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**Locating *Moana* Through Children’s Eyes: “Seeing with Others” in  
Cultural Identity and Global Media in Aotearoa New Zealand**

A thesis

submitted in fulfilment

of the requirements for the degree

of

**Doctor of Philosophy in Screen and Media**

at

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by

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## Abstract

This thesis investigates how children aged 5 to 12 in Aotearoa New Zealand interpret cultural representations in global animated media, with particular attention to Disney's *Moana* (2016). Through a child-centred, transnational lens, the research examines how young audiences make sense of ethnicity, culture, and identity in mediated stories, and how these interpretations are shaped by their personal, familial, and educational experiences.

The study draws on Jesús Martín-Barbero's (1987, 2006) theory of cultural mediations, along with theories of globalisation and transnationalism, to understand how meaning-making occurs across local and global cultural flows. It also engages with children's geographies to attend to questions of spatial belonging, migration, and place-based identity.

The study is based on qualitative data gathered from 94 research participants through face-to-face and online data collection with a diverse group of 54 children representing over 30 ethnic backgrounds, including a large subset of participants from 10 Brazilian-background families living in Aotearoa New Zealand. Children were invited to interpret a range of 24 characters drawn from 16 Disney and Pixar media texts (15 animated films and one television series), with a particular emphasis on *Moana*. In addition, perspectives from 36 parents, as well as three primary school teachers and one principal, were collected to examine how families and educators use media for cultural learning and identity negotiation.

Findings reveal that children actively interpret cultural cues through visual, emotional, and relational frameworks. Characters such as Moana and Maui were often identified as being "from here", drawing on landscape, school-based learning, and everyday cultural knowledge. Brazilian families used global media texts to support cultural transmission, while children articulated desires for characters who resembled them not only in ethnicity, but also in language, values, and personality. Across the thesis, tensions emerged between cultural recognition and confusion, reflecting the complex dynamics of growing up in a legally bicultural and yet multicultural society, such as Aotearoa.

This study contributes to scholarship on children's media reception, transnational identity, and cultural representation by highlighting the voices of young viewers and the interpretive environments in which global media are made meaningful. By bringing together children's perspectives with those of their families, and situating these within the cultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand, the thesis underscores how global animated films like *Moana* are not passively consumed but actively negotiated. It offers new insights into how identity, belonging, and cultural knowledge are shaped through everyday interactions with media, particularly for children growing up in transnational and multilingual households.

**Keywords:** children's media reception; cultural identity; transnational childhoods; cultural mediation; global media; Aotearoa New Zealand; Disney's *Moana*

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And last, but not least, I thank God, who—even in my darkest moments—never abandoned me and always showed me the way.

## Dedication

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I hope you both always find yourselves in the media you consume, in the image you see in the mirror, and, above all, within your own being. May you always know who you are and where you come from, embracing it with pride and joy.

This is because of you, and this is for you.

## Preface

### **A personal journey from Disney's *Moana* (2016) to Aotearoa New Zealand**

The idea for this study began with my observation of the lack of diverse cultural and racial representation in Brazilian mass media, particularly in children's animated films during my childhood. I remember not identifying with media productions in Brazil in the 1980s and most of the 1990s. The sensation of not feeling represented by characters or media productions, both by media produced within Brazil and by imported media, was strong enough for me to realize that the media texts that circulated at that time did not reflect my identity. Instead, I simply looked at those media texts and did not see myself in any of them, nor did I see most of my friends or family members. At that time, most children's media content was produced by Disney or other North American studios in Hollywood that would create stories targeted at children, such as Barbie movies, or Disney Princess animated films, for instance.

While imported media dominated much of the children's entertainment landscape, local productions in Brazil also offered limited cultural diversity. A key example from the 1980s and 1990s was *Xou da Xuxa* (1986 – 1992), a children's TV show from Globo television (Globo TV), the largest free-to-air television channel in the country, and the biggest national media content producer (Lopes Junior, 2024). Maria da Graça Meneghel, aka Xuxa, was a phenomenon in Brazil, Argentina, and other Latin American countries (Simpson, 1993), having had a solid career focused on entertainment for children for many years. Xuxa became an emblematic figure of Brazil's idealised Whiteness, embodying a national narrative that promoted European physical features as the aspirational standard.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Brazilian Government advertised (Bento, 2016; Petean, 2012) an ideal of the Brazilian people's physical features: a White or European Brazilian physical appearance was preferred with the promise of whitening Brazilian society mainly after the abolition of slavery in 1888 and the infiltration of millions of Black people in the local society as a consequence for over three centuries of slave trade. There were a mixture of eugenics and sanitization through the Brazilian Government's encouragement of racial mixing with the promise of whitening its society generation after generation and having the boost of European migration into the Brazilian society to fill in the work force gaps caused by the abolishment of slavery in 1888 (Cords, 2024). The mindset of having a whiter society permeated not only government policies but a general social mindset, and consequently, the mainstream media in Brazil, over a century after the abolition of slavery. In this sense, seeing a Brown-skin character, such as *Moana's* protagonist in a global media production and on big screens provided an immense satisfaction as a Brazilian mother.

Finally, someone (Moana, main character) with a phenotype that goes against the mainstream White/European beauty standard is being celebrated in a global production such as Disney's, so widely consumed by the Brazilian society. For the first time, chasing after non-White/European main characters in the mainstream media had a pause when my oldest daughter, a Brown-skinned girl, at the time of *Moana's* launch, at almost four years old, looked at Moana (character) in a life-size display on a cinema's entrance in Brazil, pointed out to Moana's figure, and said, "*Mummy, it's me! Look!*". When you have a child who belongs to a minority, who is under-represented by the mainstream media (Mizael et al., 2021), and identifies herself with a media text made by the biggest global media conglomerate such as Disney (Birkinbine et al., 2017; Freeman, 2022), it creates an inexplicable feeling of joy and relief for a parent, in this case myself.

Interestingly, besides physical similarities with Brazilians, *Moana*'s story also shares some cultural values that are close to Brazil's social values, such as prioritizing family, looking after elderly people, and displaying a tropical scenery that easily reminisces Brazilian landscape. Although I had some ideas about the reasons behind the success of Disney's *Moana* in Brazil, it made me think if the same success and identification happened in the places that the story represents.

Just after experiencing seeing my daughter identifying with the film's main character, I conducted some initial research and I found that among the places that *Moana* was representing included the South Pacific, and, more specifically, in Aotearoa New Zealand and its association with Māori culture (Presse, 2016). So, here I arrived at my topic for this PhD!

### **Disney's *Moana* (2016) success in Brazil**

When released in November 2016, Disney's animated film *Moana* was a huge success in Brazil (G1, 2017; Jovem Pan, 2017; Pécora, 2017; Penilhas, 2017). Most of the positive response from the audiences was due to the fact that the mainstream Brazilian media, in general, do not represent positively Black or Brown people apart from football and carnival representations, even though the majority of the Brazilian population being of fifty-four per cent identified as Black (Gomes & Marli, 2018; Prudente, 2020). Although Black people make up the majority of Brazil's population, they are significantly underrepresented in mainstream media (Moreno Fernandes, 2021). The same lack of representation occurs regarding racial and ethnic minorities in the Brazilian media (Araújo, 2008, 2018; Cavalcanti & Reis, 2022; Guimarães, 2019; Moreno Fernandes, 2020, 2021; Moreno Fernandes et al., 2021; Moura & Almeida, 2021; Soares, 2012).

The lack of representation of Black or Brown people also repeats in Brazilian media targeted at children (Dourado Gonçalves et al., 2020; Gomes Barbosa & De Souza, 2018; Santos et al., 2015). In addition to the underrepresentation in mainstream media in Brazil, *Moana* displays a different setting of characters compared to what Disney has made in the last two decades when compared to other Disney princesses such as Elsa and Anna from Disney's *Frozen* (2013), Merida from Disney/Pixar's *Brave* (2012), Rapunzel from Disney's *Tangled* (2010), and Tiana from Disney's *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). Apart from Tiana, all other main characters are White and albeit Disney tried to represent the only Black Princess in 2009 animated film *The Princess and the Frog*, Tiana spends most of the story represented as a frog.

*Moana* (Clements & Musker, 2016) is a story of a teenager who is the chief's daughter and is expected to rule her people in the fictional island of Motunui, in the Pacific Ocean. She has dark skin colour, comes from an Indigenous background, and lives in a place with beautiful tropical landscapes comprising for coconut trees, white sand beaches, warm weather, sunshine and clear blue seawater. At this time, I noticed many families from Black family roots switched from *Frozen* or *Tangled* to *Moana* as a theme for their children's birthday parties. It made more sense and generated more connection to Brazilian people than an icy landscape (e.g. Disney's *Frozen*) or castles (e.g. Disney's *Tangled*).

These experiences marked the beginning of my research journey. Seeing my daughter connect so deeply with a character like Moana made me reflect on the importance of cultural representation in media, especially for children from marginalised backgrounds. It led me to explore how children in Aotearoa New Zealand make sense of these kinds of stories, and whether they also see parts of themselves reflected on screen.

***“Yes, you are Brazilian, darling, but please do not be so proud of it” (personal comment from my mother)***

My mother’s family fits within a broadly Caucasian and European profile. My maternal grandfather was German, and my maternal grandmother came from Italy. My name—both given and family—is of Germanic origin. On my father’s side, however, there has always been a deep absence of information about our ancestry. My father passed away during my doctoral journey in 2019, after having been diagnosed with both Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s disease. Sadly, even before his illness, he consistently refused to speak about his family background, despite my lifelong attempts to learn more about it.

My family and I believe that this silence was, at least in part, due to a learned sense of shame or discomfort surrounding aspects of his ancestry. We suspect that his family included Jewish heritage, and that one of my paternal great-grandfathers may not have been officially named on my grandfather’s birth certificate. In Brazil, at the end of the nineteenth century, it was unfortunately common for names to be omitted from official records when individuals had either Black African or Indigenous heritage. These identities were, at the time, marginalised and often silenced within families.

Like my own, the stories of millions of Brazilians are marked by uncertainty around ethnic origins and ancestral histories. This erasure is a legacy of colonisation, during which communities such as Jews, Black people, and Indigenous peoples were actively prevented from speaking their languages and practising their cultures. This long-standing process of cultural erosion continues to shape the identities of many today, including mine.

In this context, witnessing Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand continuing to contest ongoing colonisation and celebrating cultural heritage brings me joy and hope. It signals the possibility of a future in which children can grow up with a strong sense of identity and pride

in their roots. This study is dedicated to all those who have been, and continue to be, denied the right to know who they are.

### **Shifting Plans and Unexpected Support**

Initially, this study was designed to include distinct cohorts of children: Māori, Pasifika, Brazilian, and children from other ethnic backgrounds living in Aotearoa New Zealand. The aim was to explore a wide range of cultural interpretations and engagements with global media across diverse groups. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic brought unforeseen challenges. Several schools that had initially agreed to support the data collection process had to withdraw their participation, as this was not a priority during that period.

In response, I had to adapt the recruitment strategy and heavily rely on my personal and professional networks to find participants. This included a social media campaign, which led to significant engagement from the Brazilian community in the Waikato region. As a result, the study ended up with a stronger representation of Brazilian families than originally planned, shaping both the scope and the direction of the research.

What follows is the result of that exploration, a study shaped by both personal experience and academic inquiry.

I hope you enjoy the reading!

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## Glossary<sup>1</sup> and Abbreviations

- Āhurutanga: Māori word meaning to create a safe, comfortable, and nurturing space, both physically and emotionally.
- Kaiako: Māori word for teacher, instructor or teachers, instructors.
- Kaitiakitanga: Māori word for stewardship.
- Kaupapa Māori: Māori educational setting, Māori principles, Māori ideology.
- Koha: Māori word meaning to maintain social relationships and giving back to the community.
- Manaakitanga: Māori word for hospitality, kindness, generosity, support.
- Māori: the Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand.
- Mātauranga: Māori word for knowledge, wisdom, or understanding.
- OIAA: Office of Inter-American Affairs.
- OST: Oceanic Story Trust.
- Pākehā: Māori word for New Zealand European.
- Tamariki: Māori word for children.
- Tauwiwi: Māori word for foreigner.
- Te reo Māori: Māori language.
- Tino rangatiratanga: Māori word for self-determination.
- UNCRC: United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Whakapapa: Māori word for genealogy.
- Whakawhanaungatanga: Māori word meaning the process of building and maintaining relationships.
- Whānau: Māori word for family.

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<sup>1</sup> All Māori words in this glossary are sourced from Te Aka Māori Dictionary.

## Use of Technology Statement

This thesis was prepared with the support of the following technological tools:

- Otter: Used for transcribing interviews conducted in English.
- Transkriptor: Used for transcribing audio in New Zealand English and Portuguese.
- Microsoft Word: Used to transcribe audio-dictated notes produced by the thesis author.
- Google Translate: Used to assist with translation between Portuguese, English, and Spanish.
- Google Forms: Used as a research tool for survey distribution and data collection.
- Zoom: Used for online meetings and the recording of one-on-one interviews.
- Grammarly: Used to support academic language refinement of the author's original texts.
- Google Drive: Used to securely store data and private documents from research participants.
- One Drive: Used to securely store data and private documents from research participants.

All analysis, interpretation, and written content presented in this thesis remain the original work of the author.

## Chapter 1

### Wayfinding Aotearoa: Navigating Global Media with Children

#### 1.1 Introduction to the Topic

For many children, especially those growing up in multicultural environments, media play a central role in how they come to understand culture, shape their identities, and develop a sense of belonging. Their perceptions are informed not only by family and community influences but also by the stories they regularly consume through media. These narratives, while often framed as entertainment, are embedded with cultural and ideological meanings that can significantly influence how children see themselves, relate to others, and interpret the world around them.

The stories children consume, particularly from global media conglomerates such as Disney and Pixar, are not neutral; they often influence how young audiences perceive culture, identity, and belonging (Buckingham, 2007a, 2007b; Giroux & Pollock, 2010; Wasko, 2020; Zipes, 1994). These representations can either affirm children's own sense of identity and place or reinforce limited and stereotypical views of other cultures, shaping how they perceive people from different backgrounds (Giroux, 1994; Giroux & Pollock, 2010; Towbin et al., 2004). As children actively engage with these stories, they are not passive recipients but rather meaning makers, drawing from their own place experiences, family histories, and cultural contexts to interpret the narratives they encounter (Block & Buckingham, 2007; Buckingham, 2000, 2007a; Lemish, 2015).

This view connects with wider discussions that question tendency to frame children's media use in terms of risk or harm. Lemish (2023) stresses that children are not vulnerable consumers but also active participants who interpret and reshape media according to their own experiences and needs. Recognising this active role is central to the way this study approaches children's engagement with Disney's *Moana* (2016).

At the same time, media<sup>2</sup> serve as powerful public platforms for articulating selective images of childhood, often idealised as a phase of domesticated innocence. These representations are not neutral but are shaped by class, gender, and ethnicity, and frequently naturalised through recurring discourses in popular culture (Drotner, 2022). Such constructions of childhood frame how young people both are represented and positioned as audiences, influencing the ways in which children themselves engage with global media texts.

## **1.2 Problem Statement and Research Gap**

Despite a growing body of work on cultural representation in media, there remains a lack of research focused on how children in Aotearoa New Zealand interpret such representations in global media texts. While much has been written about media influence and identity, studies tend to overlook the voices of children, particularly those from migrant backgrounds who navigate multiple cultural frames. This thesis addresses this gap by centring children's perspectives and by examining the interpretations of Brazilian-background children, a group largely absent from existing literature. Moreover, few studies have applied Martín-Barbero's framework of cultural mediations to research with children in the context of New Zealand's bicultural and multicultural landscape.

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<sup>2</sup> I acknowledge that the term media is plural, and I use it to refer to the diverse and heterogenous forms it includes.

This approach resonates with recent reflections on the field of children and media studies, which emphasise the importance of examining children not only as media audiences but also as producers and co-constructors of meaning within mediatised childhoods. As Lemish (2025) notes in the 18-year reflection of the *Journal of Children and Media*, the field has shifted from an exclusive focus on media effects to a broader recognition of children's active engagement with media, their creative participation, and the contextual nature of research. This thesis contributes to this evolving agenda by situating children's interpretations within the cultural and social contexts of Aotearoa New Zealand.

### **1.3 Context and Significance**

In Aotearoa New Zealand, a nation with a rich bicultural heritage grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi) (Anderson et al., 2014; Orange, 2013), and shaped by growing multiculturalism (Spoonley, 2020), the role of cultural representation in children's media becomes particularly significant. The New Zealand education system and wider society are built on the principles of biculturalism, which provides a framework for understanding Māori (Indigenous peoples or tangata whenua) and Pākehā (the New Zealand European settlers or tangata tiriti) identities. At the same time, an increasing number of tamariki (children)<sup>3</sup> from various migrant backgrounds are reshaping the social fabric of the country (Spoonley, 2020). For many tamariki, especially those with migrant or first-generation backgrounds, the media they engage with becomes a crucial space for negotiating their own sense of identity and belonging.

The significance of context in shaping children's media experiences has been increasingly recognised within the field. Lemish (2025) calls for study locations to be highlighted

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<sup>3</sup> Māori terms are used in this thesis in keeping with Aotearoa New Zealand's bicultural context. Definitions are provided to support clarity for international readers where appropriate.

explicitly in titles and abstracts to emphasise situated knowledge. By placing Aotearoa New Zealand at the centre of its investigation, this research aligns with such calls, showing how bicultural and multicultural dynamics uniquely shape children's meaning-making of global media. In this specific context, while whānau (family) and school are central to children's understandings of culture, global media also play an influential role in shaping their perceptions of themselves and others (Lemish, 2015).

Research on parental mediation shows that families guide children's media use through a variety of practices, including restriction, discussion, co-use, and supervision. These strategies are often influenced by parents' own childhood experiences of mediation, highlighting the intergenerational dimension of media engagement (Elias et al., 2024). Such insights are especially relevant to this study, which considers both children's and parents' perspectives on cultural representations in global media.

This thesis explores how children, from a variety of cultural backgrounds, and with an emphasis on Brazilian heritage, interpret and navigate cultural representations in Disney and Pixar narratives, with particular focus on Disney's *Moana* (2016), a film rooted in Polynesian culture (Alexeyeff & McDonnell, 2018; Armstrong, 2018; Leslie, 2017; Seybold, 2021; Yoshinaga, 2019).

While a broad range of Disney and Pixar texts were included in the research, particular emphasis was placed on *Moana* (2016), given its central relevance to the study's focus on cultural representation and children's interpretation of place, identity, and belonging. The corpus of media texts explored in this study includes a curated selection of Disney and Pixar films, along with one television series. The Disney films used, listed in alphabetical order, are: *Aladdin* (1992), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Cinderella* (1950), *Frozen* (2013), *Moana* (2016), *Mulan* (1998), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *Snow White and the*

*Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Tangled* (2010), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *The Princess and The Frog* (2009). From Pixar, the selected films are *Brave* (2012), *Coco* (2017), and *Toy Story* (1995). The only TV show included in the research was *Elena of Avalor* (2016), a Disney Channel series featuring Elena, a Latin American princess, as its main character. Across these media texts, children were asked about a range of central characters, including (in alphabetical order): Aladdin, Anna, Ariel, Aurora, Beast, Belle, Buzz, Cinderella, Elena, Elsa, Genie, Jasmine, Kristoff, Maui, Merida, Miguel, Moana, Mulan, Pocahontas, Prince Adam, Rapunzel, Snow White, Tiana, and Woody.

Disney's *Moana* is an animated film set in the fictional Polynesian island of Motunui and was developed in consultation with cultural experts from the Pacific (Tamaira & Fonoti, 2018; Tamaira et al., 2018), making it an example of a contemporary global film that attempts to represent Indigenous cultures. In a country like Aotearoa New Zealand, which is situated within the Polynesian region (Salesa, 2017), the cultural references in *Moana* may resonate strongly with children familiar with Māori and Pacific cultures. At the same time, given Aotearoa New Zealand's foundational commitment to biculturalism through Te Tiriti o Waitangi, children from diverse cultural backgrounds may also connect with the film's themes of identity, belonging, and place.

This thesis examines how school-aged children from five to twelve in New Zealand interpret cultural representations in Disney and Pixar animated films, with particular attention to *Moana* (2016), through the theoretical lens of cultural mediations. Drawing on Te Tiriti o Waitangi as a foundational bicultural framework that shapes New Zealand's education, media, and sociopolitical structures, the study investigates children's perceptions and experiences of cultural origin, identity, and place in globalised media. With a participant cohort of 54 children representing over 30 different ethnicities and 36 parents and four

kaiako, the research explores how young audiences in a multicultural, yet officially bicultural society mediate cultural meaning, negotiate identity, and position stories like *Moana* within, or outside of, the cultural landscape of Aotearoa New Zealand. Through a series of three interlinked journal articles, this research explores how children and families in New Zealand navigate cultural representation, locate characters and stories geographically and culturally, and use global media as a space for negotiating meaning, identity, and transnational connection.

Aotearoa New Zealand's bicultural context also requires careful attention to how ethnicity and culture are understood in this thesis. Hall (2017) describes ethnicity as a signifier of cultural difference that brings together language, history, values, beliefs, customs, rituals, traditions, and shared worlds of meaning. This approach emphasises that ethnicity is not inherited via DNA but through lived experiences. This understanding aligns with the official approach in Aotearoa, where ethnicity is “self-perceived, and people can belong to more than one ethnic group” (Stats NZ, n.d.). Stats NZ also outlines that ethnicity may include:

- “a common proper name
- one or more elements of common culture, for example religion, customs, or language
- unique community of interests, feelings, and actions
- a shared sense of common origins or ancestry, and
- a common geographic origin” (Stats NZ, n.d.).

These elements show how ethnic identification can be flexible and layered, and how ideas of culture, ancestry, and belonging are imagined and lived in different ways. In this thesis, I often work with the terms culture and ethnicity in close relationship with one another. I find

the Stats NZ definition especially helpful, not only because it reflects an official policy that recognises ethnicity as self-perceived and multiple, but also because it aligns with the ways participants in my study articulated their own cultural and ancestral roots. This definition also guided the development of Appendix 12: Whānau's Online Survey (Phase Two), which drew on these criteria when asking families to describe their understandings of ethnicity and cultural backgrounds.

Culture is approached in this thesis as a dynamic, negotiated, and continually produced process. Canclini (1995) writes that culture is fundamentally marked by hybridity, emerging from intersections, appropriations, and reworkings of both traditional and modern elements within global contexts shaped by power relations. As he explains, "I understand for hybridization sociocultural processes in which discrete structures or practices, previously existing in separate form, are combined to generate new structures, objects, and practices" (1995, p. xxv). Complementing this definition, Moreno (2006, p. 300) writes that culture is "the particular manner in which a specific human community experiences, imagines, and represents its capacity to coexist". Martín-Barbero writes about the "*arena cultural*" (cultural arena) as a dynamic social space where different groups negotiate, contest, and re-signify cultural meanings and power dynamics. For Martín-Barbero, culture is a space of ongoing struggle and expression, particularly concerning how popular sectors interact with mass media and hegemonic culture. These definitions situate culture as a dynamic and lived concept that is continually shaped through practices and mediations.

As a Brazilian scholar based in Aotearoa New Zealand, my own migrant experience informs the lens through which I approach questions of identity, media, and belonging. This positionality has shaped both my interest in transnational cultural flows and my ethical orientation when working with children from diverse backgrounds.

#### 1.4 *Moana* (2016) as a Culturally Distinctive Text

Because Disney has previously been accused of cultural appropriation (Dutka, 1995; Giroux, 1994; Lacroix, 2004; Towbin et al., 2004), it assembled not only a crew but also a cast with ancestral ties to the Pacific Islands in the making of *Moana*. This strategy was intended to reduce criticism related to cultural misrepresentation. Nevertheless, some scholars still argued that Disney engaged in cultural appropriation against the Indigenous peoples of the Pacific region (Alexeyeff & McDonnell, 2018; Pihama, 2017; Yoshinaga, 2019). Others (Dittmer, 2021; Hyland, 2020) acknowledged Disney's effort to create a media text that incorporated cultural elements shaped by research and the contributions of local communities.

*Moana* (2016) is the first Disney princess film to adopt a production model similar to that used for *Coco* (2017) (Alvarado-Sizzo et al., 2024), including collaboration with cultural consultants and field research (Galarza & Rodríguez Burciaga, 2021), reminiscent of Disney & El Grupo's South American project in the 1940s (Harrington, 2015). *Moana* achieved global success, with a box office total exceeding USD 643 million, 61.3 percent of which came from international markets (IMDbPro, 2016). A sequel was released in November 2024, and a live-action adaptation is in production, expected in 2026. These milestones highlight not only Disney's global marketing power but also the wide-reaching appeal of *Moana*'s storytelling, which resonated with audiences from Brazil to Japan (G1, 2017; Pécora, 2017).

The popularity of *Moana* can be attributed to a convergence of factors, including shifts in the global sociocultural landscape and Disney's adaptation of production methods in response to past criticisms. Although the film remains a cultural product of The Walt Disney Company, the largest media and entertainment conglomerate in the world (Birkinbine et al., 2017), the production team aimed to depict the history and culture of Polynesian peoples. The titular

character, a Pacific Island girl, shares the screen with Maui, a legendary Polynesian demigod voiced by Dwayne Johnson. The directors, Ron Clements and John Musker, spent several years researching Polynesian cultures and consulting with advisors to try and produce a more authentic narrative (Giardina, 2016; *NZ Herald*, 2017) what Disney and Pixar called as cultural advisers or cultural consultants (Galarza & Rodríguez Burciaga, 2021). This attention to detail is visible in the film's music, language options, and visual aesthetics, which were designed to honour the traditions of the Pacific Islands.

A key element of this cultural consultation process was the formation of the Oceanic Story Trust (OST), a group comprising anthropologists, filmmakers, archaeologists, linguists, historians, and geographers, all with Indigenous roots in the Pacific Islands. Their role was to advise on cultural representation throughout the production. This collaboration enriched the film's narrative and visual language, helping to produce a more nuanced and respectful portrayal of Pacific cultures. For example, the first version of the screenplay was written by Taika Waititi, a Māori filmmaker from Aotearoa New Zealand (Hunt, 2017; Yoshinaga, 2019). The final credits at timestamp 1:42:13 thank cultural consultants such as Dr Dionne Fonoti (Samoa), Dr Paul Geraghty (Fiji), and Dr Vilsoni Hereniko (Fiji/Hawai'i), among others. These acknowledgements highlight Disney's effort to involve Pacific academics and cultural experts, contributing to the perception that *Moana* was more culturally sensitive than previous Disney films.

### **1.5 Thesis Statement and Contribution**

This study argues that the children who participated in this research in Aotearoa New Zealand engage with global media through culturally mediated lenses shaped by their personal, familial, and educational experiences, revealing complex interactions between Aotearoa's bicultural framework and its increasingly multicultural reality. Drawing on cultural

mediations (Martín-Barbero, 1987, 2006), the study demonstrates that children are active interpreters of media who use their diverse cultural resources to assess the cultural origins, relevance, and identification of global animated films like Disney's *Moana*.

The research makes an original contribution by applying Martín-Barbero's theory of cultural mediations to explore children's meaning-making processes in relation to global media within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, and by presenting empirical findings gathered from children and parents. It centres the perspectives of children from multicultural backgrounds, with a special focus on 10 Brazilian migrant families, a group underrepresented in New Zealand media studies, and examines how their cultural identities shape interpretations of cultural representation in animated media targeted at children.

By situating children's interpretations within a bicultural, at the same time, multicultural society, this research contributes to global conversations on how young audiences engage with cultural narratives in increasingly transnational media landscapes.

## **1.6 Research Aims and Questions**

The aim of this research is to explore how 54 children aged five to twelve in Aotearoa New Zealand engage with and interpret cultural representations in selected Disney and Pixar media texts, with a particular emphasis on the film *Moana* (2016). Through the lens of Martín-Barbero's theory of cultural mediations, this study investigates how children from diverse cultural backgrounds, including a significant proportion of 10 Brazilian migrant families, make sense of identity, place, and belonging in response to global media narratives.

This study also aims to understand how children's interpretations are shaped by their broader cultural contexts, including family background, school experiences, and the bicultural framework of Aotearoa New Zealand society. By involving parents in the research process,

the study seeks to better contextualise children's responses within intergenerational and cultural narratives, shedding light on how families negotiate cultural meaning-making in relation to globalised media.

Furthermore, the research aims to examine how children recognise, particularly Māori and Polynesian cultural features, in media texts like *Moana*, and how this recognition informs their sense of cultural familiarity or distance to both the film (*Moana*) and the place (Aotearoa New Zealand).

### ***1.6.1 Research Aims***

- To explore how children aged 5 to 12 in Aotearoa New Zealand interpret cultural representations in selected Disney and Pixar media, with an emphasis on *Moana*.
- To investigate how children's cultural backgrounds and lived experiences shape their interpretations of these media texts.
- To examine how *Moana*, as a film developed with input from Pacific cultural experts, is understood by children in relation to Aotearoa New Zealand's cultural landscape.
- To understand the role of parents in mediating children's interpretations of media representations, especially in migrant families.
- To contribute to the academic discourse on children's media reception through the application of Martín-Barbero's cultural mediations framework.

### **1.6.2 Research Questions**

1. How do a group of multicultural children aged 5–12 in Aotearoa New Zealand perceive and interpret cultural representations in selected Disney and Pixar animated films?
2. In what ways do children recognise cultural elements in *Moana*, relating those to Māori and/or Polynesian cultures, in an official bicultural yet multicultural Aotearoa New Zealand context?
3. How do Brazilian children’s interpretations of media representations reflect their cultural identities, family backgrounds, and everyday experiences?
4. What roles do familial and educational settings play in mediating children’s perceptions of culture and identity as represented in global animated media?
5. How does Martín-Barbero’s framework of cultural mediations help explain the processes through which children negotiate meaning in relation to global media texts?

### **1.7 Theoretical Framework: Cultural Mediations**

This thesis is grounded in the theoretical framework of cultural mediations, as developed by Jesús Martín-Barbero, which provides the lenses through which to explore how children in Aotearoa New Zealand engage with cultural representations in global media, particularly Disney and Pixar narratives. Early models, such as the theory of media effects (Valkenburg & Oliver, 2019), assume media have strong, direct consequences on *passive* audiences. This overemphasis on media power underestimates the role of individual agency and audience interpretation (Katz et al, 1973; Blumler & Katz, 1974; Katz et al., 2017). Or like the critical theory of the cultural industry (Tarr, 2017), which often treats audiences as passive recipients

of ideological messages, Martín-Barbero's approach recognises the interpretive agency of audiences and situates meaning-making within complex cultural processes.

Cultural mediations highlight the ways in which media texts are re-signified by individuals and communities, depending on their sociocultural positions, lived experiences, and historical contexts (Martín-Barbero, 2006). As Rincón (2024, p. 633) puts it, reflecting on Martín-Barbero's contribution, "we need to move from reasoning and illustration to telling and narrating", a shift that underscores this study's focus on lived experience and cultural storytelling. Martín-Barbero's understanding of *lo popular* (the popular) diverged from both Marxist theories of cultural imperialism and Adorno's notion of the culture industry, which positioned popular culture as a space where audiences lacked the power to generate new meanings (Rincón, 2024). This theoretical move is particularly relevant to this study, which treats children not as passive consumers but as meaning-makers who actively engage with and reinterpret global media through their own cultural lenses.

At the core of Martín-Barbero's framework is the idea that communication is not simply the transmission of messages but a process of cultural production and negotiation. Mediations refers to the various practices, institutions, and cultural logics through which people make sense of media content. This process is neither linear nor uniform; rather, it is shaped by the intersections of everyday life, symbolic structures, and social power relations (Escosteguy, 2018; Felippi, 2018; Gomes, 2018; Huergo & Morawicki, 2018; Lopes, 2018; Martín-Barbero, 2001, 2006, 2018; Rincón, 2024; Rodríguez & Murphy, 2024; Laverde Toscano & Aranguren Díaz, 1997). In this sense, meaning is always mediated, filtered through the viewer's own background, cultural references, and subjectivities.

In the context of this study, cultural mediations offer a way to examine how children actively interpret the cultural representations they encounter in global animated media productions.

Children are not culturally empty recipients; they bring with them a repertoire of meanings drawn from home, school, language, cultural heritage, and the broader sociopolitical environment of Aotearoa New Zealand (Block & Buckingham, 2007; Buckingham, 2000; Lemish, 2015). These dimensions of identity and experience mediate how children perceive characters, stories, and how they relate these to their own understanding of place and belonging (see Chapter 3 and 7).

As a Latin American scholar, Martín-Barbero was especially concerned with how imported media content is reinterpreted in local contexts, often in unexpected or resistant ways (Martín-Barbero, 2006). This insight resonates with the multicultural and migratory realities of the children in this study, especially those from Brazilian backgrounds living within a bicultural New Zealand framework. For these children, interpreting media may involve navigating between multiple cultural frames, for instance, Brazilian, Māori, Pākehā, and this process of navigation is a central concern of cultural mediations.

Moreover, Martín-Barbero's work pushes us to examine the mediating structures, for this research, such as the education system, family narratives, and national identity discourses, that shape how children understand cultural representation embedded in global animated films (Buckingham, 2007a; Silverstone, 1999; Tranter & Sharpe, 2008). In New Zealand, the principle of biculturalism, as in Te Tiriti o Waitangi, informs and structures not only formal education but also public conversations about culture and identity (Rata & Sullivan, 2009; Te Heuheu Tukino & Orange, 2017). This bicultural framework can influence children's expectations and recognition of Māori and Polynesian cultural elements in media. For instance, when watching *Moana*, children may not only recognise Polynesian motifs but also link them to local Māori culture, thus engaging in a complex process of cultural mediations that reflects both personal and national discourses.

This theoretical approach also allows for attention to power and ideology without reducing analysis to textual critique alone. While the representations within Disney and Pixar texts matter, this study is less concerned with textual fidelity to cultural “authenticity” than with how children interpret, adopt, or resist the meanings offered to them (Götz et al., 2005; Hall, 1994; Hall & Greer, 2010; Lemish & Götz, 2017). Martín-Barbero encourages an understanding of audiences as cultural producers, not simply consumers, who mobilise media texts to articulate their own identities, values, and understandings of the world.

To summarise, cultural mediations provide a conceptual foundation for this thesis by centring the interpretive agency of children, the role of context in shaping meaning, and the dynamic interplay between global media and local cultures, in this case, in Aotearoa New Zealand. It enables a nuanced analysis of how children’s cultural identities and everyday experiences mediate their engagement with media representations particularly those that intend to represent the cultural spaces they inhabit. Therefore, this framework assists us in understanding not only what children see in Disney and Pixar films, but how they make sense of what they see, and what this reveals about identity formation in Aotearoa as a nation that is officially bicultural but, in many places, socially multicultural.

### **1.8 Brief Methodological Overview**

This study made use of a qualitative approach that included online surveys and interviews with 54 children (see Table 4) aged five to twelve and 36 parents, representing more than 30 different ethnic backgrounds, and four kaiako (teachers) totalling 94 research participants. The research took place in Aotearoa New Zealand, mainly in the Waikato region, and was conducted in both English and Portuguese to accommodate Brazilian participants, when necessary. Ethical approval was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the

Division of Arts, Law, Psychology and Social Sciences at the University of Waikato (case file FS2018-32, see Appendices 1 and 2).

This methodological orientation resonates with broader disciplinary debates. As Lemish (2025) highlights, advancing the field requires innovative, inclusive approaches that give voice to children through diverse practices such as art, journaling, and self-recording. In this thesis, the research design (see Chapter 4) was guided by a commitment to child-centred and context-sensitive methods that recognise children's agency in the research process. To this end, a range of participatory tools were applied, including drawing, playing with toys, songs, costumes, character cards, surveys, and one-on-one interviews supported by visual cues. The research design was adapted to accommodate online methods due to COVID-19 restrictions, which shaped the ways in which data were collected and participants engaged.

## **1.9 Structure of the Thesis**

The body of analysis of this study comprises three interconnected journal articles (chapters), each focusing on different yet complementary aspects of children's and families' engagement with cultural representations in global media. The first article reflects on how the New Zealand curriculum system, in conjunction with *Moana*, informs children's perception of media representations of culture. The second focuses on children's perceptions of culture and ethnicity in *Moana* and other Disney/Pixar films. The third article explores Brazilian-background children's responses in more depth, revealing how transnational identity shapes cultural recognition and belonging. Together, these studies provide a layered understanding of cultural mediations in a bicultural yet increasingly multicultural New Zealand context.

The thesis begins with a chapter on theoretical and conceptual frameworks, followed by a literature review and a methodology chapter. The three empirical chapters (Chapters 5, 6 and

7) form the central analysis of this study. These chapters consist of journal articles: one already published<sup>4</sup> (Chapter 5), one to be submitted (Chapter 6), and one currently under revision (Chapter 7). The thesis concludes with a general discussion that brings together findings from the three articles (chapters), reflects on theoretical and methodological implications, and outlines directions for future research.

The first analysis chapter (Chapter 5, journal article 1) is intended to answer the following research questions: a) How do a group of multicultural children aged 5–12 in Aotearoa New Zealand perceive and interpret cultural representations in selected Disney and Pixar animated films? b) In what ways do children recognise cultural elements in *Moana*, relating those to Māori and/or Polynesian cultures, in an official bicultural yet multicultural Aotearoa New Zealand context? c) How does Martín-Barbero's framework of cultural mediations help explain the processes through which children negotiate meaning in relation to global media texts? Using frameworks such as funds of knowledge (Esteban-Guitart, 2023; González et al., 2005; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 2005) and cultural mediations (Bustamante, 2017; Escosteguy, 2018; Martín-Barbero, 2018), and framing Aotearoa New Zealand from a multicultural perspective (Zalipour & Athique, 2016; Spoonley, 2020), this research highlights how children interpret Disney and Pixar characters' cultural backgrounds, showing that factors like schooling and educational activities shape their understandings of culture in media.

