Racial Color Blindness: A Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis of Social Media Reactions to Disney's Little Mermaid Teaser

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ABSTRACT

Social media, as an interactive platform, reflects society's reality. This study explored how racial color blindness ideology is reinforced and reshaped through users' discourse patterns on social media platforms. It refers to the ongoing process through which individuals collectively redefine, negotiate, and perpetuate color-blind ideologies through their digital interactions and responses to racially charged media content. This research specifically aimed to identify linguistic patterns and discourse strategies that demonstrate how social media users' responses to Disney's The Little Mermaid teaser contribute to the maintenance and transformation of racial color blindness ideology in contemporary digital spaces. Racial color blindness persists as a critical issue in contemporary media representation, with this study investigating how social media users construct and negotiate racial discourse through their responses to Disney's casting decisions in The Little Mermaid teaser. Utilizing a Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) approach, the research analyzed 75,000 YouTube comments (948,610 tokens) for quantitative corpus analysis and supplementary Twitter (hereinafter referred to as X) data for qualitative discourse interpretation using Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding theory. Data collection involved multi-platform scraping through the YouTube API and X data collection, with corpus processing through AntConc software, integrating quantitative corpus linguistic techniques with qualitative discourse analysis. The multi-platform analysis revealed three primary response categories: dominant (embracing diversity), negotiated (ambivalent representation), and oppositional (rejecting racial recasting).

Keywords: corpus linguistics; cultural perception; racial color blindness; representation; social media discourse

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INTRODUCTION

The idea of color blindness is frequently discussed in the public discourse on racial inequity. Many people in today's culture would like to think that racial discrimination does not exist anymore. However, a rising number of people increasingly fear that this ideal of a color-blind society may be dangerous. This discussion calls into question the best way to teach people about racial disparities and the struggle for equality. The subject of the significance of the portrayals of race in movies still exists. To respond to a question like that, examining how different races are represented and determining whether any patterns can be found is necessary.

The advancement of digital technology and social media platforms has fundamentally transformed how individuals communicate and negotiate social identities across traditional boundaries (Kannan et al., 2020; Schmidt & Kaess, 2020). These platforms have created new spaces for cultural exchange and social interaction, particularly influencing younger generations' values, behaviors, and cultural practices (Scully et al., 2020; Steinsbekk et al., 2021). Social media platforms function as complex communicative ecosystems characterized by four key components: user intention, content creation and sharing, network structure, and interactive engagement (Sayogie et al., 2023). However, rather than eliminating social inequalities, digital platforms have become new sites where existing racial tensions and ideologies are reproduced and negotiated. Contemporary racism in digital spaces often manifests through seemingly race-neutral language and practices, a phenomenon known as racial color blindness. Unlike overt racism, racial color blindness operates through the denial or avoidance of racial discussions, creating a paradoxical situation where the refusal to acknowledge race actually perpetuates racial inequalities (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Apfelbaum et al., 2012). This ideology suggests that the best way to end racism is to stop talking about race entirely, effectively silencing discussions about racial discrimination and systemic inequality.

Recent scholarship has examined various aspects of racial discourse in digital environments, revealing the complexity of contemporary online racism. Brooks (2024) identified "color-blind nationalism" as a prevalent discourse strategy in the post-"new racism" era online communication, where users employ race-neutral language to express racialized preferences. KhosraviNik and Unger (2016) demonstrated how Corpus-Assisted Critical Discourse Analysis (CACDA) can effectively reveal discriminatory discourse patterns in digital spaces, particularly showing how subtle linguistic choices construct otherness and exclusion.

Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas (2021) conducted a systematic review of racism and hate speech in social media, identifying a shift from explicit racial slurs to more sophisticated, coded forms of racial discourse that are harder to detect and moderate. Yuliawati et al. (2024) applied corpus linguistics to analyze negative criticism in online news comments, revealing how evaluative, directive, and analytical speech acts function to construct social hierarchies and group boundaries. Research on racial color blindness has primarily focused on offline contexts or general social attitudes. Bonilla-Silva (2020) analyzed how color-blind ideology limited understanding of racial inequalities during the COVID-19 pandemic, while Plaut et al. (2018) examined color blindness as a diversity model from psychological perspectives. Doane (2017) theorized colorblindness across multiple social domains (interpersonal, educational, legal, organizational), but did not address digital discourse specifically.

Kim et al. (2019) investigated the relationship between color-blind racial attitudes and workplace microaggressions. Garrett-Walker et al. (2018) examined how colorblindness is used strategically to avoid being perceived as racist. However, these studies focused on interpersonal

interactions rather than large-scale digital discourse patterns. Despite this growing body of research, a significant gap exists in understanding how racial color blindness manifests specifically in audience responses to mainstream entertainment media featuring racial representation changes. No studies have applied corpus-assisted discourse analysis to examine how audiences negotiate racial color blindness when responding to casting decisions in popular culture. This gap is particularly significant given the increasing frequency of diverse casting in Hollywood adaptations and the intense social media debates these decisions generate.

Furthermore, existing studies have not integrated quantitative corpus linguistics approaches with qualitative theoretical frameworks like Hall's encoding-decoding theory to understand how audiences construct different interpretive positions regarding racial representation in entertainment media. The established theoretical foundations of racial color blindness research and corpus-assisted discourse analysis warrant application to these understudied digital entertainment contexts. Disney's The Little Mermaid (2023) teaser presents a strategic research site for such examination: its casting of Halle Bailey generated unprecedented social media engagement across multiple platforms (3.7 M+ comments in 72 hours per YouTube Analytics, with extensive X discourse), positioning it as a significant case study in audience reception of racial representation across diverse social media environments.

