed the representation of postfeminism in Disney’s *Enchanted* (2007), a film that combines animation and live action. Tasker argued that Nancy, a professional woman in this film, symbolizes disappointment in the contemporary gender norms and embracement of postfeminism (Tasker, 2012). Moreover, it has been examined that *Hannah Montana* of the Disney Channel constructs contemporary US girlhood and Hannah is positioned as a postfeminist subject (Blue, 2013). From the perspective of postfeminism, Kyosuke Yamamoto of the University of Tokyo examined the changing representation of female characters in Disney/Pixar’s *Cars* trilogy (2006-2017), paying attention to the shift in the female representations (Yamamoto, 2024). In addition, Maja Rudloff contended that Disney’s *Frozen* (2013) conveys both feminist and postfeminist messages in a paradoxical manner (Rudloff, 2016).

Likewise, Michael Macaluso investigated Disney’s *Frozen* (2013) and argued that the film represents the “postfeminist princess” (Macaluso, 2016). Macaluso moreover investigated Disney’s *Incredibles* film series by applying an analytical framework:

“postfeminist masculinity” as a potentially new Disney norm (Macaluso, 2018). Notably, postfeminist masculinity can take specific forms such as “vulnerable men in crisis, supportive husbands, and/or caring and inclusive male-figures” (Ibid). More interestingly however, it needs to be noted that the “ridiculed depiction of masculinity seems most prevalent in Disney films of late” (Ibid). From the postfeminist perspective, Tifanie Valade examined how children in classrooms take up gender and sexuality norms represented in Disney princess films (Valade, 2023-2024). Moreover, Cassandra Stover analyzed implications of postfeminist discourse and advertising of Disney princess films for young female viewers (Stover, 2013). Of course, there are criticism against Disney's postfeminist portrayal of women in the age of the fourth wave of feminism (Crafton, 2024). Samantha L. Seybold also argued that Moana is a postfeminist heroine who defies the patriarchal narrative and acts independently with a help of another male character (Seybold, 2021). Thus, previous research on feminism and postfeminism regarding Disney films suggest that although these two concepts are apparently confusing, they are applicable to analyze Disney princess films, including *Moana* film series in relation to the concept of feminism and postfeminism.

3. Background of Political Correctness and Disney Films

As well as feminist/postfeminist aspects examined above, the examination of political correctness is also necessary to combine the gender-related norms with the issue of political correctness. The term, political correctness, is defined as the “act of avoiding language and actions that could be offensive to others, especially those relating to sex, gender, and race” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2026b). The term, political correctness, has been employed and investigated by academics. It has been examined from the perspective of “academic research, higher education curricula, affirmative action, and speech codes” for example (Dzenis, 2025). The issue of political correctness or identity politics is inevitably related with contemporary cultural wars (Samuels, 2024). Some researchers examined political correctness and incorrectness represented in Indian political cartoons (Balakrishnan and Venkat, 2023). While applying a psychoanalytic theory to sociology, some opponent of political correctness has argued that the philosophy of political correctness may cause harm to social order (Schwartz, 2016). Thus, the concept of political correctness has been viewed as both promising and problematic in previous research.

Regarding Disney's attempt to include messages related to political correctness, there are both supportive and unsupportive comments in media and academia. Notably, John Musker who worked on *The Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin*, and *Moana*, as a director of Disney, claimed that Disney has been putting “political messages ahead of storylines in its recent film releases” (Williams, 2024). Musker discussed Disney's political correctness and “wokeness” that caused criticism, and commented that “I think they need to do a course correction a bit in terms of putting the message secondary, behind entertainment and compelling story and engaging characters... We weren't trying to be woke, although I understand the criticism” (Ibid). He moreover added that “the classic Disney films didn't start out trying to have a message. They wanted you to get involved in the characters and the story and the world, and I think that's still the heart of it... You don't have to exclude agendas, but you have to first create characters who you sympathize with and who are compelling” (Ibid).

