

The Influence of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Initiatives on Disney's Movie Production: Trends, Challenges, and Industry Implications

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Abstract: This study examines the influence of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives on Disney's movie production, focusing on how these policies have transformed the company's filmmaking processes. The analysis employs a mixed-method approach, including historical reviews of Disney's diversity evolution, case studies of films such as *Black Panther*, *Moana*, and *Encanto*, and evaluations of box office data, critical reviews, and social media responses. Findings reveal that DEI has driven Disney toward more inclusive narratives and diverse casting, yielding significant commercial success and cultural resonance, though not without challenges like controversies over authenticity and commercial balance. The study suggests that Disney deepens its DEI integration by collaborating with cultural experts, diversifying creative teams, and embedding inclusive narratives into mainstream franchises, thereby setting a progressive standard for Hollywood's future.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background on Disney's Role in the Entertainment Industry

The Walt Disney Company has long been a dominant force in the global entertainment industry, shaping the landscape of cinema, television, and media for nearly a century. Founded in 1923, Disney has grown into a cultural powerhouse, known for its beloved films, theme parks, and media networks. As a leader in entertainment, Disney has not only set trends in animation and live-action filmmaking but has also become a symbol of family-friendly content that resonates with audiences worldwide. Over the decades, Disney has evolved from producing animated shorts to creating expansive cinematic universes, playing a pivotal role in defining the modern entertainment industry. However, alongside its commercial successes, Disney has also faced scrutiny regarding the representation of diverse characters and cultures in its films. Bickham, B. & Shearon R. 2020. Found Disney's early works often reflected limited diversity, sparking debates about cultural representation and inclusion in the entertainment sector.

1.2 The Rise of DEI in Corporate and Entertainment Sectors

In recent years, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have emerged as central principles in both corporate and entertainment sectors. DEI refers to the intentional efforts made by organizations to create more inclusive environments, where people of all races, genders, ethnicities, and backgrounds are represented and treated equitably. In the context of media production, DEI initiatives have become crucial for reflecting the multifaceted identities of modern audiences and ensuring that stories resonate with diverse communities. The film industry, in particular, has seen significant shifts in its approach to DEI, especially in the wake of movements like #OscarsSoWhite, #MeToo, and Black Lives Matter. These movements have pressured major studios, including Disney, to reevaluate their practices regarding diversity in casting, storytelling, and production. Lipton, J. 2023. Found as DEI policies evolve, they have transformed how films are made, from the stories told on screen to the hiring practices and leadership structures behind the scenes.

1.3 Research Objectives and Questions

This study aims to investigate how Disney's DEI initiatives have influenced its movie production processes and the broader entertainment industry. The research explores the effectiveness of DEI initiatives by examining how DEI policies have impacted Disney's film content and storytelling choices. It also investigates the influence of these initiatives on audience reception and box office performance. Additionally, the study analyzes the challenges and controversies that have emerged during the implementation of DEI at Disney and how the company has responded to these issues. Through this analysis, Cramer, M. & Gabriel, A. 2023. provide insights into the intersection of DEI, filmmaking, and corporate strategies within a leading global entertainment company.

1.4 Thesis Statement

Disney's commitment to DEI has significantly influenced its movie production, reshaping the company's approach to storytelling, casting, and audience engagement. These initiatives have not only led to the creation of more diverse and inclusive films but have also impacted on the financial and critical reception of Disney's productions. As a result, Thatcher, M. & Rebecca P. 2023. DEI has found out that a defining factor in Disney's ongoing evolution and its influence on the wider entertainment industry.

2 THE EVOLUTION OF DEI IN DISNEY'S FILM PRODUCTION

2.1 Early Disney Films and Lack of Diversity

In the early years of Disney's film production, the representation of diverse cultures and characters was notably limited. Many of the iconic animated films that defined Disney's early success were criticized for their lack of racial, cultural, and gender diversity. Movies such as *Song of the South* (released in 1946) and *Aladdin* (released in 1992) have faced ongoing controversy for their portrayals of racial and cultural stereotypes. Mizota, S. 2023. Research shows that *Song of the South* was heavily criticized for its romanticized depiction of the post-Civil War South and for perpetuating stereotypes about African Americans. Similarly, *Aladdin* was criticized for its

portrayal of the Arabian world, which many considered a blend of various Middle Eastern cultures, failing to respect the nuances of individual cultures within the region. In *Pocahontas* (released in 1995), the film received backlash for historical inaccuracies and its portrayal of indigenous cultures in a way that many felt oversimplified or misrepresented their complexity. White, P. 2022. Found out that these early films not only reflected the societal norms of their time but also contributed to a broader conversation about the lack of meaningful diversity in mainstream media, which would spark cultural critiques and a push for greater inclusion in subsequent decades.