The second analysis chapter (Chapter 6, journal article 2) engages with the following research questions: a) How do a group of multicultural children aged 5–12 in Aotearoa New Zealand perceive and interpret cultural representations in selected Disney and Pixar animated films? b) In what ways do children recognise cultural elements in *Moana*, relating those to Māori

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<sup>4</sup> The text shown in this thesis Chapter 5 is adapted from the original published in Spieker (2024).

and/or Polynesian cultures, in an official bicultural yet multicultural Aotearoa New Zealand context? c) How does Martín-Barbero's framework of cultural mediations help explain the processes through which children negotiate meaning in relation to global media texts?

Although engaging with the same research questions as Chapter 5 (journal article 1), this study investigates how multicultural children in Aotearoa New Zealand interpret specifically Disney's *Moana* (2016), showing how they relate its characters and story to their own lives, and environments. Grounded on Martín-Barbero's (1987, 2006) theory of cultural mediations, the findings highlight children's interpretative agency in negotiating global narratives locally, contributing to debates on cultural identity, belonging, and media's role in everyday life.

The third and final analysis chapter (Chapter 7, journal article 3) examines how ten Brazilian families in Aotearoa New Zealand negotiate cultural identity through engagement with Disney and Pixar films, using theories of globalisation, transnationalism, and cultural mediations. The study shows how family practices, school experiences, and migration shape interpretations of cultural representation, highlighting children's agency, parental mediation, and the role of media in transnational identity and belonging. This chapter addresses the following research questions: a) How do Brazilian children's interpretations of media representations reflect their cultural identities, family backgrounds, and everyday experiences? b) What roles do familial and educational settings play in mediating children's perceptions of culture and identity as represented in global animated media? It also reflects on the questions: c) How does Martín-Barbero's framework of cultural mediations help explain the processes through which children negotiate meaning in relation to global media texts? And, d) In what ways do children recognise cultural elements in *Moana*, relating those to Māori and/or Polynesian cultures, in an official bicultural yet multicultural Aotearoa New Zealand context?

It is important to note that this study was divided into two phases due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which required a shift from face-to-face research instruments to an online setting. The first phase focused on children aged five to eight, while the second phase expanded to include children aged six to twelve, reflecting children's abilities to engage in conversations about culture and identity. In addition, the three analysis chapters described above are based solely on data collected from second phase, which included children aged six to twelve. This is further explained in Chapter 4, where the methodology is presented and discussed.

The findings from the three analysis chapters (Chapters 5, 6 and 7) reveal that children who participated in the study in Aotearoa New Zealand are not passive media consumers but demonstrate agency while actively interpreting global media texts based on their cultural knowledge, family experiences, and educational settings. Children demonstrated an ability to identify cultural elements in *Moana*, often relating these to Māori and Pasifika cultures, and located the film's characters and story in relation to their own lives and the local cultural and natural environment. Brazilian-background children, in particular, offered insights into how transnational identity influences cultural recognition and belonging. Children's responses across the studies highlight the nuanced and context-dependent ways in which meaning is constructed within Aotearoa New Zealand's bicultural and multicultural setting.

## Chapter 2

### **Consuming Media as a Collective Practice: Jesús Martín-Barbero's Perspective on Media**

#### **2.1 Introduction to Martín-Barbero's Cultural Mediations**

To examine whether and how representations of ethnicity in animated films such as Disney's *Moana* (2016) intersect with children's cultural identities in Aotearoa New Zealand, this study adopts a Latin American theoretical framework informed by the work of Jesús Martín-Barbero. A Spanish-Colombian scholar, Martín-Barbero was instrumental in introducing and reinterpreting the approaches of the British Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) through a Latin American lens. Central to his theory of cultural mediations is the idea that media function not merely as a vehicle for transmitting messages, but as a tool through which individuals and communities come to recognise, interpret, and make sense of the world around them. Although Martín-Barbero's theory of cultural mediations was formulated in response to the socio-political conditions of Latin America, it offers a highly adaptable framework for understanding media reception in other contexts. Because it focuses on the processes through which meaning is constructed (via social structures, cultural repertoires, and everyday experience), it remains relevant for analysing how audiences in diverse global settings, including Aotearoa New Zealand, interpret and negotiate media texts. The following section outlines the development of Martín-Barbero's influential contributions and considers their relevance within the context of New Zealand's cultural history and social landscape. This framework is used to analyse how children make sense of cultural representations in global animated media.

## 2.2 The Emergence and Adaptation of Cultural Studies in Latin America

While cultural studies began to take shape in the late 1950s through the foundational works of Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and E. P. Thompson's studies of the English working class, it became institutionally consolidated with the establishment of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham in 1964 (Escosteguy, 1998; Moresco, 2015; Ortiz, 2019). This emerging framework introduced a new way of thinking about culture as deeply entangled with social structure and historical context. It was grounded in the belief that capitalist societies are inherently unequal, and that culture represents a key arena in which these inequalities are both reproduced and contested (Escosteguy, 1998; Kellner, 1995; Martín-Barbero, 2001).

Cultural studies emphasised popular culture and mass media as worthy of academic attention, challenging the traditional division between *high* and *low* culture that characterised earlier approaches, particularly those of the Frankfurt School, born from Adorno and Horkheimer's ideas of the Cultural Industry, within the critical theory (Alvarado Castro & del Pino Díaz, 2023; Escosteguy, 2010; Tarr, 2017). Rather than seeing the popular solely as a form of ideological submission, the new approach of Cultural Studies recognised the potential for resistance, creativity, and negotiation within everyday cultural practices.

Although cultural studies emerged in a European context, the framework quickly found fertile ground in Latin America during the 1970s. This was a period marked by military dictatorships in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, where censorship, state propaganda, and U.S. intervention shaped the cultural and political landscape (Avila, 2023; Domínguez Avila & Grisolio, 2015; Giorgini, 2021). Within the broader context of the Cold War, the United States exerted considerable influence across Latin America, not only through political and military support for authoritarian regimes, but also through the promotion of

American cultural values via mass media (Casals, 2024). This dissemination of U.S. media content functioned ideologically, promoting the “American way of life” as an implicit alternative to socialism.

As these dynamics unfolded, scholars in Latin America turned to cultural studies, reworking its approaches to address the particular challenges and nuances of their societies. A central figure in this intellectual movement was Jesús Martín-Barbero, who played a defining role in shaping the field. His seminal work *De los medios a las mediaciones* (1987) shifted the focus from textual analysis to the processes of reception and mediations, emphasising how audiences actively make meaning in contextually specific ways (Martín-Barbero, 2006). Rather than assuming a passive audience, he examined how people engage with media through lived experiences, cultural histories, and socio-political conditions.

Martín-Barbero’s work diverged sharply from the Frankfurt School’s perspective, which tended to reduce popular culture to a mechanism of ideological control and treated audiences as undifferentiated masses. Drawing on and extending British cultural studies, Martín-Barbero proposed a distinct Latin American framework for analysing how media are received, interpreted, and negotiated in everyday life. His work often centred on the telenovela, a media form locally produced and widely consumed across Brazil and other Latin American countries. At a time when free-to-air television was the primary form of mass communication, *telenovelas* became a powerful medium for public engagement and cultural dialogue (Ribeiro & Tuzzo, 2014).

Martín-Barbero recognised that telenovelas played a role in shaping national conversations. For example, portrayals of marital conflict and separation brought the topic of divorce into Brazilian households before it was publicly debated on a national scale. These media narratives contributed to a shift in public opinion that eventually culminated in the

legalisation of divorce in Brazil in 1977 (IBDFAM, 2010). Through such examples, Martín-Barbero observed that media, politics, law, and audiences form an interconnected web of cultural practices that can generate social transformation (Conway, 2012; Pensadores.co, 2014a, 2014b).

From these insights, Martín-Barbero developed his influential framework of cultural mediations. Rather than viewing media communication as a linear transmission from producer to receiver, this model proposes that meaning is produced through a complex process involving institutions, cultural histories, social interactions, and power relations (Bustamante, 2017; Escosteguy, 2018; Júnior, 2009; Moresco, 2015). Media are shaped by their audiences just as audiences are shaped by media, and both are embedded within broader systems of political and economic organisation.

Central to this approach is the understanding that individuals are not isolated consumers but are formed through social interaction. Cultural practices emerge within communities, and media reception is mediated by social settings such as family, school, and peer groups (Martín-Barbero, 2006). This perspective aligns with the present study's investigation of children's media interpretations. While it directly addresses Research Question 5 (How does Martín-Barbero's framework of cultural mediations help explain the processes through which children negotiate meaning in relation to global media texts?), it also provides a conceptual foundation that informs the analysis of all other research questions.

The framework of cultural mediations emphasises that socialisation is not confined to formal institutions like family or school but is also significantly influenced by media. Reception studies grounded in this approach therefore prioritise context and environment over textual content alone (Bonin, 2018; Scolari, 2015, 2017; Escosteguy, 2010). The ways in which

audiences interpret media texts cannot be disentangled from their everyday lives, cultural experiences, and institutional surroundings.

While Martín-Barbero's ideas share similarities with Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model (Hall & Greer, 2010; Hall & Morley, 2019), his framework directs more attention to the socio-political forces that shape media production. He suggests that media function within capitalist systems that prioritize profit but also respond to fluctuations in public opinion and political circumstances (Escosteguy, 2010). From this perspective, media not only help to shape cultural values but also adapt to the expectations of its audiences and the broader economic and political context.

In this study I look at the overlap between how audiences respond to media, the pressures of capitalist media industries, although by the reception's perspective, and the political contexts in which both take shape. This overlap provides a main angle for analysis rather than a side concern. Later in the Literature Review Chapter, I return to these issues in more depth by considering the ways large companies like Disney position their works within different cultural settings. Section 3.7, Academic Research on Disney's *Moana* (2016), in Chapter 3, follows up on this point and the subsections expand on it further.

### **2.3 From Encoding to Mediations: Comparing Hall and Martín-Barbero in Media Reception Theory**

This section contextualises Jesús Martín-Barbero's theory of cultural mediations by examining how it connects with and differs from Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model and the circuit of culture. These frameworks each offer valuable insights for analysing media reception, particularly in relation to how audiences interpret media texts. However, they

emerge from distinct socio-political contexts and propose different emphases on production, meaning-making, and the role of the audience.

Hall's encoding/decoding model foregrounds the active construction of meaning in media texts, proposing that communication involves a complex interplay between encoding by producers and decoding by audiences (Hall & Greer, 2010). Hall situates this model within the political context of late twentieth-century Britain, where mass media, particularly television, became increasingly central to domestic life. For Hall and other scholars within British cultural studies, technological changes in media (especially the rise of television) introduced new ideological forms of influence. Television, unlike print media, offered both visual and auditory messages simultaneously, making it more immersive and ideologically persuasive within everyday routines (Bustamante, 2017; Escosteguy, 1998, 2010).

Hall's work marks a transition from the dominant ideology thesis toward a Gramscian understanding of hegemony. He describes how media operate within circuits of capital, linking the moments of production, circulation, consumption, and reproduction (Hall, 1994). While media texts may reinforce dominant ideologies, audiences are not passive recipients. Instead, they decode texts based on their social positioning, cultural background, and interpretive capacity, allowing for negotiated or oppositional readings (Hall & Morley, 2019). This introduces a key idea also found in Martín-Barbero's work: that audiences engage with media through lived experience. Positioned within broader intellectual trajectories that include Gramsci and Althusser, Martín-Barbero reworked these frameworks through culturally situated understandings of hegemony and transformation. His work influenced a generation of Latin American scholars and contributed to the development of decolonial approaches to media and communication, centring cultural memory, popular practices, and everyday meaning-making as central to media analysis (Rodríguez & Murphy, 2024).

However, Martín-Barbero's theory of cultural mediations departs significantly from Hall in both focus and scope. While Hall's model was shaped by British working-class contexts during a period of expanding media technology, Martín-Barbero's work emerged from a Latin American landscape marked by authoritarian regimes, systemic inequality, and widespread censorship during the Cold War. In this setting, the study of popular culture took on a different urgency. Media consumption became one of the few available avenues through which marginalised communities could engage with public discourse. As a result, the framework of cultural mediations was developed to capture the layered and historically embedded processes through which meaning is constructed across media, politics, religion, family, and memory (Martín-Barbero, 2006, 2018).

In contrast to the Frankfurt School's hierarchical division of culture into *high* and *low* categories, and unlike Hall's focus on textual codes and audience literacy, Martín-Barbero argued that media consumption is a continuous experience that begins before, and extends beyond, the moment of textual engagement. It is not a result but a process. Meaning is constructed before, during, and after media use, shaped by the audience's socialisation, institutional affiliations, and access to information (Alvarado Castro & del Pino Díaz, 2023; Jacks, 2013; Jacks & Wottrich, 2016). Media consumers are therefore not simply individuals decoding messages, but social beings whose interpretations are formed through embedded cultural practices and power relations.

When the British cultural studies framework arrived in Latin America, it encountered a radically different socio-political context. The structural violence of military regimes, widespread poverty, and entrenched censorship made popular culture a critical manifestation of symbolic resistance. In this environment, the notion that audiences decode media texts was not sufficient. It became necessary to understand how these texts were socially mediated and

how their interpretations were shaped by broader processes of negotiation, survival, and meaning-making. This insight underscores Martín-Barbero's departure from Hall. While both acknowledge audience agency, Martín-Barbero places greater emphasis on culture, community, and historical depth as mediating forces.

## **2.4 Media Consumption as Collective and Situated Practice**

Martín-Barbero's theory of mediations represents a profound shift in how media consumption is theorised, especially within Latin American scholarship. Rather than focusing solely on media texts or technologies, Martín-Barbero redirects attention to the cultural, social, and historical processes through which media acquire meaning for its audiences (Martín-Barbero, 1987, 2006). This perspective is particularly relevant to the present study, which examines how children in Aotearoa New Zealand, many from Brazilian migrant families, interpret cultural representations in global media, including *Moana* (2016).

Martín-Barbero described mediations as a kind of *mapa nocturno*, or night map (nocturnal map). It is not a map that can be seen clearly, but one that can still be known through memory, knowledge, and intuition. In this metaphor, the media text may no longer be fully visible, yet what remains is the viewer's memory of it, their interpretation, and the associations they bring to the experience. Mediations, therefore, are not the medium itself, nor is it solely the audience. It is everything that exists in between. It is the symbolic, affective, and contextual journey of the message. It encompasses what media do with people and what people do with media. Mediations invite us to move beyond dualistic thinking and to understand the relationship between media and people as a dynamic, reciprocal process. In the context of this study, this approach provides a way to understand children as active participants in the interpretation of global media texts such as *Moana* (2016), rather than passive recipients of cultural messages.

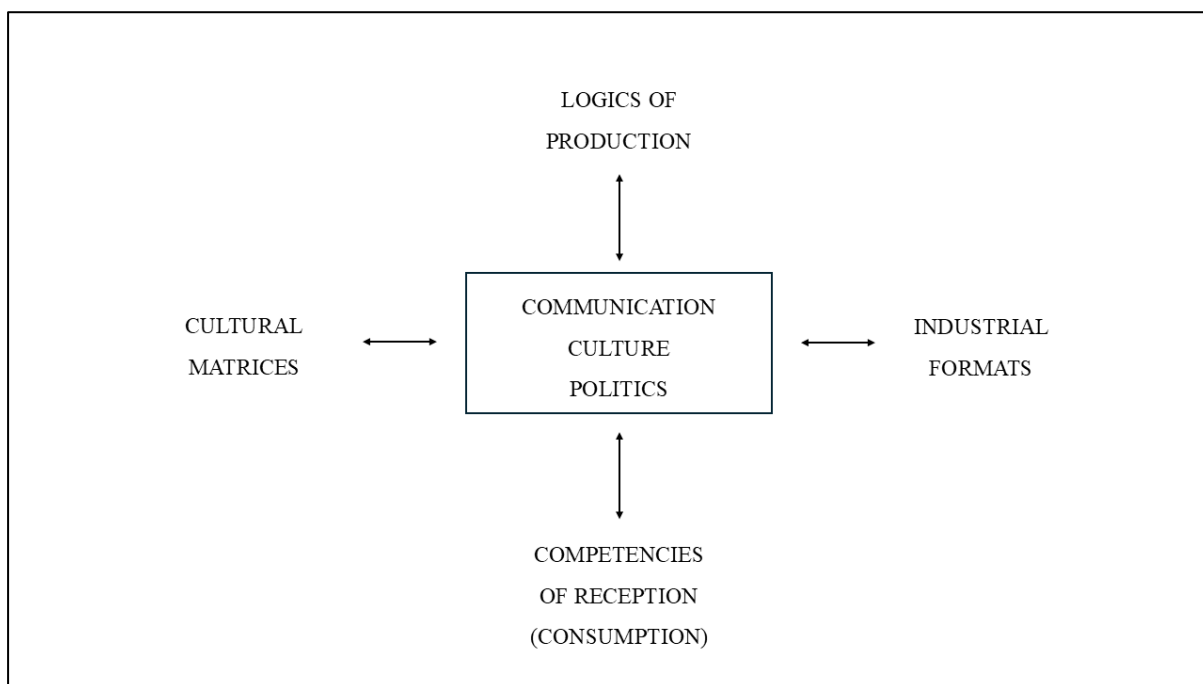
Martín-Barbero views media not as a system of information transmission, but as a symbolic space shaped by the collective experiences of its users. The process of media reception is always mediated, by age, language, family life, religion, memory, and identity. For children, these factors are especially influential, as they are in the early stages of socialisation and identity formation. Although memory is cited by Martín-Barbero as a key factor in interpretation, this study did not explicitly assess memory as a variable, though some responses reflect children's recollections or perceived memories of films and characters.

Martín-Barbero draws on Raymond Williams' notion of culture as "a whole way of life" to argue that communication is not simply about messages but about lived, socialised experiences. Media reception, in this framework, is not a moment of decoding but an evolving process filtered through institutions like family, school, church, and peer groups. These mediations shape what content is consumed, how it is interpreted, and which meanings are reinforced or resisted. Importantly, this means that children's media engagement must be analysed in relation to their local and transnational realities, not just as viewers, but as socially embedded meaning-makers.

In the current context of global media circulation and cultural mixing, Martín-Barbero's framework helps explain how audiences, particularly children in multicultural societies, make sense of international cultural products. Disney films are often presented as universal stories, but they carry ideological and cultural messages that do not always match the realities of every viewer. When children take in these messages, they do not just absorb those communications directly. Instead, they work them into their own social worlds. In doing so, they open up spaces for cultural negotiation where identity is not fixed but constantly shaped, questioned, and sometimes reimagined.

Maria Immacolata Vassallo de Lopes (2018) suggests that Martín-Barbero's idea of cultural mediations should not be read as a fixed or closed model. Instead, it serves as a developing epistemological and methodological framework for the communication studies field. Lopes (2018) outlines three "maps" that emerged over time from Martín-Barbero's newest ideas presented in the latest editions of his groundbreaking book, *De los medios a las mediaciones*. Each map displays the historical shifts in how communication, culture, and society relate to one another. Rather than replacing earlier versions of those maps, they expand Martín-Barbero's ideas and keeping them open to changes in media, social structures, and technology. Observing and recognising these shifts is especially important when applying the theory to current contexts, such as in transnational, digital, and culturally hybrid settings as in this study.

The first map (Figure 1), introduced in *De los medios a las mediaciones* (1987), focuses on the cultural mediations of communication. In this stage, communication is understood as a field marked by the historical tensions between cultural traditions and industrial formats, as well as by the logics of production and competencies of reception. Rather than perceiving media as isolated texts, this perspective situates media within broader cultural and political structures. In the Latin American context of the 1980s, this was emphasised by the consumption of the mass media genre such as the *telenovelas*. Within that landscape, Martín-Barbero explored how audiences worked with their own cultural repertoires to engage with popular media, instead of simply assimilating ideological content from a hegemonic perspective (Martín-Barbero, 2006).



*Figure 1: First methodological map of mediations, from 1987 (Lopes, 2018, my translation)*

The second map (Figure 2), emerging in the late 1990s, marks a shift from analysing the media through cultural mediations to understanding culture through communication. In this phase, communication becomes the central category for analysing social life. Mediations are no longer seen as fixed structures but as dynamic and layered practices, involving rituality, technicity, and sociality. Media reception is embedded in everyday life, shaped by both technological environments and cultural practices. Here the emphasis lies on how media are lived, used, and interpreted within specific cultural communities; a concept especially relevant for this thesis, which investigates how children's meaning-making is shaped by their social worlds and cultural belonging.

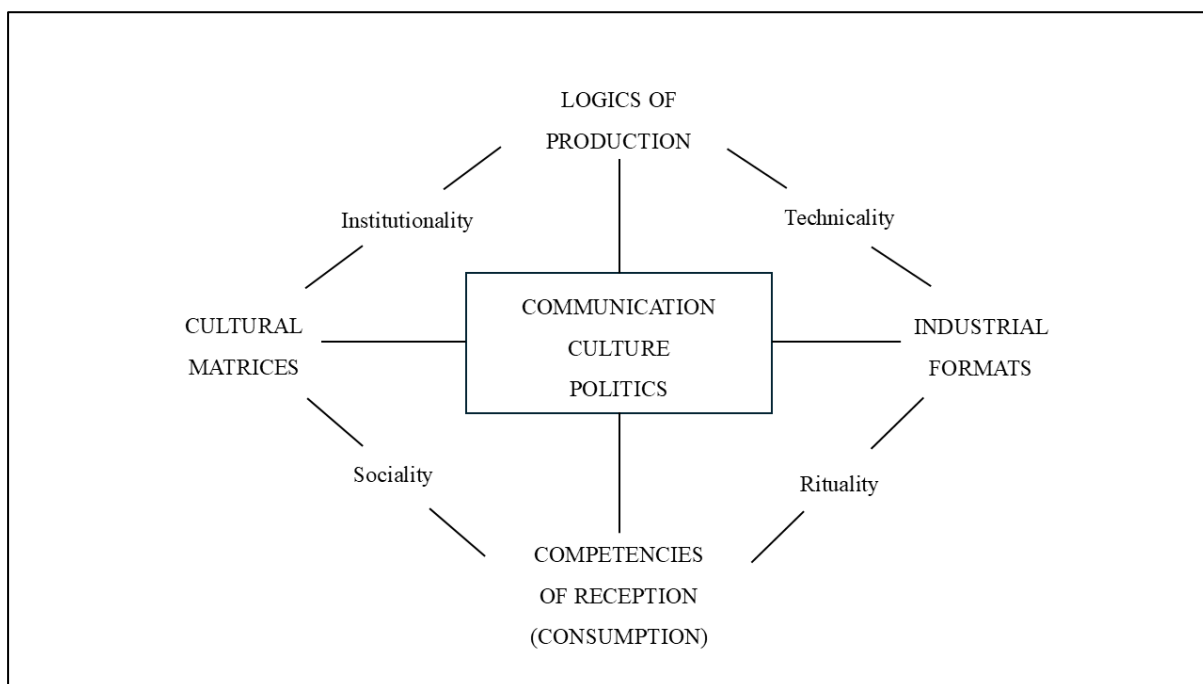
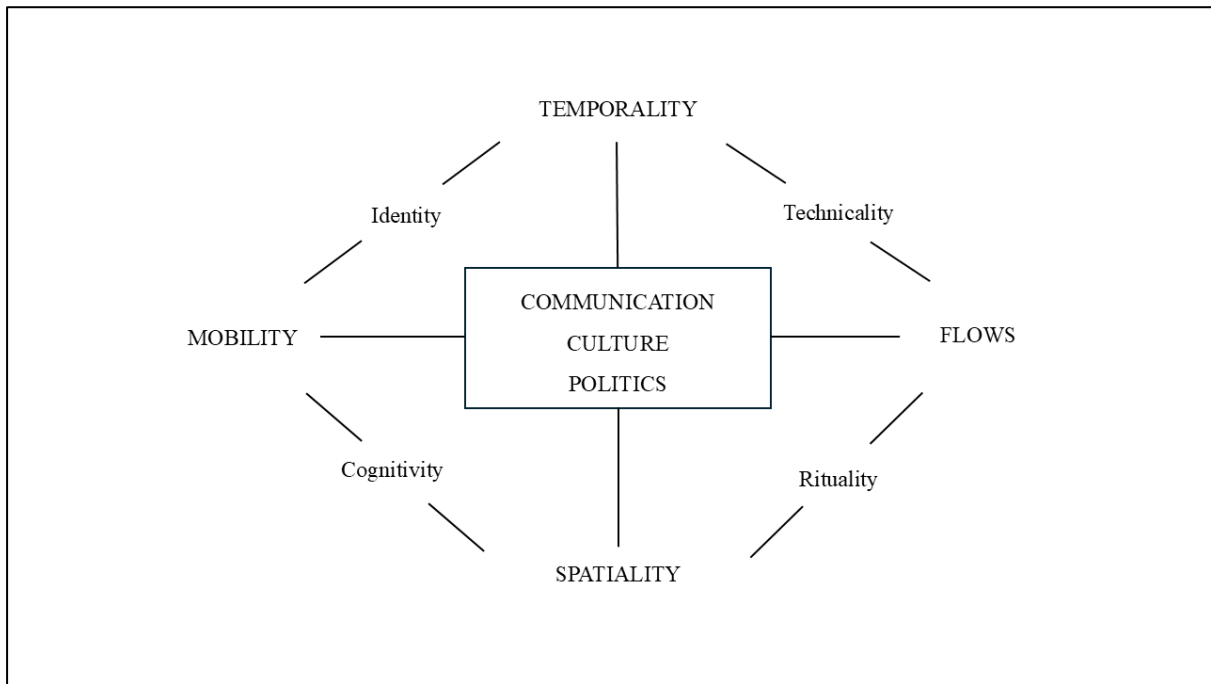


Figure 2: *Second methodological map of mediations, 1998 (Lopes, 2018, my translation)*

The third map (Figure 3), formulated in the 2000s and 2010s, addresses the mutations of contemporary culture within the context of digital, mobile, and networked environments. The key mediating dimensions in this phase are spatiality, temporality, mobility, and flows of information. These categories reflect the fragmentation of modern experience and the reconfiguration of identities across digital platforms and global circulations. According to Martín-Barbero (2006), communication is no longer defined by stable media channels but by interfaces, interactivity, and fluid cultural negotiations. This map helps explain how Brazilian-background children in Aotearoa New Zealand interact with global cultural texts such as *Moana* (2016) in transnational family life and on digital platforms like Disney+, for instance.



*Figure 3: Third methodological map of mediations, 2010 (Lopes, 2018, my translation)*

Lopes (2018) points out that the maps should not be seen as rigid phases but as methodological tools that scholars can adapt to different research questions. In this study, the third map is particularly useful because it helps to show how children move between their family backgrounds and the global narratives that circulate through commercial media. The second map also remains relevant, since it highlights the social settings and interpretive frameworks that shape how children make sense of what they watch. When analysed together, these maps provide a flexible way of understanding Martín-Barbero's cultural mediations as a process linked to history, context, and lived experiences.

## **2.5 Cultural Mediations, Global Communication, and the Critique of Western-Centric Models**

Martín-Barbero's work has had an impact well beyond Latin American communication studies and is frequently in wider conversations about communication theory. Rather than following the usual ideas that see media only in terms of effects (Valkenburg & Oliver, 2019)

or assume that technology alone drives change, Martín-Barbero takes another approach. He sees communication as something that happens through culture, history, and everyday life (Jacks et al., 2019). From this view, media texts are not fixed objects waiting to be analysed. They are part of the everyday interactions and practices that shape how people live and make sense of the world.

One of Martín-Barbero's key contributions was challenging Eurocentric and North American ideas about communication, especially Everett Rogers' modernisation theory (Rodríguez & Murphy, 2024). Rogers saw communication as a one-way process where the Global South needed to be "modernised" by taking on Western technologies and values. In this view, traditional cultures were often seen as obstacles to development and progress. Martín-Barbero argued against this, promoting approaches that were more dialogical and participatory, grounded in everyday life and local knowledge.

This perspective also aligns with the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire concept of critical pedagogy (Freire, 2005), which framed communication as a tool for empowerment rather than for hegemony (Escosteguy & Jacks, 2023). For Martín-Barbero, communication is less a matter of transmitting information but a process that supports understanding of identity, social agency, and collective meaning-making, which means that it is a practice that comes from the collective rather than the individual or the media itself.

In the "cultural turn" of communication studies (Rodríguez & Murphy, 2024; Scolari, 2015), Martín-Barbero helped reframe popular culture as ordinary; not as vulgar or inferior but as a space of common and everyday creativity, negotiation, and resistance. He advocated for abandoning rigid dichotomies, such as traditional versus modern or elite versus popular, and instead proposed that culture should be understood as a field of battles (*um campo de lutas*) over meaning, shaped by both global influences and local responses.

Although the theory of cultural mediations originated and was developed in Latin America, scholars have since applied it in many other contexts, especially in work on transnational media, identity, and migration. Martín-Barbero's ideas have been used, for example, to study how diasporic communities, young audiences, and marginalised groups make sense of global media by connecting it to local ways of interpreting culture (e.g., Escosteguy, 2010; Rodríguez & Murphy, 2024). This broader use of the framework shows that media are more than just a way to communicate. They are also a space where people negotiate culture, shape their identities, and learn how to connect with others.

Since Martín-Barbero first shared his ideas, many others have used them in different ways. Escosteguy (2010) and Bonin (2018) looked at how young people in Brazil and Southern Europe use media in their daily lives. Kraidy (2024) followed the journey of Turkish TV shows and how they became popular across both the Middle East and Latin America. Rodríguez and Murphy (2024) showed how the same framework can help rethink communication studies from the perspective of the Global South. All of these studies show that Martín-Barbero's idea of cultural mediations can be applied in many different ways. Even though it started in Latin America, people have taken it up to make sense of media and culture in different places and situations.

For example, Couldry (2024) uses Martín-Barbero's ideas to think about current issues like big data and algorithms. He suggests the theory gives us ways to push back against systems that try to take away people's ability to make and share meaning. Similarly, Rodríguez and Murphy (2024) suggest that Martín-Barbero's legacy reaches beyond Latin America and supports the call for more culturally grounded and de-Westernised approaches to communication in today's globalised world.

Those issues become evident when considering global media conglomerates like Disney. A film such as *Moana* illustrates the point well. The film presents simplified versions of complex cultural traditions, turning Indigenous and Pacific Islander narratives into images made for international audiences, sometimes even merging elements from different cultures into a single storyline. From one perspective, this strategy helps the film's narrative to be more accessible to wider audiences. From another perspective, it risks erasing historical differences and reducing cultural specificity. I will return to this point in more detail in Chapter 3.

Drawing on Martín-Barbero's framework, this study argues that global media need to be examined not only in terms of what it shows but also in terms of how audiences receive and reinterpret media texts in their own cultural settings. For children, media are not simply a form of entertainment (Lemish, 2015). It can be seen as an arena for modelling identity, belonging, and difference, and where those ideas are tested, reshaped, and sometimes contested.

To summarise, Martín-Barbero's theory of cultural mediations offers an alternative way of thinking about how media, culture, and audience agency converge. By rejecting Western-centric models of communication and focusing on social practices, collective experiences and cultural hybridity (Canclini et al, 1995), his work shows how these processes unfold in everyday contexts. For this research, the cultural mediation framework is particularly useful for making sense of how children in Aotearoa New Zealand engage with global media through their own transnational and multicultural experiences. This perspective reinforces the idea that media are understood not only through texts themselves but also through the social contexts in which meaning is produced.

## 2.6 Extending Mediations: Globalisation, Transnationalism, and Deterritorialisation

While this chapter has centred on Martín-Barbero's theory of cultural mediations, its analytic strength is deepened by engagement with key concepts from globalisation, transnationalism, and deterritorialisation, which will be discussed in Chapter 7. These theories complement the mediations framework by addressing the structural and cultural shifts that define the global media environment. Rather than moving away from Martín-Barbero's framework, they build upon his insight that meaning-making occurs at the intersection of media, culture, and society.

Among these complementary perspectives, Arjun Appadurai's (1996) theory of globalisation and global flows (ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes) provide a useful lens for thinking about how media texts circulate across borders. These ideas help explain how a global film like *Moana* can travel across countries and still create shared ways of imagining and connecting for audiences living in very different cultural settings.

For instance, transnationalism is about how families stay connected across countries (Vertovec, 2009; Levitt & Schiller, 2004). For Brazilian families in Aotearoa New Zealand, media are one of the ways they do this. Watching global films helps them enjoy stories from around the world while also keeping a sense of connection to Brazil. Parents and children mix what they see on screen with their own daily life in New Zealand, blending memories, traditions, and local experiences. In this way, media are not just for fun or pure entertainment. They also help audiences think about who they are and where they belong.

Adding to the concept of transnationalism, the idea of deterritorialisation (Appadurai, 1996; Heyman & Campbell, 2009) helps to explain how cultural meanings move, change, and take on new shapes in different settings. It describes the way cultural symbols, traditions, and stories are taken out of their original context and reshaped as they enter new environments. A

film like *Moana* shows this clearly. Parts of Polynesian culture are celebrated (Hollowell, 2021) but also turned into products for a global market (Armstrong, 2018). For the children in this study, films like this are not seen as fixed or final cultural portrayals. Instead, they are part of a shifting media world that connects with their own transnational lives. This shows how children actively make sense of global media through experiences that are complex and layered.

Together, the ideas of cultural mediations, global flows, transnationalism, and deterritorialisation help explain how children today engage with media. Martín-Barbero (2006) shows that cultural meaning is shaped through everyday life, and this idea is at the heart of this study. The global spread of films and cultural symbols (Block & Buckingham, 2007) also shows how children grow up in spaces that are mixed and constantly changing (Appadurai, 1996; Heyman & Campbell, 2009; Canclini et al., 1995). Thinking with these ideas makes it easier to see how children in Aotearoa New Zealand use global films like *Moana* to think about who they are and where they belong.

## **2.7 Transnationalism and the Mediations of Cultural Identity**

In this context, media play an important role as both a tool for cultural reproduction and a means of symbolic connection. Vertovec (2009) notes that transnational practices reshape the everyday experience of migration by allowing people to keep ties with their homelands while also adapting to new cultural environments. For Brazilian families in Aotearoa New Zealand, digital and audiovisual media often act as bridges across these spaces, helping pass on language, values, and cultural knowledge to younger generations. This becomes especially significant for children who may never have lived in Brazil themselves, yet come to know it through media texts, for instance, by interpreting texts like *Moana* through culturally specific perspectives. This will be further discussed in Chapter 7, having a focus on how cultural

mediations play an important role in children's perceptions of culture represented in media and how families engage with media content to keep ties with their cultural background while in a transnational setting.

The way media are used here connects with Martín-Barbero's (2006) idea of cultural mediations. Rather than acting only as a channel or vessel of content transmission, media become a space where meaning is shaped through everyday practices and lived experiences. This approach brings memory, language, emotion, and imagination together, allowing children to make sense of culture across different places. Appadurai's (1996) ideas of ethnoscaping and mediascaping help explain this process, showing how families manage their many cultural ties. Through media, children and their families place themselves within global flows while also holding on to their own cultural experiences.

Transnationalism adds another layer to this research by showing how identity is shaped across different places, movements, and emotional ties. When put together with Martín-Barbero's (2006) idea of cultural mediations and Appadurai's (1996) work on globalisation and flows, it becomes clear that media are not only about entertainment. It is also a tool that families use to make sense of culture and belonging, to hold on to traditions, and to work through the complex questions of place and identity that come with migration.

The framework discussed in this chapter helps to ground the study in wider research on how children engage with media and how culture appears in global films, with a focus on Aotearoa New Zealand and Disney's *Moana*. It positions the study within these broader conversations while also showing how concepts such as cultural mediations, transnationalism, and globalisation can be used to explain how children understand questions of culture and identity through media. Building on this framework, the next chapter revises

the existing body of work in children's global media practices and in Aotearoa New Zealand, as well as the complexity of Disney's *Moana* production.

## Chapter 3

# From Aotearoa to Motunui: Children Navigating *Moana* in a Global Media Landscape

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews academic literature relevant to the cultural interpretation of animated media by children, with a focus on Disney's *Moana* (2016). It situates the study within interdisciplinary debates in media studies, children's geographies, postcolonial theory, and transnational cultural flows. The chapter opens by examining the media environment in Aotearoa New Zealand and key studies on children's media engagement. It then discusses theoretical approaches to cultural representation and reception, including globalisation, deterritorialisation, and cultural mediation. A substantial section is dedicated to *Moana*, reflecting its central role in the study, with scholarly critiques focused on representation, commodification, gender, and consultation. The final section identifies gaps in the existing literature, particularly the lack of child-centred research into how global media texts are interpreted by culturally diverse children in specific local contexts. This chapter sets the stage for the methodological and analytical frameworks presented in the chapters that follow.

### 3.2 Children and Media in Aotearoa New Zealand

Over the last few decades, the media environment in Aotearoa New Zealand has become increasingly complex. Early research by Lealand and Zanker (2008) revealed children's high engagement with television, even as newer platforms such as gaming and the internet emerged.

However, the local production ecology has long been constrained by structural limitations. As Zanker (2011, 2017) and Lustyik (2005) show, New Zealand's deregulated broadcasting environment, shaped by neoliberal reforms in the late 1980s, left few protections for children's content. Without a public broadcaster mandated to serve young audiences, local programming relies heavily on contestable public funding through agencies such as NZ On Air and Te Māngai Pāho. These constraints often result in short-run, low-budget magazine-style shows that, while rich in cultural value, are limited in scope and continuity. Meanwhile, transnational corporations such as Disney and Viacom dominate children's media consumption with content tailored to US or pan-Asian markets, often offering limited localisation (Lustyik, 2005; Zanker, 2017).

Research in New Zealand shows that children in Aotearoa remain strongly involved with different kinds of media. A report by the Broadcasting Standards Authority (2008) noted that children between six and thirteen years regularly use television, internet, games, and mobile devices, and many are capable of judging whether the content is appropriate for their age group. At the same time, the report pointed to uneven access, with Māori and Pacific children often having fewer opportunities to use newer digital media devices, a gap that can deepen existing social inequalities.