Previous corpus-assisted discourse studies have primarily focused on general racist discourse patterns in social media without specifically examining racial color blindness ideology. For instance, KhosraviNik and Unger (2016) analyzed discriminatory discourse in digital spaces using CADS approaches, while Brooks (2024) examined "color-blind nationalism" in post-racism era discourse. However, Yuliawati et al. (2024) applied corpus linguistics to online news comments, focusing on linguistic expressions of criticism, and recent studies by Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas (2021) conducted systematic reviews of racism in social media discourse. Notably, these existing studies have not specifically investigated how racial color blindness ideology manifests through audience responses to mainstream media content featuring racial representation changes, particularly in the context of entertainment media casting decisions. In this study, the researchers explore how the construction of color blindness is reflected through people's reactions to the teaser of Disney's The Little Mermaid across social media platforms, with primary focus on the YouTube release on September 10, 2022, and subsequent X discourse.

CORPUS-BASED STUDY AND COLORBLINDNESS STUDY

CORPUS-ASSISTED DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The study of racial ideology and discourse in digital spaces has made significant contributions to the understanding of contemporary racism and how it manifests itself through online communication (Määttä, 2014; Ajšić, 2021). Research using Corpus-Assisted (Critical) Discourse Analysis (CADS/CACDA) has revealed how racial ideology and prejudice are constructed and perpetuated through language patterns in social media and online discussions. The work of KhosraviNik and Unger (2016) shows how the CADS approach can effectively analyze the discursive construction of discrimination in digital spaces.

Several recent studies have shown how digital platforms play a role in reinforcing discriminatory discourses. The literature on styles of race talk suggests that racial discourse is either covertly or overtly racist, with covert racism being particularly prevalent in online spaces (Brooks, 2024). Contemporary research has moved beyond simple hate speech detection to

examine more nuanced forms of digital racism, including what Brooks (2024) terms "color-blind nationalism" in post-"new racism" era discourse.

Applying corpus linguistics to online news comments by Yuliawati et al. (2024) analyzed linguistic expressions of negative criticism toward Governor Anies Baswedan in the comment section of Detiknews, a major Indonesian online news portal. The findings show that negative comments use a lot of nouns, pronouns, and negation lexicons to strengthen the pragmatic impact of insults. The dominant speech acts are evaluative, directive, and analytical, reflecting the social role of commentators as judges, activists, or analysts. Most commentators act as judges with a tendency to convey insulting comments. This study groups commentators into three categories: supporters, opponents, and neutrals, but the limitations of anonymous data hamper the analysis of socio-economic background.

RACIAL COLOR BLINDNESS STUDY

Racial color blindness is regarded as a potential method to eradicate racism. Racial color blindness is a concept that advocates for disregarding an individual's race, ethnicity, or culture (Garrett-Walker et al., 2018). In practice, racial color blindness manifests as a novel kind of racism. Neglecting to acknowledge race and racism adversely affects minority groups, rendering the racial reality they encounter invisible (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Kim et al., 2019). Many individuals in the majority group, specifically Whites, employ racial color blindness to evade the perception of racism (Garrett-Walker et al., 2018). Color blindness permeates and is manifested across various facets of our culture. It affects all members of the community. The concept of colorblindness as a societal movement significantly influences and manifests in the attitudes and behaviors of individuals within the community. These manifestations of colorblindness arise across diverse social strata and domains, including interpersonal, educational, legal, organizational, and societal contexts (Doane, 2017).

The ideology of racial color blindness, which advocates for equality by disregarding race, is prevalent on social media, where it both influences and is influenced by online discourse. Social media platforms, as participatory and broadly accessible environments, mirror social beliefs, especially color-blind behaviors that conceal racial realities. For instance, individuals frequently refrain from overtly addressing race, preferring neutral or ambiguous phrases such as "diversity" or "inclusivity" to project a non-racist image. This reflects the propensity of color-blind ideology to evade racial matters, which, as Bonilla-Silva (2014) observes, fortifies institutional racism by muffling minority voices and sustaining white supremacy. Furthermore, the architecture of social media—characterized by algorithms that emphasize engagement, content regulation frameworks, and user interaction dynamics, exacerbates these color-blind inclinations, frequently favoring dominant narratives over fair racial representation (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021).

Minority races persistently endure maltreatment from the dominant race, sometimes termed discrimination or racism (Danewid, 2022). Racism constitutes a persistent system of domination, power, privilege, injustice, and oppression founded on socially constructed racial hierarchies that remain a social and political reality in the United States (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021), leading to mistreatment, disproportionate burdens, and inequities for individuals of color (Miller et al., 2018). Racism is perpetuated and sustained by the enactment of racial prejudice, wherein authority is wielded against a purportedly inferior racial group (Jones, 1997). This includes diverse activities such as subtle microaggressions, discrimination, overt threats, social exclusion, and stigmatization (Sayogie et al., 2023).

This avoidance raises significant issues. Garrett-Walker et al. (2018) argue that by avoiding the topic of race, social media discourse can obscure systemic disparities and devalue minority perspectives. For example, when individuals evaluate media representations—such as the casting of people of color in historically white roles—they may emphasize narrative or aesthetic aspects over racial connotations, demonstrating intentional colorblindness that avoids addressing systemic issues (Doane, 2017).