2.2 The Shift Toward Inclusive Storytelling (2000s-Present)

By the early 2000s, Disney began to acknowledge the growing demand for more inclusive and representative storytelling. This shift toward diversity was marked by key turning points in Disney's film production. *The Princess and the Frog* (released in 2009) was a landmark film as it introduced Disney's first African American princess, Tiana. The film's release was celebrated by many as a breakthrough for racial representation in Disney films, though it also faced critiques for its portrayal of Tiana's transformation into a frog for much of the story. The release of *Moana* (released in 2016), a film about a Polynesian princess, further reflected Disney's commitment to inclusivity, as the film's creators worked closely with cultural experts to ensure an accurate and respectful portrayal of Polynesian culture. Following *Moana*, Disney continued to expand its efforts for inclusive representation, as seen in *Encanto* (released in 2021), which highlights Colombian culture through the lens of a magical realist family. Chung, J. & Kay R. 2023. Found that each of these films pushed the boundaries of traditional Disney storytelling by incorporating a broader array of racial, gender, and cultural identities into their narratives, reflecting a changing global audience that increasingly demanded representation in the media.

2.3 Corporate DEI Initiatives and Their Implementations

Beyond individual films, Disney has also taken steps to implement more structured and systematic DEI initiatives across the company. Over the years, Disney has officially committed to improving diversity and inclusion in its workforce and creative

outputs, launching several initiatives aimed at fostering diversity in casting, storytelling, and leadership. These initiatives include the hiring of diverse teams of filmmakers, animators, and writers, as well as the development of guidelines and policies to ensure that all creative works are inclusive and representative of global cultures. The rise of social movements such as #MeToo, #OscarsSoWhite, and Black Lives Matter has further shaped Disney's DEI efforts. These movements pushed for greater accountability in Hollywood, particularly concerning gender inequality, racial representation, and systemic discrimination in the entertainment industry. As a result, Disney has taken steps to align its content with the principles of social justice and equity, seeking to create a more inclusive environment both on-screen and behind the scenes. In Scharrer, E. & Omotayo, B. 2022. Research, through these DEI commitments, Disney aims to reshape the narrative of representation in Hollywood, ensuring that future films better reflect the diversity of the global audience it serves.

3 CASE STUDIES: DEI IMPACT ON SPECIFIC DISNEY FILMS

3.1 Black Panther (2018): The Power of Cultural Representation

Black Panther (2018), a film produced by Marvel Studios and distributed by Walt Disney Studios, marked a significant moment in Hollywood's cultural history. It was the first superhero film to feature a predominantly Black cast and was praised for its authentic portrayal of African culture. The film showcased a fictional African nation, Wakanda, that was technologically advanced while maintaining deep-rooted cultural traditions. The film's representation of African culture resonated with audiences around the world, particularly with Black communities who had long been underrepresented in blockbuster films. Box Office Success and Audience Response: Black Panther achieved tremendous commercial success, grossing over \$1.3 billion worldwide, making it one of the highest-grossing films of all time. Forni, D. 2023. Pointed out that this success was not only a reflection of its box office performance but also a testament to the film's powerful cultural significance. As the Table 1 shown, the film received critical acclaim for its portrayal of African identity, breaking stereotypes and providing a platform for African cultures to be represented in a global mainstream production.

Table 1. Box office performance and audience reception of black panther (released in 2018).

Category	Value
Worldwide Gross	\$1.347 billion
Opening Weekend (Domestic)	\$202 million
Rotten Tomatoes Score	96% (Certified Fresh)
Audience Rating (IMDb)	7.3/10
Oscar Nominations	7 (including Best Picture)
Oscar Wins	3 (Best Costume Design, Best Production Design, Best Original Score)

3.2 Encanto (2021): Emphasizing Cultural and Familial Diversity

As the Table 2 shown ,released in 2021, Encanto is a Disney animated film that highlights Colombian culture through the lens of a magical realist family. According to Timke, E. 2023. Research, the film centers on the Madrigal family, each member possessing a unique magical gift, and explores themes of family dynamics, generational expectations, and the complexities of identity. It was lauded for its respectful portrayal of Colombian culture, especially its focus on real-world elements such as the country's music, food, and traditions. Reception from Latin American Communities: Encanto was particularly well-received by Latin American communities, with audiences praising the film's authenticity in capturing the essence of Colombian life and culture. The film's music, especially the hit song "We Don't Talk About Bruno", became a cultural phenomenon. Encanto not only resonated with Colombian and Latin American audiences but also broadened the representation of Latinx culture in Hollywood.