Thus, it is obvious for audiences and observers of Disney films that the company has sought to intentionally include and convey messages related to political correctness. Then, why has Disney needed to express politically correct messages for audiences? The reason stems from continuous criticism of Disney films in terms of gender, racial, ethnic, and cultural stereotypes that could cause or aggravate various types of discrimination. Indeed, the Walt Disney Company has been frequently criticized for its gender stereotyping. For instance, it was reported that Disney sent a rejection letter to a woman, Mary V. Ford, who had applied for the animator training school at Walt Disney in 1938. In the letter, she was informed that “girls are not considered” for creative positions (Bahadur, 2013). The letter noted that “women do not do any of the creative work in connection with preparing the cartoons for the screen, as that work is performed entirely by young men. For this reason, girls are not considered for the training school” (Malec, 2014). Referring to the 1938 rejection letter, Meryl Streep harshly called Walt Disney a “sexist and anti-Semite” (Ibid). The rejection letter is one of the most infamous examples, and Disney movies have been negatively evaluated in terms of conventional gender stereotypes.

Critics of Disney films have negatively evaluated Disney's first live-action musical drama, *Song of the South* (1946) (IMDb, 1990-2026b). “Zip-a-Dee-Do-Dee”, the hit song of this film, won the 1947 Academy Award for Best Song, and the film became an inspiration of the Disney theme park attraction Splash Mountain. However, there were criticism from the African American community, especially the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) against this movie for representations of racial discrimination (Tobias, 2019). For this reason, Disney has never released VHS, DVD, Blue-ray, or on Disney+ either, due to the strong accusations of racism and stereotypes of African Americans (Disney Fandom, 2026). Moreover, Splash Mountain was closed at Disney theme parks in the United States owing to the influence of public accusations in the end (Chen, 2023). Disney movies have been subject to criticism for the racial, sexual, and political representations, and therefore, Disney has been sensitive about the potential criticism and has intended to include so-called politically correct representations in recent films. Given the historical background, it is important and imperative for students and scholars of Disney studies to investigate how

Disney has attempted to visualize its considerations for diversity or political correctness in the age of postfeminism and political correctness.

4. Feminist Critique: Masculinity and Patriarchy in *Moana* Film Series

From the perspective of feminism, Disney's *Moana* (2016) can be critically reviewed for its gender representation, masculinity, and patriarchy. Madeline Streiff and Lauren Dundes shed light on the aspect of "hypermasculinity" which can be seen as a gender stereotype represented as a physical characteristic of Maui (Streiff and Dundes, 2017). Notably, Streiff and Dundes argued that the fishhook of Maui is critical to his sexual identity which made Te Fiti infertile and angry at Maui. They also pointed out that the film is based on patriarchal way of thinking because of the "association of youthful, fertile females with good and witch-like infertile females with evil" (Ibid). In the light of patriarchy, Moana seems to be restrained by the influence of her father (Chief Tui) as her line symbolizes: "I'm the daughter of the chief" (Ibid).

The robbing of Te Fiti's heart by Maui is the reason why Te Fiti became lava monster Te Ka. In this sense, it is possible to analyze that Te Ka's wrath is directed at the female oppression by the patriarchal system (Hamado, 2017: 92). The storyline of Maui and Te Fiti can be interpreted as gender-based violence by the demigod against the goddess in an attempt to gain immortality (Elliott, 2021). In traditional Maori folklore, Maui "tries to steal the heart of his grandmother Hinenuitēpō (the Great Woman of Death) by climbing up through her birth canal while she sleeps" (Tamaira and Fonoti, 2018: 306). As well as the hypermasculinity of Maui with a "macho attitude", the sexist use of language was observed in earlier studies, too (Toro, 2021).

As observed by Hartina Hamado, Maui treats Moana as if she is inferior to him as follows:

In the scene, Moana meets Maui and asks him to join her to restore the heart of Te Fiti's; it seems that Maui doesn't agree with it. He steals Moana's canoe and leaves Moana on the island which he drifts ashore for a thousand years. Moana then chases Maui with ocean's help to get his canoe back and join with Maui to start their journey, but Maui then doesn't allow her neither to get her canoe back nor join with him. He decides to throw away Moana in the ocean, but with ocean's help, Moana always gets back in her canoe and Maui. Maui still won't listen to Moana who always tries hard to persuade him in order that he accede to what Moana wants (Hamado, 2017: 93).