The influence of the family has become an increasingly significant factor. Using data from both New Zealand and the United States, Swit and colleagues (2023) reported that problematic media use in young children was linked to reduced closeness between parents and children, as well as heightened parental stress. This suggests that media use should not be considered solely in relation to its content or the technology itself, but also in connection with the quality of family relationships and the rhythms of daily life.

### **3.3 Children's Global Media Studies**

The rise of digital technologies has transformed the global media environment, giving children around the world unprecedented access to animated films and related content. While often regarded simply as entertainment, animated films also act as vehicles of cultural expression, shaping how young viewers come to understand identity, values, and social norms (Buckingham, 2000; Lemish, 2015). Because these films circulate internationally, they not only convey cultural narratives but also influence the ways children perceive both their own cultures and those of others. This review examines the influence of animated films on school-aged children, with particular attention to Aotearoa New Zealand.

### **3.4 Media Socialisation and Cultural Representation**

According to David Buckingham (2000), media function as a key site of socialisation, where children absorb the values, expectations, and norms of their societies. Animated films stand out in this regard, as they frequently provide children with their first encounters with cultural difference. Through these encounters, films not only entertain but also shape the ways young audiences imagine and interpret cultural identities on both national and global scales.

Building on this line of thought, Lemish (2015) argues that children's media play an active role in shaping cultural ideologies. Far from being neutral entertainment, children's media contributes to how young audiences come to understand categories such as race, ethnicity, gender, and class. The representations presented in children's media thus influence the way children perceive themselves and others (Lemish, 2015). This highlights the need of promoting and fostering critical media literacy, enabling children to question and critically engage with the media they consume (Buckingham, 2000).

### **3.5 Globalisation and Media Consumption**

Globalisation has led to the widespread circulation of media products across borders (Appadurai, 1996), and children's animated films are no exception. Kapur (1998) critically examines the uneven impact of global media and economic liberalisation in postcolonial India, particularly on childhood and class. While Arjun Appadurai optimistically sees global media as enabling new forms of imagination and mobility, in turn, Kapur (1998) argues that these fantasies often reinforce social immobility for the majority. India's integration into a global consumption economy benefits a small elite who live transnational lifestyles, while most middle- and working-class families experience increased economic insecurity and pressure. This economic pressure intensifies the adultification of children, who are expected to perform academically to secure future mobility. As a result, childhood becomes a space of labour rather than leisure, where competitive educational demands and parental expectations burden children. In this context, global capitalism constructs Indian children less as consumers, like their Western counterparts, and more as future intellectual labourers. Kapur (1998) concludes that media's transformative potential is constrained by local historical and socioeconomic conditions.

### **3.6 Children's Media, Spatial Imaginaries, and Globalised Childhoods**

Building on Martín-Barbero's understanding of media as a socially situated practice (see Chapter 2), a growing body of work in Children's Geographies has explored the role of media in shaping how children understand the world around them, particularly through the lens of spatial imaginaries. Rather than treating children as passive recipients of media messages, these studies emphasise their capacity to engage, resist, reinterpret, and emotionally respond to media content in ways that are grounded in their social, cultural, and spatial environments (Buckingham, 2007a; Curti et al., 2016; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). This approach aligns with

the framework of cultural mediation (Martín-Barbero, 2018), which underscores how meaning is co-constructed through lived experience and collective interpretation.

Buckingham (2007a) examines the globalisation of children's media cultures, noting the tension between cultural homogenisation and the localisation of global media texts. His discussion of Disney, Pokémon, and other international brands illustrates how children engage with these narratives in context-specific and varied ways. Tranter and Sharpe (2008) take this further by reading *Monsters, Inc.* as an allegory of energy politics and urban sustainability. Their analysis illustrates how animated films can be used to think about wider systems of power. They also emphasise the importance of child-friendly cities and argue that children should be recognised as active participants, both in urban life and in the ways they make sense of media.

Curti et al. (2016) extend this understanding of media as socially generative by describing it as producing "affective networks-at-play." Drawing on Deleuzian thought, they argue that children's engagement with media is not merely passive but can spark creative, emotional, and relational shifts in everyday life. Their work unsettles fixed binaries such as adult versus child and consumer versus subject, presenting children instead as co-creators of meaning who move through play, affect, and imagination in ways that reshape social space.

Pyndiah (2018) develops the idea of emotional geographies to show how testimonial texts, such as Anne Frank's diary, can transform classrooms into spaces of affective learning and historical empathy. Her research highlights how media texts can act as cultural and emotional resources that connect formal education with informal learning practices. This lens is especially valuable in transnational family contexts, where media in the home often serves as both a means of cultural education and a source of belonging.

Tisdall and Punch (2012) critically reflect on the field of childhood studies, questioning the universalisation of Minority World models of childhood and calling for more relational and culturally specific approaches. By foregrounding children's agency and the contextual character of childhood experience, they underline the need to attend to how global media texts are read differently across cultural and migratory contexts.

Together, these studies position children as active participants in global cultural flows. Their interpretations of media are shaped by emotional geographies, spatial imaginaries, and locally rooted forms of knowledge. This perspective is key for understanding how the children in this study engage with global media texts such as *Moana*, making sense of representation, identity, and belonging in ways that are deeply connected to their transnational experiences and everyday lives in Aotearoa New Zealand.

### **3.7 Academic Research on Disney's *Moana* (2016)**

This section outlines major debates on the cultural politics of *Moana*, providing a basis for thinking about how children may interpret the film's representations. Disney's *Moana* (2016) has attracted wide scholarly attention for its portrayals of Polynesian cultural identity, gender dynamics, environmental concerns, and its place within global media networks (Anjirbag, 2018; Ching & Pataray-Ching, 2017; Dittmer, 2021; Hollowell, 2021; Hyland, 2020; Leslie, 2017; Streiff & Dundes, 2017; Tamaira & Fonoti, 2018; Yoshinaga, 2019). Set on the fictional island of Motunui, the narrative follows Moana, a young girl who challenges patriarchal expectations in order to restore ecological balance and safeguard her community. While praised for its visual beauty and for centring a strong female lead grounded in Indigenous voyaging traditions, the film has also faced critique over questions of cultural authenticity, commodification, colonial influence, and Disney's role in constructing globalised identities.

### ***3.7.1 Cultural Representation and Appropriation in Moana***

A central concern in the literature is *Moana*'s representation of Polynesian culture and mythology. To enhance cultural credibility, Disney consulted the Oceanic Story Trust (OST), comprised of Pacific Islander scholars, artists, and community leaders (Yoshinaga, 2019). The OST influenced aspects such as Maui's design and ceremonial traditions. Critics, however, argue that the film ultimately reflects a Westernised perspective, and that Indigenous contributions were subordinated to Disney's corporate imperatives (Anjirbag, 2018; Armstrong, 2018; Dittmer, 2021; Hyland, 2020; Leslie, 2017). Maui, traditionally depicted as an agile and intelligent trickster, is recast as a comically oversized demigod, reinforcing stereotypes about Polynesian masculinity (Anjirbag, 2018; Ching & Pataray-Ching, 2017; Leslie, 2017; Schmidt, 2016). The film's amalgamation of distinct Pacific cultures into a fictional setting results in cultural flattening, which erases the specificity of historical figures such as Maui, a central myth to the real-world revival of Polynesian wayfinding (Hollowell, 2021; Hyland, 2020; Nauta, 2018). This homogenisation reflects what Anjirbag (2018) refers to as the erasure of epistemic difference for Western narrative coherence.

### ***3.7.2 Commodification and Cultural Ethics in Moana***

In parallel, scholars critique *Moana* for commodifying Pacific cultures through merchandise and global branding strategies. Items such as Maui costumes and tattoo sets commercialise sacred cultural symbols, offering little material benefit to the communities from which they are drawn (Anjirbag, 2018; Dittmer, 2021; Hollowell, 2021; Tamaira & Fonoti, 2018; Yoshinaga, 2019). This reflects broader patterns of symbolic expropriation, where Indigenous cultural labour is celebrated aesthetically but marginalised economically within Hollywood industries (Armstrong, 2018; Hollowell, 2021). The marketing of a controversial "Maui skin-

suit” exemplifies tensions between cultural sensitivity and commercial interest (Leslie, 2017). Music also plays a key role in these debates. While the soundtrack, developed by Lin-Manuel Miranda, Mark Mancina, and Opetia Foa’i, incorporates Polynesian elements, scholars argue it reinforces musical colonization by embedding Indigenous sounds within Western harmonic frameworks (Anjirbag, 2018; Armstrong, 2018). These musical choices contribute to the containment of Indigenous expression within familiar, palatable forms for global audiences.

### ***3.7.3 Gender, Empowerment, and Contradictions in Moana***

*Moana*’s main character is widely interpreted through a feminist or postfeminist lens. She is portrayed as an independent, courageous leader who challenges gender norms by assuming the traditionally male role of “wayfinder” (Anjirbag, 2018; Hine et al., 2018a; Leslie, 2017; Streiff & Dundes, 2017). Her refusal to conform to romantic or domestic roles distinguishes her from earlier Disney princesses, aligning her with Indigenous feminist concepts such as *mana wahine*, which emphasise spiritual and social leadership (Dittmer, 2021; Hollowell, 2021; Hyland, 2020; Tamaira & Fonoti, 2018). Scholars also note contradictions. *Moana*’s journey is often mediated through her interactions with Maui, who initially belittles her and dominates key decision-making (García de Toro, 2021; Seybold, 2021). These dynamics suggest that Disney’s empowerment narratives remain bound by broader patriarchal and neoliberal structures. Importantly, empirical research indicates that children themselves are aware of these shifts. Hine et al. (2018a, 2018b) found that children identify that main characters in newer Disney movies exhibit more positive and androgynous behavioural profiles. It can, therefore, be reasonably argued that children exposed to such models may adopt more positive interpretations of the expected and permissible behaviour and roles of women.

Nevertheless, children also continue to associate princesses with traditional feminine traits, suggesting that Moana (character) challenges but does not entirely redefine the Disney princess archetype (Anjirbag, 2018; Hine et al., 2018a; Streiff & Dundes, 2017).

#### ***3.7.4 Environmental Themes and Aestheticised Resilience in Moana***

Another major theme concerns the film's environmental narrative. The theft of Te Fiti's heart and subsequent ecological decay are widely read as allegories for colonial extraction, environmental degradation, and the spiritual rupture of Indigenous landscapes (Dittmer, 2021; Leslie, 2017; Tamaira & Fonoti, 2018). The film celebrates sustainable practices and local ecosystems, yet scholars argue that it aestheticises resilience while obscuring the political realities of climate change, militarisation, and displacement in the Pacific (Leslie, 2017; Steiner, 2016; Yoshinaga, 2019). Moana's ecological journey symbolises Indigenous stewardship but risks oversimplifying complex environmental relationships and responsibilities, thus reflecting the broader depoliticisation of global Indigenous experiences in entertainment media.

#### ***3.7.5 Disney's Storytelling Shifts and Persistent Coloniality in Moana***

Several studies place *Moana* within the context of Disney's evolving approach to cross-cultural storytelling, particularly in comparison to earlier films like *Mulan* (Anjirbag, 2018). While the use of cultural consultants and Indigenous music may signal progress, scholars argue that the narrative remains embedded in colonial logic, exoticism, and the containment of otherness (Anjirbag, 2018; Armstrong, 2018; Ching & Pataray-Ching, 2017; Leslie, 2017). The production process continues to reflect Western hegemonic control over narrative framing, authorship, and distribution. Moreover, the film's romanticisation of Polynesia as a harmonious "paradise" has drawn criticism for obscuring histories of colonialism and

systemic inequality (Anjirbag, 2018; Ching & Pataray-Ching, 2017). The use of the “island paradise” trope, deeply rooted in Western imaginaries, is seen as a mechanism for depoliticising Indigenous realities and repackaging them for entertainment (Leslie, 2017).

### ***3.7.6 Media Hybridity and the “Contact Zone” in Moana***

A number of scholars frame *Moana* as a “contact zone,” a space where Indigenous cultural expression meets globalised storytelling, creating possibilities for both empowerment and compromise (Dittmer, 2021; Hyland, 2020; Tamaira & Fonoti, 2018; Yoshinaga, 2019). For some Pacific youth, this blending has been a source of pride and inspiration, yet it also raises difficult questions about voice, ownership, and the ethics of authorship (Armstrong, 2018; Leslie, 2017). While the film has been applauded for its progressive elements, its location within a Western system of production and distribution underscores the ongoing challenges of representing culture in global media (Anjirbag, 2018; Ching & Pataray-Ching, 2017). In light of this, critics call for storytelling practices that place Indigenous voices at the centre from the outset and directly engage with the power dynamics that shape cultural narratives.

### ***3.7.7 Pacific Islander Perspectives on Moana***

Outside of academic discussion, *Moana* has generated a variety of reactions within Pacific Islander communities, ranging from expressions of cultural pride to strong criticism (Anjirbag, 2018; Ching & Pataray-Ching, 2017; Leslie, 2017; Schmidt, 2016). These responses draw attention to the complex dynamics of cultural representation and appropriation, as well as the wider impact of global media on Indigenous storytelling traditions (Anjirbag, 2018; Ching & Pataray-Ching, 2017; Leslie, 2017; Steiner, 2016).

Many Pacific Islanders welcomed the film's global portrayal of Polynesian culture. At the National University of Samoa, for instance, students described *Moana* as a rare moment of cultural pride and visibility, treating it as an opportunity to share their heritage with wider audiences (Anjirbag, 2018; Armstrong, 2018; Ching & Pataray-Ching, 2017; Leslie, 2017; Steiner, 2016). The involvement of the Oceanic Story Trust, which brought together Indigenous elders, artists, musicians, and scholars, was often viewed as a step toward cultural accuracy and respect (Armstrong, 2018; Leslie, 2017). The inclusion of Polynesian music, voyaging traditions, and symbolic imagery also resonated with audiences who read *Moana*'s journey as a story of Indigenous leadership and cultural renewal (Hine et al., 2018a, 2018b; Leslie, 2017; Streiff & Dundes, 2017).

At the same time, the film has attracted sharp criticism. Scholars and commentators contend that *Moana* reproduces a Westernised, commodified narrative that repackages Indigenous culture for global profit (Anjirbag, 2018; Armstrong, 2018; Ching & Pataray-Ching, 2017; Leslie, 2017). Vicente Diaz, for example, labelled the film "Polyface," (Alexeyeff & McDonnell, 2018; Yoshinaga, 2019) a term he uses to describe the erasure of colonial violence and the romanticisation of Indigenous symbols when removed from their historical context. The depiction of Maui has been particularly controversial: while intended as a comic figure, his exaggerated body and behaviour have been criticised for reinforcing stereotypes of Polynesian masculinity and for overlooking traditional representations of Maui as a quick-witted, agile trickster (Anjirbag, 2018; Ching & Pataray-Ching, 2017; Leslie, 2017; Schmidt, 2016).

Critics have also drawn attention to the film's portrayal of Polynesia as a timeless paradise, a framing that, they argue, conceals the real histories and present-day challenges of Pacific communities, including climate change and the persistence of neocolonial structures

(Anjirbag, 2018; Armstrong, 2018; Hine et al., 2018a; Leslie, 2017; Streiff & Dundes, 2017). Tina Ngata, for instance, maintains that *Moana*, even with its cultural consultation, is still “a White person’s story.” Questions about cultural commodification have further surfaced around merchandise, most notably the Maui “skin-suit” costume, which many regarded as both exploitative and offensive (Anjirbag, 2018; Armstrong, 2018; Ching & Pataray-Ching, 2017; Leslie, 2017). Pacific scholar Tēvita O. Ka‘ili has additionally criticised the omission of central figures such as Hina, Maui’s female counterpart, noting that her absence distorts the balance inherent in traditional Polynesian cosmologies (Anjirbag, 2018).

Pacific Islander responses to *Moana* have been diverse rather than uniform. Some community members took part in the film’s production and celebrated its cultural visibility, while others raised concerns about the power relations that allowed Disney, as a global corporation, to control the story (Anjirbag, 2018; Armstrong, 2018; Ching & Pataray-Ching, 2017; Leslie, 2017). The figure of Maui illustrates this split: for some, his presence acknowledged an important cultural hero, but for others, his exaggerated and comedic portrayal reduced him to a caricature that diminished cultural dignity (Anjirbag, 2018; Armstrong, 2018; Ching & Pataray-Ching, 2017; Leslie, 2017; Schmidt, 2016). These divergent reactions highlight the ongoing tensions between cultural visibility, narrative sovereignty, and the ethics of representation.

In sum, Pacific Islander perspectives on *Moana* reveal the film’s dual role as both a vehicle for cultural celebration and a site of neocolonial reproduction (Anjirbag, 2018; Armstrong, 2018; Ching & Pataray-Ching, 2017). As Leslie (2017) argues, *Moana* offers a case study in the fraught politics of cultural storytelling in global media, reaffirming the importance of Indigenous leadership in shaping how their own cultures are represented.

### 3.7.8 Cultural Consultants in Disney's Productions

The idea of researching other cultures through local visits to different countries is by no means new to Disney's strategies in creating new media materials. In 1941, Walt Disney was invited by John Hay "Jock" Whitney and Nelson A. Rockefeller and sponsored by OIAA, Office of Inter-American Affairs (Hess, 2017), to make an incursion into Latin America, mainly focusing on what President Roosevelt called the A-B-C countries, standing for Argentina, Brazil and Chile (Bertolaccini & Mullen, 2023; Thomas, 2008). The reason behind this strategic and political move was the then President of the United States Franklin D. Roosevelt's Good Neighbour Policy (Haines, 1977; Harrington, 2015). The policy, developed during the World War II, intended to strengthen ties between United States and other countries from the Americas due to an increasing number of Germans migrating and seeking asylum into the region of the A-B-C countries, mainly.

The idea that fascism could infiltrate and spread in the Americas was one of the major concerns of Roosevelt's administration. To prevent Nazism to find roots in South America (Mondello, 2009), Walt Disney, alongside eighteen artists that worked with Disney at that time, flew to South America in a twelve-week project that resulted in two Oscar-nominated films, *Saludos Amigos* (Jackson et al., 1942) and *The Three Caballeros* (Ferguson, 1944). Those productions made history presenting to the world characters such as Carmen Miranda, Joe Carioca, and many more. Disney himself participated in a broader foreign policy endeavour, with the goal of portraying a sense of togetherness throughout the Western Hemisphere, but without a genuine focus on attaining cultural proficiency from the region to enhance the creation of its media texts.

In other words, the media project named by Disney as *Disney & El Grupo* aimed to create media content that would uplift the Americas and, hopefully, be seen as positive rather than

stereotypical, yet this aim was framed from the perspective of Disney's staff members rather than from the local communities involved. Although made from the United States' viewpoint, both films' outcome was successful having the majority of South American countries supporting the United States during the World War II and Cold War. In that sense, countries in the Americas would have a positive approach to United States political propositions and plans.

From the post-war period until the beginning of the twenty-first century, little was done by The Walt Disney Company in terms of visiting or researching local cultures. In 2006, many decades after the Disney & *El Grupo* tour in South America, the company acquired Pixar Animation Studios. Through this process, Disney gained access to a team of talented professionals. These individuals brought expertise and experience in engaging with local communities and often participated in negotiations to obtain information that could inspire media productions. Disney also gained access to Pixar's research group, which supported creative projects. These staff members were labelled as cultural consultants (Galarza & Rodríguez Burciaga, 2021).

### ***3.7.9 Interpreting Moana: Audience Gaps and the Contribution of this Study***

Debates around *Moana* provide a useful backdrop for considering how the film works both ideologically and aesthetically. Much of the existing scholarship has concentrated on its production context, artistic qualities, and the cultural politics of representation. What is less developed, however, is an understanding of how children, particularly those growing up in bicultural or diasporic settings, interpret the film's portrayals. Although scholars have examined issues such as cultural authenticity, commodification, and the ethics of storytelling (Anjirbag, 2018; Armstrong, 2018; Tamaira & Fonoti, 2018), there has been little focus on how young audiences engage with *Moana* in the course of their everyday lives.

This gap highlights the importance of audience-centred approaches, particularly those shaped by Martín-Barbero's theory of cultural mediation, which stresses that meaning is created through social experience, institutional contexts, and cultural memory. In the case of *Moana*, children do not simply absorb representations but actively interpret them through the lens of their everyday lives, including family, school, and peer interactions. This process is especially complex for children in transnational contexts, who may experience the film as either a source of inclusion or exclusion within the global media they consume.

This study draws on Martín-Barbero's (2006) theory of cultural mediation, which places media reception within wider patterns of social practice and meaning-making. Instead of viewing children as passive recipients, this framework recognises them as active interpreters who bring emotional, cultural, and experiential perspectives to global media texts. Read alongside theories of globalisation, transnationalism, and deterritorialisation (Appadurai, 1996; Vertovec, 2009; Heyman & Campbell, 2009), it shows how children's identities and senses of belonging take shape through the intersecting flows of media, memory, and mobility.

Ching and Pataray-Ching (2017) situate *Moana* within a broader history of cultural adaptation technologies, tracing how Indigenous Hawaiian narratives have been reshaped through colonial tools, from print to picture books to animation. They argue that the film participates in a pattern of Western reframing of oral traditions, whereby Indigenous epistemologies are abstracted, simplified, and repackaged for mass consumption. Although consultation played an important role in the production process, the authors stress that consultation by itself does not amount to shared authorship or narrative sovereignty. From this perspective, *Moana* illustrates what they describe as "technologies of adaptation,"

practices that often reproduce colonial logics even as they present themselves as gestures of cultural respect.

Scholars have also highlighted the aesthetic and commercial framing of *Moana* as a stylised island fantasy that draws on long-standing colonial imaginaries of the Pacific. Alexeyeff and McDonnell (2018) argue that the film reinforces a long-standing trope of the Pacific as a feminised, sensual, and idyllic space created to meet Western desires for exoticism and escape. This framing works on an affective level, encouraging global audiences to form emotional connections with island landscapes while obscuring ongoing histories of colonialism, migration, and economic inequality. While *Moana* gestures toward themes of empowerment and ecological balance, its visual language and narrative structure often emphasise spectacle rather than cultural specificity, resulting in a packaged version of “paradise” that is easily circulated in global markets.

Leslie (2017) describes *Moana* as an “island idol,” a symbolic character who brings together elements of cultural pride, gender empowerment, and commercial appeal. *Moana*’s hybrid identity allows her to act as a cultural ambassador while still being easily understood by global audiences, illustrating Disney’s wider strategy of creating stories that are at once culturally resonant and commercially profitable.

Yoshinaga (2019) critiques *Moana* as a multicultural project that ultimately upholds colonial logics. Despite surface-level inclusion of Pacific voices, the film promotes a vision of cultural unity that erases conflict, resistance, and history. The representation of *Moana*’s world as timeless, spiritual, and harmonious reinforces an exotic imaginary, positioning Polynesia as a cultural resource for global consumption rather than a site of ongoing Indigenous political struggle.

Tamaira and Fonoti (2018) provide a nuanced critique of the production process, noting that while the OST contributed meaningfully to aspects of cultural accuracy, key narrative decisions remained controlled by Disney. Drawing from interviews with Dionne Fonoti, a Samoan filmmaker and OST member, Tamaira highlights how consultation was a process of ‘negotiated visibility’, wherein cultural elements were included selectively, often filtered through commercial priorities. This underscores the limitations of consultation when authorship and final editorial control remain external to the cultures represented.

### **3.8 Conclusion**

This review has shown that, while there is a strong body of research on children’s media access and production in Aotearoa New Zealand, relatively little work has focused on how children interpret global media texts in relation to cultural identity, particularly from the perspectives of culturally diverse and migrant families. Earlier studies of media use among children demonstrate that young audiences in New Zealand grow up in a highly mediated environment and engage with both local and global content on a daily basis (Lealand, 2001; Broadcasting Standards Authority, 2008). Yet, despite this established engagement, few studies have explored how children actively make sense of cultural representations, or how they connect these texts to their own lived identities and family backgrounds.

Disney’s *Moana* offers a particularly relevant case for such an investigation. The film not only draws inspiration from the Pacific region, which situates it close to Aotearoa geographically and culturally, but also raises questions about authenticity, representation, and ownership of cultural narratives. These themes resonate strongly in New Zealand, a nation marked by both bicultural foundations and growing multicultural diversity (Zanker, 2011; Lustyik, 2005). For children in Aotearoa, *Moana* therefore operates at the intersection of

global media flows and local cultural identities, making it an ideal lens through which to examine how young audiences interpret and negotiate questions of belonging.

The scarcity of child-led, interpretive studies on how young viewers in New Zealand respond to cultural representations in such films highlights an important gap in the literature.

Addressing this gap, the following chapter outlines a qualitative, child-centred methodology informed by Martín-Barbero's theory of cultural mediations. It positions children not simply as media consumers but as active interpreters of meaning, whose voices are central to understanding the cultural work performed by global media in everyday life. This methodology details how children aged five to twelve, along with their families, were engaged through multimodal, narrative, and culturally responsive tools, designed to capture the complex ways in which texts such as *Moana* are navigated, negotiated, and localised within the diverse social worlds of Aotearoa New Zealand.

## Chapter 4

# “Seeing with Others”: Child-Centred Methodologies for Cultural Meaning-Making Through Media in Aotearoa

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodology employed to explore how children in Aotearoa New Zealand, particularly those from diverse cultural backgrounds, including Brazilian families, interpret cultural representations in Disney films, with a focus on *Moana*. I discuss the research paradigm, methods of data collection and analysis, ethical considerations, and my positionality. The approach is grounded in qualitative, child-centred methodologies, drawing on reception studies, visual elicitation, and semi-structured interviews.

### 4.2 Research Paradigm and Epistemological Positioning

This research is situated within an interpretivist paradigm, which holds that knowledge is socially constructed and that individuals actively make meaning from their experiences (Schwandt, 2003). In line with reception theory and the concept of cultural mediations, this study treats children as knowledge holders who bring their own cultural frameworks to media texts (Buckingham, 2007a; Martín-Barbero, 2006).

This study also takes inspiration from Martín-Barbero’s decolonial reorientation of media research, particularly his call to “see with others”, that is to shift the place from which questions are asked, and knowledge is generated (Rincón, 2024, p. 637). Rather than approaching children’s interpretations from *above* or *outside*, the study begins from within their worlds of meaning, centring their sensibilities, aesthetic experiences, and affective

investments in media. As Rincón (2024) shows, the task of media research is not simply to interpret texts, but to understand how people retell and re-enchant cultural meanings through everyday pleasures, storytelling, and shared practices. This epistemological orientation grounds the study's child-centred methodology, which recognises children's interpretations as situated, creative, and politically significant.

The study also draws from critical multiculturalism (Zalipour & Athique, 2016), acknowledging the power dynamics embedded in media production and educational systems, and seeks to amplify the voices of children from underrepresented backgrounds, especially migrant children and ethnic minorities in Aotearoa New Zealand.

## **4.3 Research Design**

### ***4.3.1 Qualitative, Multi-Method Approach***

This study employed a qualitative, multi-method design combining:

- Visual and verbal elicitation with children aged 5–12;
- Semi-structured interviews with parents;
- Close engagement with the Disney film *Moana* (2016) as a shared reference point during data collection and other global animated media.

This design allowed for triangulation of perspectives from children (see Table 4), their parents, and the media content itself, offering a more layered and contextualised understanding of how cultural representations are interpreted, negotiated, and embedded in everyday experiences.

In addition to *Moana* (2016), which served as the core reference point for this study, a selection of other Disney and Pixar films, along with one television series (*Elena of Avalor*), were incorporated into the research materials. These media texts were chosen for their diverse cultural settings and potential to prompt children's reflections on ethnicity, geography, and cultural identity. They were used during interviews and surveys to instigate responses to place, resemblance, difference, and belonging. Table 1 summarises the films and TV show included in this study, alongside their key production and cultural context details.

<b>Title</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Director(s)</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Cultural setting/notes</b>
<i>Moana</i>	Film	Ron Clements & John Musker	2016	Fictional Polynesia; inspired by Pacific Island cultures; main focus of analysis
<i>Aladdin</i>	Film	Ron Clements & John Musker	1992	Middle Eastern and Asian inspiration
<i>Beauty and the Beast</i>	Film	Gary Trousdale & Kirk Wise	1991	Inspired by 18 <sup>th</sup> -century France; fairy-tale Europe
<i>Brave</i>	Film	Mark Andrews, Brenda Chapman & Steve Purcell	2012	Set in Medieval Scotland
<i>Cinderella</i>	Film	Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson & Hamilton Luske	1950	Inspired by a 17 <sup>th</sup> -century French tale
<i>Coco</i>	Film	Lee Unkrich & Adrian Molina	2017	Mexico; <i>Día de los Muertos</i> and Mexican family traditions
<i>Elena of Avalor</i>	TV Series	Craig Gerber (creator)	2016	First Latin American Princess of the Disney franchise
<i>Frozen</i>	Film	Chris Buck & Jennifer Lee	2013	Nordic-inspired fantasy kingdom (Arendelle); based on Scandinavian culture
<i>Mulan</i>	Film	Tony Bancroft & Barry Cook	1998	Ancient China
<i>Pocahontas</i>	Film	Mike Gabriel & Eric Goldberg	1995	Colonial Virginia; inspired by Native American history of Pocahontas
<i>Sleeping Beauty</i>	Film	Clyde Geronimi, Les Clark, Eric Larson & Wolfgang Reitherman	1959	Medieval European fairy tale with many media adaptations
<i>Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs</i>	Film	William Cottrell & David Hand	1937	Inspired by The Brothers Grimm's German fairy tale
<i>Tangled</i>	Film	Nathan Greno & Byron Howard	2010	Inspired by Rapunzel; European fairy tale kingdom
<i>The Little Mermaid</i>	Film	Ron Clements & John Musker	1989	Inspired by Danish fairy tale; underwater theme-related kingdom
<i>The Princess and the Frog</i>	Film	Ron Clements & John Musker	2009	Inspired by a German fairy-tale; New Orleans, USA; African American culture
<i>Toy Story</i>	Film	John Lasseter	1995	Not culturally specific; iconic 1990s film set in a suburban American neighbourhood

*Table 1: Disney and Pixar films and television series used in the study, with production details and cultural settings. Source: IMDb*

By engaging with both audience voices and media texts, the study aimed to connect meaning-making processes to broader cultural, familial, and social contexts. This approach aligns with Martín-Barbero's (2006) theory of cultural mediations, which emphasises the importance of

examining not only the content of media but also the socio-cultural frameworks through which audiences make sense of it.

#### ***4.3.2 Research Design Evolution and COVID-19 Adaptation***

The original research design was grounded in face-to-face, school-based data collection with tamariki (see Table 4) and their whānau. This approach drew from kaupapa Māori-informed practices (see 4.8 Researcher Positionality) and child-centred qualitative methods, including wānanga (Hill et al., 2023) and pūrākau methodologies (Lee, 2009, 2015), group work with children (Tisdall et al., 2009), observation (Weerakkody, 2009), and participatory techniques such as drawing, role play, and visual prompts. I had planned to conduct this research within familiar school settings to ensure comfort and cultural safety for children and their families.

The first phase of data collection began in 2019 and involved in-person group sessions with children. However, shortly after this initial phase, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted access to schools and public settings. As a result, the research design had to shift abruptly to online methods. While this shift limited opportunities for extended in-person engagement, it also opened up new pathways for participant involvement from a broader geographic range (e.g. from Auckland region).

Throughout this transition, the study retained its child-centred and ethically grounded approach. Visual elicitation, multimodal prompts, and open-ended questions were adapted for use via video calls and digital platforms. Although the digital format required some compromises, particularly in the use of embodied, play-based interaction, it also enabled continuity of research while prioritising participants' safety. The values underpinning the original face-to-face design, including respect, reciprocity, and cultural responsiveness, remained central to the online adaptation.

Data from the first (face-to-face) phase was thematically analysed alongside later online data using the same coding framework, with contextual notes applied to reflect differences in setting. This blended approach is consistent with a flexible qualitative methodology and maintains the integrity of the overall research aims.

#### ***4.3.3 Phase One (2019): Face-to-Face Data Collection***

Before the COVID-19 pandemic required a shift to online research, the original design of this study was grounded in face-to-face work with children in school and community settings.

Phase One in 2019 served as a valuable experience for developing and testing culturally responsive, child-centred research tools. It was informed by a blend of qualitative methods, including group work, participant observation, visual prompts, and kaupapa Māori-informed practices.

Group work with children was adapted from focus group methodology, following Tisdall et al.'s (2009) model. While traditional focus groups are widely used with adults (Weerakkody, 2009), group work offers a more flexible and developmentally appropriate format for engaging children. This method allows for the expression of diverse opinions within a supportive environment, encouraging discussion, play, and collaborative meaning-making rather than consensus (Gallagher, 2009). For this study, group work created space for children to explore and discuss representations of culture in Disney's *Moana* (2016) and other animated texts in ways that were interactive, imaginative, and dialogic.

Alongside group work, participant observation was employed to gain insight into the children's spontaneous interactions, forms of play, and meaning-making processes (Jacobs, 2023; Moss et al., 2015; Lemish & Götz, 2017). Observation allowed me to better understand the children's interpretations in context, particularly when using research tools such as

drawing, role play, and costume-based performance. These tools were inspired by observations of how my own children and their peers naturally engaged with media, through dressing up, dancing, singing, and storytelling. By offering children Disney and Pixar costumes and materials, I encouraged them to express their associations with particular characters and cultural elements in ways that extended beyond language.

A distinctive aspect of this first phase was its engagement with the wānanga approach, as outlined by Hill et al. (2023). While I do not whakapapa to Aotearoa, I was guided by Māori cultural advisor Dr Lesley Rameka in understanding how ethical and relational concepts such as koha (maintaining social relationships and giving back to the community), kaitiakitanga (stewardship), and āhurutanga (creating a safe, comfortable, and nurturing space, both physically and emotionally) could inform respectful research practice. These principles, though grounded in kaupapa Māori, provided a valuable framework for creating a culturally safe environment for all participants. The wānanga approach provided opportunities for building trust and meaningful connections with children, allowing them to share stories, memories, and impressions in their own terms.

Phase One was also crucial in shaping the development of later tools used during the online phase of the research (Phase Two). Ideas such as the use of printed Disney character cards, open-ended prompts about cultural identity, and the interpretation of media through play emerged here and were adapted for remote use in 2020 and 2021. Although the pandemic interrupted the continuity of in-person engagement, this phase laid the foundations for a multimodal, narrative-based methodology grounded in responsiveness, participation, and co-construction of meaning.

#### **4.3.3.1 Phase One Research Tools: Creative and Multimodal Approaches**

The Phase One of this study in 2019 was instrumental in designing and testing creative, child-centred tools to investigate how tamariki make sense of cultural representation in media.

These research instruments were developed in alignment with my epistemological stance, informed by interpretivism, performance theory, funds of knowledge (Esteban-Guitart, 2023; González et al., 2005), and culturally responsive methodologies, and sought to offer children multiple, developmentally appropriate ways of expressing themselves.

Across all research phases, face-to-face and online inclusive, a total of 24 main characters from 16 Disney and Pixar media texts (see Tables 1 and 2) were selected as prompts for child engagement. These characters were used consistently across multiple research tools, including printed cards, toys, costumes, and visual prompts embedded in surveys and one-on-one interviews. The selection was designed to reflect a range of cultural, ethnic, and geographic representations, supporting children's reflections on identity, familiarity, and difference. Table 2 provides an overview of the characters included in this study, alongside their associated films, gender and cultural or geographical references.

Character	Film/TV Show	Gender	Cultural Setting/Notes
Aladdin	<i>Aladdin</i>	Male	Middle Eastern; Asian
Anna	<i>Frozen</i>	Female	Scandinavian
Ariel	<i>The Little Mermaid</i>	Female	Underwater theme-related
Aurora	<i>Sleeping Beauty</i>	Female	European
Beast (Prince Adam)	<i>Beauty and the Beast</i>	Male	European; French
Belle	<i>Beauty and the Beast</i>	Female	European; French
Buzz (Lightyear)	<i>Toy Story</i>	Male	American; Futuristic; Space Toy
Cinderella	<i>Cinderella</i>	Female	European; French
Elena	<i>Elena of Avalor</i>	Female	Latin American
Elsa	<i>Frozen</i>	Female	Scandinavian
Genie	<i>Aladdin</i>	Male	Middle Eastern; Asian
Jasmine	<i>Aladdin</i>	Female	Middle Eastern; Asian
Kristoff	<i>Frozen</i>	Male	Scandinavian
Maui	<i>Moana</i>	Male	Polynesian demigod
Merida	<i>Brave</i>	Female	Scottish
Miguel	<i>Coco</i>	Male	Mexican; Latin American
Moana	<i>Moana</i>	Female	Polynesian/Pacific Islander
Mulan	<i>Mulan</i>	Female	Chinese
Pocahontas	<i>Pocahontas</i>	Female	Native American
Prince Adam	<i>Beauty and the Beast</i>	Male	European; French
Rapunzel	<i>Tangled</i>	Female	European
Snow White	<i>Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs</i>	Female	European; German
Tiana	<i>The Princess and the Frog</i>	Female	African American
Woody	<i>Toy Story</i>	Male	American; Cowboy Toy

Table 2: Main Disney and Pixar characters used in the study, with associated films, gender and cultural or geographical references. Source: IMDb; character descriptions adapted from official film materials

The use of these characters across various research tools proved valuable in prompting children's reflections on cultural representation, similarity, and difference. Characters were recognised not only by their names or visual prompts, but also through their perceived cultural backgrounds, behaviours, and environments.

The selection was intentionally diversified in terms of gender to encourage broader participation, particularly among boys, as Disney princess films rely heavily on gender-based representations of femininity (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023). On occasion, children referred to versions of characters from live-action films (e.g. *Aladdin* and *Mulan*), books, or alternate adaptations (e.g. *Maleficent* in relation to *Sleeping Beauty*). These responses were welcomed as part of each child's unique media repertoire and were included in the analysis.