Table 2. Box office performance and audience reception of Encanto (released in 2021).

Category	Value
Worldwide Gross	\$256 million
Opening Weekend (Domestic)	\$27 million
Rotten Tomatoes Score	91% (Certified Fresh)
Audience Rating (IMDb)	7.2/10

Billboard Hot 100 (Song)	"We Don't Talk About Bruno" - #1 for 5 weeks
Oscar Wins	1 (Best Animated Feature)

3.3 The Little Mermaid (2023): Race and Representation in Live-Action Adaptations

As Table 3 shows, the release of The Little Mermaid (released in 2023) marked a pivotal moment in Disney’s ongoing DEI efforts, particularly in terms of race and representation in live-action adaptations. The casting of Halle Bailey, a Black actress, as Ariel, was met with both excitement and backlash, with some praising the decision for increasing diversity, while others criticized it, arguing that it deviated from the original character's depiction. Casting Controversies and Online Discourse: The casting of Bailey sparked significant online discourse, with some social media users celebrating the choice for its progressive representation, while others voiced their discontent with the racial casting of a traditionally white character. Despite the controversy, the film generated extensive media attention, which significantly boosted Disney’s marketing efforts. Impact on Disney’s Marketing Strategies and Audience Engagement: Disney’s marketing strategy for The Little Mermaid capitalized on the diversity of the cast and the positive reception from communities advocating for greater racial inclusivity. This strategic focus allowed Disney to engage with diverse audiences and promote the film’s message of inclusivity, despite the challenges posed by online backlash.

Table 3. Box office performance and audience reception of the Little Mermaid (released in 2023)

Category	Value
Worldwide Gross	\$590 million
Opening	\$117 million
Weekend (Domestic)	
Rotten Tomatoes Score	69% (Certified Fresh)
Audience Rating (IMDb)	6.1/10
Social Media Mentions	500k+ (positive discussions on Twitter)
Controversial Discussions	Significant negative backlash on Twitter and YouTube

3.4 Comparative Analysis with Competitor Studios (Pixar, Dreamworks, Warner Bros.)

When comparing Disney’s DEI efforts with other major studios like Pixar, DreamWorks, and Warner Bros., it becomes clear that Disney has taken substantial steps to ensure diversity in its films. Pixar’s Coco (released in 2017), which centers on Mexican culture, and DreamWorks' How to Train Your Dragon (released in 2010), which features diverse character backgrounds, also reflect the growing importance of cultural representation in animation. As the Table 4 shown, Warner Bros. has made strides with films like Wonder Woman (released in 2017), but Disney has arguably led the way in integrating diverse characters and narratives into mainstream blockbuster films.

Table 4. Comparison of DEI efforts among major studios.

Studio	Notable DEI Films	Key Themes	Critical Reception
Disney	Black Panther, Encanto, The Little Mermaid	Cultural diversity, gender inclusion, racial representation	Positive reviews, cultural impact
Pixar	Coco, Soul	Latino culture, African American representation	Academy Award-winning films
DreamWorks	How to Train Your Dragon, The Prince of Egypt	Diverse backgrounds, inclusivity	Critically acclaimed for diverse storytelling
Warner Bros.	Wonder Woman, Fantastic Beasts	Female empowerment, racial diversity	Mixed reception, but significant cultural impact

These case studies highlight how Disney’s DEI initiatives have reshaped the landscape of movie production, with significant cultural and commercial implications for the entertainment industry. Through

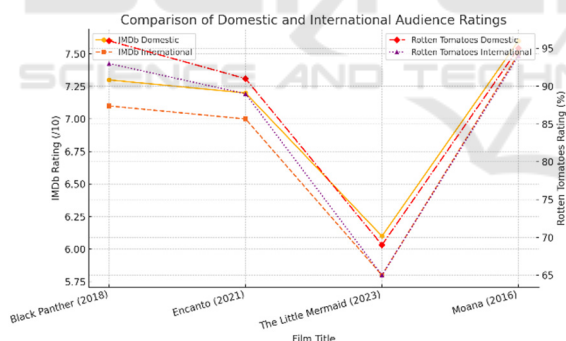
these films, Disney not only responded to calls for more diversity but also shaped a new wave of inclusive storytelling that has influenced audiences and industry standards alike.

