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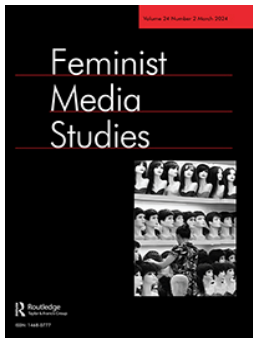
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Too black to be *The Little Mermaid*? Backlash against Disney's 2023 *The Little Mermaid* – continuity of racism, white skin preference and hate content in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

When it was released globally and in Vietnam in May 2023, the live-action Disney movie *The Little Mermaid* was met with strong backlash online and boycotting in the Southeast Asian country. Negative reactions against the movie due to the casting of Halle Bailey, a Black actress for the titular role, a mermaid and princess of the ocean named Ariel, showed concerning signs of racism and sexism that stem from a preference for white skin and an emphasis on the importance of looks in women. This article seeks to understand such reactions through its discussion of cultural factors such as the issues of racism and white supremacy and how they intersect with a tendency to resist inclusive movements, the growing trend of hate content and sexist conception of beauty in Vietnam. The article suggests an intersectional approach and considers the concept “misogynoir” to explain the backlash against Halle Bailey's starring in the movie.

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Little Mermaid; racism; white supremacy; anti-woke; Vietnam

Since Disney's 2019 announcement of its casting of Halle Bailey, a Black actress for the titular role in its live-action movie *The Little Mermaid*, a mermaid and princess of the ocean named Ariel, until the screening of the movie across the globe in May 2023, strong backlash and boycotting had been observed in certain markets. Among them, Vietnam showed worrying signs of racism and sexism that stem from a preference for white skin colour and an emphasis on the importance of looks in women. This commentary article seeks to understand the negative reactions towards *The Little Mermaid* and actress Halle Bailey through its discussion of cultural factors such as the issues of racism and white supremacy and how they intersect with a tendency to resist inclusive movements, growing hate content and a sexist conception of beauty in Vietnamese society. Following an intersectional approach, the article makes use of the concept “misogynoir” to explain Bailey's experience.

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Local backlash, the global anti-woke wave, and the growth of hate content in Vietnamese social media

Echoing some international fans' complaints about *The Little Mermaid's* failure to be true to the 1989 animated film of the same name (which is itself an unfaithful adaptation of a Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale but portrays Ariel as white as he described), often under the banner of the hashtag #NotMyAriel, Vietnamese audiences showed negative reactions online. Many called the movie a nightmare or a horror film featuring an "ugly" heroine who, according to them, looks more like a witch or a servant than a princess. A number of influential media pages on Facebook (the most popular social media platform in Vietnam, with approximately 70 million users) had fed into this backlash by persistently posting unflattering images of Bailey. Many such posts received thousands of "haha" (laughing out loud) reactions from followers, laying bare their desire to ridicule and shame Bailey.

In order to understand the negative reactions to *The Little Mermaid* and Bailey as its protagonist, we adopt an intersectional approach (Kimberle Crenshaw 1989) and consider the concept "misogynoir" (Moya Bailey 2021; Moya Bailey and Trudy 2018). Crenshaw (1989) developed "intersectionality" to describe how systems of oppression overlap to create distinct experiences for people whose identities belong to multiple categories. According to Crenshaw, how people experience life including discrimination and benefits is greatly influenced by their various identities. In her legal practices, Crenshaw noted that Black women were discriminated against for being both women and black, meaning their gender *and* race. In this sense, Black women are subject to double discrimination of racism and sexism. Specifically, Crenshaw highlighted legal cases wherein "women were required to choose between bringing a claim of racism or sexism and could not say that they had been discriminated against due to the combined effects of race and sex" (1989, 149). Embracing Crenshaw's intersectionality, the concept of "misogynoir," coined and developed by Moya Bailey and Trudy (Bailey 2021; Bailey and Trudy 2018), describes the anti-Black racist misogyny which Black women and girls encounter and addresses how they experience multi-layered oppression due to the intersecting dynamics of racism and sexist structures (Bailey and Trudy 2018). Black women and girls experience misogynoir in multiple forms, from everyday harassment and sexual assault to discriminatory hospital treatment and the objectification of their body images in pop culture (Bailey 2021). The stereotypical depictions of Black women as animalistic, hypersexual beings or fat mammies in Western pop culture are typical examples of misogynoir (Bailey 2021).