The only prerequisite for participation in this study was that children had previously watched Disney's *Moana*, which served as the central comparative reference point throughout the investigation. This multimodal and character-driven approach supported children's engagement and facilitated deeper conversations about identity, place and belonging, as further explored in the following reflections from both in-person and online data collections.

#### **4.3.3.2 Drawing**

Children were invited to draw (Figures 4 and 5) themselves either as an existing character from media or as a new character they created. This prompt was also adapted to children who wanted to draw someone else instead of themselves. This open-ended visual method encouraged imaginative projection and identity play.

The fantasy journey method (Götz et al., 2005) is a guided visualisation that leads children into their imaginary worlds through relaxation, evocative storytelling, and quiet time for exploration. Afterwards, they return to the present and express their experiences through drawings and short written reflections, offering a safe and structured way to share their fantasies. While not directly applied in this study, the method provided inspiration for how drawing can support children's imaginative expression and create a safe space for them to communicate beyond verbal responses.



*Figure 4: Drawing from a 6-year-old female*



*Figure 5: Drawing from an 8-year-old male*

Children were then asked to describe their drawings and explain their choices. Children's explanations often extended beyond the initial prompt, revealing additional layers of meaning not directly tied to the question. For instance, several children (as in Figure 5) drew about their relationship or affiliation with the media, rather than a specific imaginative or existing character, expressing, in this case, "*I love YouTube*" written on the drawing. Such moments of divergence suggest that drawing activity enabled children to guide the conversation in ways that reflected their own priorities and understandings. Moreover, they can also highlight the need for more clarity while engaging with young children (from 5 to 8 years old) in relation to topics such as cultural identity. Drawing, as Lealand and Zanker (2008) have argued, offers an effective way for children to communicate emotional and symbolic meanings that might not easily surface through verbal questions alone. Yet, I noted that, in order to be more effective and prompt a conversation around representations of culture, it

would have been more meaningful to have a dedicated session with the children solely to collect data via drawings, instead of this being one of several activities in the same session. In this sense, it would allow children to have more time to elaborate on their perceptions of the topic as well as enable them to explain and reflect on their ideas in their own words and at their own pace.

#### **4.3.3.3 Character Cards**

Printed cards (Figure 6) of Disney and Pixar characters were used to prompt discussion about appearance, similarity, difference, and cultural recognition. Children were asked a series of reflective and relational questions, such as who looked like them, who reminded them of their family, or who they might want to see included, to explore ideas of visibility, belonging, and representation. These cards provided a familiar yet flexible point of entry for conversations about ethnicity, culture, and identity.



*Figure 6: Printed cards displaying<sup>5</sup> 24 Disney/Pixar's main characters used during in-person data collection (personal archive, 2019)*

#### **4.3.3.4 Toys**

A selection of character dolls and action figures (Figure 7) was offered to children, who were invited to engage freely and respond to open-ended questions. These questions focused on relational and imaginative engagement: who the children would choose as a neighbour, classmate, or best friend; whether any character looked like them or a family member; and who they might wish to be. This tool extended the semiotic analysis of representation into embodied play and identification, recognising how children perform cultural meanings through material objects. Yet, similarly to the drawing activity, using toys to prompt discussions around the questions presented would be more effective if children had more time to elaborate and create proper interactions with their peers, rather than this being one activity

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<sup>5</sup> Genie (*Aladdin*, 1992) was out of frame.

among many others. It is not that using toys was not sufficient or effective, but it would be worth trying to dedicate more time for children to express themselves and guide them through the discussion. Also, it felt like a staged theatre task rather than an organic and spontaneous response to the prompts.



*Figure 7: Children playing with toys (dolls and action figures) during in-person data collection. Still frame from video recording. Faces were blurred for children's privacy*

#### **4.3.3.5 Costumes and Songs**

Costumes (Figures 8, 9 and 10) from various Disney films, especially *Moana*, were made available for children to dress up if they wished. A playlist of selected soundtrack songs (see Table 3) was played while children engaged in free movement, dancing, or singing.

Following the activity, children were invited to reflect on their choices: why they selected certain costumes, whether they related to the characters, and how they felt wearing clothing that was (or was not) associated with their own culture. Questions also explored the role of

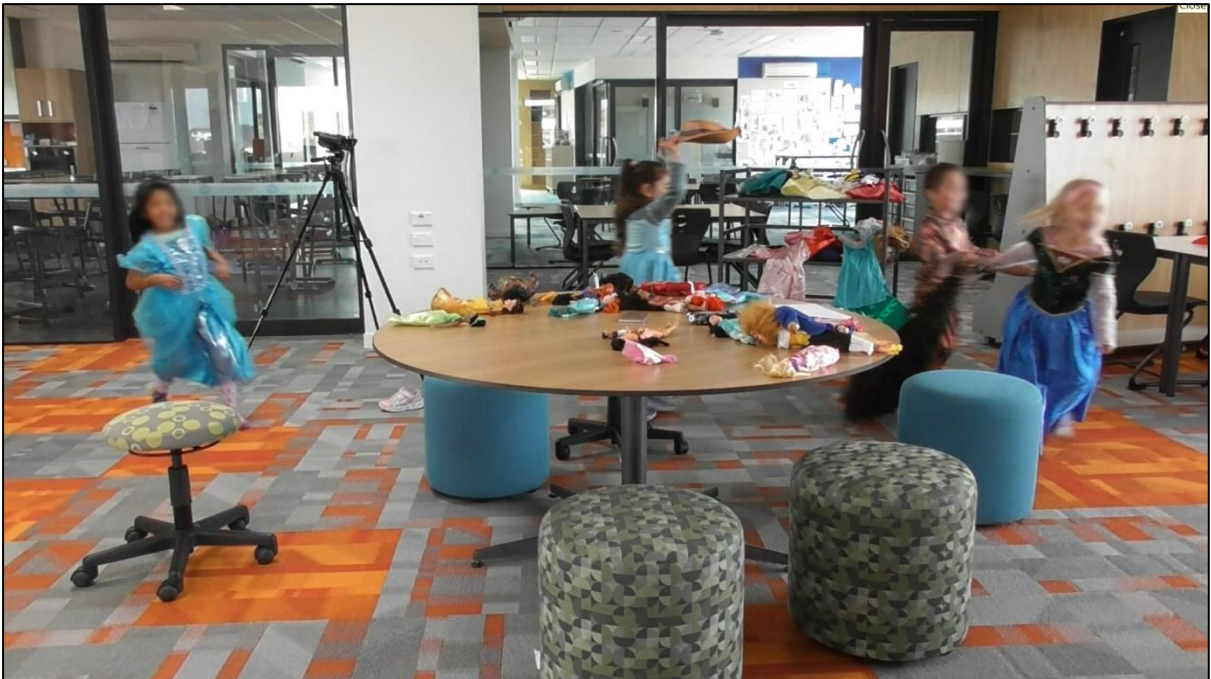
language, including their responses to the idea of watching films in their home language. This method brought performativity and embodiment (Clammer, 2015) into the research process, opening space for affective, linguistic, and cultural reflections. For instance, an eight-year-old female (at the centre at the top of Figure 8) shared with me that she picked both Merida's costume and doll because her mother told her she has roots in Scotland and Ireland, so she was "like Merida".



*Figure 8: Children playing with costumes. Method applied during in-person data collection (personal archive, 2019)*



*Figure 9: Children playing with costumes and listening to the playlist during in-person data collection (Phase One). Still frame from video recording.*



*Figure 10: Children playing with costumes and listening to the playlist during in-person data collection (Phase One). Still frame from video recording*

Song	Film	Written by	Performed by
You're welcome	<i>Moana</i> (2016)	Lin-Manuel Miranda and Mark Mancina	Dwayne Johnson
How far I'll go	<i>Moana</i> (2016)	Lin-Manuel Miranda	Auli'i Cravalho
We Know The Way	<i>Moana</i> (2016)	Lin-Manuel Miranda, Opetia Foa'i	Lin-Manuel Miranda, Opetia Foa'i
How Far I'll Go (Tukuna Au)	<i>Moana</i> reo Māori (2017)	Maisey Rika (reo Māori version)	Maisey Rika
Let It Go	<i>Frozen</i> (2013)	Robert Lopez and Kristen Anderson-Lopez	Idina Menzel

Table 3: Playlist for the face-to-face data collection (Phase One) used in conjunction with the costume activity

Interestingly, gender options for playing with costumes differed regarding how girls would approach their choices compared to boys. Several females chose male characters (e.g. *Moana's* Maui, and *Toy Story's* Buzz and Woody) to embody and interpret those characters, whereas males did not take the opposite direction in choosing female characters to portray. One boy approached the mermaid (Ariel, *The Little Mermaid*) costume and seemed interested in wearing it, but felt uncertain and hesitant about it, despite my encouragement for him to take the role.

These tools, tested and refined during the Phase One, were essential in shaping the methodological flexibility of the study. Although some required adaptation for online implementation during the pandemic, the underlying approach of offering children multiple entry points for meaning-making remained consistent throughout all phases.

#### 4.3.4 Reflections and Observations from the Phase One

The Phase One was a valuable experience for observing how children interacted with the research process. During this phase, I worked with 26 tamariki (see Table 4) in small group sessions, 12 whānau members in one-on-one interviews, and four kaiako (including the

school principal and three primary school teachers). These engagements provided early insights into both the strengths and limitations of my initial approach.

Children's engagement levels varied by method. Drawing proved to be the least effective of the tools. Although it was designed to allow space for imagination and self-representation, many of the younger children (aged 5 to 8) responded with drawings unrelated to the questions. I attribute this to developmental factors as children in this age range tend to think more concretely (Brouse & Chow, 2009; Chapman & Lindenberger, 1989), which made it difficult for them to translate abstract questions into symbolic drawings. After data collection, I noted that the drawings were often too vague or too broad for the age group and disconnected from the cultural prompts.

In contrast, the costumes and songs activity proved the most successful. Children enthusiastically dressed up and performed characters, describing this experience as being "*like a birthday party*." This method allowed imaginative embodiment and cultural projection through play. However, it also made it challenging to pause for verbal reflection, as the excitement of the activity sometimes made it hard for children to stop and explain their choices.

Working with toys and character cards yielded mixed results. Some children needed time to relax and engage with the toys, and a few boys expressed frustration at the limited availability of male characters. The cards, however, proved effective at prompting discussion, especially when questions were repeated or scaffolded. I later extended the use of these cards to the interviews with parents and caregivers, applying similar questions to elicit family-oriented reflections. This continuity allowed for comparisons between children's and adults' perceptions.

Several notable dynamics emerged when preparing for, and during, the group sessions. Children not originally selected for the study asked to participate, and many families expressed curiosity about the research beyond the data collection sessions. These spontaneous expressions of interest reaffirmed the value of the project and its relevance within the school community. At the same time, a few children chose not to participate, either finding the activities “too boring” or preferring to do something else. Respecting their autonomy was essential and consistent with the child-led ethos of the project. For instance, a boy said to me, “these are baby stuff!”, referring to the heavily Disney princess options presence. In one of the activities he asked if he could pretend to be a spaceship and played like that with his peers.

Gendered play emerged as another key theme. Boys occasionally played with dolls but hesitated to dress up as female characters, while girls more freely dressed as male characters, often explaining: “I know that I’m a girl, but what is the problem in pretending to be a boy? It’s just pretending.” (Rylee, Māori, female, 6 years old). These observations pointed to the importance of paying attention to performative identity and social norms even within playful spaces.

In relation to culture and ethnicity, children in this phase rarely addressed these concepts directly. Yet, when prompted to compare characters to people in their families, such as saying, “This guy [Maui] looks just like my uncle! They’re both fat and with a lot of tattoos” (Tio, Māori, New Zealand European, English, Fijian, French, German, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, male, 7 years old), they revealed the types of cultural recognition that felt valid to them. This informed my later choice to approach ethnicity relationally and through family resemblance, rather than through direct or abstract questioning during Phase Two. For instance, in Phase Two (see Appendix 11), I added flags from the countries or regions I wanted children to

associate with or to reflect on regarding their perceptions of culture and association of cultural identity. I also decided to rephrase my questions according to the child's understanding. For example, when I asked, *Are any of these characters similar to your family?*, I noted that I had to rephrase it to *Does any of these characters resemble your family? Or look like your family?* specifically after I had a prompt from one of the parents that stayed next to her child during data collection. In this sense, I was open to adapt and to learn from my research participants as well. Another example of how I incorporated cultural elements to the data collection was by presenting children with some questions before asking them about the films or main characters. For instance, I would frame a rationale starting with "I would like you to think about your family, your friends, your classmates, your neighbours.", then I would ask, "Are you different from each other?". This question would have a follow-up query "Do you come from the same places or countries?". Also, there was a dedicated section focusing on people and places, where we would discuss "What makes people different from each other?" For that, children would have visual prompts for the options I provided, such as the language they speak, the way they sound (accent), family traditions they celebrate (e.g. Chinese New Year, Matariki, Diwali, Ramadan, Christmas, Easter, etc.), the way they dress up, the food they eat, the way their faces look like (eyes, nose, mouth shape), their hair colour or things people put over their heads, their skin colour, the songs they listen to, and the dance moves they make.

This phase of fieldwork also prompted a revision of the participant age range. I chose to work with older children (6–12 years) in later phases, particularly as the concept of culture proved difficult for the youngest children to engage with meaningfully. Finally, these observations reinforced my decision to shift toward one-on-one interviews and online methods, where children were often more focused, more verbally expressive, and less distracted by the group setting.

#### ***4.3.5 Phase Two: Online Data Collection During COVID-19 (2020–2021)***

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 forced a substantial reconfiguration of my original research design. While the Phase One in 2019 had been planned around in-person, group-based activities conducted within schools, this became unfeasible under Alert Level restrictions (Tretiakov & Hunter, 2021). As a result, I shifted to an online research model that prioritised safety, accessibility, and methodological continuity. Although this shift involved compromises in terms of embodied engagement and group dynamics, it also introduced unexpected benefits, including increased focus and flexibility.

During Phase Two (2020 and 2021), I collected data from 29 children (see Table 4) and 25 parents. Apart from Tio, who also engaged with this study in Phase One, this new cohort of participants was distinct from those involved in Phase One, and was used in the analyses for Chapters 5, 6, and 7. This new group included individuals from a diverse range of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds across Aotearoa New Zealand, representing 22 ethnicities. Because the original research tools had been designed for face-to-face interaction, involving costumes, toys, shared materials, and observation, they could not be fully replicated in an online format. Instead, I developed new digital instruments (Figures 11–14) using familiar visual prompts and culturally responsive methods adapted for the screen.

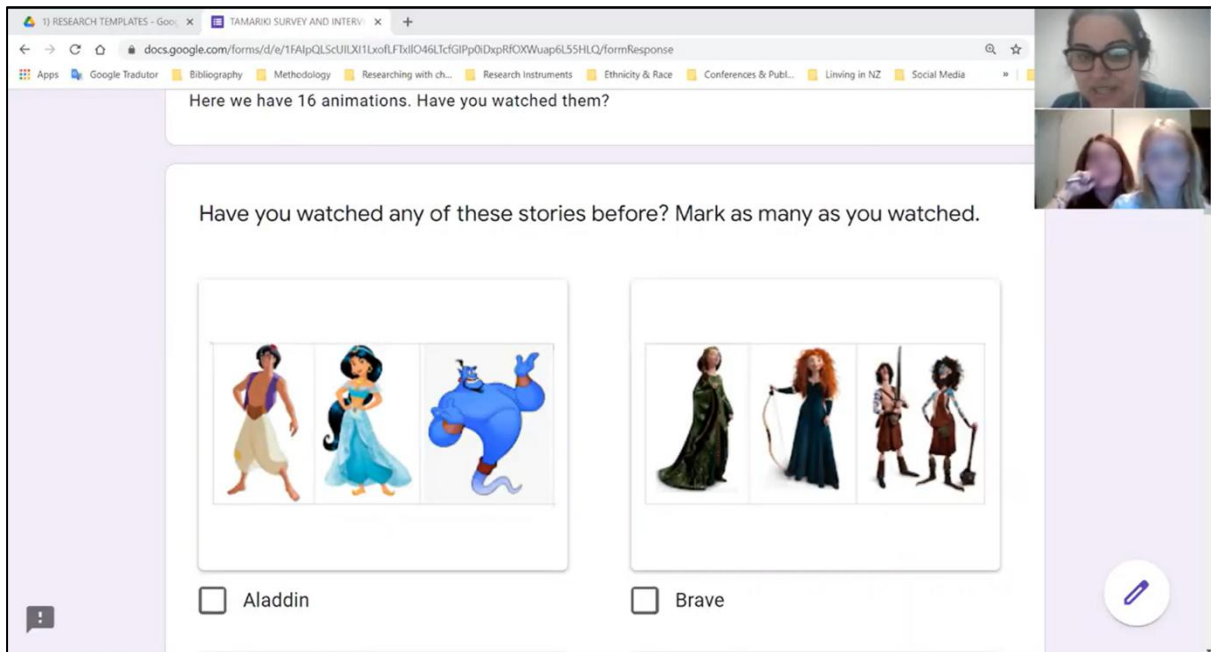


Figure 11: Collecting data via Zoom during COVID-19 pandemic. Sharing screen and showing visual cues for the survey and interview with children. Still image from video recording of online data collection

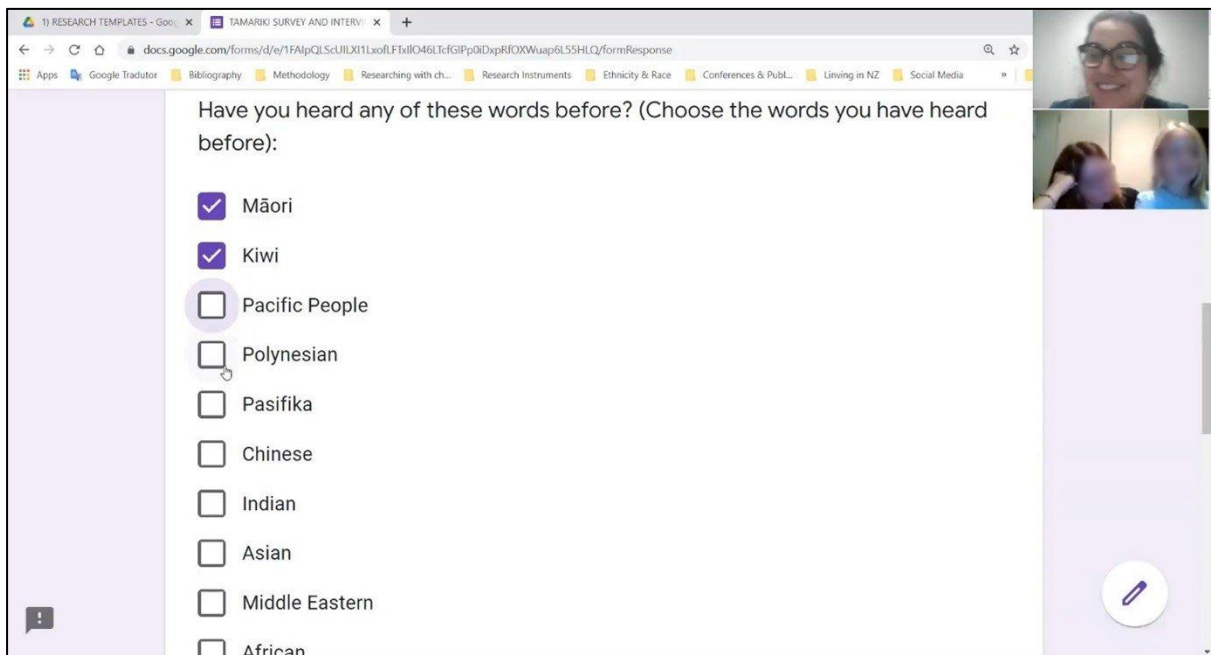


Figure 12: Filling out the survey form with the children. Still image from video recording of online data collection

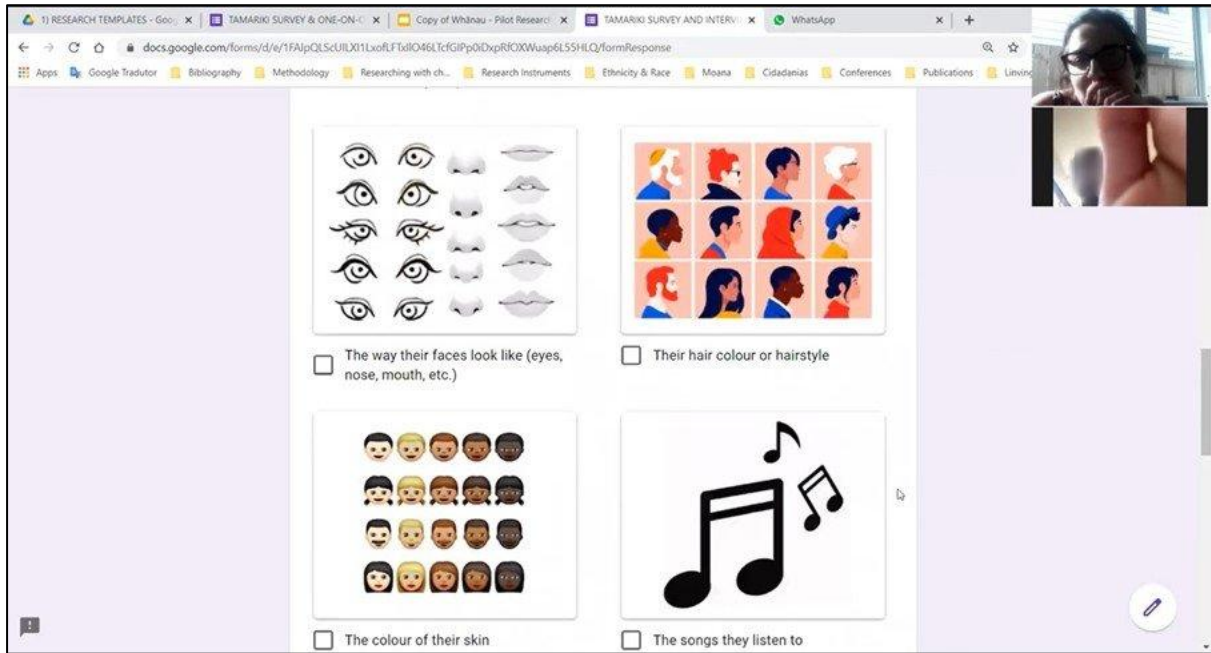


Figure 13: Utilising visual cues to describe elements of culture. Still image from video recording of online data collection

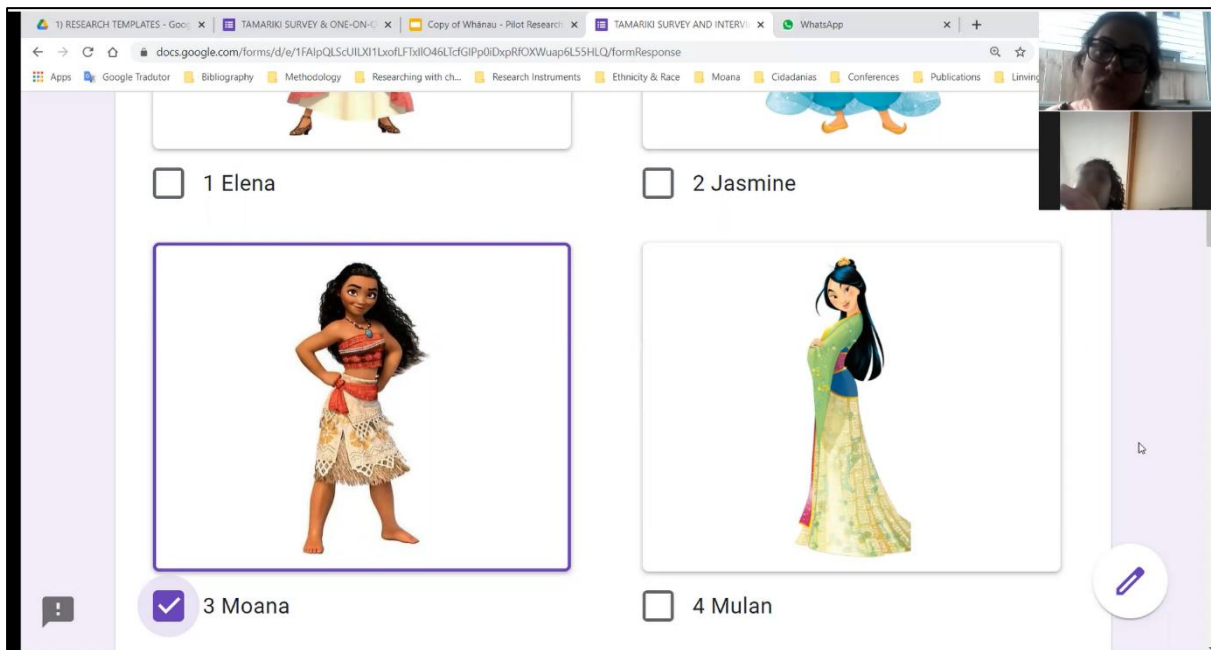


Figure 14: Utilising visual cues to describe elements of culture. Still image from video recording of online data collection

Children were interviewed individually via Zoom, and in some cases, I used screen sharing to guide them through a form-based activity containing character cards, film stills, and visual cues from Disney and Pixar films. With some participants, particularly in 2020, I also played

songs from *Moana* (the same playlist I used in 2019), which helped elicit emotional and cultural responses in a relaxed, interactive way. The one-on-one format was often more effective than expected, as it allowed for increased focus and more sustained dialogue, particularly among older children. The discreet use of video and microphone recording also enabled smoother data collection without intimidating the participants.

The greater use of video technologies in this phase reflects a broader shift in education, where video has become integral to both teaching and research. White et al. (2023) point out that video serves not only as a source of data but also as a means of representation. This dual role raises important questions about visual ethics while at the same time opening up to new possibilities for co-production and creative forms of engagement.

In cases where children were unable to participate in a live interview, often due to scheduling conflicts or limited engagement, I invited parents to facilitate the activity at home using the survey materials I provided. In these instances, parents recorded their children's responses and shared them with me in writing. While this was not ideal in terms of researcher–participant interaction, it was a practical and ethical solution that maintained the child's voice in the process. All parents completed a survey, and 13 of them also participated in follow-up interviews, where they reflected more deeply on media use, cultural identity, and their children's interpretations of animated characters.

No kaiako (teachers or principals) were involved in this second phase, as school access was still limited, and the design focused instead on direct engagement with families. Despite these constraints, the online data collection phase produced high-quality, focused responses from both children and parents. The flexibility of digital tools and the familiarity of online platforms also made it easier for some families to participate, particularly those in regions or

circumstances where in-person interviews would have been difficult even before the pandemic.

This phase demonstrated the potential for substantial, multimodal research with children in online environments. While some embodied and interactive elements from the 2019 phase could not be replicated, the digital tools retained the project's core values: relationality, child agency, and culturally grounded interpretation. The findings generated during this period built directly on the Phase One of work from 2019 and significantly contributed to answering the research questions:

1. How do a group of multicultural children aged 5–12 in Aotearoa New Zealand perceive and interpret cultural representations in selected Disney and Pixar animated films?
2. In what ways do children recognise cultural elements in *Moana*, relating those to Māori and/or Polynesian cultures, in an official bicultural yet multicultural Aotearoa New Zealand context?
3. How do Brazilian children's interpretations of media representations reflect their cultural identities, family backgrounds, and everyday experiences?
4. What roles do familial and educational settings play in mediating children's perceptions of culture and identity as represented in global animated media?
5. How does Martín-Barbero's framework of cultural mediations help explain the processes through which children negotiate meaning in relation to global media texts?

#### 4.4 Participants and Recruitment in Phase Two

Participants were recruited using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling (Edmonds, 2019; Topdemir Kocyigit, 2022; Barmin & Velichkovsky, 2025). Initial participants were identified through personal and community networks, including school contacts, Brazilian cultural associations via social media and families known to me. From there, snowball sampling (Edmonds, 2019) allowed other eligible families to be referred through these trusted social networks. This approach proved effective for accessing migrant families who may not have been reached through institutional channels. Snowball sampling is a well-established strategy in qualitative research as it builds on social trust and enables the researcher to form meaningful connections with participants (Topdemir Kocyigit, 2022; Barmin & Velichkovsky, 2025; Edmonds, 2019).

Participation was voluntary, and all families received detailed information about the research prior to taking part. Children's involvement was negotiated with care, following ethical protocols outlined in Section 4.7, with attention to age-appropriate language and consent processes (see Appendix 5). Recruitment spanned three moments: an initial face-to-face data collection in 2019, followed by two online data collections in 2020 and 2021. Snowball sampling (Edmonds, 2019) was used to recruit families from diverse ethnic and migratory backgrounds, particularly those within the Brazilian and wider Latin American community. This approach allowed participants to be accessed through personal and social networks, which is especially important when working with transnational or hard-to-reach populations. Snowball sampling is commonly used in qualitative research where trust, shared experience, and cultural familiarity support participation (Topdemir Kocyigit, 2022).

#### ***4.4.1 Selection Criteria and Demographics***

To participate in the study, families needed to have at least one child aged 5 to 12 and be residing in Aotearoa New Zealand. While the focus of this research proposal was originally on families of Māori, Pasifika and Brazilian backgrounds, recruitment was broadened to include a wider range of migrant and local families, reflecting the transnational and multicultural realities of New Zealand society. The totality of the final sample included 54 children, 36 parents, three teachers, and one principal totalling 94 research participants identifying across a diverse range of ethnic, gender, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds.

Table 4 summarises the demographic diversity of 54 child research participants in terms of ethnic group, gender and age. Ethnic group was primarily identified by participants' whānau, with a few self-reported by tamariki. These identities were recorded through parent surveys, one-on-one interviews with parents and children, and child group activities. They reflect both single and multi-ethnic identifications, as well as layered transnational family histories. In Phase One, eleven children were not ethnically identified because this information was collected only through one-on-one interviews with parents who voluntarily agreed to a follow-up meeting. In Phase Two, to prevent this, all tamariki had this information gathered first-hand through forms completed by their whānau prior to data collection.

Study Phase	Child Pseudonym	Ethnic Group(s)	Gender	Age
Phase One	Neve	Indian	Female	5
Phase One	Elisa	Unknown	Female	5
Phase One	Brie	Māori	Female	5
Phase One	Claire	American, Australian, New Zealand European	Female	5
Phase One	Margarida	Belgium, Filipino	Female	5
Phase One	Hannah	Unknown	Female	5
Phase One	Brooke	Unknown	Female	5
Phase One	James	Unknown	Male	5
Phase One	Rowan	Unknown	Female	5
Phase One	Kayla	Unknown	Female	5
Phase One	Kyle	Unknown	Male	5
Phase One	Andrew	New Zealand European, Canadian, Scottish, Russian	Male	6
Phase One	Mary	Indian	Female	6
Phase One	Rylee	Māori	Female	6
Phase One	Terry	Unknown	Male	6
Phase One	Hunter	New Zealand European	Male	8
Phase One	Juliana	Irish	Female	7
Phase One	Lauren	Spanish, New Zealand European	Female	7
Phase One	Eva	Indian	Female	6
Phase One	Charles	Unknown	Male	6
Phase One	Brandon	Hungarian	Male	7
Phase One	Shiloh	Unknown	Female	6
Phase One	Summer	Irish	Female	8
Phase One	Julieta	Unknown	Female	7
Phase One	Zara	Malaysian, Chinese	Female	8
Phase One & Two	Tio	Māori, New Zealand European, English, Fijian, French, German, Irish, Scottish, Welsh	Male	7 (Phase One), 8 (Phase Two)
Phase Two	Wei	Chinese	Male	10
Phase Two	Margaret	South African	Female	6
Phase Two	Jack	New Zealand European, English	Male	11
Phase Two	Ana	Brazilian	Female	7
Phase Two	Emily	New Zealand European, English, Brazilian	Female	6
Phase Two	Mei	Chinese	Female	9
Phase Two	Lilly	Scottish, Brazilian	Female	8
Phase Two	Koa	Samoan, Filipino	Male	6
Phase Two	Sophie	New Zealand European	Female	6
Phase Two	Neha	Turkish, Indian	Female	7
Phase Two	Xue	Chinese	Female	6
Phase Two	Julia	African, Brazilian, German	Female	8
Phase Two	Lucas	Brazilian, German	Male	6
Phase Two	Kenji	Papua New Guinean	Male	12
Phase Two	Nadeesha	Sri Lankan	Female	10
Phase Two	Zana	Indian	Female	9
Phase Two	Aroha	Māori, New Zealand European, English, Fijian, French, German, Irish, Scottish, Welsh	Female	10
Phase Two	Marcelo	Brazilian, Portuguese	Male	7
Phase Two	Gabriel	Brazilian, German	Male	8

Phase Two	Alya	Saudi	Female	7
Phase Two	Luiz	Brazilian	Male	10
Phase Two	Meghan	English, Romanian	Female	8
Phase Two	John	English, Romanian	Male	6
Phase Two	Daisy	New Zealand European, Brazilian	Female	7
Phase Two	Camila	Brazilian, German, Portuguese	Female	10
Phase Two	Laura	Brazilian, German, Portuguese	Female	7
Phase Two	Mariana	Brazilian, German, Portuguese	Female	7
Phase Two	Rafaela	Brazilian	Female	7
Total number of child research participants: 54				

*Table 4: Demographic diversity of tamariki research participants*

As demonstrated in Table 4, participants ranged in age from 5 to 12 years, with the majority in Phase One aged 5 to 8 years, and 6 to 12 years in Phase Two. The largest groups aged 6 years (14 participants), 7 years (13 participants), and 5 years (11 participants); smaller groups were aged 8 years (7 participants), 9 years (2 participants), 10 years (5 participants), and only one child each at 11 and 12 years. The gender distribution was weighted towards female (37 participants comprising of 69% of the sample compared with 17 males. Only one child (Tio) participated in both phases, contributing perspectives at ages seven and eight. Tio represented a richly diverse multi-ethnic background spanning nine ethnic groups. This age and gender distribution provides important context for understanding how children at different developmental stages engage with and interpret media content.

Ethnic identification reflected both single and multi-ethnic backgrounds, with the most frequently represented groups being Brazilian (13 participants), New Zealand European (8), German (8), English, (6), Indian (5), Māori (4), Scottish (4), Irish (4), and Chinese (4). Several other ethnic groups were cited only once, including African, American, Australian, Belgian, Canadian, Hungarian, Malaysian, Papua New Guinean, Russian, Samoan, Saudi, South African, Spanish, Sri Lankan, and Turkish. Across both study phases, there were 31 distinct ethnic groups cited in total, excluding *unknown*.

Table 5 emphasises all Brazilian child participants in this study. All Brazilian children engaged with the data collection during Phase Two, mainly due to snowball recruitment influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this phase (Two), I extensively advertised my research (see Appendix 9) via social media and mailing lists. This communication was primarily shared with my acquaintances and colleagues, who then circulated it with their own networking, resulting in a significant proportion of Brazilian tamariki (24%) out of 54 children. Chapter 7 investigates the results from this specific cohort. It is important to note that, because of limited engagement with themes of culture and ethnicity specifically, I decided not to include data from participant Lucas (Brazilian-German, male, 6 years old).

Study Phase	Child Pseudonym	Ethnic Group(s)	Gender	Age
Phase Two	Ana	Brazilian	Female	7
Phase Two	Emily	New Zealand European, English, Brazilian	Female	6
Phase Two	Lilly	Scottish, Brazilian	Female	8
Phase Two	Julia	African, Brazilian, German	Female	8
Phase Two	Lucas	Brazilian, German	Male	6
Phase Two	Marcelo	Brazilian, Portuguese	Male	7
Phase Two	Gabriel	Brazilian, German	Male	8
Phase Two	Luiz	Brazilian	Male	10
Phase Two	Daisy	New Zealand European, Brazilian	Female	7
Phase Two	Camila	Brazilian, German, Portuguese	Female	10
Phase Two	Laura	Brazilian, German, Portuguese	Female	7
Phase Two	Mariana	Brazilian, German, Portuguese	Female	7
Phase Two	Rafaela	Brazilian	Female	7
Total number of Brazilian child participants: 13				

*Table 5: Brazilian tamariki participants*

Table 6 represents whānau that engaged in the data collection. The whānau group comprised of 36 parents or guardians who engaged in Phase One and in Phase Two. Only one parent (Awhina) engaged in both phases, being counted once only. Most parents were women (27), while a smaller group were men (9). This cohort present a great ethnic diversity, with Brazilian (10), New Zealand European (6), Māori (3), Chinese (3), Indian (2), Fijian (1), Saudi (1), German (3), Portuguese (1), Spanish (1), Irish (1), Hungarian (1), Turkish (1), Belgian (1), Canadian (1), Scottish (1), Romanian (1), Italian (1), South African (1), Australian (1), and American (1). Some parents identified with more than one ethnic group.