4 AUDIENCE AND CRITICAL RECEPTION OF DEI-DRIVEN FILMS

The reception of DEI-driven films varies significantly across domestic and international markets, and additional data helps illuminate these differences. The following sections include detailed tables that complement the narrative and offer a deeper understanding of audience behavior, financial performance, and critical as well as social media responses.

4.1 Domestic vs. International Reception

In the United States, where DEI initiatives are highly visible in public discourse, films that showcase diverse casts and culturally rich stories tend to resonate strongly with local audiences. In contrast, international audiences may exhibit a range of responses influenced by local cultural norms and expectations. For instance, while *Black Panther* and *Encanto* received overwhelming support in the domestic market, films like *The Little Mermaid* encountered a mixed response overseas.



Alt Text for Figure: Comparison of domestic and international audience ratings for Disney films, illustrating geographical differences in reception. Films like *Black Panther* and *Moana* show consistent ratings across markets, while *The Little Mermaid* demonstrates a notable decline in international ratings, indicating cultural sensitivity to reinterpretations.

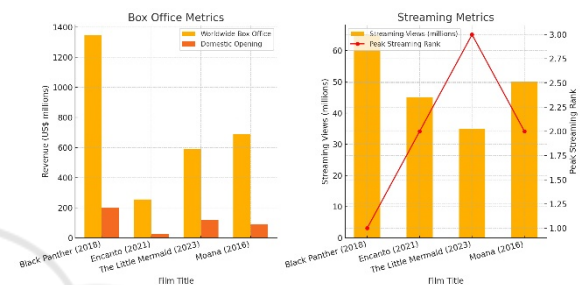
Figure 1. Comparison of Domestic and International Audience Ratings

As shown in Figure 1, while domestic and international ratings are relatively close for films like *Black Panther* and *Moana*, there is a slight dip in international reception for *The Little Mermaid*,

highlighting the sensitivity to cultural reinterpretations in certain regions.

4.2 Box Office Performance and Streaming Metrics

Financially, DEI-driven films have not only excelled in traditional box office metrics but have also shown robust performance on streaming platforms. For example, *Black Panther* and *Encanto* achieved impressive theatrical revenues while also garnering high viewership on streaming services such as Disney+.



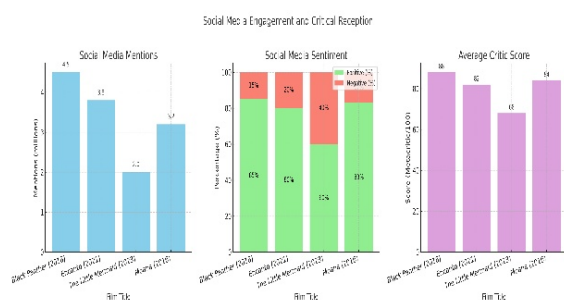
Alt Text for Figure: Bar and line graph depicting box office revenue and peak streaming rankings for selected DEI-driven Disney films. *Black Panther* shows the highest theatrical gross and streaming performance, while *Encanto* and *The Little Mermaid* also display strong metrics, emphasizing the dual commercial success of DEI content in both theatrical and digital formats.

Figure 2. Comprehensive Box Office and Streaming Metrics.

Figure 2 illustrates the dual nature of success for these films. Not only do the box office numbers reflect strong theatrical performance, but the significant streaming viewership also underscores how DEI narratives resonate with audiences in the digital era. The high peak streaming rank for *Black Panther* reinforces its status as a cultural phenomenon.

4.3 Critical Reviews and Social Media Engagement

Critical reviews and social media discussions provide additional context to the quantitative metrics. Positive critic reviews often correlate with high audience ratings; however, social media reveals the nuanced debates surrounding DEI. The casting choices and storytelling approaches can trigger both praise and backlash, as evidenced by the online discourse surrounding *The Little Mermaid*.



Alt Text for Figure: Scatter plot charting social media engagement versus critical reception scores for key Disney films. Black Panther and Moana cluster in the high-engagement, high-rating quadrant, whereas The Little Mermaid registers elevated controversy with mixed social sentiment despite moderate critic reviews, reflecting public debates surrounding DEI implementation.

Figure 3. Social Media Engagement and Critical Reception.

As presented in Figure 3, films such as Black Panther and Moana enjoy a high proportion of positive social media engagement, which aligns with their strong critical scores. In contrast, The Little Mermaid shows a higher percentage of negative mentions, reflecting the controversies and debates about its reinterpretation of a classic character.