In addition to perpetuating racial inequality, this phenomenon limits the availability of substantive online discourse about race. Despite its importance, there is little research on racial colorblindness in digital contexts, particularly in terms of media representation. While studies such as KhosraviNik and Unger (2016) examine discriminatory language online, little is known about how social media directly alters color-blind ideology in response to media content. This gap is significant because of the vast reach and immediacy of social media, which makes it a crucial platform for examining how color-blind practices have evolved in the current era. By analyzing social media reactions to the teaser for Disney's The Little Mermaid, starring Halle Bailey as Ariel, this study specifically addresses these disparities. We were able to observe how people addressed racial issues online thanks to casting decisions, which drew widespread criticism. According to the results, a significant percentage of users avoided discussing race or interpreted casting decisions as narrative decisions rather than racial considerations. This behavior demonstrates and has the potential to reinforce color-blind behavior. To demonstrate how social media platforms contribute to the perpetuation of racial colorblindness, this study examined how they influence media portrayals and racial justice. This was done by correlating these sentiments with general color-blind perspectives.

METHOD

This study combines the Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) approach with discourse analysis using Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding approach. This approach blends textual interpretation grounded in social theory with linguistic analysis (Hjelm, 2021). It emphasizes the belief that discourse dynamics influence cultural change as a form of communicative action (Chouliaraki, 2008; van Hulst et al., 2025).

The Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) approach was used to analyze social media users' responses to Disney's official teaser "The Little Mermaid." Baker et al. (2008) state that this approach combines big data-based corpus analysis with qualitative analysis to explore how racial discourse and minority representation are constructed in online comments. The primary dataset consists of 75,000 comments taken from Disney's official YouTube teaser video, comprising 948,610 tokens. The corpus in this study is called Corpus Little Mermaid, abbreviated as CLM. Data was collected using scraping techniques through Google Colab by connecting to the YouTube API. The collection process involved downloading comments based on video ID using Python libraries such as the Google API client and pandas. To provide deeper qualitative insights into audience reception patterns, supplementary data were collected from X responses to The Little Mermaid teaser. These X responses were retrieved from replies to posts made by the official Disney account (@DisneyStudios) sharing the trailer. Data from X was selected using purposive sampling to identify representative examples of dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings as defined by Hall's encoding-decoding theory. This platform was chosen because X's character limit encourages concise, direct expressions of opinion, making it ideal for identifying clear ideological positions.

After collecting the data, the comments were cleaned to remove irrelevant elements such as spam, links, and non-text symbols. The cleaned data were then tokenized using *AntConc* software to produce linguistic units to be analyzed. Data analysis was carried out using three complementary corpus linguistics techniques: frequency analysis, collocation analysis, and Key Word in Context (KWIC) analysis. The frequency analysis involved identifying the most prevalent terms within the discourse using the *AntConc* corpus linguistics tool to establish primary thematic focuses. The quantitative collocation analysis involved calculating collocation frequencies using log-likelihood ratio statistics, a standard metric for identifying statistically significant word pairings within a corpus (Al-Otaibi, 2022). Strong collocation was determined using a threshold of log-likelihood > 3.84 ($p < 0.05$). The selection of key terms followed three criteria informed by established corpus linguistics practices, which prioritize a combination of quantitative metrics like frequency to identify salient linguistic features and qualitative judgments to ensure alignment with the discursive themes under investigation. Frequency analysis serves as a foundational step in corpus-assisted discourse analysis (CADS), as high-frequency terms often signal the most prominent topics or "aboutness" of a corpus, providing entry points for deeper ideological examination (Baker, 2006; Stubbs, 2010). Additionally, a systematic review of word selection in corpus linguistics highlights frequency as a primary criterion, alongside relevance and semantic associations, to capture terms that are both statistically significant and thematically pertinent (McEnery & Hardie, 2012).

These criteria were: (1) highest frequency occurrence in the corpus, to focus on linguistically dominant elements that reflect recurrent patterns in user discourse; (2) direct relevance to racial representation themes, ensuring the terms directly pertain to the study's emphasis on minority portrayals and ideological constructions; and (3) semantic relationship to character identity discourse, enabling analysis of how terms interconnect through collocations and contexts to reveal underlying preferences and stances (Baker et al., 2008). Specifically, "Ariel" was selected as the primary node due to its centrality as the main character. At the same time, "Black" and "mermaid" were chosen for their direct representation of racial issues and character identity within the adaptation context—the collocation analysis aimed to uncover underlying semantic preferences and ideological stances reflected in the discourse. To examine the contextual usage and semantic prosody of key terms, a KWIC analysis was conducted using AntConc software. This technique enables examination of target words within their immediate linguistic environment, displaying the node word centered with surrounding context. KWIC analysis was applied to the most significant collocations identified in the previous stage, particularly focusing on racial discourse markers such as "black," "white," and character-related terms. The KWIC concordance lines were systematically analyzed to identify semantic prosody, recurring patterns of usage, ideological positioning within context, and discourse strategies employed by users. The statistical analysis results from the YouTube corpus were subsequently interpreted through a qualitative lens using representative X examples, analyzed through Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding communication model. This interpretive framework provides insight into how audiences decode media messages differently based on their cultural backgrounds, ideological positions, and contextual experiences. Hall's theory identifies three distinct interpretative positions: dominant-hegemonic readings (where audiences accept the intended message), negotiated readings (where audiences partially accept but modify the message), and oppositional readings (where audiences reject or resist the intended meaning) (Hall, 1980; Shaw, 2017). X examples were categorized into these three positions to illustrate the discourse patterns identified in the larger YouTube corpus, providing a comprehensive approach to analyzing audience reception across platforms.