Study Phase	Parent Pseudonym	Ethnic Group(s)	Gender
Phase One	Maia	Māori	Female
Phase One	Peter	American, New Zealand European, Australian	Male
Phase One	Bastien	Belgium	Male
Phase One	Christine	New Zealand European, Canadian, Scottish	Female
Phase One	Anahera	Māori	Female
Phase One	Sarah	New Zealand European	Female
Phase One	Saoirse	Irish	Female
Phase One	Marcela	Spanish	Female
Phase One	Divya	Indian	Female
Phase One	Eszter	Hungarian	Female
Phase One	Melati	Malaysian-Chinese	Female
Phase One and Two	Awhina	Māori-Fijian-New Zealand European	Female
Phase Two	Dilani	Sri Lankan	Female
Phase Two	Jonas	Papua New Guinean	Male
Phase Two	Fabiola	Brazilian-German	Female
Phase Two	Sabrina	Brazilian-German	Female
Phase Two	Penxi	Chinese	Female
Phase Two	Marta	Turkish	Female
Phase Two	Simon	New Zealand European	Male
Phase Two	Sara	Filipino	Female
Phase Two	Carolina	Brazilian	Female
Phase Two	Jun	Chinese	Male
Phase Two	Clarice	Brazilian	Female
Phase Two	Patricia	Brazilian	Female
Phase Two	Grant	New Zealand European	Male
Phase Two	Margareth	South African	Female
Phase Two	Penny	Chinese	Female
Phase Two	Ananya	Indian	Female
Phase Two	Natalia	Brazilian	Female
Phase Two	Faisal	Saudi	Female
Phase Two	Bia	Brazilian	Female
Phase Two	Ioana	Romanian	Female
Phase Two	Chiara	Brazilian-Italian	Female
Phase Two	Leticia	Brazilian	Female
Phase Two	Rodrigo	Brazilian-German-Portuguese	Male
Phase Two	Sofia	Brazilian	Female
Total number of parent research participants: 36			

*Table 6: Demographic diversity of whānau research participants*

The kaiako group was smaller (Table 7) with four participants in total, being three women and one man. Their ethnicities were Māori (3) and New Zealand European (3), with some kaiako identifying with both.

Study Phase	Kaiako Pseudonym	Ethnic Group(s)	Gender
Phase One	Manaia	Māori	Female
Phase One	Kate	New Zealand European	Female
Phase One	Kaia	Māori, New Zealand European	Female
Phase One	Scott	Māori, New Zealand European	Male
Total number of kaiako research participants: 4			

*Table 7: Demographic diversity of kaiako research participants*

This diversity of backgrounds was essential to understanding how ethnically diverse children in Aotearoa interpret ethnic representation in global animated films. The varied cultural identifications helped generate insights into how familiarity, resemblance, and difference are negotiated by children across intersecting ethnic and national affiliations.

#### **4.5 Phase Two Data Collection**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the original plan for face-to-face data collection had to be adapted. In-person activities were replaced with online methods, including digital surveys and video calls. While this shift introduced practical challenges, it also created new opportunities to engage with children and families in understandable and respectful ways. Similar adaptations were noted in another child-focused research during the pandemic. Olusoga (2024), for example, examined how children engaged emotionally and creatively with their environments through play during lockdown, highlighting the richness of their experiences beyond formal learning settings. Potter and Cowan (2020) explored children's ongoing meaning-making through play in both physical and virtual spaces, demonstrating how play remained a powerful form of communication. Although the present study did not

involve play-based methods, these examples informed a broader understanding of how children's perspectives can be accessed during periods of disruption and how methodological flexibility supports ethical and responsive research design.

Data were collected between 2019 and 2021, using a range of qualitative, child-centred tools. The first phase took place in 2019 through face-to-face, group-based interactions with children at Te Ao Mārama Primary School (Hamilton, New Zealand). The second phases, conducted in 2020 and 2021 respectively, took place online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and had research participants from thirteen schools across the Waikato and Auckland regions. These later phases included individual interviews with children via Zoom, as well as parent surveys and interviews. Table 8 summarises schools of research participants as well as city/town and region.

Schools of Research Participants	City/Town and Region	Participant Numbers
Monte Cecilia Catholic School	Auckland/Auckland	1
Whangaparāoa School	Whangaparāoa/Auckland	1
Knighton Normal School	Hamilton/Waikato	3
Marian Catholic Primary School	Hamilton/Waikato	3
Peachgrove Intermediate	Hamilton/Waikato	1
Rototuna Junior High School	Hamilton/Waikato	1
Rototuna Primary School	Hamilton/Waikato	1
Silverdale Normal School	Hamilton/Waikato	2
St Pius X	Hamilton/Waikato	1
Te Ao Mārama School	Hamilton/Waikato	36
Te Tōtara Primary School	Hamilton/Waikato	2
Hilltop school	Taupō/Waikato	1
St Patrick's Catholic School	Te Awamutu/Waikato	1
Total number of children		54

*Table 8: Schools of research participants by city/town, region, and correspondent participant numbers*

Throughout all phases, the data collection approach remained grounded in visual, creative, and narrative-based methods. Research tools included drawing prompts, character cards, toys, music, costumes, and open-ended interviews (see Appendices 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, and 13). These tools were designed to be playful, culturally responsive, and developmentally appropriate,

allowing children to explore and express their understandings of ethnicity, culture, and representation in multimodal ways.

During the online phases, these tools were adapted for digital use. Visual prompts were shared using screen sharing, character cards were embedded into interactive forms, and songs were played via shared playlists. Children were interviewed one-on-one, and in some cases, parents facilitated the activity at home using the materials I provided. All interviews were recorded with consent (see Appendices 4, 5, and 10), transcribed, and included in the thematic analysis. While the online format limited some embodied and group-based aspects of the original research design, it also allowed for more focused, flexible, and sustained dialogue in many cases.

With children, data were generated through a mix of visual and verbal elicitation activities. These included screen-shared scenes from films, as well as prompts using Disney/Pixar character cards. Children were invited to describe what they saw, talk about where they thought characters might be from, and reflect on whether any looked like people they knew. Some children were also encouraged to draw or map these ideas, although this method proved more effective with older children. These tasks were designed to support multimodal expression and culturally responsive engagement (Edwards, 2024).

Parents participated through surveys and, in 13 cases, follow-up semi-structured interviews. These interviews explored children's media use, family cultural background and language, and parents' perceptions of Disney's portrayal of ethnicity and culture, particularly in relation to *Moana*. These reflections helped contextualise how family narratives, migration histories, and cultural values may shape children's interpretations (Buckingham, 2007a).

This multi-phase, multi-method data collection approach generated a rich dataset of children's verbal, visual, and performative responses, complemented by parents' reflections

and contextual insights. Across all phases, data collection was guided by ethical principles of respect, cultural safety, and child agency.

#### **4.6 Data Analysis**

The analysis followed a thematic approach grounded in qualitative interpretive analysis. Thematic analysis, understood broadly as the process of identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative data (Tretiakov & Hunter, 2021) was used to organise participants' responses around the key topics embedded in the research questions and data collection tools. These included cultural recognition and misrecognition, identity and belonging, ethnic difference, and comparisons between *Moana* and other animated films.

Data were gathered from child interviews, parent interviews, and surveys, each incorporating both closed-ended and opened-ended questions designed to elicit reflections on culture, ethnicity, and media. In the 2019 phase, additional data were collected through visual methods such as drawings and costume-based activities, which were analysed in conjunction with children's spoken responses. During the online phases (2020–2021), data collection was limited to surveys and one-on-one interviews. However, visual prompts, including still images and character cards - were embedded into the digital surveys and screen-shared during the interviews with both children and parents, maintaining a visual and dialogic format even within the remote setting, also allowing the process to be more engaging and visually attractive.

Children's data were initially analysed separately from parents' data, without categorising participants by cultural background. This allowed age-specific patterns and intra-family connections to emerge. As the analysis progressed, I observed interpretive differences that appeared to reflect cultural background, particularly among Brazilian families. Out of the 54

child participants, 13 had Brazilian roots. This led to a comparative stage in which responses from Brazilian and non-Brazilian participants were examined in parallel, allowing for contrasts and commonalities to be drawn across groups.

While the analysis was guided by recurring themes and patterns that emerged inductively, it was also informed by the study's broader theoretical framework, particularly the concepts of cultural mediations (Martín-Barbero, 2006), funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005), and performative identity (Clammer, 2015; Kelly-Ware, 2018). My approach combined inductive and deductive strategies, maintaining openness to emergent meanings while grounding interpretation in theory.

My own positionality as a Brazilian migrant mother and media researcher shaped the way I interpreted participants' responses. I remained conscious of this throughout the analysis, recognising that meaning was co-constructed and often filtered through my own transnational lens. Reflexivity was an integral part of this process, requiring me to critically examine how my identity, background, and lived experiences influenced the research at every moment along the way. As Falconer Al-Hindi and Eaves (2023) argue, reflexivity is central to feminist geography because it promotes accountability, transparency, and ethical research practices that challenge dominant epistemologies. This aligns with the emancipatory aims of my project, particularly in relation to power, representation, and cultural voice.

Reflexivity also enabled me to navigate shifting insider-outsider dynamics (Adu-Ampong & Adams, 2020), especially when engaging with Brazilian families whose cultural references and transnational experiences I could relate to, yet whose perspectives and contexts were distinct from my own. Following these insights, I viewed reflexivity not as a one-off statement of identity, but as a continuous and critical process that helped me engage with the complexities of power, cultural proximity, and trust in cross-cultural qualitative research.

Building on this reflexive positioning, and in line with Martín-Barbero's invitation to "see with others" (Rincón, 2024), I approached analysis not as a search for definitive answers but as a situated, relational reading of how children interpret culture. Rather than forcing coherence, I allowed space for contradiction, ambiguity, and emotional nuance to emerge as central to the meaning-making process. This approach honours children's subjectivities while remaining analytically grounded.

#### **4.7 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical protocols followed the guidelines of the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Division of Arts, Law, Psychology and Social Sciences at the University of Waikato (case file: FS2018-32). Informed consent was obtained from parents or guardians (see Appendices 4 and 10), and agreement to participate, along with understanding about data use and storage, was sought from children at the beginning of each data collection session using age-appropriate language. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. They were also made aware that sessions would be recorded for academic purposes only and that all data would be securely stored in a password-protected folder. Care was taken to create a non-judgemental, comfortable environment throughout the process. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of all research participants, including both children and parents.

This research takes seriously the shifting understanding of children and young people not as passive subjects but as competent social actors capable of expressing meaningful views on issues that affect them. As Lumby et al. (2018, p. 88) argue, it is now widely recognised that "young people are able to make sense of their own experience and articulate it given the right environment and tools."

This perspective is reinforced by Powell and Smith's (2009) study of researchers working with children in Aotearoa New Zealand, which highlights how participation rights are often compromised by adult gatekeeping and institutional assumptions of vulnerability. Rather than viewing children as passive recipients of adult decisions, the study affirms that they are "competent and both willing and able to make decisions about matters such as participation in research" (Powell & Smith, 2009, p. 125). This aligns with the approach taken here, where children were approached with respect for their autonomy and provided with developmentally appropriate tools to decide whether and how to take part.

Children's participation rights are enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), particularly Article 12, which affirms their right to express their views freely and have these considered in all matters that affect them (Powell & Smith, 2009, p. 125; Sinclair, 2004). Gatekeeping processes were carefully managed, but the central ethical commitment was to maintain these rights through intelligible and informed participation.

Visual and video-based methods raise additional ethical challenges. As Peters et al. (2021) emphasise, ensuring children's informed assent, anonymity, and protection from long-term risks of digital visibility requires careful consideration. Video data can inadvertently reveal children's identities, intensify power dynamics, and create enduring digital footprints, making reflexive, transparent practice essential. In this study, at the beginning of every session, all children were informed of their right to withdraw from data collection, as well as how their data would be collected and stored (see Appendix 7: Participant Consent Form for Tamariki, Phase One). Only one child, during Phase One, requested that their image not be recorded and only their voice, which required me to adjust the camera's positioning in the room. Furthermore, any images from data collection, whether presented at conferences or in any publication, have children's faces blurred to prevent their identification.

These challenges are not unique to this study but are reflected internationally. Rutanen et al. (2018), in an international and multi-country study, note that video-based research with children raises complex concerns of privacy, confidentiality, and long-term rights to one's image, which varies across cultural and legal contexts. They emphasise the importance of ongoing consent processes and sensitivity to cultural differences while working with children's visual data.

Traditional ethical models often position children as vulnerable and in need of protection, which historically has led to their exclusion from conversations about media, culture, or identity. However, more recent approaches, aligned with the UNCRC, affirm the importance of listening to young people and recognising their agency in meaning-making processes (Powell & Smith, 2009).

In line with these perspectives, this study created opportunities for children to participate using developmentally appropriate, multimodal methods such as drawing, cards, playing with toys, and wearing costumes, and open-ended discussion (in the 2019 phase), and visual cues embedded in surveys and interviews (in the 2020–2021 phase). These methods were chosen not only for their analytical value, but also for their ability to support children's voice in respectful, culturally sensitive ways. As Lumby et al. (2018) emphasise, qualitative research using creative and participatory tools enables deeper insight into how young people interpret sensitive or complex issues such as cultural representation.

#### ***4.7.1 Cultural Safety***

Given the study's focus on cultural representation and identity, cultural safety was prioritised throughout the research process. Specific measures included:

- Consultation with Māori cultural advisor Dr Lesley Rameka (University of Waikato), whose guidance informed my methodological sensitivity when working with Māori and Pasifika participants.
- Acknowledgement that while principles such as manaakitanga (hospitality) and whakawhanaungatanga (the process of building and maintaining relationships) informed the data collection, I did not fully apply kaupapa Māori or Pasifika methodologies due to positionality (see 4.8 Researcher Positionality) and research context.
- Attention to power dynamics, especially when working with migrant families and children from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including care with language differences and family-specific contexts.

Although the study did not involve Kura Kaupapa Māori or Pasifika schools, it included a small cohort of Māori and Pasifika children and parents. The research aimed to create an inclusive space in which all participants, regardless of their background, could engage on their own terms, and where cultural identity was treated as relational, situated, and worthy of thoughtful interpretation.

#### **4.8 Researcher Positionality**

As a researcher with a transnational identity and background, I occupy a liminal position within the research context. My own experiences as a migrant and bilingual individual inform my understanding of cultural negotiation and identity formation (Cormier, 2018). This study therefore embraces a reflexive stance that acknowledges the influence of the researcher's perspective in co-constructing meaning (Court & Abbas, 2022).

In this sense, my positionality is also informed by Martín-Barbero's invitation to "see with others," which foregrounds the importance of engaging with the lived experiences, pleasures, and everyday rituals of media users (Rincón, 2024). This involves a shift from seeking definitive answers to listening more attentively to where and how meaning emerges, often from what is joyful, ordinary, and shared. As Rincón (2024, p. 637) puts it:

Martín-Barbero taught us that our main goal should be to change the place from where we ask our questions, moving from safe places to unstable ones. This means looking at phenomena from a different angle, listening to what young people have to say... believing in communities, in others, and in beauty.

As a researcher who shares aspects of cultural hybridity and migration with many participants, I am not an external observer but a partial and relational subject. Embracing a narrative mode of inquiry, aligned with Martín-Barbero's notion of *contar para contar* (telling to tell, in a political sense), I view this research as a collaborative act of storytelling rooted in community, identity, and affect (Rincón, 2024). My reflexive engagement with children's interpretations is thus guided not only by analytic rigour but also by a commitment to understanding what matters to them, in their own terms.

At the same time, I recognise the responsibilities and limitations that come with researching in a land to which I do not whakapapa. I was fortunate to receive guidance from Māori cultural advisor Dr Lesley Rameka (School of Education, University of Waikato), who supported my understanding of ethical and methodological practices when working with Māori and Pasifika children and families. With her advice, I drew on principles such as manaakitanga (hospitality, generosity), storytelling, and reciprocal relationships, values that were upheld throughout my research with all families, regardless of cultural background. These values align with my own Latin American decolonial lens and reflect a shared

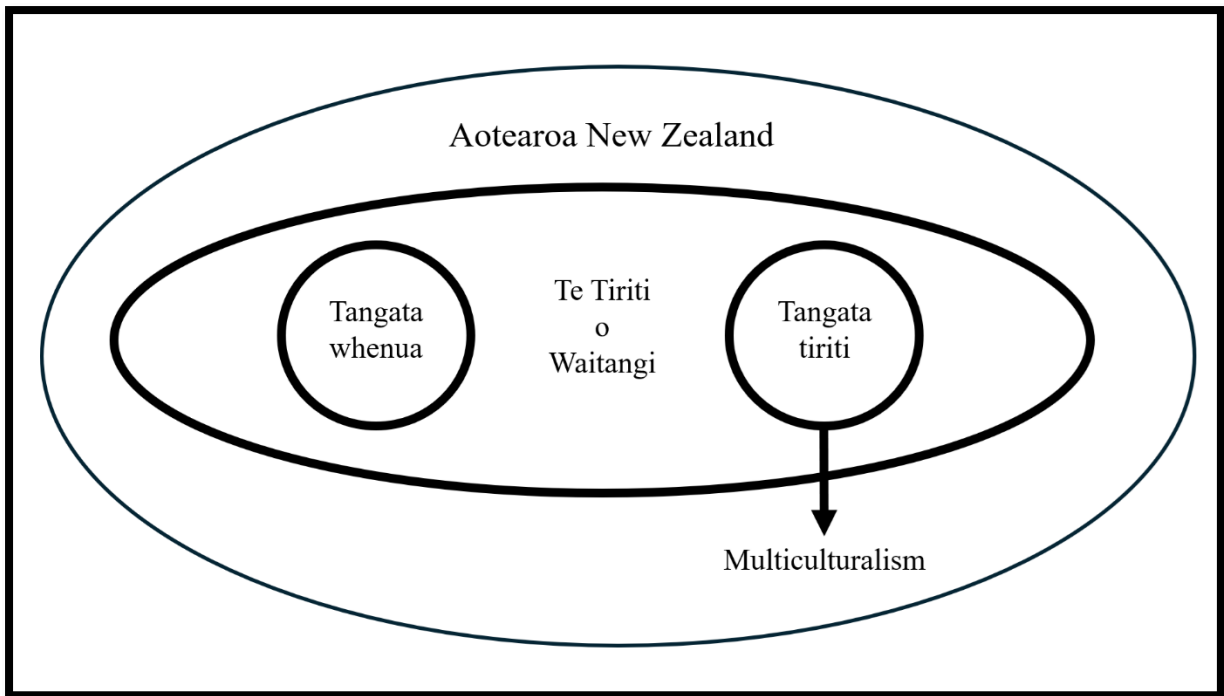
commitment to relational, child-centred, and community-based knowledge. I do not claim to work within kaupapa Māori or mātauranga Māori frameworks, and I understand that these knowledges belong to the communities from which they arise.

However, I also acknowledge that I was unable to fully apply Māori or Pasifika methodologies due to my own cultural background and the practical constraints of data collection, particularly during the pandemic. Within this context, broader debates about biculturalism, multiculturalism, and superdiversity in Aotearoa become especially relevant to my positionality as a migrant researcher. Scholars have highlighted the ongoing tensions that arise as the original treaty partnership between Māori and the British Crown intersects with increasing cultural diversity shaped by contemporary migration (Chan and Ritchie, 2023). These tensions are understood as historically and socio-politically grounded, and they are intensified by the fact that migration policies and settlement processes have largely developed without meaningful consultation with Māori. As a result, biculturalism, understood as the recognition of Māori first nation status and treaty rights, and multiculturalism are often positioned as competing frameworks. Managing this relationship is widely recognised as a central challenge in pursuing equitable and balanced ethnic relations in Aotearoa (Chan & Ritchie, 2023).

In dialogue with this body of scholarship, I advocate for an understanding of Te Tiriti that recognises its bicultural foundation while also accommodating the cultural diversity that characterises Aotearoa today. I argue that Te Tiriti is bicultural in the sense that tangata whenua and tangata tiriti represent Māori as the people of the land and non-Māori as the people of the Treaty. In this view, tangata tiriti becomes an umbrella term that encompasses all non-Māori individuals living in Aotearoa, including tauwiwi or foreigners. This conceptualisation contrasts with interpretations that limit the treaty relationship to Māori and

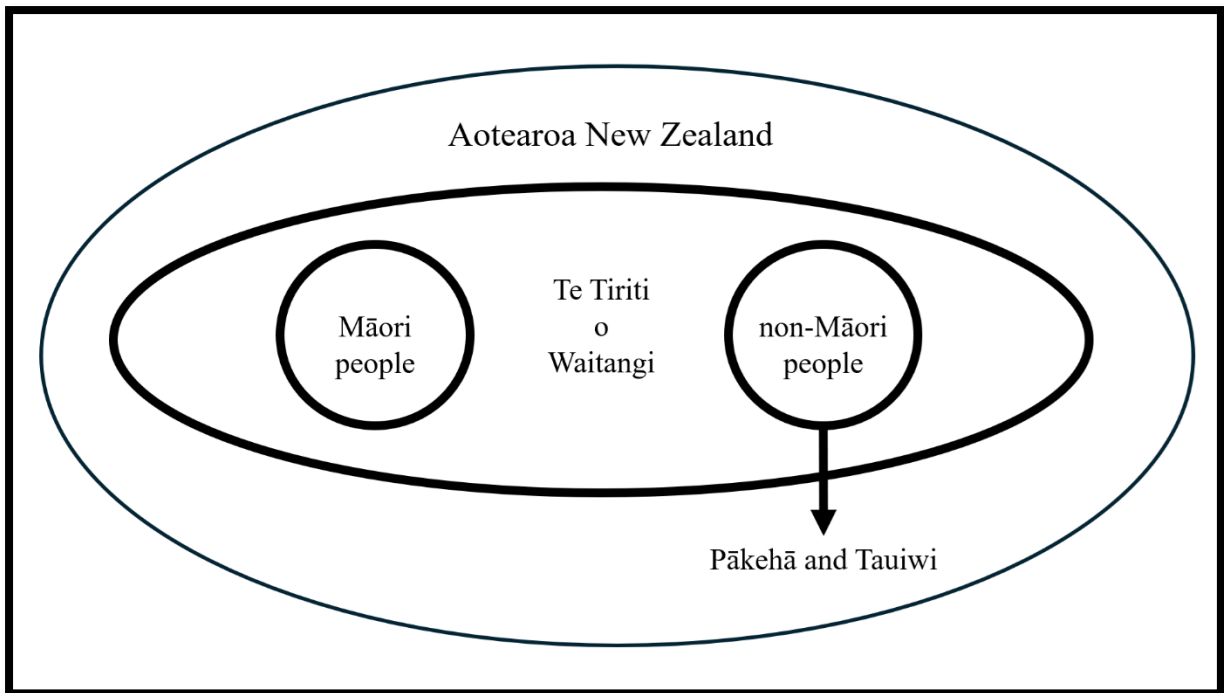
New Zealand Europeans. Instead, it positions all who choose Aotearoa as their home as participants in the treaty relationship, acknowledging their responsibilities and contributions within it. This perspective aligns with the social reality of a superdiverse population and suggests a more inclusive way of relating bicultural and multicultural frameworks without treating them as oppositional.

To clarify this conceptualisation, I developed a visual representation of how I understand the relationship between biculturalism, Te Tiriti, and multicultural communities in Aotearoa. In this diagram (Figure 15), Te Tiriti o Waitangi sits at the centre and frames the relational space shared by tangata whenua and tangata tiriti. Multicultural communities are positioned within tangata tiriti, which reflects the view that all non-Māori residents, regardless of their specific cultural backgrounds, become part of the treaty relationship. This conceptualisation reinforces my argument that biculturalism and multiculturalism are not opposing frameworks but can instead be understood as layered, with Te Tiriti forming the foundation upon which diverse communities relate ethically to Māori.



*Figure 15: Bicultural framework of Aotearoa New Zealand as used in this study*

A second diagram (Figure 16) presents an alternative but complementary way of visualising these relationships by grouping populations as Māori people and non-Māori people. Within the non-Māori category, both Pākehā and tauīwi are included, which challenges interpretations that restrict the scope of Te Tiriti to Māori and New Zealand Europeans alone. This framing aligns with scholarship that positions migrants as participants in the treaty relationship and affirms that obligations under Te Tiriti extend to all who make Aotearoa their home. For my own positionality as a migrant researcher, this model provides an ethical and conceptual grounding that locates me within tangata tiriti while upholding the centrality of tangata whenua.



*Figure 16: Researcher interpretation of Aotearoa New Zealand's biculturalism*

Following this understanding of my place within the broader sociocultural landscape of Aotearoa, I also recognise that engaging with video ethics also demands reflexivity, as researchers' cultural positions influence how visual data are collected, interpreted, and shared (Peters et al., 2021; Rutanen et al., 2018). My decisions to blur children's faces in photographs and still images from video recordings, to anonymise their identities, and to withhold the data collected in this study reflect these ethical commitments.

This study also draws from the theory of funds of knowledge (Esteban-Guitart, 2023; González et al., 2005), which holds that all people, including children, possess culturally embedded knowledge grounded in everyday life. Informed by this framework, I approached children not as incomplete or in need of correction, but as capable social actors whose lived experiences, play, stories, and relationships carry intellectual and emotional insight.

Additionally, drawing from performance theory (Clammer, 2015; Kelly-Ware, 2018), I

understand identity not as fixed, but as enacted, something children do, show, and negotiate in interaction with others and with media texts. These intersecting perspectives helped me remain attuned to how children express who they are, how they belong, and how they imagine difference, not only in words, but through drawings, play, preferences, and performances.

#### **4.9 Limitations**

As with all qualitative, child-centred research, this study carries certain limitations. Language barriers may have affected how some younger children expressed themselves, particularly when communicating nuanced thoughts about culture or difference. While care was taken to use age-appropriate and visual methods, linguistic and developmental factors likely shaped how children interpreted and responded to the tasks.

The sample size was relatively small and not intended to be representative of all children in Aotearoa New Zealand. As such, findings cannot be generalised. However, the study was designed to prioritise depth over breadth, with a focus on rich, contextualised interpretations from children and families with diverse cultural backgrounds. The exploratory nature of the research supports interpretive insight rather than statistical comparison.

Children's perspectives were captured at specific moments in time and within particular cultural and pandemic-related contexts. Their interpretations are therefore understood as situated, relational, and subject to change over time. This is especially relevant when studying meaning-making in childhood, where preferences, identifications, and cultural reference points are continually evolving.

As a non-native English speaker, I also encountered challenges during interviews, particularly in ensuring that both children and parents fully understood my questions. I often

needed to rephrase prompts or explain them in multiple ways, especially when working with younger children. To prepare for this, I developed alternative phrasings in advance and embedded them into the interview guide and survey tools. While this added complexity to the interaction, it also reflected the multilingual realities of the research context and allowed me to adapt flexibly to participants' communication styles.

Finally, my cultural background and positionality, while a strength in terms of shared experience with many participants, may also have shaped the types of questions asked and the ways responses were interpreted. Reflexivity was used throughout to navigate this, but complete neutrality is neither possible nor desirable in interpretive research.

#### **4.10 Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the qualitative, child-centred methodology used to explore how cultural background, family context, and national identity shape children's interpretations of cultural representation in Disney films. It has detailed the multi-phase research design, including both in-person and online data collection, and described the visual and narrative tools used to support children's participation. The chapter also reflected on ethical considerations, cultural safety, and the researcher's own positionality, situating the study within a reflexive, interpretive framework grounded in cultural mediations and child agency.

The following chapters take the form of three peer-reviewed journal articles. Each article presents a different aspect of the research findings, examining how children from diverse cultural backgrounds interpret global media texts, how parents contextualise these interpretations through family practices and transnational ties, and how issues of identity, recognition, and belonging emerge in children's meaning-making processes. Together, the

articles contribute to a deeper understanding of how global cultural products are engaged with in everyday life in Aotearoa New Zealand.

## Chapter 5

### Journal Article 1

# Listening to the Kids: Children's Perceptions of Culture and Ethnicities in Global Animated Films in Aotearoa New Zealand<sup>6</sup>

Annelore Spieker (The University of Waikato/New Zealand)

#### Abstract

This study examines children's opinions and ideas about representations of culture in global animated films. It highlights children's answers to online surveys and one-on-one interviews from the second part of the data collection, which took place in Aotearoa New Zealand over three years. As a theoretical framework, concepts such as funds of knowledge, cultural mediation, and multiculturalism are used to support the social and cultural landscape in which the research participants lived during the data collection. The interviews with the children focused on sixteen Disney and Pixar films and their twenty-four main characters. The purpose of the conversations was to explore where children think the films' characters might have come from, and therefore which cultural backgrounds children believe those characters belong to. According to the research findings, some factors influence children's

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<sup>6</sup> This journal article was originally published as:

Spieker, A., & Mortensen Steagall, M. (2024). Listening to the kids: Children's perceptions of culture and ethnicities in global animated films in Aotearoa New Zealand. *LINK PRAXIS*, 2(1), 40–75.

<https://doi.org/10.24135/link-praxis.v2i1.30>

It is important to note that Mortensen Steagall served as the translator to Portuguese and Spanish, with Spieker as the sole author of the work.

Text shown here is adapted from its original publication.

comprehension of cultural representations in media, such as the schools they attend and the activities they engage in within those educational environments.

## 5.1 Introduction

This paper presents findings from a broader study that was discussed in a presentation during the LINK 2023 International Conference of Practice and Research in Design and the Global South (Spieker, 2023). The main ideas explored in this journal article relate to children's perceptions of the main characters and films produced by Disney and Pixar (see the methodology section for more details), as well as the associations children make between these characters, their stories, and their possible cultural backgrounds. The paper also considers how children personally identify with leading roles in these films.

The focus of this article is to listen to children's ideas and give them a voice to express their beliefs about culture, identity, New Zealand as a place of belonging, and the wider world.

This focus is particularly relevant given that Aotearoa is an increasingly diverse nation and is expected to become even more so in the coming years (Spoonley, 2020; Stats NZ, 2023). To understand children's awareness of culture, the researcher draws on Latin American cultural studies and reception studies, due to her background and academic work in that region.

Giving voice to audiences is strongly advocated by Latin American scholars such as Martín-Barbero (1987, 2006, 2018), Jacks and Wottrich (2016), Escosteguy and Jacks (2023), and Canclini (2010).

To help understand children's viewpoints on culture, ethnicity, and identity, Disney and Pixar films were used to initiate conversations about how children perceive culture in global media. This approach enabled the researcher to identify points of interest, as Si'ilata (Ministry of Education, 2015) explains in an interview about the cultural diversity curriculum principle in

Aotearoa, which aligns with the concepts of funds of knowledge (Esteban-Guitart, 2023; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 2005).

The interest in this topic emerged with the launch of Disney's *Moana* (hereafter, *Moana*) in November 2016. It was observed that this film depicted characters and stories in a different way from previous Disney media texts, particularly in relation to the company's Princess films and their historical representations of race and ethnicity (Robinson, 2016; Rooij, 2019; Sciretta, 2016; Tamaira and Fonoti, 2018; Yoshinaga, 2019). Across Disney's history of Princess films from 1937 to 2013, there has been a notable lack of representation of cultural backgrounds from regions outside Europe (Kelly-Ware, 2018; Lacroix, 2004). Of the fourteen Princesses introduced up to 2013, only a few diverged from this pattern, such as the Middle Eastern Jasmine (1992), Native American Pocahontas (1995), Chinese Mulan (1998), and African American Tiana (2009). The Latin American Princess Elena (2016) was showcased only on the Disney Channel, rather than on global cinema screens. Disney's *Elena* (2016) was included in the research tools to offer children a more diverse set of options to choose from and discuss.

The lack of diversity in representation in global media consumed by children is concerning, as it perpetuates stereotypes and limits children's exposure to different cultures and perspectives (Cubbage, 2019; Kolucki and Lemish, 2011; Mastro, 2015; Zhang et al., 2019). It is important for children to see main characters who look like them and come from different backgrounds in order to support inclusivity and understanding, as well as to enhance self-awareness and self-esteem (Durkin and Judge, 2001; Durkin et al., 2012). Representation in media plays a crucial role in shaping the way children see themselves and others (Christensen, 2004; Cubbage, 2019; Dittmer, 2021). By showcasing a wide range of diverse characters, media can help break down barriers and promote acceptance and empathy towards

other cultures. Without meaningful representation, children may struggle to relate to characters in their favourite shows and films, which may lead to feelings of exclusion and alienation.

By including diverse characters in media, a more inclusive environment is created where children can feel seen and valued (Kolucki and Lemish, 2011). It is imperative for content creators to make a conscious effort to include diverse perspectives in their work to ensure that all children can see themselves reflected in the stories they consume. Ultimately, representation in media has the power to influence how children perceive themselves and the world around them, making it essential for promoting a more compassionate and understanding society (Soares, 2012; Trebbe et al., 2017; Vandenbosch, 2017).

Drawing on concepts, theories, and methodologies from Latin American, Māori, European, and other global scholars, this study focuses on how children engage with media through the framework of cultural mediations (Martín-Barbero, 2018; Bustamante, 2017; Escosteguy, 2018) and funds of knowledge (Esteban-Guitart, 2023; González et al., 2005; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 2005). The researcher believes that children attending schools in Aotearoa develop a stronger understanding of both their cultural heritage and the country's history and cultural legacy. This contributes to children's knowledge and perceptions of culture and ethnicity and equips them with tools to analyse and understand the places they belong to in a more profound way.

Through this interdisciplinary approach, this study aims to shed light on the nuanced ways in which children navigate and interpret the media landscape. The intention is to enhance current understandings by adding more subtle detail to the role of media in shaping young minds in the context of New Zealand. This study ultimately seeks to foster a more informed and critical dialogue surrounding children's media consumption (Block and Buckingham,

2007; Schott and Lealand, 2010; Ville and Tartas, 2010), highlighting the need for culturally sensitive approaches to media research and analysis.

Moreover, the author of this paper believes that establishing a substantial background involving discussions about diversity and inclusion helps to develop children's perceptions of themselves and of the world around them. Children of today are the future leaders of tomorrow, and they will guide their communities. It is crucial that they are equipped with a strong foundation of understanding and respect for diversity and inclusion so that mistakes such as colonisation (Smith, 2021), racism (Baron and Banaji, 2006; Hardy, 2013), and other forms of discrimination are not repeated. Providing children with the necessary tools to enhance their understanding of culture can help them better understand who they are and embrace diversity.

## **5.2 The Educational System in Aotearoa and Funds of Knowledge**

To understand how children in Aotearoa perceive cultures, it is essential to understand how the educational system works in New Zealand. This is because of the cultural background and history of this place, and because it is where the children in the sample lived during data collection. Therefore, this section presents an overview of The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007, 2020), which is an official national document and a framework that guides primary and secondary schools and kura kaupapa Māori to achieve its proposals and goals. The curriculum emphasises the importance of cultural diversity in children's education and aims to create a more inclusive and equitable society by applying the concept of funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005; Esteban-Guitart, 2023; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 2005).

The concept of funds of knowledge supports and acknowledges the experiences, knowledge, and sociocultural practices of students and their families from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds (González et al., 2005). In this sense, children and their families are regarded as intellectually capable, regardless of their social, physical, intellectual, economic, linguistic, or cultural circumstances (Esteban-Guitart, 2023; González et al., 2005). This practice aims to promote equality and fairness by fostering collaborative and reciprocal relationships among teachers, students, and families. Through these relationships, it seeks to establish meaningful connections between educational practices in schools and the lives, contexts, and practices of students. Its purpose is to assist students in the formation of their identities by encouraging critical self-awareness and a deeper understanding of their surroundings (Cooper et al., 2023; Esteban-Guitart, 2023; González et al., 2005).

In the schools where data were collected, it was possible to observe that these institutions promoted a culturally diverse environment by celebrating occasions such as Chinese New Year, Eid, Ramadan, Diwali, and Matariki, as well as by encouraging students to share their ethnic backgrounds through events such as Cultural Parade and Identity Day, among others mentioned in interviews with children and their families. These events welcome children and their whānau to be part of the planning and organisation, allowing those who belong to these cultures to present and explain aspects of their heritage to children and whānau from other cultural backgrounds.

The researcher believes that the educational system in Aotearoa supports children to become more aware of cultural differences and more receptive and inclusive towards them, partly because these differences are celebrated regularly in schools. Therefore, children in Aotearoa demonstrate a capacity to identify cultural traits from a young age, even as early as six years old. More about this will be discussed in the findings section below.

### 5.3 Cultural Mediations

Although the concept of cultural mediations (Martín-Barbero, 2006) was not developed with a focus on children, educators, or educational systems, it, similarly to the funds of knowledge concept, refers to what audiences bring in terms of their perceptions of the world and, consequently, how they make sense of media. Cultural mediation, although not described by Martín-Barbero as a decolonial concept, contributes to decolonising theoretical frameworks used to analyse media consumption by moving away from the producer and receptor equation promoted by the Frankfurt School (Tarr, 2017) in Latin America.

The concept of cultural mediation was formulated through the lenses of Martín-Barbero who, as a semiotician, perceived audiences as creators of meaning from media texts. While living in Latin America and researching telenovelas, Martín-Barbero observed that audiences create meaning through their lived experiences rather than from the media text alone. Cultural mediation also perceives audiences as co-creators of meaning as they exchange ideas about media and the world on a daily basis through ordinary conversations at home, at school, and in other social spaces. Although Martín-Barbero's studies focus mainly on adults and television, his framework has been applied to other research areas such as graphic design (Acosta, 2020), technology and culture (Martín-Barbero, 2006), journalism (Felippi and Escosteguy, 2013), alternative media (Vicente and Rebêlo, 2022), among others.

The idea of mediation centres on how audiences make sense of what they consume through media, recognising that the process of creating meaning is not an isolated event but rather a collective experience that emerges from exchanges about any topic presented in a media text. For example, what families discuss around the dinner table is as significant as what people talk about or share during work breaks or at school. Mediation involves sharing and creating new meanings. It acknowledges that media are not powerful enough to dominate people's

minds and that audiences are intelligent and capable of thinking independently of media messages. For Martín-Barbero, thinking about mediation means thinking about the mass, that is, the audiences in a way that is not dualistic. It requires considering both the relation of media with people and the relation of people with media (Scolari, 2015). In other words, cultural mediation concerns understanding how audiences make sense of media.

#### **5.4 Multiculturalism in Aotearoa**

To understand how children make sense of the media, it is important to highlight the cultural and demographic background of the research sample. Aotearoa is a multicultural place (Zalipour and Athique, 2016) and, to comprehend New Zealand multiculturalism, it is necessary to return to Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi), which is historically intertwined with the preservation of Māori culture and the development of multiculturalism in Aotearoa. The signing of the Treaty on 6 February 1840 marked the beginning of a complex relationship between the native Māori and the European settlers, Pākehā (Anderson et al., 2014). The Treaty guaranteed Māori rights and the protection of their lands, but its interpretation and implementation have been the subject of ongoing debate and conflict (Anderson et al., 2014; Dewes, 2022). Despite attempts to promote biculturalism and uphold the Treaty partnership, Māori continue to confront systemic discrimination and marginalisation, including in relation to their language and culture (Cooper et al., 2023). This history underscores the importance of addressing power imbalances and promoting genuine inclusivity within the country's multicultural framework (Spoonley, 2020).