Although Maui treats Moana lightly because he believes that she is only mortal, but these scenes of Maui give the audience considerable "misogynist attitudes" toward the feminist heroine. In this sense, it was argued that "It is a postfeminist story because it positions Moana as the heroine but gives her no real power while placing the adventure's outcome in Maui's hands. Thus, Disney illustrates its preference for conservative storylines" (Crafton, 2024: 10). Likewise, Moana's father also exhibits "misogynist behavior" in the film, but it has to be noted that he eventually learns to "make way" for Moana's skillful sea voyaging leadership (Hollowell, 2020). In this sense, it can be argued that Disney intentionally depicted the misogynist representation so that it could contrast and emphasize the feminist leadership of Moana in a paradoxical manner. Thus, this film contains both antifeminist and feminist aspects at the same time, and hence it is necessary to pay attention to the feminist perspectives of *Moana* film series as well.

5. *Moana* as a Feminist/Postfeminist Disney Princess Film

Disney's *Moana* (2016) has been regarded as one of the most feminist Disney animation films for a number of feminist elements. For example, Beatriz Serrano compared 15 Disney princesses from Snow White to Moana, and concluded that Moana is the "best feminist Disney princess" among them for her empowered feminism, especially leadership. Serrano commented that "something is definitely going right in a movie in which the leading lady is not asking herself who she should marry or what will happen when her father dies, but rather how far she can go... She wants to go where no one has gone before, where no one has dared to go, so she can save her village from destruction and be a great leader" (Serrano, 2017). Therefore, it fair to argue that this movie tries to convey a feminist message that if one woman can advance, all women can do the same thing, symbolizing the philosophy of feminism (Ibid).

Likewise, Mara Eller observed that *Moana* is one of the most pro-women films she has ever seen, calling it a "truly feminist masterpiece" (Eller, 2020). Eller pointed out that Moana can take leadership and save her village as a woman without disguising as a man unlike the case of Mulan who behaves like a man. She moreover added that Moana "saves the world not through physical strength, magical powers, or even cunning but through emotional strength, intuition, and compassion—distinctly feminine qualities" (Ibid). In other words, while Mulan can be regarded as another feminist Disney princess who fights with sword (violence)", Moana can be categorized as a feminist heroine who can save her island with her feminist characteristics rather than violence. In this sense, feminism of Moana is an empowered feminism in comparison with that of Mulan and former Disney princesses.

Other than Moana, female characters play significant feminist roles in this movie. Although Te Fiti, the mother goddess of the film, shows her anger and violent nature, she can become a feminine and peaceful goddess once her heart is returned to her. It can be argued that Te Fiti symbolizes a typical female in the patriarchal society, but the role of Moana is to resolve the problem of Te Fiti i.e. the deep-rooted tradition of patriarchy in the world (Roux, 2019). Moana's mother (Sina) basically abides by her husband's laws as a symbol of patriarchy but she also helps Moana escape the island, even if it defies her husband's wishes. In this sense, Moana's mother contributes to the liberation of Moana from the male-dominated society. Moana's grandmother (Tala) is depicted as a keeper of the traditional knowledge which is a "Polynesian symbol of graceful strength and wisdom that teaches one to stay true to oneself" (Ibid). Without the spiritual guide of the grandmother, it is impossible for Moana to save the world, and hence, the role of Tala is indispensable for the successful journey of Moana, symbolizing a feminist element too.

Tia Shah argued that *Moana* is "an unapologetic feminist film" in that Moana is an incredibly powerful female leader who can achieve what men, including her father and even Maui, are afraid of (Shah, 2017). Moreover, Moana does not fall in love with a man and she does not rely on a man in a helpless manner. In other words, there is no heterosexual romance and she has average proportions as opposed to other traditional Disney princesses who tend to have unbelievably thin waists and end up with romantic relationships with princes or male characters. More importantly, Moana is not only a princess, but also a leader who saves her island and ultimately becomes a chief of the island (Ibid). In addition, it is fair to argue that the film is based on "ecofeminism" that represents animated mother nature as well (Jumrah and Karim, 2022). In essence, Moana as a feminist/postfeminist Disney princess is depicted as an active and independent Pacific princess in the film series.