As Nina Jablonski (2004, 584) puts it, "when humans visualise a body, they see mostly skin," skin colour is inseparable from the impression we form of one another. In the case of *The Little Mermaid*, although mermaids with white skin are products of imagination because there is no scientific evidence of mermaids of any strokes in real life, the canonical visualisation of a mermaid of a half white-woman, half fish has been imprinted in the minds of millions of Disney viewers for decades. Therefore, as they made pejorative comments on Bailey's looks, some Vietnamese netizens dismissed charges of racism by arguing that they only commented on the suitability of the actress to the role. They insisted that they only expressed their preference for an actress that "looks the part." One popular argument made in such cases was that their

childhood was attached to the 1989 animated version of the movie with Ariel, *The Little Mermaid*, being a red-haired girl with white skin. Any deviation from such portrayal would be considered destructive to “my childhood” or “our childhood.” According to these people, a black protagonist was unfit because the history of this story, if there was any history, was warped, and their childhood was distorted. But how valid were these claims? Was it really about the denigration of childhood memories, or personal preference? Was it just a person’s preference, or a collective preference? Is personal taste enough to explain the overwhelmingly negative comments on the film and especially Bailey online?

The strong local backlash against *The Little Mermaid* and other films seeking to promote inclusion through the casting of non-white actors for traditionally white characters such as Disney’s *Snow White* starring mixed-race actress Rachel Zegler (planned for release in 2025) forms part of a global anti-woke discourse. This discourse involves criticisms over colour blind casting or the overall greater appearance of actors of colour in films and TV series. The term “woke,” inherently linked to Black consciousness and anti-racists endeavours, has now been weaponised by right-leaning groups who view it as “a progressive over-reaction” and even turn it into an insult against those fighting fascism, racism, and other forms of injustices (Bart Cammaerts 2022, 735).

According to Hosseinmardi Homa, Amir Ghasemian, Aaron Clauset, Markus Mobius, David M Rothschild and Duncan J Watts (2021), anti-woke people tend to view themselves as non-ideological “free thinkers” who seek to oppose social justice movements pertaining to identity and race. Vietnamese audiences’ chilly reception of Bailey’s role as a dark-skinned Ariel can be linked to this anti-woke attitude. Many people insisted that they were not racist and even supportive of Black actors in other films embracing Blackness such as *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and *Black Panther* (2018). They argued that they were only against the unreasonably woke Western “Black-washing” trend that “robs” White actors of “their” roles. These people’s support for “Black people within Black spaces” and their concern with a Black invasion into White spaces demonstrates a desire to put Blackness in “their place,” further reinforcing racial differentiation. In fact, if it was not a white-skinned portrayal, any skin colour simply would fail to represent the character. An actress with Asian looks would probably not do, neither would an indigenous, native-American actress, or an Australian Aboriginal, or a New Zealand Māori one. As a result of such views of “unfaithful portrayal” of the Mermaid, there was a large amount of hate content against *The Little Mermaid* in Vietnamese social media. Many Vietnamese social media pages seemed to capitalise on this local existing tendency to resist inclusive movements and the local emphasis on white-skin beauty standards as they repetitively posted unflattering photos of Bailey to trigger reactions and comments.