Although Te Tiriti o Waitangi acknowledges Māori and Pākehā as the foundational bicultural groups of New Zealand, Aotearoa has increasingly become a multicultural population. More than one quarter of its residents were born overseas (27.4 percent), and its ethnic composition includes five major groups: New Zealand Pākehā or European New Zealanders at 70.2

percent (3.2 million), Māori at 16.5 percent (0.77 million), Asian peoples at 15.1 percent (0.70 million), Pasifika or Pacific Peoples at 8.1 percent (0.38 million), and MELAA (Middle Eastern, Latin American, and African) at 1.5 percent (0.07 million) of the total population (Stats NZ, 2023). Subsequent waves of migration from Europe, Asia, and the Pacific Islands have significantly enriched the cultural diversity of Aotearoa (Anderson et al., 2014; Zalipour and Athique, 2016).

It is important to note that the whānau of children in the research sample come from more than twenty countries of origin, mirroring the multicultural landscape that continues to develop in Aotearoa. Being part of such a multicultural environment exposes children to a variety of cultures, traditions, and perspectives, which can support a greater understanding and appreciation of the world around them. Additionally, when children from diverse backgrounds see themselves represented in media, it provides a sense of validation and empowerment (Kolucki and Lemish, 2011; Lemish, 2015; Lemish and Götz, 2017; Trebbe et al., 2017).

## **5.5 Sample and Methodology**

The sample presented in this journal article comes from a broader study that involved a heterogeneous group of individuals from different cultural origins, aged between five and twelve years, including both males and females, and residing in Aotearoa. The original study that informed this article encompassed two sets of data collection: one involving face-to-face interactions and the other involving online environments. This journal article specifically concentrates on the second set of data collection, which occurred in Aotearoa during the pandemic. Data from twenty children are discussed here. Children completed online surveys and participated in virtual interviews for the purpose of data gathering. To deepen the understanding of how children perceive culture represented in global animated films, I also

conducted online interviews with parents. These interviews aimed to shed light on the impact of family dynamics on children's understandings of culture and cultural identity, their media consumption habits, and the influence of the schools and communities to which they belong (Arias and Punyanunt-Carter, 2017; Jacobs, 2023; Ware et al., 2018).

To understand if and how these children relate to cultural representations through global animated films such as Disney and Pixar productions, a triangulation of methods was used (Ólafsson et al., 2013): survey (Weerakkody, 2009), interview (Tisdall et al., 2009), wānanga (Pihama et al., 2015), and pūrākau (Lee, 2009, 2015) approaches. The survey made it possible to gather quantitative data on children's exposure to and preferences for animated films. The interviews allowed for deeper exploration of their perceptions and understandings of characters and storylines. The wānanga sessions created opportunities for group discussions and collective knowledge sharing, while the pūrākau approach helped uncover cultural connections and nuances present in their interpretations. By combining these methods, it was possible to gain a comprehensive understanding of how children engage with global animated films.

The survey method (Weerakkody, 2009) supported conversations about children's family backgrounds, their school activities related to identity and culture, and their knowledge of Disney and Pixar films and characters. There was also a dedicated session about Moana, given that the story represents a Pasifika character (Rechtshaffen, 2016; Rika, 2016; Tamaira and Fonoti, 2018; Tamaira et al., 2018) in a global animated film and because Aotearoa is geographically located in the South Pacific and comprises populations from the Pacific Islands in addition to its native people, Māori, who are also considered Pacific Peoples (Centennial Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1939; Anderson et al., 2014).

The interviews (Weerakkody, 2009) provided more in-depth insights (Tisdall et al., 2009) into how children personally related to the characters and themes depicted in the films. These conversations offered opportunities to explore the emotional and psychological impact that animated films had on children, as well as how they perceived different cultures and identities when sharing their stories and listening to their parents' stories (Pihama et al., 2015). The combination of surveys and interviews made it possible to understand how factors such as age, gender, and cultural background influenced the way children interpreted and connected with the films. In particular, the discussions about *Moana* highlighted the importance of representation and diversity in children's media and how these elements can shape their perceptions of themselves and others.

The study aimed to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the elements that influence children's media preferences and viewing patterns by including parents in the research process. The results of this study are expected to contribute to ongoing discussions about the influence of popular media on the development and socialisation of children. The investigation into children's perspectives on Disney and Pixar media texts originated from a desire to gain deeper insights into how the convergence of cultural portrayal, the New Zealand educational system, and home dynamics informs the development of young individuals.

Finally, linking back to the concept of cultural mediation (described in the previous section), this framework was applied to the data because of the polemic surrounding the launch of *Moana* (Constante, 2016). Māori and Pasifika scholars were divided in their views, with some expressing support (Hereniko, 2017) and others expressing rejection (Pihama, 2017). Supporters noted that Disney created a group of scholars, the Oceanic Story Trust, who helped shape the cultural details of the film. Critics, however, accused Disney of perpetuating

colonialism and cultural appropriation, as the largest media conglomerate in the world (Birkinbine et al., 2017) produced a global media text for profit based on Indigenous cultures. This study therefore sought to understand children's perceptions of *Moana*, alongside their observations of fifteen other films, regarding representations of culture.

## 5.6 Findings

The findings from the children's interviews concerning relations between stories, main characters, and Aotearoa are explored in this paper because Aotearoa is where research participants lived during data collection. In this sense, and drawing on the concept of funds of knowledge (Esteban-Guitart, 2023; González et al., 2005; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 2005), the researcher enabled children to bring their own understandings of New Zealand into the discussion and to express their perceptions of how films and characters might relate to their lived experiences. This also helped in understanding the factors that shape children's interpretations of films, which are connected to cultural mediations (Martín-Barbero, 2018; Scolari, 2015).

Beginning with children's connections between the films and Aotearoa, sixty percent of respondents stated that *Moana's* story could have taken place in Aotearoa New Zealand, followed by *Tangled* (40 percent) and *Brave* (35 percent) as the next most frequently mentioned films. Among the reasons given, one child explained:

*"Because of Maui, and his families and the old stories. And the shiny crab. And the tiki face when he jumped down and the mouth opened. Yeah, I think that's a tiki face."* (eight-year-old boy).

Here, the child refers to hei tiki (Keane, 2006), which is considered one of the earliest Māori forms. The same boy continued:

"And I heard a story about Maui and the fishing hook. He hooked the sting ray, big sting ray that looks like the land [referring to the North Island legend]. That's why the nature lady green [Te Fiti] and he [Maui] said: 'She [Te Fiti] loved me pulling the islands up'. So, I think he pulled the sting ray kind of island up. So that's why this other half of New Zealand that's up".

In this interpretation, the child drew on his understanding of Aotearoa's landscape and Māori stories learned at school to position *Moana* as a New Zealand story.

Another child commented on several films in the sample and referred to Pixar's *Coco* (2017) as possibly being from Aotearoa, "because they are people. Like... real normal people", referring to the film's more realistic animation style. When identifying which films could be from Aotearoa, she added:

"Not *Frozen*, because there is no snow here, only the ones that melt." (6-year-old girl).

She then discussed Disney's *Elena*:

"*Elena* because they look like real people and that's mainly all my answers."

Her further comments included:

"*Moana* because there is a lot of beaches here."

"*Pocahontas* because of the nature."

"I think *Ariel* was from New Zealand because of the beaches.",

"Not [*The*] *Princess and the Frog*. Essentially there is NO frogs here."

She concluded:

*"I think Toy Story because looks like real people. Real, real people."*

This six-year-old girl primarily based her reasoning on landscape and environment when explaining why she believed some films could or could not be from Aotearoa. For her, the more realistic the animation, the more she felt it could represent where she comes from, in this case, New Zealand.

Children frequently mentioned that Moana is from Aotearoa "*because she has a waka*." (10-year-old boy). The use of the Māori term *waka* (canoe) rather than boat signals their cultural understanding, likely acquired from living in Aotearoa. In Māori and Pasifika cultures, *waka* carries deep cultural significance as a symbol of identity, ancestry, and connection to land and sea (Barclay-Kerr, 2012; Pouwhare, 2020). By referring to Moana's vessel as a *waka*, children demonstrated cultural awareness and associated those traits with the film's narrative, perceiving elements of New Zealand culture within it.

A notable finding was the high frequency of references (75 percent,  $n = 15$ ) to Moana as being of Māori heritage. When asked why, children commonly mentioned their exposure to Te Wiki o te Reo Māori (Māori Language Week) at school, and several noted that they had watched the film dubbed in te reo. From the children's perspective, Moana is Māori because they experienced her story in te reo, even though Disney officially portrays her as Polynesian (Tamaira and Fonoti, 2018). Children also highlighted that Moana's necklace resembles a *koru*, a design carved in pounamu (greenstone) by Māori artists (Keane, 2006), further reinforcing their association of *Moana* with Māori culture.

For these children, the combination of learning te reo Māori at school, living in Aotearoa, and watching the te reo version of *Moana* contributed to their perception that Moana is Māori. These interpretations illustrate what Martín-Barbero (2006) identifies as cultural mediations that reflect how children draw on their lived cultural contexts to form meaning.

Children also associated Maui with Aotearoa, frequently identifying him as Māori. One boy commented on Maui's clothing: "*I'm pretty sure you can get those clothes around the country,*" referring to Māori garments. Another child associated Maui with Māori heritage because of his tattoos. A seven-year-old boy from a Māori background remarked: "*Oh, he looks like my uncle!*"

Since the conversations covered twenty-four characters from sixteen films, children also made associations with other figures such as Kristoff from *Frozen*. When asked why Kristoff might be from New Zealand, a six-year-old girl responded:

*"Because he resembles my father."*

When asked whether this was due to skin tone or hair colour, the child explained:

*"He's just like people you see around [in New Zealand]."*

She also continued saying that Kristoff is a kiwi because "*He seems not to have an accent,*" implying that those without noticeable accents are perceived as local. When asked, "*What is a person that doesn't look to have an accent?*" the child replied: "*It appears to be him.*"

This suggests that Kristoff's White European appearance aligns with some children's perceptions of what a New Zealander, particularly a Pākehā, looks like. The connection between accent, physical appearance, and cultural identity emerged as a significant theme in the discussions.

The most recurring pattern in the data was children saying, "*I see people like them around me,*" referring both to Māori (often via Maui) and to Pākehā (such as Kristoff or Woody from *Toy Story*). This suggests that New Zealand's multicultural environment and educational settings expose children to diverse cultural groups, shaping the way they interpret animated

characters. Children from non-Pākehā backgrounds more frequently highlighted differences in language, accent, food, and other non-physical attributes. Their educational experiences appeared to significantly influence how they perceived culture and ethnicity.

Overall, children focused on the depiction of their own cultures and traditions in the films. The importance of seeing characters with similar backgrounds in mainstream media emerged strongly, supporting literature that highlights the role of representation in fostering feelings of inclusion (Lemish, 2015; Lemish and Götz, 2017). The absence of diversity in Disney's earlier films was raised by several children, who expressed a desire for more diverse characters in future productions. For example, one child expressed wanting to see a Princess "*like me*" (seven-year-old girl), pointing to her prescription glasses, while another child of Chinese background shared that he wished to see characters with "*the eyes like mine*", indicating eye shape.

## **5.7 Conclusion**

Since the data collection for this study took place in Aotearoa and involved school-aged children, the principles of funds of knowledge and cultural diversity evident in the findings not only fostered a sense of belonging and acceptance amongst children but also promoted unity and mutual respect among different cultural groups, particularly towards Māori. By embracing cultural diversity, schools can create more inclusive and supportive environments for students from a wide range of backgrounds.

In relation to children's cultural mediations, their perceptions of Moana's cultural background were strongly connected to Māori and Pasifika heritage. Children drew on their lived experiences at home and at school to interpret the character, demonstrating that their responses were not due to misunderstanding the film or lacking knowledge about New

Zealanders. Instead, the findings show that children created meaning about Disney's *Moana* through multiple sources of information, such as participating in te reo Māori language week and watching the film dubbed in te reo.

It is therefore crucial for schools to continue prioritising cultural diversity as a foundational principle in their educational practices. Aotearoa is a multicultural place and is expected to become even more diverse in the coming years (Spoonley, 2020; The University of Waikato, 2024), which will lead to increasing numbers of children in New Zealand schools from cultural backgrounds that extend beyond Māori and Pākehā.

In terms of the representation of ethnicity and race in media targeted at children, large media conglomerates such as Disney should continue to strive for more diverse representation in their films to reflect the multicultural world in which children live. Princesses and main characters from a range of regions and ethnicities should be given equitable opportunities to appear on global cinema screens, inspiring children around the world.

Lastly, asking children directly about their perceptions rather than relying solely on adult viewpoints enhances academic understanding of how children interpret the media they consume and how they make sense of the world. By valuing children's opinions and experiences, we can empower future generations to promote positive transformation and contribute to inclusive and diverse communities underpinned by understanding and respect. Prioritising children's wellbeing and learning is essential for cultivating a culture of inclusiveness and acceptance from an early age. Encouraging children to articulate their understandings of the world, alongside exposure to a diverse range of media and an educational system that celebrates cultural diversity rather than monocultures, nurtures early appreciation for diversity, promotes empathy and understanding, and lays the foundation for a fair and inclusive society for future generations.

## Chapter 6

### Journal Article 2

#### ***‘They’re From Here!’: Localising Disney’s *Moana* Through the Lenses of Aotearoa New Zealand’s Children***

Annelore Spieker

#### Abstract

This article examines how children in Aotearoa New Zealand interpret cultural representations in Disney’s *Moana* (2016), focusing on the ways they position its characters and story in relation to their own lives, identities, and environments. Drawing on qualitative data from 29 children aged six to twelve across 22 ethnic backgrounds, the article explores how young audiences make sense of *Moana* through place-based, relational, and sensory frameworks. Rather than viewing the film as a distant cultural text, many children described the characters Moana and Maui as “from here,” using visual cues, family parallels, and school-based experiences to localise the story. Others reflected on what makes storytelling trustworthy, raising questions about voice, learning, and cultural authorship. Grounded in Martín-Barbero’s theory of mediation and situated within children’s geographies, the findings reveal how children negotiate global narratives within their local contexts. The article foregrounds children’s interpretive agency and offers a contribution to interdisciplinary debates on cultural identity, spatial belonging, and the everyday cultural work of global media.

Keywords: children's agency; Disney's *Moana*; cultural representation; spatial belonging; Aotearoa New Zealand; cultural mediations.

## 6.1 Starting Point: Introduction

Children's engagement with global media is shaped by their everyday environments, cultural backgrounds, and lived experiences of place (Buckingham, 2007; Block & Buckingham, 2007). In Aotearoa New Zealand, where children grow up in increasingly multicultural communities, media are not simply consumed but interpreted in active, localised ways. This article explores how children aged six to twelve interpret cultural representations in *Moana* (Disney, 2016), drawing on their own knowledge of people, language, localised nature, and traditions. At times, children identified the characters as being "from here," linking the film to Pacific and New Zealand places and expressions. These interpretations reveal how global narratives are understood through situated, everyday forms of knowledge shaped by schools, families, peers, and social contexts.

This meaning-making takes place within a media environment where global content dominates. Structural changes in Aotearoa's broadcasting system, including the commercialisation of state television and the absence of a strong public service broadcaster for children, have led to reliance on imported content, particularly from the United States (Lustyik, 2005; Zanker, 2011, 2017). Because local productions are often limited and underfunded, Disney films and other global brands tend to dominate what children see on a daily basis (Lealand & Zanker, 2008). This dominance shapes not only the kinds of cultural narratives they are exposed to but also how they make sense of them. In this context, it becomes even more important to look closely at how young audiences adapt, rework, and localise global stories within their own everyday worlds.

This attention to children's own perspectives aligns with broader shifts in the field of children and media studies. As Lemish (2025) notes in reflecting on the 18 years of the *Journal of Children and Media*, research has increasingly moved from studying media effects to recognising the mediatisation of childhood, where children are seen as active co-constructors of media meaning. By situating children's interpretations in Aotearoa New Zealand, this study contributes to this evolving scholarly agenda, highlighting the contextual nature of meaning-making in global media reception.

Recent studies highlight that young people in multicultural or migration-affected contexts often develop what scholars call "multilingual and transnational media repertoires" (Bozdağ & Karakasoğlu, 2024). In practice, this means they can move easily across languages, platforms, and symbolic systems, drawing on media from a wide range of cultural and linguistic sources. A study in Germany found that youth media choices were strongly shaped by cultural identity, while research with ten-year-olds in Malaysia demonstrated how children made complex meaning from media within their homes, even though these competencies were rarely acknowledged in formal schooling (Baboo, 2013). Mateus (2021) similarly argues that access to media is not enough: media literacy must support children in thinking critically about media's cultural meanings and socio-political effects. This article builds on such perspectives by attending to how children in Aotearoa interpret globalised narratives like *Moana* through culturally and geographically situated forms of knowledge.

This article does not engage with critical academic debates over the authenticity or political intentions of Disney's *Moana*, but rather centres how children in Aotearoa New Zealand themselves interpret and position the film's characters and cultural setting. Drawing on in-depth interviews with children aged six to twelve from a range of ethnic and transnational backgrounds, the article examines how place, identity, and cultural familiarity are imagined

through characters such as Moana and Maui. Instead of assuming that children read culture in fixed or adult-oriented ways, the study explores how interpretations emerge through schooling, family relationships, environment, and media exposure. These insights are understood through Martín-Barbero's (2006) theory of mediations, where media meaning is not taken at face value but formed in relation to lived experience. The findings show that children place characters in relation to themselves through a mix of resemblance, emotional connection, and everyday familiarity, shaping their sense of cultural belonging through visual, relational, and spatial cues.

## 6.2 Grounding the Study

Disney's earlier portrayals of culture have often been criticised for reinforcing Eurocentric and colonial perspectives. Films such as *Pocahontas* and *Mulan* are regularly cited in this regard (Anjirbag, 2018; Baswan, 2023; England et al., 2011; Haynes, 2020). Responding to these critiques, the company began to adjust its approach by involving directors, writers, and cultural consultants with direct connections to the communities being represented (Galarza & Rodríguez Burciaga, 2021; To, 2016). *Moana* (2016) is a clear example of this shift, as its production drew on advice from the Oceanic Story Trust and included Pacific actors in key roles in order to strengthen both cultural accuracy and authenticity.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the film reached wider audiences through the release of a te reo Māori version in 2017. This adaptation, which was supported by the Māori Language Commission and strongly advocated for by local communities, was celebrated as a significant contribution to language revitalisation. Yet, despite the publicity surrounding it, the dubbed version was not especially prominent in the way children spoke about the film during this study. Many drew instead on their own cultural and linguistic knowledge when making sense of the characters and settings.

Reception of *Moana* in Aotearoa needs to be understood within local cultural frameworks that give prominence to Indigenous knowledge and bicultural obligations. The Treaty of Waitangi, for instance, provides the foundation for recognising Māori as tangata whenua (people of the land) and for affirming bicultural partnership. While the Treaty is not directly related to the film's production, it nevertheless shapes the cultural environment in which the story is encountered. The visible presence of Māori and Pacific cultures in schools, media, and community life also increases the likelihood that children could recognise particular words, landscapes, and values portrayed in the film. In this way, the Treaty and other frameworks operate indirectly, shaping the interpretive conditions through which global media texts are understood.

Lemish (2025) stresses that context is central to understanding children's media practices, and that the research setting should be made explicit to strengthen situated knowledge. This view highlights the need to examine how Aotearoa's bicultural and multicultural context frames children's encounters with *Moana* and influences the interpretative possibilities available to them.

Children's engagement with global media is always shaped by the cultural, institutional, and media environments in which they live. In Aotearoa, a largely deregulated media landscape has contributed to a significant decline in locally produced children's content. As a result, companies such as Disney and Nickelodeon now dominate what children watch (Lustyik, 2005; Zanker, 2017). Local productions tend to be short-run, publicly funded series with limited reach and visibility (Lealand & Zanker, 2008). This imbalance gives greater weight to global narratives in children's everyday lives and reduces opportunities for them to see their own cultural environments represented on screen (Shepherd, 2008). Within this context,

*Moana* holds a distinctive place. Although made offshore, it draws on cultural symbols that are familiar to many children in the region.

Children in Aotearoa are active participants in complex media ecologies that span school, home, and peer contexts. National reports show that they engage with multiple platforms and media types, but that access and media literacy varies significantly across ethnic and socioeconomic lines (Broadcasting Standards Authority, 2008). Māori and Pasifika children, for instance, often face reduced access to digital resources, which may affect not just consumption patterns but also the development of critical and interpretive skills (Swit et al., 2023). These differences point to the importance of considering how both structural conditions and family contexts influence the way children engage with media, especially in culturally diverse communities.

Parental mediation is another important dimension of this engagement. Elias et al. (2024) show that parents guide children's use through strategies such as restriction, discussion, co-use, and supervision, practices that are often shaped by their own childhood experiences of mediation. This perspective underscores that children's interpretations of global media like *Moana* should be understood within the familial contexts that shape everyday media use.

While this study did not investigate parents' own media histories, research such as Elias et al. (2024) reminds us that mediation practices often carry intergenerational dimensions, which may also inform the dynamics observed here.

Media literacy is a key factor in how children make sense of media and negotiate meaning. Buckingham (2000) and Lemish (2013) point out that media literacy extends beyond the ability to decode messages. It also requires interpreting how culture, gender, and race are represented. This process involves recognising the ways media can reproduce dominant ideologies, while at times also providing room for counter-narratives. Efforts to strengthen

critical media literacy, particularly in schools and communities, have been seen as important for supporting children to notice the social and political implications of what they watch (Mateus, 2021). At the same time, children's interpretive agency does not only come from formal programmes. It often develops through informal channels, such as everyday conversations, peer interactions, and family stories.

This study contributes to wider debates that consider children as active audiences rather than passive receivers of messages. Concerns about the harmful impact of media continue to appear, often framed in moral panics about screen time or digital addiction. Yet scholars argue that such approaches are limited, as they underestimate children's interpretive capacities. Lemish (2023), building on the active audience framework, stresses that children use media in ways that respond to their own contexts and needs. In doing so, they often resist oversimplified portrayals of childhood as defined primarily by vulnerability. This perspective aligns closely with the focus of this study on children's agency and their meaning-making in relation to *Moana*.

The theory of cultural mediation developed by Martín-Barbero (2006, 2018) is particularly helpful for explaining these interpretive processes. Instead of treating media as texts to be decoded, cultural mediation positions it as a practice embedded in social life. Meaning emerges at the intersections of institutions, cultural memory, and media, and is shaped by lived experience, environment, and emotion. For the children in this research, *Moana* was not simply something to watch. It became a story they reworked through their own knowledge and everyday lives. Looking at media in this way shifts attention to the ordinary practices of reception, where identity, language, place, and relationships all play an active role in shaping meaning.

### **6.3 Disney's *Moana* and Cultural Representation**

Disney's *Moana* (2016) is often described as a turning point in the studio's handling of cultural representation. The film drew on Pacific Islander stories, languages, and aesthetics, and it brought together the expertise of the Oceanic Story Trust (Tamaira & Fonoti, 2018), a collective of community leaders, scholars, and artists from across the Pacific. Their involvement, together with the choice of Pacific actors and the use of cultural motifs such as tattooing and ocean voyaging, indicated a wider attempt to move animation toward forms of storytelling that are more inclusive of diverse voices (Galarza & Rodríguez Burciaga, 2021; To, 2016).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the release of a te reo Māori version in 2017 gave *Moana* further cultural resonance. Produced with a fully Māori cast and crew (Tapaleao, 2017), this version was celebrated as both a step in language revitalisation and a statement of cultural identity. Even though the children in this study rarely referred to it directly, many of them drew on Māori words and cultural references while talking about the film, showing that such elements were already part of their interpretive environment.

### **6.4 Child-Centred Data Collection**

This study used a qualitative, child-centred methodology guided by Martín-Barbero's (2006, 2018) theory of cultural mediation. Data were gathered entirely online between 2020 and 2021 due to COVID-19 restrictions. The methods included visual prompts, interviews, and surveys that were adapted for remote participation. The research examined how children in Aotearoa New Zealand interpret cultural representations in the Disney film *Moana* (2016), with particular attention to the role of language, culture, and everyday experience in shaping how they make meaning from media.

The study involved twenty-nine children aged six to twelve, all living in Aotearoa New Zealand, and representing more than twenty different ethnic backgrounds. Informed consent was obtained from parents or guardians, and child assent was confirmed through age-appropriate protocols approved by the University of Waikato Human Research Ethics Committee (case FS2018-32).

To discuss culture with children, it is important to highlight that children between the ages of seven and eleven typically engage in thinking that is grounded in concrete operations, called the Concrete Operational Stage (Chapman & Lindenberger, 1989; Jamison, 1977). As described by Piaget, this stage represents an important phase in a child's cognitive development. During this period, children may explore different ways of combining, separating, ordering, and transforming objects and actions. Recent studies (Brouse & Chow, 2009; Eni Astuti, 2018; Smith & Lillard, 2012) suggest that Piaget's stages can be influenced by environmental factors, with the range for this stage sometimes extending from six to twelve years of age. This range encompasses the entire sample in the present research.

Children were interviewed individually via Zoom and, when possible, in person. When live interviews were not practical because of scheduling or comfort, children completed the same visual activity with support from a parent. A shared online form guided each session and included film stills, Disney and Pixar character cards, and short prompts to encourage reflection on familiarity, cultural recognition, and place. These visual materials were adapted from earlier face-to-face data collection for online use.

As Rutanen et al. (2018) note, cross-cultural and international contexts heighten the ethical complexities of video and visual research with children, particularly around privacy and data sharing. Such insights resonate with the challenges of adapting visual prompts for remote engagement in this study.

This approach is in line with ongoing calls in the field for methodological innovation. Lemish (2025) emphasises the need for inclusive methods that give voice to children, whether through art, journaling, or digital practices. While this study relied primarily on interviews and visual prompts, it was guided by the same principle of treating children as knowledgeable participants whose interpretations enrich scholarly and practical understandings of media and culture.

When suitable, music from *Moana*'s soundtrack was played to help create engagement. All interviews were recorded with consent and later transcribed for thematic analysis. The use of video in child-centred research is not without ethical challenges. Peters et al. (2021) emphasise that visual data requires careful negotiation of consent, anonymity, and long-term digital implications, concerns that informed the decisions taken in this study.

Thematic analysis was guided by both inductive insights and the theoretical lens of cultural mediation. This approach opened up space to examine how meaning was shaped by children's family knowledge, their familiarity with language, peer relationships, and their sense of place. The aim was not to identify a single shared interpretation but rather to highlight the contextual and culturally specific ways in which children reworked global stories through their own perspectives. The interviews offered opportunities to hear children's reflections on culture and identity, while also attending to wider influences such as schooling and community life that played a role in how they thought about media (Arias & Punyanunt-Carter, 2017; Jacobs, 2023).

To explore children's encounters with cultural representation in global animation, especially Disney and Pixar films, a mixed set of methods was used. A survey (Weerakkody, 2009) provided quantitative information about the films children watched and the characters they preferred. Interviews (Tisdall et al., 2009) added another layer, creating room for

conversation about interpretation, comparison, and personal meaning. These meetings encouraged dialogue among participants, bringing out subtle cultural connections and showing how children's own backgrounds shaped the way they understood the narratives.

### **6.5 Ideas and Interpretations about Disney's *Moana***

Participants from the sample are all based in Aotearoa New Zealand, yet they came from a diverse range of nationalities and cultures including over twenty cultural backgrounds, from Africa to Wales. The children in this study came from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. Brazilian roots were the most common (13), often combined with other cultural backgrounds. German (8) and Portuguese (4) heritage frequently appeared as well, the latter usually alongside Brazilian cultural roots. Other countries represented included China (3), England (6), and New Zealand (7), as well as South Africa (1), Scotland (2), Samoa (1), the Philippines (1), Turkey (1), India (2), Papua New Guinea (1), Sri Lanka (1), Saudi Arabia (1), and several European nations such as France (2), Ireland (2), and Wales (2). The total sum of countries is higher than the number of participants (29) because many children were identified by their parents as having more than one ethnicity. It is worth noting that parents were the ones who identified the children's ethnicities and could identify with more than one ethnic group at a time. The diversity of the ethnicities reinforces the multiculturalism nature of the regions involved in the data collection, Waikato and Auckland.

#### **6.5.1 Place and Belonging: *Moana* and *Maui* as 'From Here'**

Across the dataset, many children interpreted *Moana* and *Maui* as characters who belong to Aotearoa or to the wider Pacific region. These interpretations were often grounded in visible markers (such as clothing, tattoos, and hair) as well as symbolic tools, like *Maui's* magical hook, and experiences of school-based cultural learning. For some children, identifying

Moana and Maui as “from here” reflected a sense of local belonging, while for others it revealed the ways Indigenous and Pacific identities are blurred in children’s visual and narrative reasoning.

Tio (8, Māori–Pasifika–Pākehā) immediately recognised both characters as local:

“Moana... I think she comes from New Zealand... Maui too.”

He explained that Moana looked like she came from New Zealand “just like here... lots of islands.” His identification of Maui was based on recognition of cultural objects, particularly the presence of a large, magical hook.

Aroha (10, Māori–Pasifika–Pākehā) offered a slightly different reading. While confident that the story did not take place in Aotearoa, she still described both characters as Pacific:

“Maui came from like the Cook Islands or Hawaii... one of the Pacific.”

Although Aroha did not refer to Maui as Māori, she recognised the characters as culturally familiar, citing the film’s ocean setting and sense of adventure. Her response suggests a Pacific sense of belonging that is connected to her own experience, even if not geographically specific.

Several Brazilian-background children also located Moana and Maui in New Zealand, drawing on both school knowledge and embodied familiarity. Luiz (10) confidently declared:

“I know she is from New Zealand... my teacher said it’s part of the culture.”

He recalled watching the Māori language version of the film at school, and made connections between Moana’s necklace, houses, and “those legends” and the Māori culture he was learning about. His interpretation of Maui was similarly localised: “Same thing from Moana.”

For Luiz, formal education mediated his understanding of the characters' cultural origin, reinforcing Martín-Barbero's (2006) argument that meaning is produced not only through media texts but through situated, everyday interpretive contexts.

Camila (10, Brazilian–German–Portuguese) likewise connected Moana and Maui to Aotearoa through setting and cultural activity. She associated the waka, “doing Māori things”, and beach environments with her own school-based experiences, including “the haka... a welcome... we had to eat.” These comments reveal how physical landscapes and school ritual become part of the interpretive process. In her words:

“Because of the beaches... the woods... and the marae.”

Younger participants often relied more on visual resemblance and cultural markers to position the characters. Rafaela (7, Brazilian-born in NZ) explained:

“Moana is from the Pacific. Her clothes, her skin colour, her necklace.”

She placed Maui alongside her, adding: “He has tattoos, hair, and the leaf thingy.” These recognitions were supported by her approval of the Pacific voice casting and her understanding that *Moana* was not set in Europe or America.

Similarly, John (6, Romanian–English) described Maui as “kind of Māori”, explaining that he used “all the tools most Māori people have.” His sister Meghan (8), though less vocal, agreed that Moana was “from the Pacific”. Their interpretations blended personal observations with cultural artefacts, a pattern seen across several younger children.

Together, these responses show how children locate characters through a mix of relational familiarity, schooling, cultural symbols, and environmental cues. For many, Moana and Maui are not abstract Pacific icons, they are from here in the everyday sense of looking, acting, or

sounding like people children know. This everyday logic of belonging reflects what Martín-Barbero (2006) describes as mediation through territory and practice: meaning emerges not from fixed geography, but from lived contact, shared symbols, and remembered stories. At the same time, children also drew on specific visual and sensory traits to interpret cultural difference, particularly through how Moana and Maui looked, dressed, or sounded.

### ***6.5.2 Recognising Difference: Hair, Skin, Artefacts, and Voice***

Children in this study often drew on visible and sensory cues to interpret the cultural identity of Moana and Maui. These included features such as skin tone, hair texture, clothing, tools, tattoos, and the sound of voices or songs. For many, the process of recognising difference was not guided by formal knowledge of Pacific cultures, but rather by how characters looked, moved, dressed, or spoke in relation to children's everyday experiences. These interpretations show how visual culture intersects with bodily familiarity, emotional resonance, and schooling to produce meaning.

Tio (8, Māori–Pasifika–Pākehā) identified Moana as coming from New Zealand, explaining that “Moana has a different colour skin than most,” and her surroundings reminded him of places “just like here.” Maui's large hook, tattoos, and magical abilities were also noted as culturally specific: “He's got a big hook... it's magical,” said Tio, linking the object to Māori cultural knowledge acquired at school. Similarly, Mei (9, Chinese) pointed to “special necklaces and tattoos” as clues that Moana came from a Polynesian culture, adding that the style of dress and carved objects reminded her of what she had seen in Māori contexts.

Camila (10, Brazilian–German–Portuguese) associated Moana with New Zealand and Māori culture through clothing, tools, and the waka (canoe):

“She does Māori things... we had a haka at school, and we got a welcome... it’s kind of the same.”

She also mentioned the marae and food as cultural markers that helped her recognise Moana’s world as connected to her own environment.

Other children referred to the material details of the film when describing Maui’s cultural background. John (6, Romanian–English) confidently stated that “Maui has all the tools most Māori people have,” pointing to his hook, tattoos, and clothing. Aroha (10, Māori–Pasifika–Pākehā) recognised Maui as Pacific but not specifically Māori, saying: “Maui came from like the Cook Islands or Hawaii... one of the Pacific.” She described his “leaf garment” and “hair and skin” as cultural indicators, showing how visual features became key to her reading.

For some children, recognising cultural difference also included listening closely to the sounds of the film. Rafaela (7, Brazilian-born in NZ) described how Moana “sounded right” when watched in te reo Māori and explained that casting Pacific actors made the voices “more trustworthy.” She identified Moana as Pacific “because of her necklace, her clothes, and her skin colour,” and Maui as belonging to the same world: “He has tattoos, hair, and the leaf thingy.”

Children’s responses suggest that visible and embodied traits were not interpreted in isolation but worked in combination with symbolic or sensory elements to create a sense of place and belonging. These recognitions were not always culturally precise, but they reflected children’s efforts to make sense of difference through what Martín-Barbero (2006) describes as mediations, everyday practices, school-based learning, and embodied experience that shape how media meaning is produced. The characters in *Moana* were not simply seen as animated figures but as carriers of cultural signs, recognised through the interplay of appearance, story, voice, and memory. Beyond recognising difference, many children also

connected with Moana and her world through relational and emotional familiarity, mapping their own families and personalities onto the characters.

### ***6.5.3 Representation and Family Mapping***

Many children participating in this study expressed a desire to see themselves reflected in animated characters, or recognised aspects of their families in the relationships portrayed in *Moana*. For younger children in particular, characters were not only viewed as cultural figures but also as emotional or relational stand-ins for themselves, their siblings, or their caregivers. These forms of recognition were often affective, grounded in how characters behaved, interacted, or “felt right”, rather than based solely on visual resemblance or shared ethnic background.

Laura (7, Brazilian–German–Portuguese) said she loved Rapunzel for her golden hair but also noted that Moana was someone she would like to be friends with “because she’s brave.” When asked about characters who reminded her of family, she associated her dad with Moana’s father, a figure who “carries her back from the beach,” just as her own father does. She also said that her grandmother “looks the same as Moana’s grandma,” linking physical resemblance with emotional memory.

Rafaela (7, Brazilian-born) also saw strong parallels between her family and Moana’s:

“My dad is like Moana’s dad — he protects me. My mum is like Aurora, she sleeps a lot. My grandma is just like Moana’s grandma. Kind and fun.”

These reflections show how familial roles are mapped onto film characters through shared behaviours and emotional qualities, rather than direct cultural match. Moana’s

intergenerational storyline and close family dynamics appeared to resonate with many children, regardless of their cultural background.

Luiz (10, Brazilian) offered a humorous and energetic interpretation, saying:

“Moana is my brother, because he’s crazy. Maui is the daddy, he’s adventurous. The grandma is my grandma. The mum is my mum — she protects me.”

Here, character roles are transposed directly onto his own family structure, suggesting that identification operates playfully but meaningfully, allowing children to organise and narrate their own family dynamics through the lens of the film.

Camila (10, Brazilian–German–Portuguese) took a more reflective approach. She identified herself with *Sleeping Beauty* because she was “always the last to wake up,” but also admired Moana’s personality, saying: “She would help me if I didn’t want to do something.” For Camila, representation was not just about appearance but also about personality traits, values, and relationships. She added that she would like to see a character like her in a Disney film “because I want to be an actress,” and imagined a character who acts like her, rather than just looks like her.

Some children were hesitant or uncertain when asked if Disney characters looked like them.

Mariana (7, Brazilian–German–Portuguese) responded, “I don’t know,” and Meghan (8, Romanian–English) said it “might be a bit embarrassing.” Others, like Zana (9, Indian), expressed clear interest in seeing a character like themselves: “They’d have the same personality as me... and look like me. I’d be proud.”

These responses reveal that for many children, the desire for representation is shaped not only by ethnic identity or physical similarity, but by deeper connections to emotion, personality, and family experience. *Moana*’s world, while culturally specific, offered space for children to

recognise themselves and their loved ones in ways that were relational, imaginative, and grounded in everyday life. These affective identifications support Martín-Barbero's (2006) emphasis on media as a site where cultural meaning is negotiated through memory, emotion, and social experience, not just through surface representation. These personal and emotional readings also shaped how children thought about who should be allowed to tell stories like *Moana*, and what makes a story feel fair, respectful, or trustworthy.