RESULTS

FREQUENCY

The frequency analysis reveals the lexical prominence of key terms within the Corpus Little Mermaid (CLM), providing quantitative insights into the dominant themes and concerns expressed by social media users. This analysis identifies the most salient vocabulary items that drive discourse patterns in audience responses to Disney's casting decision. The results show the frequency and dominant concordance of the most frequently occurring words in this corpus, as shown in the figure below:
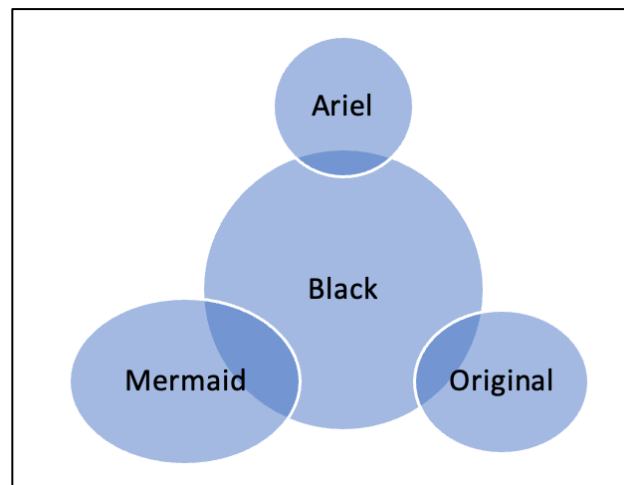

FIGURE 1. Dominant Frequency in Corpus Little Mermaid (CLM)

The frequency distribution demonstrates several critical discourse patterns within the 948,610-token corpus. The analysis reveals that discussions are heavily centered around character identity and racial representation, with specific lexical items indicating areas of ideological tension and negotiation. The analysis results show that several main themes heavily influence discussions related to this film. The frequency of use of words such as "*Ariel*", which appears 13,010 times, reflects the focus of discussion on the main character. The word "*Mermaid*", which appears 3,568 times, shows attention to the story's central theme, while the word "Black," which appears 2,053 times, indicates a strong involvement in the discourse of racial representation. In addition, the word "*original*", which occurs 1,803 times, underlines the public's emotional attachment to the 1989 classic animated version.

COLLOCATION ANALYSIS

The quantitative results show that several main themes heavily influence discussions related to this film. The word "*Ariel*" appears 13,010 times (1.37% of total tokens), reflecting the discourse's primary focus on the protagonist's character transformation. This high frequency indicates that audience responses are fundamentally character-centric, with users engaging directly with questions of character authenticity and representation.

The word "*Mermaid*" appears 3,568 times (0.38% of total tokens), demonstrating sustained attention to the story's fantastical elements and genre expectations. This frequency suggests that users frequently invoke the mythological and narrative aspects of the character when discussing representation changes.

Significantly, the word "*Black*" appears 2,053 times (0.22% of total tokens), indicating substantial engagement with racial discourse. This frequency reveals that race becomes an explicit topic of discussion rather than remaining implicit, challenging assumptions about color-blind discourse in digital spaces.

The word "*original*" appears 1,803 times (0.19% of total tokens), underlining audience attachment to the 1989 animated version and concerns about adaptation fidelity. This frequency pattern suggests that discussions of racial representation are often framed through concepts of authenticity and canonical preservation.

These frequency patterns establish the lexical foundation for deeper collocation analysis, revealing how individual terms combine to construct more complex ideological positions regarding racial representation in popular media.

ARIEL-CENTERED COLLOCATIONS

TABLE 1. Collocations of *Ariel* in CLM

No	Word	Frequency	Likelihood
1.	White	293	844.060
2.	Panther	77	447.550
3.	Character	123	258.307
4.	Tarzan	54	232.712
5.	Mermaid	245	232.372
6.	Girl	102	231.229
7.	Person	70	188.138
8.	People	180	158.778
9.	Goriils	14	81.331

The collocation analysis reveals significant patterns in how racial discourse is constructed within YouTube and X comments responding to The Little Mermaid teaser. The strongest collocation pair "*White*" (frequency: 293, likelihood: 844.060) indicates a pronounced dichotomous framing in user discussions, suggesting polarized discourse around racial representation.

The collocation with "*Panther*" (frequency: 77, likelihood: 447.550) demonstrates intertextual references, as users frequently invoke other media properties when discussing Disney's representation choices. The high likelihood value for "*character*" (frequency: 123, likelihood: 258.307) shows that discussions center significantly on characterization aspects rather than purely aesthetic considerations.

Cross-media references extend to other Disney properties, evidenced by collocations with "*Tarzan*" (frequency: 54, likelihood: 232.712) and "*Mermaid*" (frequency: 245, likelihood: 232.372), indicating that discourse transcends the immediate film to encompass broader Disney representation patterns. The social dimension of racial discourse is reflected in collocations with "*person*" (frequency: 70, likelihood: 188.138) and "*people*" (frequency: 180, likelihood: 158.778), suggesting that conversations evolved from character-specific discussions to broader media representation issues.