The negative reactions to *The Little Mermaid* can also be linked to a growing desire to engage in hate content in Vietnam. In recent years, many anti- and hate groups have emerged and mushroomed on social media platforms such as Facebook, focusing on muckraking, exposing and shaming celebrities because aspects of their looks or personality go against social expectations (too outspoken, too effeminate, too soft, etc.). These groups are followed by thousands and in some cases even hundreds of thousands of accounts, including anonymous ones which do not reveal the identities of its owners. The managers and followers of such groups seem to enjoy a sense of solidarity by exercising

what they view as a right to voice opinions and the “freedom to hate” (Merlyna Lim 2017, 420). Famous celebrities in Vietnam such as Miss World Vietnam 2023 Huỳnh Trần Ý Nhi and the showbiz entertainer and film director Trần Thành have become victims of frequent extreme hate content.

“She’s not our Mermaid!”—racism and beauty standards in Vietnam

As discussed above, the anti-woke trend contributes to the hate wave on social media platforms targeting Bailey as the unfaithful embodiment of Ariel, the Little Mermaid. But in Vietnam specifically, is that the only reason? Why all the hate over a fictional story? Why did some netizens show such strong emotions about a film they claimed they would not watch? To understand local netizens’ expressions of hate towards this film, one needs to consider the issues of racism, white supremacy and beauty discourse in Vietnamese society.

Racism in Vietnam is rarely researched. Evidence from the available literature, however, shows that racism and white supremacy may be widespread. In the local industry of English language education, for example, non-white English teachers, especially those with darker skin, have been discriminated against by private English centres (Dominic Hewson 2018). English teachers in Vietnam have complained of racism, stressing that “looking the part” (being white) would help one find a teaching job more easily and that being white is prioritised over other qualifications such as English-teaching certificates or pedagogic experience (Hewson 2018). White teachers are regarded as representing not only the language but also the ideal “culture” and “soul.” Hewson (2018, 820) even refers to a “fetishisation of whiteness” in the local private education sector. Research by Kimberly Kay Hoang (2015) reveals that Vietnam is an attractive destination for white Western male travellers who desire exotic sexual experiences with young women and opportunities to assert their First World status by acting as “white saviours” through their offers of valuable gifts and money to local women.

Racism, as argued by Eric P. H. Li, Hyun Jeong Min, Russell Belk, Junko Kimura and Shalini Bahl (2008), develops socially rather than biologically, and one marker artificially coded to categorise races is skin colour. Skin colour, in turn, creates notions of beauty. There has been plenty of discussion regarding the emergence of white skin as the epicentre of ideal beauty, reinforcing certain consumption behaviour patterns. Skin whitening is the benchmark of female beauty in many Asian societies, Vietnamese modern society included (Nguyen Tu 2019). As observed by Dorie Topolsky (2010) and the authors, advertisements for whitening creams and images of women with very pale skin dominate TV commercials, beauty ads in magazines and billboards in Asia and Vietnam. Researchers such as Mikiko Ashikari (2003) and Patricia Goon and Allison Craven (2003) note that skin lightness affects perceptions of a woman’s beauty, her marital prospects, employability, social status, and even earning power and potential in Asia. According to Li et al. (2008), modern celebration of white skin involves the postcolonial links between Western colonisers and the once-colonised Asians, Western global mass-media and pop culture, and traditional Asian cultural values. Specifically, in Western culture, the historical myths of paleness associated with feminine discourses of beauty, and “whiteness” as an “imperialist, racialised value of superiority” (Goon and Craven 2003, para 5). Meanwhile, in Asian countries like India, white skin is the marker of the high and powerful class in the

society, in contrast to darker skin which is symbolic to underprivileged people, thus equating to dirtiness, poverty, and low class (Hakin Arif 2004). Similarly, in China and South Korea, women with milk-white skin tend to be seen as more beautiful. In Japan, maintaining pale skin was even regarded as a woman's moral duty during the Edo period (Ashikari 2003).