#### ***6.5.4 Who Can Tell the Story? Cultural Authorship and Media Ethics***

When asked whether someone who is not from New Zealand or the Pacific could tell a story like *Moana*, children gave nuanced and sometimes conditional answers. These responses point to an emerging sense of ethical storytelling, an understanding that cultural stories are not just creative products, but representations shaped by experience, relationships, and knowledge. Rather than seeing authorship as universally open or restricted, many children described the importance of learning, listening, and respect.

Zana (9, Indian) believed someone could write about a culture not their own "if they search up and ask people who know about it." She also shared an example of a school writing task in which she created a story about Māui "using Māori words", supported by her teacher. For Zana, storytelling was acceptable if it was accompanied by guidance and effort. Camila (10, Brazilian–German–Portuguese) agreed, saying:

"I can create the story of whatever I want... New Zealand, Brazil... it's about imagining it, but also getting help from people who know."

Tio (8, Māori–Pasifika–Pākehā) expressed a similar view:

“Yes, you can [tell a story about New Zealand] ... if you learn the language and most stuff about the culture.”

For him, learning (both formal and relational) was the condition that allowed others to tell culturally specific stories. These views resonate with Martín-Barbero’s (2006) argument that cultural production is not based solely on origin but on practice, proximity, and lived engagement with meaning.

Others positioned storytelling in relation to empathy and experience. Aroha (10, Māori–Pasifika–Pākehā) supported the idea that someone from outside New Zealand could tell stories about it, but added:

“You have to imagine that you’ve been here all your life.”

Her response places imagination and emotional proximity at the centre of cultural authorship, suggesting that storytelling is possible if rooted in respectful perspective-taking.

Rafaela (7, Brazilian-born) was more concerned with how the story was told than by whom. She expressed strong support for Disney’s decision to cast Pacific actors and praised the te reo Māori version of *Moana*, saying:

“It’s better than just pretending a voice... like using Snow White’s voice in another story.”

She explained that casting Pacific people made the story “more trustworthy.”

These reflections suggest that children’s understandings of cultural voice are both practical and affective. While few articulated authorship in political or rights-based terms, they recognised the importance of lived experience, correct language use, emotional closeness, and consultation. Across their responses, the idea of trust emerged as central: children wanted stories to feel right, whether through voice, setting, or the way characters acted. For some,

that trust came from knowing the storytellers shared the culture. For others, it came from knowing they had tried to learn or listen.

In these responses, I noticed that children engaged with questions of representation and authorship in ways that echoed wider decolonial debates, not through abstract frameworks, but through their own sense of fairness, familiarity, and respect. As Martín-Barbero (2006) argues, cultural meaning is shaped not only by who speaks, but by how, where, and with whom they speak. In the case of *Moana*, children in Aotearoa reveal that authorship is not neutral, it is interpreted, weighed, and judged through the everyday lenses of trust, recognition, and cultural proximity.

### **6.6 Destination Point: Concluding Thoughts**

This study has not tried to measure how accurate *Moana* is in its portrayal of Pacific cultures or to take a position in wider debates about Disney's production choices. The focus has been on how children in Aotearoa New Zealand make sense of *Moana* and its characters in their own everyday lives.

For many of the young people who took part in this research, Moana and Maui were not distant figures from somewhere far away. Instead, they were imagined as local, familiar, and even part of the same world the children live in. The children reached their conclusions through what they observed, heard, and remembered. Clothing, tattoos, the sea, the beaches, and the way people spoke all shaped their interpretations. School lessons, family routines, and community experiences added further layers, helping them to imagine the characters as being "from here."

In the classroom, lessons on Māori and Pacific histories, traditions, and environments gave children a common frame of reference for seeing the characters as local. At home, everyday

conversations and storytelling reinforced these links in quieter but powerful ways.

Community events such as kapa haka performances, cultural festivals, and visits to marae offered still more opportunities for children to anchor the film in familiar settings. These influences sometimes overlapped and at other times stood apart, creating a mixture that was at once collective and highly individual.

Many children also pointed to specific features such as skin colour, voices, or cultural objects. What they noticed in the film often combined with what they had learned at school or absorbed in family life. A particular accent or skin tone might recall a relative or someone from the neighbourhood. Objects such as a waka (canoe) or traditional clothing could spark a memory or bring back a story. In such moments the children were not only retrieving information but weaving together formal knowledge and lived experience, producing interpretations that felt both informed and personal.

These patterns echo Martín-Barbero's (2006) argument that the meaning of media is shaped as much by lived experience as by what appears on the screen. The ways children linked Moana and Maui to their own worlds show that reception extends beyond the film's storyline or imagery. It is bound up with place, prior knowledge, and relationships that give shape to how meaning is made. In this sense, their interpretations underline the central role of place and belonging in how young audiences engage with global media.

The results add to wider discussions about how representation works and about the role of children as active audiences. These children did not simply accept *Moana's* story as it was given to them. They altered it, connected it to people and places they knew, and used it to think about questions of identity and voice. Their responses suggest that localisation is not just something that happens when studios adapt content for a region. It also happens every

day when children talk about, think about, and reimagine global stories through the lens of their own lives.

This has practical implications. For educators and parents, it underlines the value of encouraging children to think and talk about the cultural messages in what they watch. Media literacy can support children to compare perspectives, ask whose voices are being heard, and recognise different ways of telling stories. For those who create media, the findings show that cultural connection is not only about visual accuracy or broad cultural themes. It is also about reflecting the kinds of environments, relationships, and values that are meaningful to children in their daily lives.

At the same time, the growing role of video technologies in education and research raises important methodological and ethical questions. White et al. (2023) highlight that video now functions both as evidence and as a medium of representation, requiring re/sponse-able ethical engagement that parallels the interpretive responsibilities evident in children's meaning-making.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, these findings take on particular significance. The country's official bicultural foundation, the diversity of its society, and educational settings that actively value both Māori and Pākehā perspectives give children a distinctive framework for engaging with cultural representation in global media. This environment not only deepens their awareness of how stories are told and whose voices are present but also enriches the everyday processes of localisation that shape how global narratives are interpreted in relation to local places, relationships, and values. This enables them to interpret characters, settings, and narratives with a heightened sensitivity to cultural nuance.

There is room for more research in this area. Studies in other countries or with other types of media could show whether similar localisation patterns occur elsewhere. Following the same children over time might also reveal how these interpretations change as they grow older.

In the end, what stands out from this study is the depth of children's own contributions to how cultural representation works. By linking Moana and Maui to their own spaces, memories, and relationships, the children in this research showed that cultural meaning is something they build for themselves. It is not fixed in the film; it is made and remade in the context of their everyday lives in Aotearoa New Zealand.

## Chapter 7

### Journal Article 3

# **Can they be both? Children's Perceptions of Culture and Place Through Global Media in Brazilian Migrant Families in Aotearoa New Zealand<sup>7</sup>**

Annelore Spieker

This article explores how ten Brazilian families in Aotearoa New Zealand negotiate their cultural identity through engagement with global media such as Disney and Pixar animated films. Drawing on theories of globalisation, transnationalism, and cultural mediation, the study examines how children and parents interpret representations of culture, place, and belonging in ways shaped by family practices, school environments, and migration experiences. The analysis is situated within Aotearoa New Zealand's bicultural and increasingly multicultural landscape, where questions of inclusion, Indigenous rights, and cultural representation are actively debated. Methodologically, the study includes online surveys and interviews with 12 children, as well as data from 11 parents, focusing on their engagement with selected films including *Moana*. Findings reveal how children draw on emotional, relational, and cultural cues to interpret characters and narratives. Characters like Moana and Maui were often associated with Māori identity and Aotearoa, informed by school experiences and visual markers. Children also expressed a strong desire to see characters 'like them', indicating that cultural identification extended beyond ethnicity to personality,

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<sup>7</sup> Journal article submitted and under review.

experience, and language. Parental perspectives revealed how Brazilian families actively use media for informal cultural transmission. These perspectives highlight the interpretive environments in which children make sense of global media texts, offering context for their negotiations of cultural identity, belonging, and representation. By focusing on both children's agency and family mediation, the article contributes to debates within children's geographies about transnational identity, mediated cultural learning, and the potential for inclusive global storytelling.

Keywords: transnational childhoods; global media; cultural mediation; Brazilian families; Aotearoa New Zealand; Disney and identity

## **7.1 Introduction**

When migrant families settle in new countries, they encounter unfamiliar cultural frameworks that potentially negotiate with their existing cultural identities, understandings of the world, and interpretations of the media. For transnational families, media texts play a crucial role in this negotiation, offering tools for cultural maintenance, ways of understanding place and belonging, and resources for interpreting globalised narratives through local and family perspectives.

With the increasing interconnectedness of the world due to globalisation and intensified cultural flows (Heyman & Campbell, 2009; Appadurai, 1996), global media conglomerates such as Disney have achieved wide market penetration across diverse geographies. This widespread circulation of media enables audiences around the world to engage with the same media texts, yet interpretations remain varied and deeply situated. Audiences do not receive these narratives passively; rather, their responses are mediated by language, cultural background, migration histories, and everyday experiences leading to complex forms of

global and transnational media reception (Athique 2013; Straubhaar 2007, 1991). Such complexity is evident in how culturally specific representations such as Polynesian traditions portrayed in Disney's *Moana* (2016), as interpreted by Brazilian families living in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Children's interactions with media play a crucial role in shaping spatial imaginaries, which refer to their evolving understandings of place, identity, and cultural belonging. Far from being passive consumers, children actively interpret media in relation to their own lived environments, cultural contexts, and social relationships (Buckingham, 2007b; Curti et al., 2016; Tisdall & Punch, 2012; Tranter & Sharpe, 2008). Through selective interpretation, children adopt and adapt media narratives, aligning them with their familiar spatial references and cultural frameworks while rejecting elements they perceive as *foreign* or unfamiliar (Buckingham, 2007b). Media become a site of emotional and spatial meaning-making, influencing how children imagine places, map social relations, and position themselves within globalised cultural landscapes (Curti et al., 2016; Pyndiah 2018).

At the same time, children's media environments are shaped by unequal access and the circulation of dominant cultural narratives, raising concerns about how spatial imaginaries may be limited or distorted. Representations that celebrate war or colonialism, for instance, may reinforce hierarchical worldviews or exclusionary understandings of place (Curti et al., 2016; Pyndiah, 2018; Tranter & Sharpe, 2008). Scholars have argued for moving beyond a focus on media representation to explore how media actively shape children's everyday spatial and emotional worlds, paying attention to how they circulate through their daily lives (Buckingham 2007a, b; Curti et al., 2016; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). In this way, media become both a reflection of children's spatial imaginaries, allowing them to imagine, contest, and reconfigure the worlds they inhabit (Pyndiah, 2018).

This context is especially relevant within the Latin American migration context in Oceania, where cultural identity and belonging are actively negotiated. Research by Dürr (2011) and Casado and Azeredo (2023) examine the experiences of Latin American migrants through themes of belonging, identity, migration motivations, transnational practices, and integration challenges. Dürr's (2011) ethnographic research focuses on a Spanish-speaking Latin American community in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand's largest city, and framed within a bicultural context, while Casado and Azeredo (2023) examine Brazilian couples across Auckland (NZ), the Gold Coast (AU), and Perth (AU), highlighting the role of intimate relationships and the influence of migration regimes. Although not focusing on children's research, these studies reveal how cultural identities are shaped not only by national policies and settlement contexts but also by the relational and emotional dimensions of migration through family dynamics and daily life, offering insight for understanding the experiences of Brazilian families in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Meanwhile, global media companies such as Disney have, since the late twentieth century, adapted their narratives to meet the demands of increasingly diverse global audiences (Wills 2017). Rather than reflecting a genuine commitment to cultural representation, these changes appear as strategic attempts to align with global market trends and maintain commercial relevance. Through the inclusion of characters from non-Western backgrounds, such as Jasmine (Disney's *Aladdin*, 1992), Pocahontas (Disney's *Pocahontas*, 1995), Mulan (Disney's *Mulan*, 1998), Tiana (Disney's *The Princess and the Frog*, 2009), Moana (Disney's *Moana*, 2016), and Miguel (Pixar's *Coco*, 2018), Disney broadened its global appeal to resonate with more diverse worldwide audiences.

Building on this context, this study explores how ten Brazilian families living in Aotearoa New Zealand negotiate cultural identity through engagement with global media, particularly

Disney and Pixar productions. Based on online surveys and semi-structured interviews with 12 children and data from 11 parents, it examines how media consumption informs cultural background, place, and belonging, and supports cultural maintenance in transnational contexts. Framed by theories of globalisation, transnationalism, and cultural mediation (Martín-Barbero 2006), the study situates this media consumption within the multicultural landscape of New Zealand. Findings show that both parents and children use media to transmit cultural values and interpret characters and stories in ways shaped by physical features, family themes, Indigenous representation, and geographical familiarity. These interpretations illustrate how global media becomes a resource for spatial and emotional belonging.

## **7.2 Brazilian Migration, Transnationalism, and Global Media**

To understand how Brazilian families living in New Zealand engage with global media as part of their cultural identity practices, this section draws on theories of transnationalism and globalisation. These frameworks help explain how migrant communities sustain cultural ties across borders while navigating the pressures of integration and adaptation. Concepts such as Vertovec's (2009) transnationalism and Appadurai's (1996) global cultural flows, particularly ethnoscaples and mediascaples, shed light on how media become a tool for cultural maintenance, identity negotiation, and belonging in transnational lives. This framework also situates Brazilian migration within Aotearoa New Zealand's shifting multicultural landscape, offering context for how participants in this study interpret and use media texts like *Moana*.

According to Vertovec (2009), transnationalism may be understood as the many connections and interactions that bind individuals or institutions beyond national borders as a process of cultural continuity in a diasporic process. These include social, political, and economic practices in which migrants engage in activities simultaneously in both their country of origin

and their host places. For transnational families, media play a critical role in maintaining cultural identity: they offer access to native language, traditions, news, and entertainment, and facilitates intergenerational cultural transmission. Media also help transnational families preserve a strong feeling of cultural heritage and identity via, for instance, participating in events and festivities related to their cultural heritage despite living abroad. Therefore, media enable emotional bonds with distant relatives and home communities, supporting a sense of continuity and belonging despite geographic displacement. For example, families may use media to connect with cultural events, join language or cultural groups, or share culturally resonant content with their children.

Appadurai's theory of globalisation expands this perspective by framing global cultural dynamics in terms of overlapping 'scapes' or flows (Appadurai 1996). Among his five dimensions, ethnoscapas and mediascapas are especially relevant to this study. Ethnoscapas refer to the movement of people (tourists, migrants, refugees, students) whose mobility shapes the cultural fabric of both their origin and destination. In New Zealand, recent migration trends reflect increasing diversity. As of May 2024, net migration was estimated at 82,800, with 196,000 non-New Zealand citizens arriving during that period (Stats NZ, 2024b). Brazil, while not among the top source countries, had 9,216 Brazilian-born residents recorded in 2023, with the majority settling in the Auckland region (43.7%), followed by Canterbury (14.6%) and Otago (10.7%) regions (Stats NZ, 2024b). In this study, most participants (93.1%) resided in the Waikato region, with 5.2% of Brazilian-born residents (Stats NZ, 2024a), and with a strong Māori cultural presence and the Kīngitanga movement (Anderson et al., 2014).

Another useful lens for understanding media reception in transnational contexts is the concept of cultural proximity. Straubhaar (1991, p. 56) notes that although US media continues to

dominate global flows, national and regional industries have begun to occupy “a relatively more interdependent position in the world television market,” as audiences increasingly seek media with greater cultural relevance. Athique (2013) expands on this, emphasising the central role of language in shaping identification with media across regions. While linguistic familiarity often underpins cultural proximity, other factors such as racial representation, geography, and shared social values can also enhance resonance with global media. For instance, texts such as *Moana* show how cultural proximity may extend beyond language, inviting viewers from different backgrounds to connect through geographic familiarity, family-centred narratives, and diverse character representation. These dimensions are particularly significant for diasporic audiences and are further explored in the analysis.

Appadurai’s concept of deterritorialisation, as interpreted by Heyman and Campbell (2009), refers to the dislocation of cultural practices from their original places, allowing migrant groups to remain emotionally and politically connected to their homelands while challenging the fixed boundaries of nation-states: “Deterritorialization permits diaspora based ethnic politics to communicate and act across the globe... and makes the normal functioning of nation-states problematic and contingent” (Heyman & Campbell, 2009, p. 133). However, they also emphasise that flows do not only unsettle place-based identities but simultaneously contribute to their ongoing construction. As they argue, “it is not just that deterritorialization occurs, but also reterritorialization,” since flows can “constitute, reproduce, and reconstitute geographic-cultural entities” (Heyman & Campbell, 2009, p. 137). This dual dynamic enables diaspora-based cultural politics and media practices to operate globally, allowing cultural values and ideologies to transcend geographic boundaries. For Brazilian families in New Zealand, media consumption is one such practice through which cultural continuity is maintained (Vertovec 2009).

In sum, the concepts of transnationalism and globalisation, especially as articulated by Vertovec (2009) and Appadurai (1996), provide a framework for analysing how Brazilian families in Aotearoa New Zealand engage with global media. These theories shed light on the complex intersections of migration, culture, and media, and help explain the interpretive practices observed in this study.

### **7.3 Cultural Mediation and Audience Meaning-Making**

In addition to transnationalism and globalisation, this study also draws on the concept of cultural mediation (Martín-Barbero, 2006, 2018) to understand how audiences bring their own worldviews to the interpretation of media texts. Rather than viewing media consumption as a one-way transmission from producer to passive receiver, cultural mediation recognises that audiences, including children, make sense of media through their own cultural references, histories, and everyday experiences. This approach moves beyond the traditional producer–receptor model associated with the Frankfurt School (Tarr, 2011) proposing instead that media meaning is always shaped through context, dialogue, and lived experience.

Martín-Barbero conceptualises mediation as both a theoretical and methodological framework that connects media, culture, and politics. It emphasises the importance of examining how meaning is generated and exchanged collectively, including how viewers negotiate dominant ideologies embedded in media texts (Lopes, 2018; Gomes, 2018). For this study, selecting Disney media to explore cultural understanding with children and adults responds to what Giroux and Pollock (2010, p. 18), describe as “seen as an expert parental substitute whose products implemented new, cutting-edge ideas of what was best for children and society more generally”, a role that constructs a world of enchantment, often detached from politics and ideology, yet shaped by Western norms and values.

Understanding cultural mediation allows researchers to consider audiences as active participants in the reception process, interpreting media in diverse ways, shaped by both direct and indirect factors (Scolari, 2015). It also reflects a decolonial turn in media studies, which Martín-Barbero himself acknowledged was influenced by British Cultural Studies and broader Latin American critical traditions (Martín-Barbero, 2001). Within this, parental mediation forms a key audience practice, as parents guide children's media use through strategies such as restriction, discussion, co-use, and supervision. Research shows that these strategies are often influenced by parents' own childhood experiences of mediation, pointing to the intergenerational dimensions of media practices (Elias et al., 2024). This framework is particularly valuable when examining how migrant families interpret global media texts through culturally grounded and locally situated perspectives.

#### **7.4 Children's Media, Spatial Imaginaries, and Globalised Childhoods**

Children's geographies scholarship has shown that children are not passive media consumers but active interpreters who draw on their cultural and spatial contexts to make sense of global narratives (Buckingham 2007a; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). These interactions can be related to spatial imaginaries in children as they help shape children's evolving understandings of place, identity, and belonging. Media are, therefore, not only a site of representation but also a tool through which children emotionally and imaginatively engage with the world (Curti et al., 2016; Pyndiah, 2018).

Buckingham (2007a) highlights how global franchises such as Disney and Pokémon are adapted for different markets, creating glocalised texts that children engage with in locally situated ways, as part of a glocalisation process. Curti et al. (2016) explore how media interactions form affective networks that allow children to build relational and creative connections. Similarly, Pyndiah (2018) shows how testimonial narratives, such as Anne

Frank's diary, transform educational settings into spaces of historical empathy, highlighting the emotional and spatial dimensions of media reception.

Tranter and Sharpe (2008) frame Pixar's *Monsters, Inc.* as an allegory for sustainable energy and urban futures, arguing that children's films can also be critical tools for interpreting complex social issues. Tisdall and Punch (2012) critically examine the idea of universalising notions of childhood, emphasising the need for relational, contextual approaches that recognise cultural and structural differences. This study, through surveys and interviews with children, also responds to their call for 'greater emphasis is needed on the intricacies, complexities, tensions, ambiguities and ambivalences of children and young people's lives across both Majority and Minority World contexts', noting that focusing solely on children's perspectives, agency and participation is no longer sufficient. This is particularly important in transnational contexts, which is what this study aimed to address by investigating Brazilian children living in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Together, these studies frame global media as cultural and emotional resources that children interpret through localised, situated experiences. This approach complements Martín-Barbero's (2006) concept of cultural mediation and supports this study's focus on how Brazilian children in New Zealand make meaning through media in ways shaped by their transnational lives.

### **7.5 Cultural Representation in a Bicultural Nation**

Aotearoa New Zealand is officially a bicultural nation based on a partnership between Māori, the Indigenous people of the land, and Pākehā, the country's European-descended settler population. It continues to face significant power imbalances in honouring the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi). Signed in 1840, the Treaty was intended to

protect Māori rights and sovereignty, but its interpretation and implementation remain contested (Anderson et al., 2014; Dewes 2022). Despite efforts to strengthen biculturalism and uphold the Treaty partnership, Māori continue to experience institutional discrimination, particularly regarding language, culture, and self-determination (Cooper et al., 2023). These developments, while not directly related to children's media, underscore the importance of representation in shaping public discourse and collective imaginaries.

Children's media, especially content produced by major global companies such as Disney, influences how young people understand cultural difference, identity, and belonging (Banjo, 2021; Sobande, 2018; Vandenbosch, 2017; Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015). Given this influence, global media producers have a responsibility to create content that reflects a wide range of identities and cultural experiences, moving beyond Eurocentric perspectives. Films like *Moana* may not directly address political issues, but they can still contribute to broader conversations about Indigenous visibility and cultural respect. When children see characters and settings that reflect their own or other marginalised experiences, they are more likely to develop empathy, openness, and understanding, helping shape a society that values cultural diversity and inclusion (Lemish, 2015; Block & Buckingham, 2007; Buckingham, 2007a).

Nevertheless, Disney's efforts to diversify its stories remain contested. Although films like *Moana* have been acknowledged for showcasing non-Western cultures (Dittmer, 2021), they have also been criticised for cultural appropriation, shallow authenticity, and the strategic use of cultural consultants to mitigate backlash (Anjirbag, 2018; Armstrong, 2018; Tamaira & Fonoti, 2018). Critics from advocacy groups, academia, and the public have long highlighted the studio's role in shaping racial and cultural narratives through stereotyped or simplified portrayals (Dutka, 1995; Kiyomi, 2000; Huuki & Kyrölä, 2023). In this study, these concerns become particularly relevant when considering how Brazilian families in New Zealand

respond to media representations that both reflect and obscure the complexities of their cultural identities.

## **7.6 Child-Centred Methodology**

To explore how Brazilian families in Aotearoa New Zealand interpret cultural representations in global animated media, this study employed a qualitative approach combining online surveys and one-on-one interviews. The research focused on how families use media to navigate identity, cultural maintenance, and belonging in transnational contexts. Eleven parents and twelve children from ten families participated in the study. The cohort of children comprised children of school age, between six and ten years old, boys and girls, with female respondents the higher prevalence (75%). Children's ethnic backgrounds comprised 30.8% Brazilian, 53.8% Brazilian and European, and 15.4% Brazilian and New Zealand European.

Data collected from children and parents through online surveys (Weerakkody, 2009) using a mixed-method research including both closed-ended (quantitative) and open-ended (qualitative) questions. Children also had their data collected via semi-structured one-on-one interviews (Tisdall et al., 2009) focused on gathering both quantitative and qualitative information about children's self-identification, cultural perception, and relational references between place and characters. Parental surveys collected information on demographics, cultural background, household media practices, and opinions about the production and cultural specificity of Disney's *Moana*. A total of four parents agreed on a follow-up one-on-one interview with open questions to elicit in-depth insights into the role of household dynamics, schooling, peer networks, and community ties in shaping children's cultural knowledge.

Surveys and interviews included questions about children's engagement with Disney and Pixar media texts. The media sample comprised selected Disney films, *Aladdin* (1992), *Cinderella* (1950), *Frozen* (2013), *Moana* (2016), *Mulan* (1998), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Tangled* (2010), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), alongside Pixar titles such as *Brave* (2012), *Coco* (2017), *Toy Story* (1995), and the Disney Channel series *Elena of Avalor* (2016).

A dedicated segment of the survey and interview focused on *Moana*, chosen not only for its global popularity but also for its cultural proximity to the New Zealand context. As Aotearoa is part of the Pacific and home to many Māori and Pasifika communities (Anderson et al., 2014), *Moana* offered a meaningful case to explore how children negotiate cultural familiarity, difference, and identification within global media texts as it features Indigenous characters from Polynesia (Dittmer, 2021; Hyland, 2020; Yoshinaga, 2019). Given New Zealand's complex ethnic landscape, and to align with national classification systems, children were asked about ethnic representation using adapted categories from the New Zealand census: Māori, Pacific Peoples, Chinese, Indian, and New Zealand European.

To contextualise how families interpreted cultural representation in global media texts, in the following section, I first present the way parents interpreted *Moana*, creating meaning and feelings of belonging that is fluid, contextualised and shaped by the rhythms of daily life. Parents and children often chose media together, blending Brazilian, American, and global content. Second, I focus children's interpretations.

## 7.7 Brazilian Parenting with Disney in Aotearoa

Parents were first asked how they understood the terms ‘ethnicity’ and ‘cultural background.’ Most (nine) selected definitions rooted in collective culture and shared history, such as ‘one or more elements of common culture’ and ‘a shared sense of common origin or ancestry’. This understanding aligns with Martín-Barbero’s (2006) notion of cultural mediation, where individuals draw on shared narratives and experiences to interpret meaning, and with Straubhaar’s (1991) emphasis on cultural proximity, where identification is grounded in language, memory, and tradition.

Parents also rated their child’s awareness of cultural background. Most (seven) perceived their children as ‘aware’ or ‘very aware,’ suggesting that heritage is a meaningful component of children’s everyday lives. This awareness is significant in transnational contexts, where identity is co-produced through migration experiences and cultural continuity (Vertovec, 2009). It frames the interpretive lenses children bring to global media texts and influences how they understand cultural difference and belonging. As discussed by Tisdall and Punch (2012), childhood is not a passive stage but an active, relational space, where identity is shaped through daily interaction and family discourse.

When asked how they transmitted cultural knowledge, parents emphasised interpersonal sources. The majority (eight) chose *family*, ‘being in contact with whānau/relatives’, as the main source of information used to educate their children about their cultural background. Having ethnic community ties (four), ‘friends from the same ethnicity’, and using ‘media resources’ (three) were less frequent, and no one identified schools as a primary source. This emphasises that cultural education in transnational families is often informal and relational, shaped through family routines and shared practices. This mirrors Block and Buckingham’s

(2007) argument that global cultural flows are often reinterpreted through local, family contexts, where meaning is shaped by lived experience rather than institutional narratives.

These patterns also resonate with broader research on parental mediation. Elias et al. (2024) identify four common strategies through which parents shape children's media use: restrictive mediation, instructive mediation, co-use, and supervision. Their study further suggests that these practices may be influenced by parents' own childhood experiences of mediation, suggesting that family media habits may carry intergenerational dimensions. While this study did not explore Brazilian parents' own childhood media practices, these insights provide a useful framework for understanding how the mediation strategies observed here are embedded in wider familial and cultural histories of media engagement.

Language played a crucial role. Most families (90.9%) reported that their children spoke Portuguese at home, and 80% considered it 'very important' or 'important' that media be available in their home language. This highlights how language serves not only as a communication tool but also as an emotional and cultural anchor, central to cultural mediation (Martín-Barbero, 2018). Portuguese-language media (songs, films, books) is not simply consumed but actively used (81.8%) to reinforce heritage and identity within the home. As the type of media resources connected to the child's cultural background, the category 'books, picture books and comic books' led with 88.9% of home use. Songs were chosen by six parents, and 'animated movies' by five. Straubhaar's (1991) concept of cultural proximity helps explain this preference, showing how audiences gravitate toward content that aligns with their linguistic and cultural norms. Curti et al. (2016) similarly suggest that media can create affective networks, where emotional and cultural bonds are activated through everyday practices such as language use in storytelling and song. Yet these media are often embedded in broader mediascapes, as children also access English-language and global

content. This is reflected in parental responses, with three parents selecting ‘United States’ and six identifying ‘a diverse range of places’ as the primary origins of the media their children typically consume.

Parents’ emphasis on cultural education through media was mixed. A considerable proportion of parents (six) reported co-selecting media content related to their cultural background with their children. Only a small proportion (two) reported their children using cultural media daily. More often (five), media was engaged weekly or occasionally (two), often through shared family time, ‘It may happen on Fridays Happy Family Time or during some weekends in a row, and then some weeks without any.’. This suggests that media function as a flexible cultural resource, valued but not always central. It supports Martín-Barbero’s (2018) idea that meaning-making happens in fluid, contextualised ways, shaped by the rhythms of daily life. Parents and children often chose media together, blending Brazilian, American, and global content. This hybrid consumption supports Buckingham’s (2007a) discussion of glocalisation, where children actively navigate between global narratives and local references, selecting elements that resonate with their cultural worldviews. These shared decisions also reflect cultural mediation in action, where families negotiate meanings and preferences in real time, shaping how children relate to global characters and storylines.

When asked who bears responsibility for teaching cultural heritage, nearly all parents (nine) identified the ‘family’. Schools were not considered central, though eight parents acknowledged their children feel safe to express their family culture at school, for instance, engaging in cultural ‘festivities’ (three), ‘clothing they wear’ (four), and speaking in their ‘family language’ (two). This reflects a broader disjuncture (Appadurai, 1996), where formal structures do not always align with families’ cultural priorities. While schools may be inclusive in general terms, they often (seven) do not reflect the specific experiences of

diasporic communities like Brazilian migrants in Aotearoa. This observation reinforces Pyndiah's (2018) emphasis on the importance of creating emotionally safe and inclusive spaces in education, particularly when formal institutions do not fully reflect the diversity of children's lived cultural experiences.

Most parents (nine) agreed that media influence children's identity formation, though often (seven) were 'neutral' about the global spread of uniform content. While the majority (90.9%) valued diversity in children's media and wanted to see (ten) more ethnic representation about their children's cultural background, they believe (ten) the level of diversity currently available is narrow in cultural representation. This supports Appadurai's (1996) view of cultural disjuncture, where global media flows do not always match audience expectations or lived experiences.

Parents generally (ten) supported diverse media representations regardless of the creator. Many (nine) expressed approval of Disney telling stories from multiple cultures other than American. This suggests that, for the majority, visibility and engagement are valued above authenticity. This became clearer when parents were specifically asked about *Moana*. Support for Disney's collaboration with Pacific communities and the te reo Māori version was unanimous. These results point to a strong appreciation for culturally respectful production processes, reinforcing the view that audiences value not just content but the conditions of its creation. Heyman and Campbell's (2009) reading of Appadurai also highlights the relevance of reterritorialisation, as global media are received through localised practices of meaning-making, including knowledge of production contexts.

In terms of how Moana (character) was interpreted, 90.9% of parents identified Moana's cultural origin as the Pacific Islands, often referencing clothing and physical attributes, 'She looks like an Islander.'; 'She looks either Samoan or Rarotongan'; 'Because of her clothes

(looks tribal), skin colour, facial features’. Similarly, Moana’s screen partner, Maui, was linked both to the Pacific and specifically to Aotearoa New Zealand. Parents explained this through visual and behavioural markers that matched their lived experiences in New Zealand. ‘He looks like Māori.’; ‘He looks Polynesian’; ‘[from] Aotearoa mainly because of the body tattoos - that could be from the islands too. The shells and leaves are more related to Pacific Islands.’; ‘Due to living here in New Zealand, I know the men are like him.’; ‘Physical characteristics and behaviour.’ ‘I’ve been to Rarotonga and also when I watch cultural shows from there in NZ looks like Pasifika.’. These interpretations show how migrant families draw on their current local context to decode global media texts, a form of cultural proximity (Straubhaar, 1991) that blends everyday life with mediated narratives.

While most parents (nine) saw *Moana* as useful for educating children about Polynesian culture, others were hesitant to assess the film’s authenticity, deferring to Indigenous communities, ‘I don’t have a strong opinion because I can’t really evaluate the accuracy of what the story shows. I would ask people from the Pacific Islands to know their opinion.’; This suggests an awareness of positionality and respect for cultural boundaries. Some parents critiqued the film as a commercial product shaped by profit, despite its respectful tone. When asked by Disney and cultural appropriation, a parent responded, ‘Very likely. Everything is done with a purpose, and it’s called profit.’. Yet, even among critics, *Moana* was seen as a useful cultural bridge, an emotionally resonant text that opened up space for reflection, conversation, and recognition within the home, ‘I know how much research and involvement of people who belonged to the [Polynesian] culture they had. You can tell by watching. It’s amazingly made.’. As Curti et al. (2016) note, such affective engagement with media can extend beyond narrative content, becoming part of a larger relational and cultural network.

In addition, two parents viewed *Moana* as ‘pure entertainment,’ highlighting the multiple interpretive positions coexisting within diasporic communities. These findings illustrate that cultural mediation within transnational households is not imposed but negotiated through emotional geographies, symbolic references, and everyday decisions about how media are used, discussed, and lived. In the next section I turn to children’s views and lived experiences of Disney.

### ***7.7.1 Children’s Use of Disney to Navigate Cultural, Embodied and Emotional Geographies***

All twelve children surveyed had watched *Moana*, *Frozen*, *Toy Story*, and *Beauty and the Beast*, with high familiarity also reported for *Brave* (91.7%), *Cinderella*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Tangled* with 83.3%. This suggests that Disney and Pixar films form part of a shared media repertoire among Brazilian-background children in Aotearoa New Zealand. From Martín-Barbero’s (2006, 2018) perspective, such texts function as mediators of cultural meaning, shaping how children interpret identity and belonging through global media. This aligns with Buckingham’s (2007b) argument that media play a central role in children’s cultural and identity formation.

The universal exposure to *Moana* reinforces its central role in the study, while the moderate engagement with culturally themed films like *Coco* (66.7%) and *Elena* (58.3%) points to selective encounters with ethnic representation. These patterns show how children’s media consumption is embedded in broader cultural flows (Appadurai, 1996), influenced by both global accessibility and local mediation within family contexts.

Children’s choices of favourite characters reflect a mix of aspirational traits, narrative appeal, and symbolic identification. In this study, Ariel (six) and Belle (six) were the most selected

characters, followed closely by Elena (five) and Disney's *Aladdin* character Genie (five). While some choices reflected aesthetic or narrative appeal (e.g. 'Ariel turns into a mermaid', and 'I like how beautiful she [Aurora] looks), others acknowledged magical markers, such as 'Genie makes everything appear,' or 'Maui, he can transform into animals'. From Appadurai's (1996) perspective, characters circulate as part of wider mediascapes, allowing children to position themselves within global stories. The lack of mention of characters like Miguel or Prince Adam may reflect differences in familiarity. Overall, character selection reveals how young audiences navigate cultural meaning through popular media in playful but socially informed ways. These practices support the argument by Curti et al. (2016) that children build affective relationships with media texts.

Children's choices of animated characters they would like as friends reflected a strong emphasis on emotional and personality traits. Moana and Genie were equally (six) the most frequently selected, followed by Merida (five) and Rapunzel (four), with children citing attributes such as being 'adventurous', 'They look nice, and they look friendly.', 'Both like adventures are brave and fearless.'. These selections were grounded not in physical appearance or ethnicity but in character traits that resonated with children's own values and aspirations.

In alignment with Martín-Barbero's (2006) cultural mediation framework, these responses illustrate how children rework media narratives through their own cultural experiences and imaginaries. Similarly, Appadurai's (1996) concept of mediascapes helps explain how globalised characters become embedded in local identity-making practices. For children growing up in multicultural settings, animated characters become companions for emotional learning and reflection, rather than fixed cultural symbols. These findings also resonate with

Pyndiah's (2018) analysis of emotional geographies, suggesting that children engage affectively and empathetically with media narratives that align with their lived realities.

Children's responses to whether any animated characters resembled members of their families provide insight into how media are interpreted through everyday relationships.

*Moana* emerged as the most frequently (six) selected story, followed by *Brave*, *Coco*, *Frozen* and *Sleeping Beauty*. Rather than focusing on cultural or ethnic markers, children described resemblances in terms of personality, behaviour, or family roles. One child described an elaborate mapping between Moana's family and their own, assigning family roles based on traits such as protectiveness, recklessness, or adventurousness. 'Her mother [Moana's mum] is very... she protects me, right? From the cold, from things. *Don't go, don't go there*. Maui is [my] father [laughs] he is adventurous. Moana is my brother - he's crazy. Reckless.' This suggests that character identification is guided more by relational experience than by representational accuracy. This flexible attribution process reflects Martín-Barbero's theory of cultural mediation, where meaning emerges not from the text alone but from the exchange between media and lived social experience. Children draw on their own family dynamics to interpret character relationships, revealing how animation becomes a catalyst for emotional identification and symbolic connection. Pyndiah (2018) argues that such processes are central to how emotional spaces like the home shape understanding, making these interactions critical to children's emotional and cultural development.

When asked whether they would like to see a Disney character 'like them,' almost all children (eleven) responded affirmatively. Some of the responses were, 'Cool sunglasses, like a ninja, with a sword', 'my hair colour, my eye colour, my skin colour, my scars', 'Different. They would act different', 'kind, a little shy, happy, truthful, helpful, wearing prescription glasses', 'He would have my skin and hair colour'. 'She would do similar things as I do and

would like similar things as I like.’. These responses indicate that for children, seeing ‘a character like me’ is not only about ethnic or racial visibility, but also about personality, shared experiences, physical features, and even unique identifiers like *scars* or *prescription glasses*. The desire for such representation reflects a need for recognition, belonging, and affirmation in the media they consume. And, that children often note when the media they consume does not reflect who they are. This affirms the value of inclusive representation and supports the notion that children make meaning from media by connecting it to their lived realities (Martín-Barbero, 2018). It also refers to Block and Buckingham’s (2007) observation that global media can provide resources for imagining identity in ways that are both personal and socially mediated.