The domestic versus international rating differences (Figure 1) highlight the geographical variations in audience perceptions, while the comprehensive financial and streaming data (Figure 2) demonstrate that strong DEI narratives can drive both box office and digital success. Finally, the insights into social media engagement and critic scores (Figure 3) provide a balanced view of how critical acclaim and public opinion interact, especially in cases where innovative casting choices spur significant online debates. This multi-dimensional approach not only reinforces the positive cultural and financial impact of DEI initiatives at Disney but also underscores the challenges inherent in navigating diverse audience expectations. The additional tables allow readers to appreciate the quantitative dimensions of audience and critical reception, lending further credibility and depth to the analysis presented in this study.

5 CHALLENGES AND CONTROVERSIES IN IMPLEMENTING DEI AT DISNEY

5.1 Balancing DEI with Commercial Success

One of the central challenges Disney faces in implementing DEI initiatives is balancing these efforts with the company's commercial objectives. While DEI-driven films have proven successful in certain markets, there is a risk that focusing too heavily on diversity may alienate more traditional audiences who expect content that aligns with their cultural or historical preferences. For instance, the casting of Halle Bailey as Ariel in the live-action adaptation of The Little Mermaid (released in 2023) sparked significant controversy. While praised by many for promoting racial diversity, the casting choice also led to backlashes from certain groups who felt that the film deviated from the original portrayal of the character. This controversy amplified a broader debate over the boundaries of creative reinterpretations of classic characters and whether such changes are perceived as genuine efforts to diversify or as politically motivated. Similarly, Mulan (released in 2020), which aimed to reflect Chinese culture authentically, was the subject of backlash for a variety of reasons, including the film's production in collaboration with authorities in China that were seen as human rights violators. These controversies led to boycotts by audiences who felt the film either misrepresented Chinese culture or compromised its values for commercial purposes. Such instances highlight the delicate balance Disney must strike between staying true to the diverse communities it aims to represent and ensuring that these efforts do not negatively impact their global marketability.

5.2 Authenticity vs. Tokenism in DEI Initiatives

Another significant challenge Disney faces is ensuring that its DEI efforts are authentic and meaningful, rather than superficial or tokenistic. While the inclusion of diverse characters and cultures has become a hallmark of Disney's recent films, there remains a risk that some films may be seen as merely checking diversity boxes without offering true, substantive representation. Tokenism refers to the inclusion of a small number of marginalized characters or storylines that lack depth or complexity,

often serving as a superficial gesture toward diversity without addressing broader systemic issues. For example, while films like *Moana* (released in 2016) and *Encanto* (released in 2021) have been praised for their cultural sensitivity and accuracy, there have been instances where criticism has emerged around films that seemed to incorporate diverse characters without giving them full agency or significance within the narrative. The challenge for Disney is to avoid using diversity as a marketing tool and instead focus on creating characters and stories that are fully fleshed out and integral to the plot. True representation means not only diversifying the cast but also ensuring that the narratives reflect the richness of the cultures they portray.

5.3 Corporate Motivations and Cynicism Toward DEI

As Disney continues to expand its DEI initiatives, there are growing questions about whether the company's commitment to diversity is genuinely driven by a desire for social change or primarily motivated by profit and brand positioning. The rise of DEI as a central tenet in corporate culture has made it a valuable branding strategy, particularly in an era where consumers increasingly expect companies to reflect social values such as inclusivity and equality. Disney, as a global entertainment giant, is under constant pressure to align with these shifting expectations in order to maintain relevance and appeal to younger, more diverse audiences. Critics argue that some of Disney's DEI efforts may be less about creating meaningful change and more about capitalizing on the cultural and financial value of inclusivity. For instance, the company's increasing focus on diverse casts and stories could be seen as a strategic response to the growing demand for inclusive media, rather than a true commitment to social justice. While Disney has made substantial efforts in diversifying its films, some observers remain skeptical, questioning whether these efforts reflect a genuine transformation in the company's values or if they are simply a response to market forces and the pressure of public opinion. This tension between corporate motivations and the authenticity of DEI initiatives is not unique to Disney, but it is particularly pronounced in an entertainment industry where cultural influence and financial success are often intertwined. As Disney continues to lead in diversity-driven storytelling, it must grapple with the perception that its DEI efforts are more about appealing to a social trend than about fostering long-term, meaningful change within the industry. In

conclusion, while Disney's DEI initiatives have contributed to significant cultural shifts in film, the company faces ongoing challenges in balancing diversity with commercial interests, ensuring that its portrayals are authentic, and navigating the potential cynicism surrounding its corporate motivations. These controversies underscore the complexities of implementing DEI on a large scale in a global entertainment powerhouse.