6. Racial and Cultural Prejudices and Coloniality in *Moana* Film Series

Moana has been critically reviewed for its portrayal of a variety of prejudices of the Polynesian people, culture, and mythology. It was pointed out that this movie depicts the Kakamora as coconuts and this can be viewed as a racial prejudice against Pacific islanders as uncivilized "coconut people" who speak unintelligible languages (Bahar, 2024). In terms of lookism and racial prejudice, Jenny Salesa, a member of parliament in New Zealand, pointed out that the size of Maui is "simply wrong" and "could have a negative impact on Polynesian children" (Stuff, 2016). Salesa commented that "we know from history if you look back 100-200 years from today when Maui, our ancestor, was supposed to have been around, Polynesians were not overweight or obese" (Ibid). Will Illolohia of Pacific Media Association also contended that "he [Maui] is depicted in the stories that's been handed down, especially in my culture, as a person of strength, a person of magnitude and a person of a godly nature. This depiction of Maui being obese is typical American stereotyping. Obesity is a new phenomenon because of the first world food that's been stuffed down our throat" (Damm, 2016).

Moreover, Disney was criticized for selling Maui costumes, especially the use of tribal tattoos, a sacred art in Polynesian culture. Karaitiana Taiuru, an advocate for Maori people based in Christchurch, New Zealand, commented that "we need to take a stand now and say, 'Look, this is not appropriate' to prevent other entrepreneurs from trying to do something similar. There are unlimited opportunities for discrimination and exploitation" (Arnold, 2016). In response to the accusation from the Polynesian community, Disney decided to pull its controversial Maui costume, such as playsuits, boy's pajamas, and men's t-shirts, from the shelves, expressing a statement that "the team behind *Moana* has taken great care to respect the cultures of the Pacific Islands that inspired the film, and we regret that the Maui costume has offended some" (Ibid). Indeed, Maui in the mythology of Polynesia is considered to be a sacred figure to Pacific people of Polynesia, but it has been pointed out that Maui in Disney movie is depicted like a clown (Eqbal, 2024).

Some researchers argue that there are imperialist aspects in the global success of Disney animation films and theme parks, but it is also important to analyze the "power dynamics involved when a company such as Disney decides to tell stories from outside its own sphere, rooted in Western, Anglo-American, conservative-leaning hegemonic culture" (Anjirbag, 2018). Michelle Anya Anjirbag, a researcher at Cambridge University, contended that a certain degree of "coloniality" is embedded in some Disney films including *Moana* (Ibid). Anjirbag discussed that "when Disney centers a Western, Orientalizing view of a constructed image of 'China' or 'Polynesia' and then projects that depiction outwards to a globalized entertainment market, it participates in and perpetuates that coloniality while setting up its version of the narrative as authoritative and authentic - usually through a nod in the credits to ambiguous, often unnamed cultural experts and consultants" (Ibid).

The film has been criticized by some audiences from the Hawaiian perspectives. Anne Keala Kelly, an award winning filmmaker of "Noho Hewa: The Wrongful Occupation of Hawai'i", has described the film as a "threat" because the storytelling of indigenous people could be regarded as cultural exploitation of Native Hawaiian history (Kelly, 2016). Kelly pointed out that "most indigenous peoples under U.S. control, certainly Hawaiians, have yet to carve out a meaningful space to represent ourselves, what we value and our reality in mass media and film largely because America's master narrative relies on our subjugation... While there are certainly other oppressed groups, our oppressions aren't any more equal than our successes" (Ibid). Indeed, the film series of the

Pacific Disney princess do not touch on the annexation of Hawaii which occurred in the history of the United States (U.S. Department of State, 2001-2009).