WHITE DOMINATION

1. *"It doesn't make sense; King Triton is **White,** and Ariel is **black**. Her face doesn't match the script".*
2. *"King is **white** dude, and daughter is **black**. I'm so confused".*
3. *"Let's have Chris partt ply the **black Panther** now".*
4. *"Then the hero black **Panther** should cst white womn for the role ?"*

Based on the results of the KWIC analysis on the CLM corpus, the four examples above show a critical discourse pattern toward the casting decision in The Little Mermaid. In the first and second examples, it can be seen how YouTube users use genetic logic to question the credibility of the casting by highlighting the relationship between the "*white*" King Triton and the "*black*" Ariel. The use of the phrases "*doesn't make sense*" and "*I'm so confused*" indicates resistance to representations that are considered inconsistent with their narrative expectations about parent-child relationships in the context of race.

Meanwhile, users use a reverse comparison strategy in the third and fourth examples by referencing the Black Panther film. The use of the sentences "*Let's have Chris partt ply the black Panther now*" and "*Then the hero black Panther should cst white women for the role?*" shows an attempt to build an argument about the inappropriateness of the casting through a provocative analogy. This pattern reveals how users use cross-references to other media properties to strengthen their position opposing racial changes in casting fictional characters.

These four examples reflect a broader discourse of white dominance, in which a character's racial change from white to black is seen as a violation of established narrative "*logic*." The use of the word "*black*" in this context consistently emerges as a marker of difference or nonconformity, demonstrating how discussions about racial representation in media are still heavily influenced by traditional expectations about how characters should be represented. This discourse pattern also reveals resistance to efforts at diversification in the mainstream entertainment industry, where changes in racial representation are often seen as something to be questioned or challenged rather than embraced as a positive development in media representation.

KEY WORD IN CONTEXT ANALYSIS

The Key Word in Context (KWIC) analysis extends the collocation findings by examining how statistically significant word pairs function within their broader sentence contexts. This analytical approach reveals the pragmatic and ideological functions of language use, moving beyond frequency counts to understand how users construct meaning through specific linguistic choices. KWIC analysis enables researchers to identify discourse strategies, argumentative patterns, and ideological positions that may not be visible through collocation analysis alone.

By examining concordance lines, this analysis uncovers how users employ seemingly neutral vocabulary to construct complex racial ideologies. The KWIC technique is particularly valuable for revealing color-blind discourse patterns, where racial meanings are embedded within ostensibly race-neutral language about character authenticity, narrative fidelity, and aesthetic preferences. This contextual analysis demonstrates how individual lexical items participate in larger discursive formations that reproduce or challenge racial hierarchies in digital media discourse.

TABLE 2. Original Collocations in CLM

No	Word	Frequency	Likelihood
1.	Story	156	879.012
2.	Version	61	111.092
3.	Characters	59	103.860
4.	Mermaid	167	103.457
5.	Better	68	77.950
6.	Film	65	60.532
7.	Prefer	18	58.526

5. *"The movie is totally different from the **original story**. The led role herself is very beautiful, but she is totally different from real".*
6. *"Did you even read the original short **story** is based on get over skin color, and you say you're not racist?".*
7. *"Disney, please stick to the original **Version**, and people don't change color unless they're Michel J".*
8. *"Please show this version and the original **version** of The Little Mermaid to test audiences in fric and have them rate the two movies. I'd really like to know which version rates higher.,*

The collocation analysis for "*Original*" reveals how users construct authenticity arguments in racial representation discourse. The strongest association between "*Original*" and "*Story*" (Log-Likelihood: 879.012) indicates that users frequently invoke narrative fidelity when discussing casting changes, suggesting that racial representation debates are often framed through appeals to textual authenticity.

The collocation with "*Version*" (Log-Likelihood: 111.092) demonstrates comparative discourse patterns, where users contrast different adaptations to legitimize their preferences for particular racial representations. This pattern reveals how adaptation discourse becomes a vehicle for expressing racial ideologies.

The presence of evaluative terms like "*Better*" (Log-Likelihood: 77.950) and "*Prefer*" (Log-Likelihood: 58.526) in the collocation patterns indicates that discussions of originality are closely tied to aesthetic and qualitative judgments, suggesting that claims about authenticity often mask subjective preferences regarding racial representation.

KWIC analysis on the CLM corpus reveals how netizens use the word "*original*" as a rhetorical instrument in responding to the Little Mermaid movie teaser. In the comment, "The movie is totally different from the original story. The led role herself is very beautiful, but she is totally different from real", an argumentation strategy is seen where recognition of the actress's quality ("*very beautiful*") is followed by a rejection based on "*authenticity*". This pattern shows how netizens use the concept of originality to build criticism that appears objective, even though it contains resistance to changes in racial representation.

The racial aspect of the debate becomes increasingly explicit in comments such as "*Did you even read the original short story is based on get over skin color and you say you're not racist?*". This comment reflects how netizens use references to the original story to legitimize their views on race while paradoxically denying racist tendencies in their arguments. The use of the word "original" in this context becomes a kind of rhetorical shield to discuss racial issues without being seen as explicitly discriminatory.

A similar trend is seen in the comment, "*Disney, please stick to the original Version, and people don't change color unless they're Michel J,*" which directly links the concept of originality to race. The reference to Michael Jackson in this comment shows how netizens use examples from popular culture to strengthen their arguments about the "*naturalness*" of changing skin color. This suggests that the debate about originality is actually a proxy for a more sensitive discussion about racial representation in media.