Vietnam shares some similar cultural values with the other Asian countries mentioned above. Vietnamese conception of beauty is also a result of Western contact in colonial time, the global appeal of Western and Caucasian standards of beauty, and traditional Asian values which associate white skin with class, purity, femininity, and attraction. Such conception leads to the dislike of dark skin colour, likening the dark tone with dirt, filth, and defilement (David Spurr 1993). As many Vietnamese women desire white skin, they use sun protective clothes and skin whitening cosmetics to achieve a fair skin tone. In Vietnam, while men are not exempt from body shaming, women tend to be more frequent victims of it, even subject to negative comments from other women over their body size and self-care practices. It is because of a cultural emphasis on the importance of looks for women. Women are labelled “phái đẹp” (the beautiful sex), whereas men are called “phái mạnh” (the strong sex). Societal occupation with female beauty is manifested in the proliferation of beauty pageants in Vietnam: there are now about 30 annual beauty competitions in Vietnam (Phường Bảo 2023), compared to only a few in the 1990s. Those beauty pageants perpetuate a restrictive standard of beauty shaped by the stereotypical image of princesses with pale skin, which signals middle-classness, the lack of manual labour and conspicuous investment in self-care, and a pronounced nose that characterises whiteness. Those with tanned skinned colour, such as Miss Universe Vietnam 2017 H'hen Niê, have suffered from body shaming.

The present societal occupation with light skin, however, is not always to imitate Caucasian beauty but to integrate desirable features linked to lighter-toned skin into the contemporary beauty standard. South Korean entertainers with pale skin and pronounced noses, who are very popular in Vietnam thanks to the Korean Wave (the popularisation of South Korean mass culture worldwide) (Thi Gammon 2023), exemplify this ideal (Nguyen Tu 2019). Many local cosmetics clinics offering plastic surgeries capitalise on such standards of Korean beauty. The idea that every woman must be beautiful and pale skin is most beautiful has been internalised by both women and men, further strengthening women's desire to possess and maintain light-skinned to be attractive to men. This view has been used to disempower and shame dark-skinned women.

Back to our case of *The Little Mermaid* live-action remake, many comments on social media posts especially focused on Bailey's looks, including her skin colour and locs. Some compared Bailey's looks to that of Jessica Alexander, a white supporting actress playing Bailey's rival as a romantic partner to the prince. Exhibiting conventional beauty with porcelain white skin, Alexander easily fits into many Vietnamese's ideal of attractiveness. The discussion of preference for fair skin in Vietnam above can partly explain why in the country, *The Little Mermaid* underperformed in the box office and received chilly reception from viewers compared to other live-action Disney's fairy tale remakes. In China and South Korea, the same box-office flop situation was observed and has been linked to racist backlash on social media directed at the casting of Bailey as Ariel (Amy Hawkins 2023; Pamela; Pamela McClintock Brzeski and Patrick Brzeski 2023; Michelle Toh, Candice Zhu and Gawon

Bae 2023). However, in other parts of the world like Europe, or South America, and Asia such as the Philippines or Japan, *The Little Mermaid* was a hit (Brzeski and Brzeski 2023).

Conclusion

The backlash against *The Little Mermaid* and Halle Bailey went beyond a matter of preference or taste because it was not simply about local audiences' decisions not to see the film but their desire to body shame the actress through collective expressions of hate and their opposition to inclusive media movements, i.e., an "anti-woke" attitude. This commentary article has explored such backlash through our discussions of cultural factors such as the issues of racism and white supremacy and how they intersect with a sexist conception of beauty, a tendency to resist inclusive movements and growing hate content in Vietnam. Embracing an intersectional approach advocated by Crenshaw (1989), the article has made use of Moya Bailey and Trudy's concept "misogynoir" to explain the racist and sexist reactions to Halle Bailey's role in *The Little Mermaid* (2023). We hope this article can help lay a stepping stone for further research on discourses and practices of racism, sexism, and hate content online in Vietnam, which remains very limited despite its potential for fascinating insights.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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