7. A Debate on DEI and Cultural Appropriation in *Moana* Film Series

Despite the critical reviews as discussed previously, *Moana* film series has been highly evaluated not only for feminism but also for “diversity”. Disney has produced diverse protagonists as opposed to its early-stage white princesses, and hence, audiences of Disney have been diversifying in recent years (Lang, 2016). Debbie Schluskel, a conservative writer, regards the proportion of *Moana* with muscle as one of the examples of “political correctness gone too far” (Brook, 2016). Schluskel commented that “I think it tells girls that they don’t have to be fit... I think it’s setting up girls for unhealthy lives in the future and also for disappointing romantic lives” (Ibid). On the contrary, however, Rebecca Hains, a professor of media studies at Salem State University positively views *Moana*’s physical appearance as “progress”, stating that “I think that’s very significant... It’s clear to me that Disney has been listening to its critics. Having more heroines on screen who have a more average body type is really important, and it’s a positive sign that Disney is taking some of these parental concerns to heart” (Ibid).

Having said that, some critics contended that Disney’s *Moana* (2016) should be regarded as “cultural appropriation” for the misrepresentation of Maui and Polynesian traditions (Rika, 2016; and Popovich, 2016). Still, it is important to reconfirm the definition of cultural appropriation. According to Cambridge Dictionary, it is defined as the “act of taking or using things from a culture that is not your own, especially without showing that you understand or respect this culture” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2026c). Richard A. Rogers, a professor at Northern Arizona University, classified the term “cultural appropriation” into four types: cultural exchange, cultural dominance, cultural exploitation, and transculturation (Rogers, 2006). Based on Rogers’ classification, Nurul Fatha and her research colleagues argued that some representations in *Moana* (2016) can be categorized as “cultural exploitation” at least (Fatha, Adam, Manaku and Tangkilisan, 2021). For instance, the film has been viewed that it was against cultural truths, and some Native Hawaiian noted that “As much as I felt great pride in the *Moana* character; as the mom of a Hawaiian boy, the Maui character left me feeling very hurt and sad. This is not a movie I would want him to see. This Maui character is not one I would want him to watch and think is culturally appropriate or a character he should want to be like” (Herman, 2016).

Nonetheless, a critic pointed out in *National Review* that by releasing *Moana II* (2024), Disney intended to continue its dedication to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), “indoctrinating young movie-watchers to gender and race obsession” (White, 2024). The critic went to far as to comment that “now we know that Disney is in the business of teaching, not entertainment, and the company struck gold when the first *Moana* transformed Flaherty’s artistic breakthrough from cultural anthropology into feminist score-settling” (Ibid). Indeed, the background of directors Dana Ledoux Miller and David Derrick Jr. simply represent Disney’s respect for the diversity in the filmmaking process of *Moana* film series. With a Pacific islander background, Miller as a director and co-writer of the film discussed her connection to *Moana* as a “storyteller of Samoan heritage” (Dheer, 2024). When she first watched *Moana* (2016), Miller was so moved that she “recalled crying in the theater, feeling genuinely represented on screen for the first time” (Ibid). With Samoan heritage, Derrick showed his passion for honoring Polynesian culture and the concept of a shared “cultural ethnosphere” as a “network of traditions, knowledge and stories passed across generations” (Ibid). With these cultural and racial backgrounds, it can be observed that Disney attempted to pay careful attention to the identity of Asian Americans and Pacific islanders (AAPI) in the creation of the film series.

8. Cultural Appropriation vs. Political Correctness in *Moana* Film Series

Should Disney’s *Moana* film series be regarded as cultural appropriation? Disney surely showed its understanding and respect for the Polynesian culture in the filmmaking processes, although Disney was denounced for cultural appropriation over the misrepresentation of Maui and his tattoo costume. Importantly, Disney paid attention to Pacific islanders who have tended to be overlooked in the filmmaking industry. Disney featured voice actors of Polynesian descent, Dwayne Johnson, whose mother is Samoan, and Auli’i Cravalho, a Hawaiian native. Disney also employed other voice actors, screenwriter, and composer, who are Pacific islanders (Popovich, 2016). It is true that Disney’s commercial exploitation of the Maui costume offended the feelings of the people in the Polynesian society, but other than that, how do the Pacific islanders think about Disney’s *Moana* (2016)? If most of them actually consider the movie to be disrespectful for their culture and identity, it would be possible for critics to call the film “cultural appropriation” and vice versa.