The comparative dimension of this discourse is revealed in comments such as "*Please show this version and the original version of the Little Mermaid to test audiences in fric and have them rate the two movies. I'd really like to know which version rates higher*". This proposal to compare the two versions reflects how netizens use the idea of "objective testing" to validate their preference for the original version. The use of the word "fric" (Africa) in this context also reveals implicit assumptions about how the race of the audience might influence their judgment of the film.

Overall, KWIC's analysis of the CLM corpus shows that the use of the word "original" goes far beyond mere references to the source material. The term is part of a more complex discursive strategy in which the concept of originality is used to discuss, debate, and often resist changes in racial representation in mainstream media. These commentary patterns reveal how social media has become an arena where tensions between tradition and change in media representation are played out, with "original" being a keyword in the negotiation of meaning.

DISCUSSION

This study applied Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding theory to analyze how audiences interpret Disney's casting of Halle Bailey as Ariel in The Little Mermaid (2023). Hall's framework demonstrates that media messages are polysemic, containing multiple potential meanings rather than single, fixed interpretations. When Disney encoded their casting decision as a message of inclusivity and representation, audiences decoded this message through different ideological lenses, resulting in varied interpretations that reveal underlying racial attitudes. The corpus analysis of social media responses confirms Hall's theoretical premise that audience reception is not passive consumption but active meaning-making shaped by viewers' social positions, cultural backgrounds, and ideological frameworks. The diversity of responses to the casting decision illustrates how the same media text can generate fundamentally different interpretations depending on the decoder's racial literacy, cultural values, and relationship to existing power structures.

The analysis revealed three distinct reception patterns that correspond to Hall's encoding-decoding positions. Audiences adopting the dominant position fully accepted Disney's intended message of diversity and inclusion, interpreting the casting decision as a positive step toward racial equity in mainstream media representation. Their responses demonstrated high levels of racial literacy and alignment with multicultural ideologies that value diversity as socially beneficial, with comments celebrating Bailey's casting through expressions of enthusiasm and support. The negotiated position revealed more complex ideological tensions, where audiences partially accepted Disney's diversity message while maintaining reservations about its implementation, typically acknowledging the value of representation in principle but expressing discomfort with changing established characters. This ambivalence manifested through qualifying statements such as "I'm not racist, but..." followed by concerns about character authenticity or narrative consistency, exemplifying what Bonilla-Silva (2014) identifies as color-blind discourse strategies

that enable speakers to express racial preferences while maintaining non-prejudiced self-presentation. Oppositional audiences directly rejected Disney's diversity messaging, often framing their resistance through appeals to authenticity, tradition, and narrative fidelity, with responses revealing explicit forms of color-blind racism where racial motivations are masked behind seemingly objective concerns about character consistency or source material accuracy.

The corpus analysis reveals how color-blind racism adapts to digital communication environments, with social media platforms enabling sophisticated rhetorical strategies that allow users to express racially motivated preferences through seemingly race-neutral language about aesthetics, authenticity, and artistic integrity. The KWIC analysis identified specific linguistic mechanisms of colorblindness, including genetic logic arguments where users invoke biological family relationships to question the plausibility of racial diversity within fictional families, authenticity appeals that reference "original" characters and source material to present racial preferences as objective fidelity concerns, and comparative victimization through cross-media analogies that construct frameworks of reverse discrimination. Social media platforms amplify color-blind discourse through several mechanisms: the immediacy of response enables rapid circulation of racial anxieties disguised as entertainment critique, platform algorithms prioritize engagement, potentially amplifying controversial content, and the anonymity of interactions reduces social accountability for expressing problematic views. These digital dynamics demonstrate how technological affordances shape the circulation and evolution of racial ideologies in contemporary media consumption.

The analysis demonstrates that racial ideologies are not static beliefs but dynamic constructions continuously reproduced and modified through social interaction, with digital platforms becoming sites where racial common sense is actively negotiated. Many audience responses reveal unconscious absorption and reproduction of racial ideologies, where users claiming race-neutrality while expressing clear racial preferences demonstrate how color-blind ideology operates below conscious awareness, shaping responses through naturalized assumptions about appropriateness, beauty, and authenticity. Social media discussions function as collective meaning-making processes where individual interpretations influence and are influenced by broader discourse patterns, with users both reflecting existing racial ideologies and contributing to their ongoing transformation through participation in digital conversations. The corpus evidence shows how seemingly individual aesthetic preferences aggregate into systematic patterns that reproduce racial hierarchies while maintaining plausible deniability about their ideological nature, revealing the sophisticated mechanisms through which color-blind racism persists in digital environments while adapting to contemporary technological and cultural contexts.

DOMINANT

The first position on audience response is Dominant. The dominant position reflects the embracement of diversity. Viewers as recipients in dominant positions positively react to the change of race in character. Most people in this position see that the film industry is just trying to introduce diversity and provide representation to minority communities, such as Black people. This can be seen through the following examples:

9. *Wow!! She looks stunning!! The whole thing looks beautiful!!" (@ScottNevins on X, 2022).*
10. *I love this movie so much I don't know why I think it's the romntic bit but it's mzing I like how ariel is so unique nd how she loves stuff from bove the wters wht's very interesting this movie is my fv so fr, (YouTube comment, 2022).*
11. *"Omg Loved this movie nd I loved the part where she does the iconic hir flip when she turns humn nd the iconic rock scene loved this movie 10/10 good job disney," (YouTube comment, 2022).*
12. *"The ariel more thn wht I expected She relly suits the role nd I love Hlle to be Ariel and I can't imgine nyone but Hlle being the ariel, I love you Hlle my Ariel and our Little mermaid!!!.Disney sys your checks in the mil.,." (YouTube comment, 2022).*

These comments demonstrate enthusiasm and alignment with the inclusive casting, representing audiences who decoded the intended message positively. The dominant responses reflect what Stuart Hall (1980) describes as a hegemonic position—where audiences fully accept the ideological encoding of the media producer. The positive appraisals suggest an internalization of multicultural principles that value diversity as a social good (Wilton et al., 2018). Viewers in this position often possess racial literacy and interpret Disney's casting choice as a deliberate act of inclusion that broadens representation.