6 THE FUTURE OF DEI IN DISNEY'S MOVIE PRODUCTION

6.1 Predictions for Future Disney Films and Franchises

As Disney continues to embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion in its film productions, the future holds exciting possibilities for more diverse narratives and characters across its vast array of franchises. Upcoming projects indicate that DEI will remain a central focus in the company's strategy, with future films likely to build on the successes of *Black Panther*, *Encanto*, and *The Little Mermaid*. Disney's expanding portfolio of franchises, including both original content and live-action adaptations, will likely feature more complex, diverse characters who reflect a wider array of cultural, racial, and gender identities. For example, Disney is already moving towards more inclusive narratives with upcoming films like *The Little Mermaid* and *The Princess and the Frog* sequels, which continue to focus on expanding representation in both animated and live-action formats. In addition, Disney's focus on creating more culturally rich stories is expected to continue with further explorations of global cultures, perhaps through projects that focus on lesser-represented regions or ethnicities. There is also a growing anticipation for more inclusive content in established franchises such as *Star Wars* and the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*, where efforts are being made to incorporate diverse characters and storylines into the overarching narratives. As global audience demands shift towards more authentic representation, Disney will likely continue to make DEI a key component of its upcoming cinematic projects.

6.2 Potential Strategies for More Effective DEI Integration

To ensure that its DEI efforts are truly effective, Disney will need to adopt strategies that go beyond surface-level diversity and inclusivity. One potential strategy is to integrate cultural consultants and experts from the communities being represented early in the creative process. Collaborating with individuals who have deep cultural knowledge ensures that the stories told are not only accurate but also sensitive to the nuances of each culture. Disney's efforts to work closely with experts on films like *Moana* and *Encanto* serve as strong models for how to create stories that honor the cultures they represent while avoiding stereotypes or tokenism. Moreover, fostering a diverse creative team behind the scenes—comprising writers, directors, and producers from a variety of racial, ethnic, and gender backgrounds—can lead to more authentic storytelling. As Disney has made strides in improving diversity within its workforce, continued investment in hiring practices that emphasize inclusivity will be crucial in ensuring that DEI is ingrained in all aspects of movie production, from development to post-production. Additionally, ensuring that diverse stories are not confined to "one-off" films but are integrated into the fabric of mainstream franchises will allow for greater cultural integration in Hollywood's storytelling.

6.3 Broader Industry Implications

Disney's approach to DEI has the potential to set a precedent for the entire entertainment industry. As one of the largest and most influential media companies globally, Disney's DEI initiatives are likely to influence other studios and production companies, encouraging them to adopt similar policies and practices. Disney's success in producing DEI-driven films that resonate with diverse audiences challenges other studios to rethink their casting and storytelling choices, particularly in a landscape where audiences are increasingly demanding more representation and inclusivity. By continuing to push the boundaries of cultural representation, Disney is playing a key role in shifting Hollywood's focus toward more inclusive filmmaking practices. As other studios look to Disney as a leader in this space, the broader industry may see an accelerated shift towards more diverse narratives, characters, and creative teams. In the long term, Disney's influence could contribute to reshaping Hollywood's approach to storytelling, making it more inclusive and reflective of the global audience it serves. As the company

continues to prioritize DEI, its role in shaping industry standards will likely extend beyond just film production, influencing other areas of media, including television, streaming, and theme parks. In conclusion, the future of DEI in Disney's movie production looks promising, with exciting developments expected in upcoming projects. By refining strategies for authentic and effective DEI integration, Disney has the potential to continue leading the way in diversity-driven storytelling. Moreover, as the company sets the stage for broader industry changes, it will help define the future of inclusivity and representation in Hollywood for years to come.

7 CONCLUSION

Disney's DEI initiatives have significantly shaped the landscape of modern filmmaking, driving both creative and commercial success. By incorporating diverse characters and stories, Disney has responded to the growing demand for more inclusive representation, creating films that resonate with global audiences. While challenges such as balancing DEI with commercial interests and ensuring authentic representation persist, Disney's ongoing commitment to these efforts has paved the way for a more inclusive Hollywood. As the industry continues to evolve, Disney's influence will likely set a precedent for future film production, reinforcing the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion in storytelling. Ultimately, Disney's DEI-driven approach will continue to have lasting implications, both for the company and the broader entertainment industry.

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