Not surprisingly, there are some critical and negative opinions about the film, saying “To throw all Polynesians in one pot was wrong and offensive. For them to portray Gramma Tala as the ‘crazy’ lady of the village was so offensive. Why was she ‘crazy’? Because she held on to cultural practices and told stories of her people? Because she didn’t have knowledge of ‘Western’ education?” (Sloss, 2020). Others believe that Maui should have been depicted as he is in the culture, commenting that “in Hawaiian thinking, Maui was not a big, grumpy, very large character. In fact, he was quite the opposite. Maui is shown as humble, strong,

and noble, like how we in Hawaii say, a 'Hawaiian Superman'" (Ibid). At the same time however, some Pacific islanders know the background of the representation of Maui in the film, and commented that "Maui's design was based on photographs of The Rock's [Dwayne Johnson's] grandfather. Not the stereotypical body" (Ibid).

Significantly however, many Pacific islanders appreciate that the movie showcased the Pacific culture to other people in the world. One Polynesian audience commented that "As a New Zealand-born Samoan, it gave me great pride to see a Disney film on the big screen with a strong Pasifika influence and flavor" (Ibid). Another observer praised Moana as an "authentic representation of a Polynesian girl", noting that "considering Disney did their best to include the heart of the Pacific and its culture, they did a great job. It helped others see who we are. I watched the opening movie with family. The big takeaway for this group was how the film portrayed the importance of family. Moana was the model of a real Poly – thick hair, not really petite, big eyes, and always running around barefoot!" (Ibid). As for cultural appreciation rather than cultural appropriation, there is positive feedback on the film, commenting that "I am half Samoan and live in America. Moana was a wonderful movie to watch with my Samoan grandparents and aunt, and we all loved it. I think Disney has been getting progressively better at portraying different cultures. Moana includes linguistic elements and utilized actors from the cultures. While Disney may have bitten off more than they could chew, they were more respectful in their approach than they have been in the past" (Ibid).

Furthermore, some Pacific islanders felt proud of their culture while watching the film, noting that "It was a proud moment for me when my family and I went to see it especially when they started singing in Samoan! I forever will be proud of my culture! I don't think there was anything wrong with the movie!" (Ibid). The movie gave some audiences a sense of familiarity as commented by a reviewer, "I'm Hawaiian... I loved seeing a princess who looked like me as I went to a predominantly white school. Even though it came out when I was 26, I think I was so infatuated with something that innately felt familiar" (Ibid). Another Polynesian audience wished Disney to explore the Polynesian culture more thoroughly, saying "I'm a Pacific islander. It was a nice movie, and I guess it made me a little proud to see some type of representation. But the culture is so much richer. They barely even tapped into it. But I guess it's a start" (Ibid). All these unequivocally positive comments and somewhat constructive opinions about *Moana* film series could be regarded as indicators of Disney's attempt to understand and respect the Polynesian culture in the filmmaking process.

Another critic insisted that the music of *Moana* (2016) is not authentic Polynesian, and therefore, it is culturally inappropriate and could be regarded as "musical colonization" (Armstrong, 2018). However, Disney paid respect for the utilization of Polynesian music and combined it with western-taste music so that casual audience can find it natural and comfortable. This is not cultural appropriation, but it should be regarded as a result of cross-cultural understanding. As a matter of fact, Mark Mancina, a composer of songs in *Moana* (2016), utilized Polynesian vocals and percussion in combination with other musical instruments, such as guitars and strings. Mancina commented that "I've got real Polynesian vocals all over the score. While we were still writing, we sent [people] to Fiji to record a Pacific choir" (Newman, 2016). In addition, Mancina used woodwinds made from bamboo from the South Pacific and traditional hide-covered Tyka drums so that it sounds like Polynesian music. Notably, Mancina intended to synthesize the Pacific and Western music into one in the film, explaining that "we didn't want it to sound like a Polynesian documentary. We wanted it to salute their culture but have it be a hybrid" (Ibid).