Moreover, this perspective aligns with multiculturalist ideologies that advocate the visibility of historically marginalized groups in mainstream media. The supportive comments also signal a desire for cultural narratives that reflect the complexity and diversity of real-world audiences. These reactions affirm that viewers in the dominant position not only recognize the shift toward inclusivity but actively celebrate it. Therefore, their reception operates as a form of cultural validation, reinforcing the legitimacy of race-conscious casting choices in global entertainment platforms.

Importantly, such responses counterbalance prevailing narratives of backlash by illustrating that not all audience reactions are resistant to change. As highlighted by Wilton et al. (2018), multicultural approaches help foster empathy and social cohesion. The presence of dominant readings within the digital public sphere suggests that a segment of the audience is internalizing progressive cultural shifts, thus expanding the normative boundaries of representation.. Such responses articulate racial understanding and multicultural values that accept diversity and support racial equality. They exemplify the belief that differences are valuable and worthwhile, in line with the principle of multiculturalism (Wilton et al., 2019).

NEGOTIATED

A negotiated stance is one in which an audience member or receiver understands the sender's message within prevailing cultural and societal viewpoints (Hall, 1993). The messages are generally understood but interpreted with certain reservations. Comments from both X and YouTube reflect this position:

13. *"The character is white; why did they use a black actor? Not racist, it's just forced diversity." (@chickentendee on X, 2022).*
14. *"Nothing wrong with having a black mermaid, but Ariel was white with red hair. I don't think Halle should have played her." (@newkatstacksfan on X, 2022).*
15. *"She is talented but not pretty at all, her voice is beautiful but I still didn't like her role as Ariel." (YouTube comment, 2022).*
16. *"I thought it was OK. Some pluses and minuses from the original. At least they stayed true to the classic songs." (YouTube comment, 2022).*

These responses demonstrate ambivalence—partial agreement with the inclusion message while maintaining attachment to traditional portrayals. This position aligns with Hall's (1980) notion of negotiated readings, where viewers understand and partially accept the media's intended message but modify it to align with their own cultural or ideological frameworks. Many of the negotiated responses are marked by efforts to justify dissent without appearing prejudiced—evidenced by disclaimers such as "I'm not racist, but…"—which reflect what Plaut et al. (2011) refer to as defensive color-blind discourse.

In such cases, audiences acknowledge the legitimacy of racial diversity in principle but contest its application in specific contexts, such as iconic characters. This tension illustrates the persistent influence of white normativity in shaping expectations around beauty, authenticity, and narrative coherence. By emphasizing that a character "doesn't look right," commenters articulate aesthetic resistance that is underpinned by implicit racial assumptions, as described in Awad et al. (2005).

Furthermore, these responses reveal the paradox of color-blind racism, where race is simultaneously denied and made hyper-visible (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). The attempt to appear inclusive while maintaining racial preferences reflects broader societal ambivalence toward diversity. These negotiated positions are significant because they highlight how ideological contradictions are managed and expressed in everyday discourse, demonstrating how cultural resistance to racial redefinition is often veiled in moderate or reasonable tones.. Some comments begin with disclaimers such as "I'm not being racist, but…" revealing attempts to resist the racist label while still expressing discomfort with race-swapped casting. This category of response accepts the need for diversity but questions specific casting decisions, often referencing physical features like skin tone or hair color as essential to character authenticity. These comments reveal the functioning of color-blind ideology in a subtle form, consistent with what Awad et al. (2005) describe as color-blind racism, where diversity is tolerated only within the boundaries of existing norms.

OPPOSITIONAL

Oppositional recipients reject the message entirely (Hall, 1980). In this case, social media users across X and YouTube expressed overt rejection of the decision to cast a Black actress as Ariel. Examples include:

17. *"Disney replacing white characters with black actors is very wrong." (@DanielRegha on X, 2022).*
18. *"That is not her original skin color. Why??? No, I'm not being racist; besides, I'm half black and white; I'm saying that's not her original skin color." (@Askiki on YouTube, 2022).*
19. *"Her being dark-skinned here is only due to IDENTITY POLITICS promoted by 'progressive' Disney CEOs... Definite pass for me." (@AnnaMyPrecious1 on X, 2022).*
20. *"She will never be Ariel, no matter how much the woke industry tries to make you believe that's she, it's beautiful Ariel." (YouTube comment, 2022).*

These oppositional responses reflect rejection of the ideological and representational shift. They are consistent with Hall's (1980) oppositional decoding position, in which the audience directly challenges or negates the dominant code. The framing of Disney's casting decision as "woke" or politically motivated reflects an ideological stance resistant to progressive social change. Such rejection is also identified by Bonilla-Silva (2014) as a core feature of color-blind racism, where race-conscious efforts are dismissed as unnecessary or even harmful interventions into a supposed post-racial society.