Likewise, Opetai Foa'i, a Samoan artist who collaborated with Mancina in the film, contributed to providing expertise on Polynesian music based on his musical background. Foa'i proudly commented that "I have spent 20 years of my life dedicated to telling the stories of my ancestors onstage by touring the world, 40 countries, and through songs" (Ibid). Foa'i believes that *Moana* helps shed light on the Polynesian music, commenting that "people get to see and understand more of our beautiful cultures here in Oceania, more than what you see at a tourist resort" (Ibid). He moreover added that "traditional music is where it's at. For example, when you hear an ancient chant that makes your hair stand on end, that's because it's real" (Ibid). Disney surely paid respect for the Polynesian culture in the filmmaking and music-making processes so that it could create culturally and politically correct films. Therefore, it is not appropriate to describe *Moana* film series as cultural appropriation or musical colonization, given the definition of cultural appropriation and the feedback from the Pacific islanders.

9. Conclusion

This article has examined Disney's *Moana* film series from the perspective of feminism, postfeminism, and political correctness. The definition of feminism and the discourse of postfeminism were discussed, and it has been confirmed that *Moana* film series can be categorized as both feminist and postfeminist films. Indeed, Moana as a postfeminist heroine acts independently, overcomes the patriarchal tradition of her village, and manages to save the village in the end. At the same time, however, this article pointed out that there exists feminist critique regarding the film series. In particular, it was confirmed that some audiences have criticized a physical characteristic of Maui who has macho attitudes and even misogynist behaviors. Notably, it was pointed out that the storyline of Maui and Te Fiti can be interpreted as gender-based violence and that the role of Moana's father symbolizes the patriarchal system. In this regard, it is possible to argue that *Moana* film series includes both feminist and anti-feminist elements

represented in the movie series, yet feminist elements are portrayed more strongly than anti-feminist elements, because Moana eventually gets over the patriarchal tradition and takes leadership on her journey. Moreover, it was argued that other female characters, such as Moana's mother, grandmother, and Te Fiti contributed to adding feminist aspects to the movie series.

However, this article also paid attention to the racial and cultural prejudices of the film series. The film series was critically reviewed that the group of Kakamora as coconuts represents racial prejudices against Pacific islanders as coconut people. Also, the physical characteristic of Maui as an obese Polynesian has been denounced by the Polynesian community as well. In this sense, it might be true that *Moana* film series ended up with strengthening these negative racial stereotypes of the Polynesian people regardless of intentionally or unintentionally. Moreover, Disney was criticized for the Maui costume with tribal tattoos as a sacred art of the Polynesian culture. In this context, the issue of cultural exploitation and cultural appropriation of the Polynesian culture was discussed. In order to judge whether Disney's *Moana* film series should be regarded as cultural appropriation, Pacific islanders' opinions about the films were confirmed. As a result, it turned out that although there is negative feedback on the films, some Polynesian audiences feel proud of Moana as a representative of their Polynesian culture and tradition. Moreover, Disney learned about the Polynesian culture in the filmmaking process and paid respect for the culture and tradition through the diversity of voice casting. Therefore, this article has substantiated that Disney's *Moana* film series is not necessarily categorized as cultural appropriation in general.

As some Polynesian audience put it, Disney has increasingly improved in portraying different cultures and traditions in the filmmaking process in recent years. This is because Disney has been criticized in terms of political correctness as reviewed in this article. The music in *Moana* was criticized as musical colonization but as analyzed in this article, Disney paid respect for the Polynesian culture in the filmmaking and music-making processes. Disney successfully adopted the principal characteristics of the Polynesian music, and hence, *Moana* film series should not be lightly judged as cultural appropriation or musical colonization. By depicting a postfeminist princess who embodied women's empowerment and feminist ideals, Disney sent a feminist message to a global audience that any woman can make wishes and take actions for their goals, while overcoming the patriarchal mindset. By eschewing depicting a conventional heterosexual relationship with a male character, the feminist heroine represents a postfeminist media culture as well. Likewise, Disney has attempted to pay respect for DEI in the filmmaking process of *Moana* film series, and this tendency is in line with political correctness as argued in this article. In conclusion, Disney's *Moana* film series is not cultural appropriation but it can be regarded as the media portrayal of feminism/postfeminism and political correctness in the changing media culture in the world.

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