The invocation of cultural heritage arguments—such as referring to Ariel's Danish origin—is used to legitimize aesthetic and racial preferences under the guise of narrative fidelity. These rhetorical strategies obscure the racial motivation behind the critique while maintaining the appearance of objectivity. As Apfelbaum et al. (2012) argue, color blindness does not eliminate racial bias; rather, it allows it to operate through seemingly neutral language and standards.

Notably, some of the most forceful oppositional responses come from individuals of mixed or non-white backgrounds, reinforcing the idea that racial ideologies are socially constructed and widely disseminated (Banaji et al., 2021). This challenges the simplistic assumption that only white individuals maintain exclusionary views. Instead, it affirms that structural norms surrounding race and representation are deeply embedded across communities, shaping reactions that may reproduce the very hierarchies such casting choices seek to dismantle.. Often, they invoke heritage arguments (e.g., "Ariel is Danish") or employ analogies like "Let's have Chris Pratt play the Black Panther now" to illustrate perceived unfairness or inconsistency. These reactions reveal how racialized norms are defended through appeals to historical accuracy, narrative fidelity, and aesthetics, framing opposition to diversity as an objective critique. The use of phrases like "I'm not racist, but..." while asserting racial preferences illustrates how color-blind ideology is often deployed to mask explicit prejudice (Bonilla-Silva, 2014).

These patterns of response reinforce Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model by demonstrating how media texts are polysemic and open to varying interpretations depending on viewers' ideological positions. The dominant responses reflect an alignment with Disney's intended message and support for multicultural values, aligning with Wilton et al. (2018), who argue that multiculturalism sees cultural difference as enriching and deserving of positive recognition. Such viewers demonstrate a high level of racial literacy, understanding representation as a necessary step toward equity and inclusivity.

In contrast, the negotiated readings illuminate how individuals may conceptually agree with diversity but still feel conflicted due to dominant cultural scripts and aesthetic expectations. The recurring phrase "I'm not racist, but…" is emblematic of what Plaut et al. (2011) and Awad et al. (2005) identify as the paradox of color-blind ideology, where race is both acknowledged and denied. These comments are often shaped by white normativity, which serves as the unspoken standard for beauty and authenticity. This tension reflects the ambivalence inherent in color-blind discourse: an attempt to maintain a liberal, non-prejudiced self-image while resisting structural change.

Oppositional responses most clearly illustrate the endurance of color-blind racism as described by Bonilla-Silva (2014), manifesting in overt rejections of racial recasting under the guise of fidelity to the original or resistance to so-called 'woke' agendas. These rejections are not merely aesthetic but ideologically driven, defending perceived threats to white cultural hegemony. Rather than simply expressing preferences for visual continuity or canonical accuracy, the oppositional comments often invoke deeper cultural anxieties about shifts in representational power. By insisting on the importance of Ariel's "original" skin color or European origins, commenters assert an exclusive claim to cultural authenticity that aligns with dominant racial norms.

This stance is consistent with Bonilla-Silva's (2014) concept of color-blind racism, wherein racially motivated critiques are masked behind seemingly neutral objections such as "historical accuracy" or "artistic integrity." The aesthetic concern—on the surface—serves as a proxy for discomfort with racial inclusivity. As Apfelbaum et al. (2012) emphasize, color-blind approaches

do not neutralize bias but enable it to persist in coded language, allowing users to claim neutrality while maintaining exclusionary standards.

Ultimately, these responses reveal how digital discourse becomes a site for the reproduction of ideological boundaries, where resistance to racial equity is cloaked in claims of fidelity, objectivity, or tradition. The aesthetic argument thus functions as a rhetorical tool to naturalize white normativity and delegitimize Black representation, reinforcing the subtle mechanisms of modern racial ideology.

CONCLUSION

This corpus-assisted discourse analysis of 75,000 YouTube comments (948,610 tokens) and supplementary X data revealed that color-blind racism operates systematically through digital discourse, where users employ race-neutral language to express racially motivated preferences about Disney's The Little Mermaid casting, with quantitative analysis identifying three distinct audience reception patterns following Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding framework: dominant readings celebrating diversity, negotiated readings maintaining ambivalence, and oppositional readings rejecting casting changes through authenticity arguments. The study's merit is limited by the fact that the CLM corpus, while substantial in size, focuses on a single media text within a 72-hour timeframe. The YouTube dataset originally contained both comments from users opposing the casting decision and supportive responses celebrating diversity. Although oppositional comments were systematically identified through collocation analysis, there were likely many supportive comments that did not contain the analyzed keywords (*Ariel*, *Black*, *original*), which may have skewed the frequency distributions and affected the statistical reliability of the corpus-linguistic findings.

Additionally, the anonymous nature of social media data prevented demographic analysis of how user characteristics might correlate with specific discourse strategies, and the focus on English-language responses within Western cultural contexts restricts insights into how these patterns might manifest across different linguistic environments. The KWIC analysis uncovered sophisticated discourse strategies, including genetic logic arguments, reverse comparison techniques, and pseudo-empirical validation that mask racial ideologies behind seemingly objective critiques. This demonstrates that social media platforms function as sites where racial hierarchies are actively constructed through everyday entertainment discussions. The study would benefit from replication on a larger scale, incorporating multiple casting controversies over extended timeframes, and it would be particularly valuable to compare the observed patterns with audience responses to representation changes in non-Western media contexts or among different demographic groups.

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