The data show that Brazilian children possess a strong awareness of cultural difference, with all participants affirming that they are different from one another and come from different places compared to their peers. Among the chosen cultural markers of *difference*, ‘language’ (nine), ‘food’ (seven), ‘facial features’ (seven), and ‘accent’, ‘clothing’, ‘skin colour’, and ‘dance moves’ equally (six) being identified by the children. These responses suggest an early internalisation of cultural identity markers, as children across the 6 to 10-year-old group selected those categories regardless of their age. Children drew comparisons between their own cultural backgrounds and those of their peers, recognising diverse cultural practices and values. Mentions of school activities such as ‘Cultural Day’ indicate that institutional contexts contribute to these understandings. Drawing on Martín-Barbero’s (2018) concept of mediation and Appadurai’s (1996) ethnoscapas, these findings suggest that children engage with culture relationally, constructing belonging and identity through both appearance and social practice. Also, Tisdall and Punch (2012) emphasise that children’s understandings of identity are embedded in social relationships and shaped by local interactions.

Children's responses to the question of which Disney characters could be from Aotearoa New Zealand reveal how global media texts are interpreted through locally situated experiences and spatial imaginaries. Drawing on principles from children's geographies, these interpretations reflect how young viewers actively negotiate meaning through their own embodied knowledge, institutional environments, and everyday geographies. For instance, eight children identified Moana, associating her based on local cultural observations or school experiences. A ten-year-old child explained that their Māori teacher played *Moana* in te reo, 'My teacher from last year he put *Moana* [film] in Māori [te reo]. He said, right? So, it's obvious!', which led them to conclude that the character must be Māori and therefore from Aotearoa. These associations reflect the powerful role of institutions, especially schools, in shaping how children interpret cultural identity through global media. Some children extended this reasoning to visual or environmental cues, 'Moana, because she lives on an island and because of the clothes she wears.', 'Merida... maybe. Because of the story, the landscape, it could be here in New Zealand.', showing how representations are filtered through children's everyday geographies. Another child mentioned that would not choose Disney's *Frozen* character Elsa as being from Aotearoa New Zealand because, 'We don't really have coldness in here, don't we? I don't think so.', indicating how children use sensory and climatic familiarity to assess character belonging. Rapunzel and Snow White were also chosen 'because they both talk to animals sometimes.'. Answering to my follow-up question, 'So, kiwis talk to animals?', they replied, 'Some kiwis do.'. 'Not [The] Princess and the Frog. Essentially there is NO frogs here.'. This could underscore children's playful agency in applying everyday knowledge to fantastical narratives yet corroborates to a common knowledge of the importance of fauna and flora for the New Zealand culture. These responses show how children's media interpretations are shaped by personal geographies and

the socio-cultural environments they inhabit. Tranter and Sharpe (2008) argue that children creatively interpret popular films in relation to their everyday environments.

Children's responses revealed how they use visual, relational, and narrative cues to link animated characters to their local context. Kristoff (seven), Maui (six), and Woody (six) were most frequently identified as characters who could be from Aotearoa New Zealand. Reasons included physical resemblance to family members, 'Because they look like kiwi [her dad is New Zealand European]. Because they look like people from New Zealand.', when referring to Disney's *Frozen* character Kristoff. Also, perceived similarities with local people, and shared traits with peers, 'My friend looks like Moana, and she is Māori. And her father looks like Maui.'. Skin colour, landscape, and clothing emerged as the most cited reasons that children would refer to while connecting characters to place. These findings highlight how children draw on embodied experience and local contexts to make sense of global media, echoing Martín-Barbero's (2006) view of cultural mediation and Appadurai's (1996) notion of reterritorialisation, as discussed by Heyman and Campbell (2009).

Children's responses revealed a strong tendency to localise Disney's *Moana* within their own cultural and geographic context. A majority (seven) identified Aotearoa New Zealand as the characters' origin, followed by the Pacific Islands (four). A child referred to the film being from 'Aotearoa New Zealand', as their Māori teacher 'said so', and 'there are also necklaces' linking the film's story to Māori identity via institutionalised reference and material cultural cues. These responses suggest that children draw on immediate cultural hints when interpreting media, rather than adhering to geopolitical accuracy. Such findings align with Martín-Barbero's (2018) theory of cultural mediation, showing how children actively reframe global media content through localised understandings of place and identity, similar to what Buckingham (2007a) refers to the process of glocalisation. Their interpretations reflect a

dynamic negotiation between representation, language, and cultural proximity (Straubhaar, 1991).

Children were asked if they had heard of various ethnic terms and whether they understood what they meant. Due to tiredness near the end of the interview, only nine children responded, and they asked if I was referring to the *language* or the *person*. From these, all respondents had heard of Māori (100%), and most (eight) recognised both ‘African’ and the colloquial term usually associated with White New Zealanders ‘Kiwi’. Seven children were familiar with terms such as ‘Indian’ and ‘Chinese’. Fewer, however, were familiar with the following terms, Polynesian (one), Pasifika (one), or Latin American (three), and none mentioned Pākehā. Although all children who responded this question said they understood ‘some’ of the terms, qualitative data indicated confusion between ethnicity, language, and nationality. Children often used the ethnic terms interchangeably as synonyms when referring to places, languages, or people, indicating an early understanding of these as categories of social and cultural differences, even if not fully articulated.

When asked whether any Disney characters could be Māori, children overwhelmingly identified Maui (100%) and Moana (90.9%) as such. Their reasoning often linked to cultural markers like te reo Māori (language), traditional clothing, and legends presented in the film. One child cited that their teacher had shown *Moana* in te reo and discussed Māori cultural elements, reinforcing the association. Another child mentioned the waka (Māori term for canoe), Maui’s tattoos and legends showcased in the film as evidence of Moana’s and Maui’s Māori identity, ‘The necklace. The clothes. Their houses. How people were. And the waka they used. And the legends.’. This also demonstrates that children’s responses about whether Moana could be Māori or from Aotearoa New Zealand often reflected their focus on visual and material signs. These references show how children use on-screen elements to build

cultural connections, particularly when linked to prior knowledge. The recurring association of Moana with Māori or Polynesian identity points to how global media texts like *Moana* are reinterpreted within local cultural frameworks. Rather than simply mirroring what they see, children actively construct meaning through their lived experiences and socio-cultural contexts, aligning with Martín-Barbero's perspective on mediated reception. Also, these findings suggest that Māori identity is not only familiar to children in New Zealand but also recognisable through media narratives. *Moana* serves as a key text through which children interpret and affirm Māori presence in popular culture.

When asked about Pacific Islands or Polynesia, children's responses show that characters such as Moana (eight), Maui (five) and Ariel (five) were most frequently associated with the region. Their reasoning centred on visible and environmental cues, especially the ocean, clothing, and landscape. Children mentioned the way characters dress, and identified the island landscape as a clue, 'How she [Moana] dresses up. Because Moana is from an island', 'Because there is a lot of Ocean there.'. None of the children, however, linked Polynesia or Pacific Islands with New Zealand, despite Aotearoa being geographically within the Polynesian region. Instead, Polynesia was interpreted as *somewhere else*, distinct from children's everyday context. For example, Ariel was chosen 'because she is from the sea, so Pacific,' and another child named Moana, Maui, and Ariel 'because of the beaches.'. In contrast, when asked specifically about Māori ethnicity, children consistently associated characters with Aotearoa New Zealand. This suggests a geographic separation in how children interpret Polynesian versus Māori identities and places.

Children's responses to the question of whether there is a difference between people as being New Zealander, Kiwi, and Māori revealed mixed interpretations. As the data show, responses (four) were evenly split between 'yes' and 'don't know', with smaller percentages answering,

‘maybe’ (two) or ‘no’ (one). This balance suggests some conceptual confusion or ambivalence among children regarding national and ethnic identity labels, that could be related to their 6 to 10-year-old age group. Open-ended responses reinforced this: one child noted, ‘they talk differently,’ referring to Māori language use, while another said, ‘Māori are New Zealanders,’ reflecting a more inclusive view. These answers reflect how children navigate the fluidity of identity categories in their everyday environments. For many, language seems to be a key marker of distinction, while others saw no meaningful difference. These findings are consistent with research suggesting that children’s understanding of identity categories is both contextually influenced and still developing (Lemish, 2015; Buckingham, 2007a, 2007b).

At the end, when asked if someone could create a story about Aotearoa New Zealand even if they were not born there, most children (90.9%) said ‘yes’. Their reasoning revealed an emerging understanding that cultural storytelling is connected to proximity, familiarity, or shared knowledge rather than strict ethnic belonging. One child noted they could write about New Zealand ‘because I live here,’ while another suggested, ‘Only if you had a little bit of help... from someone from your friends that speaks English.’. A third child remarked when the question was framed into their family background, ‘It doesn’t have to be a Brazilian. It can be someone who knows about Brazil.’. These examples illustrate children’s flexible thinking about cultural authorship, grounded in relational access rather than essentialist ownership. While their answers suggest an openness to cultural exchange, they also point to the importance of knowing ‘enough’ to tell a story accurately or respectfully, whether through lived experience or shared community context.

## 7.8 Conclusion

This article presents research about how Brazilian families in Aotearoa New Zealand negotiate cultural identity through global media, particularly in relation to Disney's *Moana*. By engaging both parents and children as co-participants in meaning-making, the study highlights how global media texts are not passively consumed but actively interpreted through culturally situated experiences, family narratives, and everyday life in a transnational context. The findings reveal a dynamic exchange between media reception, cultural memory, and emotional identification, explaining how children construct belonging across national, ethnic, and symbolic boundaries.

Drawing on Martín-Barbero's concept of cultural mediation, the analysis shows that meaning is generated not only through on-screen representation but through affective connections and everyday conversations shaped by family histories and local contexts. Children navigated cultural categories through embodied and emotional cues, relating to characters based on shared values, language, and familiarity with place. Language also emerged as a key mediator, with many families using dubbed media or heritage-language content to support cultural identity. These practices positioned the home as a central source of cultural learning, where global narratives are *reterritorialised* into local geographies and identities.

Children's engagements with media were also shaped by schools, peer interactions, and multilingual environments. Teachers who introduced *Moana* in te reo Māori or discussed cultural aspects of the film played a significant role in shaping how children understood place and identity. These school-based mediation, when combined with family's cultural practices and home language use, helped children map global narratives onto their local experiences. Appadurai's frameworks, particularly ethnoscapes, mediascapes, and deterritorialisation, help explain how children interpret themselves as belonging to multiple cultural geographies,

imaginatively blending Brazilian heritage with Māori and New Zealand contexts. In doing so, they offer an answer to the central question: *Can they be both?*

Importantly, children's interpretations were not only reflections of representation but also practices of agency. Their preferences, identifications, and critiques demonstrate an emergent media literacy rooted in emotional resonance and cultural awareness. By choosing characters they saw as 'like them,' or associating family members to animated roles, children articulated relational understandings of identity that went beyond racial or ethnic categories. These insights reinforce the significance of media in shaping children's spatial imaginaries and sense of belonging, particularly for those growing up in culturally layered, migrant and multicultural contexts.

While *Moana* emerged as a key text of cultural identification, the study also points to the limits of representation. Children's associations of characters with place or culture often relied on visible cues like skin colour, clothing, or landscape, rather than deeper cultural knowledge. These findings reveal the ongoing challenges of creating truly inclusive global media texts that can support meaningful cultural education and avoiding reductionism and commodification.

Overall, this study contributes to children's geographies by illustrating how global media becomes embedded in the lived cultural geographies of transnational families. It shows that cultural identity is negotiated not in isolation, but through several factors, such as family, school, and mediated practices that shape how children can understand who they are, where they come from, and where they belong. In highlighting the role of media in this process, the article offers both theoretical and empirical insights into migrant childhoods, emphasising the importance of critically engaging with global media as a source of cultural formation and negotiation.

## Chapter 8

# From Motunui to Aotearoa: Interpreting Global Media and Culture Through Children's Eyes

### 8.1 Overview of the Study's Contributions

This thesis explored how a diverse group of children aged five to twelve representing several ethnic backgrounds in Aotearoa New Zealand, engage with and interpret cultural representations in global animated media, with a particular emphasis on Disney's *Moana* (2016). The research also focused on children from ten Brazilian-background families, aiming to understand how cultural identity, place, and belonging are negotiated through encounters with global media. Rather than evaluating the film's authenticity or production process, the study prioritised children's perspectives, asking how they made sense of characters, settings, and cultural elements in relation to their own lives, environments, and experiences.

Guided by Martín-Barbero's theory of cultural mediations and informed by frameworks from children's geographies and transnational cultural studies, the study examined how meaning is made not within the media text alone, but through everyday practices, relationships, and culturally situated knowledge. In doing so, it placed children at the centre of inquiry, not as passive consumers but as active cultural interpreters whose voices reveal how global narratives are localised, reworked, and made meaningful.

To address these goals, the study was guided by five research questions. These are:

1. How do a group of multicultural children aged 5–12 in Aotearoa New Zealand perceive and interpret cultural representations in selected Disney and Pixar animated films?
2. In what ways do children recognise cultural elements in *Moana*, relating those to Māori and/or Polynesian cultures, in an official bicultural yet multicultural Aotearoa New Zealand context?
3. How do Brazilian children's interpretations of media representations reflect their cultural identities, family backgrounds, and everyday experiences?
4. What roles do familial and educational settings play in mediating children's perceptions of culture and identity as represented in global animated media?
5. How does Martín-Barbero's framework of cultural mediations help explain the processes through which children negotiate meaning in relation to global media texts?

Also, this study was designed to address the following five research aims:

- To explore how children aged 5 to 12 in Aotearoa New Zealand interpret cultural representations in selected Disney and Pixar media, with an emphasis on *Moana*.
- To investigate how children's cultural backgrounds and lived experiences shape their interpretations of these media texts.
- To examine how *Moana*, as a film developed with input from Pacific cultural experts, is understood by children in relation to Aotearoa New Zealand's cultural landscape.
- To understand the role of parents in mediating children's interpretations of media representations, especially in migrant families.

- To contribute to the academic discourse on children's media reception through the application of Martín-Barbero's cultural mediations framework.

These research questions and aims framed the study of: how children recognise and interpret cultural elements in Disney and Pixar media texts, particularly *Moana*; how they relate these elements to Māori and Polynesian cultures; how Brazilian-background children reflect on identity, belonging, and cultural difference; what roles families and educational settings play in shaping interpretation; and how Martín-Barbero's theory of cultural mediations can help explain these interpretive processes. Together, these questions informed a research design that was qualitative, child-centred, and knowledgeable of the complex realities of growing up in a bicultural yet increasingly multicultural Aotearoa.

Across the three interlinked findings chapters, this thesis has shown how children and their families in Aotearoa New Zealand interpret cultural narratives in ways that reflect everyday experiences, local meanings, and transnational identities. Chapters five, six and seven explored different dimensions of interpretation: the educational and affective spaces through which meaning is shaped; the ways in which children associate visual, linguistic, and environmental cues with local and global cultures; and the specific perspectives of Brazilian-background families navigating diasporic belonging in Aotearoa New Zealand.

This research drew on a curated selection of 15 Disney and Pixar animated films and one television series, featuring 24 characters in total. While a range of texts was presented to children, particular emphasis was placed on *Moana* (2016), due to its resonance with themes of place, identity, and cultural representation that are central to this study in Aotearoa New Zealand. The Disney films included *Aladdin* (1992), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Cinderella* (1950), *Frozen* (2013), *Moana* (2016), *Mulan* (1998), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Tangled* (2010), *The Little Mermaid*

(1989), and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). From Pixar, selected texts were *Brave* (2012), *Coco* (2017), and *Toy Story* (1995). The television series *Elena of Avalor* (2016) was also included for its focus on a Latin American princess. Across these media texts, 24 main characters were presented to the children: Aladdin, Anna, Ariel, Aurora, Beast, Belle, Buzz, Cinderella, Elena, Elsa, Genie, Jasmine, Kristoff, Maui, Merida, Miguel, Moana, Mulan, Pocahontas, Prince Adam, Rapunzel, Snow White, Tiana and Woody. This selection was designed to support a range of interpretations, particularly around ethnic and cultural elements, and global storytelling.

While most academic discussions of Disney media focus on textual analysis or industry critique, this project centred the voices of young audiences. Their responses revealed a form of cultural literacy that is intuitive, affective, and deeply tied to everyday life in multicultural and bicultural Aotearoa. Through interviews, visual activities, and bilingual engagement, the children in this study demonstrated how meaning emerges not only from what is shown on screen but from where they are, who they live with, what they know, and how they feel.

## **8.2 Synthesis of Key Findings**

This section brings together central findings of the study, synthesising insights from across the three empirical chapters. The data revealed three interrelated themes: first, children consistently acted as cultural interpreters, drawing on their everyday experiences, emotional worlds, and local environments to make sense of the media texts. Second, children's interpretations often reflected place-based reasoning, where cultural meaning was anchored in sensory, spatial, and relational familiarity. Third, families played an active role in shaping children's cultural understandings, particularly within diasporic contexts where global and heritage media were used to negotiate identity and belonging. Together, these themes highlight the dynamic and situated nature of meaning-making, showing that global media is

not received passively but interpreted through everyday relationships, environments, and culturally mediated practices.

### ***8.2.1 Children as Cultural Interpreters***

Across all three empirical chapters, children consistently demonstrated interpretive agency in their engagement with *Moana*. They did not simply absorb content but recontextualised it by using their own experiences, knowledge, and environments. Their understandings of culture and identity were relational and situated, emerging through school rituals, family dynamics, spatial familiarity, and shared language. For example, several children identified Maui or Moana as “from here”, linking them to Māori culture, local landscapes, or their own family members. Others mapped their own emotions and family structures onto the film’s narrative, describing Moana’s father as being like their dad or her grandmother as mirroring their own.

These interpretations support Martín-Barbero’s argument that media meaning is not received passively but mediated through everyday practices. Children drew on what they had seen, felt, and heard, not only within the media text but also in the classroom, in their neighbourhood, or around the dinner table. Interpretation became a social and cultural practice, grounded in territory, memory, and imagination.

### ***8.2.2 Cultural Recognition and Place-Based Meaning-Making***

Children often interpreted Moana and Maui through a logic of resemblance and spatial familiarity. Tattoos, jewellery, waka, beaches, and landscape imagery prompted associations with Aotearoa and the wider Pacific. Several children had watched the te reo Māori version of *Moana* at school or recognised words and motifs that aligned with Māori culture. This kind of place-based reasoning reflects a geographical and environmental dimension to cultural

interpretation, showing that children anchor global stories in local spaces through sensory and symbolic cues.

Crucially, these recognitions were not always geographically accurate, with Polynesia often conflated with Māori culture or simply identified as “here”, but they were meaningful. They reveal how children use what is familiar, embodied, and close to them to make sense of cultural identity. This insight aligns with children’s geographies, which emphasise how place and experience shape knowledge, and with Martín-Barbero’s theory, which views culture as something navigated through mediation, not fixed in origin.

### ***8.2.3 Family Mediation and Diasporic Practices***

Parents also played a key role in shaping children’s cultural understandings. In Brazilian-background households, parents used media selectively to maintain heritage language and cultural practices, often balancing local and global content. Portuguese-language books, music, and Brazilian television were common tools for connection, while Disney films like *Moana* were framed as opportunities for both entertainment and cultural learning. Parents saw value in respectful representations, collaborative productions, and inclusive voice casting, and they hoped schools would support cultural expression even if they did not always rely on them for cultural transmission.

Together, the findings show that meaning-making is deeply relational, emerging through the interplay between family, school, media, and identity. Migrant families reinterpreted *Moana* through their own cultural lenses, using it as a flexible, affective resource for exploring questions of difference, belonging, and representation. This supports the thesis’s broader argument: that global media is never neutral or self-contained, it is always situated in the lives of its audiences.

### 8.3 Theoretical Reflection: Cultural Mediations in Practice

Martín-Barbero's idea of cultural mediations has been central to this study. It shifts attention away from the media text itself and looks instead at how people make sense of media through the social and cultural settings of their lives. The children in this research did not judge *Moana* by how faithful it was to history or how accurate its cultural detail might be. They understood the film through their own experiences, through language, emotions, family stories, and the places where they spend their time.

Rather than treating communication as something that is only sent and received, I followed Martín-Barbero's suggestion to change where the questions are asked from. This meant recognising children's feelings, everyday practices, and ways of knowing as valuable. In this way, *Moana* was not just a film to watch for fun. It became part of how children created memories, tried out identities, and connected with culture.

The findings also bring Martín-Barbero's ideas into conversation with work on children's geographies, transnational lives, and diasporas. Many children made sense of characters through familiar details: skin colour, clothing, language, tools, or even the weather. This reflects Appadurai's (1996) idea of mediascapes and ethnoscapes, where identity is shaped by both movement and imagination. For some children, their understanding came as much from kapa haka at school or learning te reo Māori as it did from what the film itself was "meant" to say. This shows that interpretation is always local, sensory, and shaped in the moment.

In this sense, the research takes up Martín-Barbero's invitation to see media studies as a practice of listening and co-creating meaning. Asking children how they see *Moana* is not just a way of collecting data. It is also a theoretical choice that shows how cultural meaning is made through bodies, spaces, and relationships, rather than through one-way communication.

## **8.4 Contributions to Scholarship**

This thesis contributes original knowledge to the interdisciplinary fields of children's reception, cultural identity, and globalisation by advancing theoretical, methodological and empirical understandings of how children engage with global media in transnational and bicultural contexts, such as in Aotearoa New Zealand. Grounded in cultural mediations, children's geographies, and transnational studies, this research repositions child audiences as active cultural producers who interpret and rework media through their everyday experiences, relationships, and environments.

By centring the voices of children from multicultural and migrant backgrounds, and applying a Latin American theoretical lens to an Aotearoa New Zealand context, this thesis offers a distinctive perspective on how cultural meaning is constructed through mediated engagement. It highlights the situated nature of children's meaning-making and emphasises the complex, layered ways in which children navigate identity, culture, and belonging are negotiated through media. These contributions are outlined below across three interconnected spheres: theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions of this research.

### ***8.4.1 Theoretical Contributions***

The main theoretical contribution of this study is using Jesús Martín-Barbero's idea of cultural mediations in a setting that is very different from where it was first developed. By placing this Latin American framework alongside the everyday experiences of children growing up in Aotearoa, a country shaped by settler colonial history, legal biculturalism, and everyday multiculturalism, the study shows that cultural meaning does not sit inside media texts on their own. Instead, meaning is built through relationships, contexts, and lived experience. This approach offers a fresh way of looking at media consumption as something

shaped by emotions, geography, and daily life. It also highlights how Martín-Barbero's thinking can travel beyond Latin America, helping to explain how migrant and diasporic families in New Zealand make sense of media across different languages, spaces, and platforms.

The integration of cultural mediations with theories from children's geographies, transnational identity, funds of knowledge, and global studies contributes to a flexible and relational theoretical framework for understanding how culture is perceived, performed, localised, and reinterpreted in children's everyday lives.

#### ***8.4.2 Methodological Contributions***

This thesis demonstrates a creative, ethical, and adaptable approach to child-centred research, particularly during the disruptions caused by COVID-19. Through multimodal tools such as drawing, play, song, character cards, bilingual prompts, and Zoom-based interviews, I engaged children in ways that respected their agency, emotional world, and communication styles. I also foregrounded reflexivity and cultural accountability, acknowledging my own position as a Brazilian migrant researcher in Aotearoa and working with cultural advisors to uphold ethical practices with Māori and Pasifika participants.

Methodologically, the study offers a creative and context-sensitive approach to researching with children, particularly in times of disruption and adaptation. Developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the design retained a strong child-centred focus by incorporating multimodal tools such as drawing, costumes, toys, music, character-based activities, bilingual prompts, and online one-on-one interviews. These methods enabled a rich dialogue and interactions that respected children's emotional and communicative styles, while also adapting to the constraints of remote engagement.

At the same time, the research emphasised reflexivity and cultural accountability. As a Brazilian migrant researcher working in Aotearoa New Zealand, I approached this study with a relational and situated sensibility, drawing on shared transnational experiences where appropriate, and seeking advice from Māori cultural advisors to ensure respectful and ethical engagement with Māori and Pasifika participants.

Instead of claiming Indigenous frameworks, the multimodal methodology adopted values such as manaakitanga (hospitality, kindness, generosity, support) and storytelling, while maintaining transparency on its limitations. This methodological contribution models how researchers can work with, not about, children and how global childhood studies might be conducted through decolonial, relational, sensitive, and child-led research practices.

#### ***8.4.3. Empirical Contributions***

Empirically, this research provides new insights into how children from a wide range of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds interpret global media in Aotearoa New Zealand. It reveals how children make sense of animated stories not only through visual and narrative cues but through embodied and place-based reasoning. Children's interpretations were often shaped by spatial familiarity, linguistic recognition, emotional identification, and family narratives, demonstrating the situated and affective dimensions of cultural interpretation.

Cultural meaning was often constructed via sensory associations: the characteristics of a landscape, the colour of a character's skin, a traditional tattoo, kapa haka performance by a character, or the sound of *Moana* dubbed in te reo. Children recognised and located characters like Maui and Moana not because they had been explicitly told these were Polynesian roles, but because children saw, heard or felt something that connected the characters to their own environments. They made meaning through proximity to: a school

kapa haka group; a greenstone necklace; a beach or island they visited; or, the presence of Polynesian motifs in their daily lives.

The data also indicate how linguistic recognition played a key role in cultural identification, especially for children exposed to te reo Māori or those from a diverse linguistic household. These multilingual and multicultural repertoires shaped how children understood identity, difference and belonging in the media texts they engaged with. Emotional identification further deepened their responses, as many children projected familial experiences or affective memories onto characters, narratives, and scenes, interpreting Moana's family dynamics with her parents or Maui's physical features through the lens of children's own relational worlds.

This thesis explores how children make sense of culture in their everyday lives and how this connects with both bicultural and multicultural identities. In Aotearoa the country is formally described as bicultural, but for many children, especially those from migrant or mixed-heritage families, life feels more layered and complicated. The ways children talked about Moana showed how these different identity frameworks often overlap, blur together, or even create tension.

Children with Brazilian backgrounds gave especially rich examples. They drew not only on Brazilian culture but also on Māori, Pasifika, Pākehā, and other influences to explain how global media helps them see themselves in characters and stories. Their answers pointed to mixed and flexible identities rather than single or fixed ones. This matters in Aotearoa, where issues of indigeneity, multiculturalism, and migration meet in everyday life, shaping how children think about who they are and how they see cultures represented on screen.

By listening to how children interpret and reorganise films like *Moana*, this study shows how culture becomes meaningful for young people as they grow up in a diverse society.

### **8.5 Reflections about the Research Process**

Throughout this thesis, reflexivity has been central to both the methodological design and the interpretive analysis. As a Brazilian migrant researcher living in Aotearoa New Zealand, my own experiences of bilingualism, transnational movement, and parenting have deeply shaped how I approached this project through the questions I asked, the ways I listened, and the interpretive lens I brought to the data.

Rather than striving for neutrality, I embraced a relational and partial position, in line with Martín-Barbero's idea of "seeing with others." My interpretation of children's voices was therefore never neutral; it was always situated, shaped and influenced by shared experiences, ethical responsibility, and the desire to listen with care.

At the same time, this positionality required critical self-awareness and ongoing negotiation. Although I was able to draw on shared diasporic experiences with many participants, linguistic and cultural hybridity, I do not whakapapa to Aotearoa, and I recognise the limits this placed on my ability to apply kaupapa Māori or Pasifika methodologies. Guided by Māori cultural advisor Dr Lesley Rameka, I adopted values such as manaakitanga and storytelling, but I did not claim Indigenous frameworks as my own. Instead, I sought to work in a way that was culturally responsive, respectful, and transparent about its boundaries.

This research also faced logistical limitations. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the original plan for school-based, face-to-face engagement. While the online methods enabled broader participation and generated rich data, they also constrained the embodied, spontaneous, and interactive dimensions of the original design. Some creative tools, such as

role play and costume activities, and in-person group activities had to be adapted or omitted. Nonetheless, the multimodal and child-led nature of the methods remained consistent, allowing children to express their ideas through visuals, speech, and imagination.

The age range also posed some challenges mainly while exploring abstract cultural ideas and concepts with younger participants being one of the reasons why the age range changed from five to eight to six to twelve, in the second phase of data collection. Language-related misunderstandings were another consideration, especially in cases where children were interviewed in two languages, Portuguese and English. These issues were aided through rephrased questions, bilingual prompts, and support from parents when needed.

Additionally, the research relied primarily on visual cues such as character images and was designed to offer a contextualised overview of children's interpretations of global media in Aotearoa. While it does not follow a longitudinal approach, the research design was purposefully structured to capture layered, situated, and emotional resonant insights across a diverse group of children and families. The goal was to explore how cultural meaning-making unfolds within particular social, familial, and educational contexts. Future research could extend this study's approach by exploring how these interpretive practices evolve, particularly through longitudinal research designs. Although this study captured valuable perspectives within Aotearoa New Zealand, comparative research across regions and international contexts could enrich understanding of how global children audiences interpret films. The research, then, produced complex, situated, and contextualised insights into how cultural identity is mediated in the lives of children and families living in Aotearoa New Zealand.

## 8.6 Final Reflections and Future Directions

This thesis has demonstrated that cultural meaning does not reside in the media text alone, nor does it circulate freely without context. Instead, it is negotiated through relationships, memories, sensory experiences, and environments. For the children in this study, *Moana* was not simply a Polynesian story, it was a representation of an uncle, a mother, or reminded them of their school kapa haka. Culture, in their eyes, was something lived and interpreted, not defined by ethnicity alone.

What this research ultimately shows is that children's voices are essential to understanding how global media takes root in local settings. Their interpretations challenge the assumption that cultural representation is passively received, and instead reveal a world of nuanced reasoning, affective recognition, and playful reworking. Asking children what they see, and how they feel, is not just an ethical choice. It is a methodological and theoretical necessity.

Although the children in this study mostly do not whakapapa to Māori, their respectful engagement with Māori culture offers hope for a more inclusive and culturally conscious Aotearoa. In their daily experiences, we can see the expression of mana, aroha, and tino rangatiratanga, a testament to Māori efforts to revitalise their culture and share it meaningfully with all tamariki. This highlights how children's media engagement can reflect broader socio-political commitments and cultural values, even when they do not explicitly name them.

While *Moana* is not a political text, in a conventional sense, its reception among children in Aotearoa shows that cultural narratives can still operate as political in effect. Through its representation of Polynesian culture, the film reinforces certain values embedded in the bicultural foundations of the nation, such as recognition of Indigenous knowledge and respect for cultural diversity. In this way, children's engagement with *Moana* not only reflects but

also subtly supports the socio-political landscape of Aotearoa where Māori culture is the foundation of New Zealand's national identity. These interactions reveal how global media can contribute to ongoing conversations about belonging, media representation and cultural and social rights, even without making explicit political claims.

In 2025, recent political developments in Aotearoa emphasise the importance of these findings. For example, a recent education ministry report revealed that the Minister of Education decided to remove all Māori words in books developed to teach five-year-old children to read, apart from characters' names (Dunlop, 2025). This change applies to the *Ready to Read Phonics Plus* series and highlights the fragile and shifting representation of Indigenous languages and cultures, even in an officially and legally bicultural country such as Aotearoa. Moreover, children's everyday environments, which in this instance encompasses both media and education settings, are directly affected. In this context, a film such as *Moana*, takes on another significance: it offers children the opportunity to see themselves and their cultures reflected on a global screen, contributing to a sense of importance, belonging and self-worth.

Yet, this research also raises uncomfortable questions about the politics of storytelling. While Disney engaged with cultural advisors and OST to construct *Moana*, the decision to trademark the name "*Moana*" and reinterpret foundational Pacific legends like Maui through a Western lens remains problematic. As Martín-Barbero (2006) reminds us, media are not neutral, they tell the world how to see and who has the right to tell. For stories to be ethical vessels of knowledge, they must be told by and for the communities they represent. Disney's appropriation of Pacific narratives, despite surface-level collaboration, risks reproducing colonial dynamics in cultural production. A decolonial media landscape would redirect

funding and creative control to Indigenous storytellers and local media makers, allowing them to tell their own stories in their own voices.

Despite those efforts, gathering a team of experts such as the OST should be seen as a starting point rather than a conclusive model for preventing cultural appropriation. While OST represents a step towards more inclusive and respectful cultural representation, it does not guarantee that global media productions avoid exploitive or appropriative practices. Instead of positioning OST as an exemplar success, it is more reasonable to view such initiatives as part of a longer, ongoing process. A process that must be continually re-evaluated, expanded, and led by the communities whose stories are being told.

At the same time, it is crucial that major media companies continue to expand their portfolios of cultural representation, moving beyond the dominant Eurocentric and white-centric norms that have long shaped storytelling. While such efforts must be approached critically, the presence of characters like Moana, a Polynesian Disney princess, carries significant symbolic weight. Her inclusion in the hall of Disney princess-type characters, not only affirms the cultural richness of Polynesia but also validates alternative beauty standards and non-hegemonic forms of femininity. For many children, seeing a protagonist who reflects their own skin tone, cultural background, or way of being can positively impact their sense of self-worth, belonging, and visibility in the world. In this sense, representation is not simply about inclusion or tokenism, but about affirming the legitimacy of diverse identities in the imaginations of young audiences.

In this context, the limited representation of non-hegemonic ethnicities in mainstream media also contributes to a broader problem of cultural homogenisation. When a single character is positioned as the sole representative of an entire culture or ethnic group, it can reinforce reductive assumptions and reinforce the notion that one figure is “enough” to fill a

representational “quota”. This creates a paradox in which visibility does not necessarily lead to recognition. Instead, it risks flattening the diversity within communities, encouraging audiences to view all Black characters, all Latin American figures, or all Polynesian peoples as interchangeable. In the case of *Moana*, while the film may affirm certain elements of Polynesian culture, it also risks encouraging the idea that all Pacific identities can be encapsulated within one fictional narrative. The scarcity of nuanced and varied representations means that visibility can lead to the loss of cultural specificity, making it even more important to support multiple, community-led stories that try to portray a spectrum of lived experiences.

There are also clear implications for educators, content creators, and media literacy programmes. If children are mapping their cultural identity through stories like *Moana*, then those stories, and the conversations around them, matter. We need media that are not only diverse, but meaningful. We need teaching that respects complexity and invites dialogue. And we need research on children and childhood that begins by engaging with what is already known about their experiences and perspectives, allowing children to have a louder voice in scholarship.

### **8.7 Concluding Thought**

This research has affirmed that culture is not fixed to media or geography, yet geography, landscape, and environment profoundly shape how culture is felt, recognised, and interpreted. The children in this study did not need academic definitions of Polynesia or production notes about *Moana*’s origins to make sense of what they were seeing. Instead, they relied on what was around them, their school’s kapa haka group, a pounamu necklace, the sound of te reo Māori, a white sand beach, a family member’s tattoos, to place characters in relation to their own world. Children’s reasoning was intuitive, situated, and deeply relational.

By centring children's voices, this thesis contributes to a growing body of work that understands young people as cultural actors. The question was never whether *Moana* got everything "right," but rather, what children do with what they see, how they negotiate recognition, belonging, and identity through media. The answer, as participants suggested, might simply be: *They're from here. They could be both.*

This seemingly simple phrase captures the interpretive openness at the heart of cultural mediation. It challenges us to move beyond binary categories of authenticity and origin, and instead to recognise the ways in which children hold multiple cultural reference points, shifting between them in creative, affective, and socially grounded ways. Their imaginations are not apolitical. They are shaped by bicultural foundations, multicultural realities, and transnational flows, as well as by the personal, familial, and educational experiences that frame everyday meaning-making. These influences converge as children engage with media, reminding us that cultural interpretation is always relational, situated, and alive.

By asking children what they think of *Moana* and other Disney and Pixar films, this research has made visible not only their interpretations, but their hopes, their questions, and their ways of knowing. These knowledges, rooted in everyday life and often expressed through play, are as valid and insightful as any formal analysis. They show us that stories travel, and when they arrive, they do not land on neutral ground. They are made meaningful by those who receive them.

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*Appendix 1: Ethics Approval*

Geography Programme  
School of Social Sciences  
Faculty of Arts and Social  
Sciences  
*Te Kura Kete Aronui*  
The University of Waikato  
Private Bag 3105  
Hamilton 3240  
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THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WAIKATO**  
*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*

Annelore Finger  
Ann Hardy  
Alistair Swale

Screen & Media Studies

30 October 2018

Dear Annelore,

Re: **FS2018-32 Visibility matters: Media, culture and identity in mass media targeted at children (New Zealand and Brazilian perspectives)**

Thank you for submitting a cover letter and a revised application to the FASS Human Research Ethics Committee.

We have reviewed the final version of your application and the Committee is now pleased to offer formal approval for your research activities, including the following:

- survey of children, based on individual play activity.
- group work for children, as an adaption of a focus group method.
- observation of children undertaking individual play activity and group work.
- survey and interview with parents/families of children involved in this research, with pūrākau approach being employed.

We encourage you to contact the committee should issues arise during your data collection, or should you wish to add further research activities or make changes to your project as it unfolds. We wish you all the best with your research. Thank you for engaging with the process of ethical review.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Colin McLeay'.

Colin McLeay, Chair  
*Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee.*

*Appendix 2: Ethics Approval with Amendments*

**Geography Programme**  
School of Social Sciences  
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THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WAIKATO**  
*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*

Annelore Finger  
Ann Hardy  
Gareth Schott

Screen & Media Studies

24 July 2019

Dear Annelore,

Re: **FS2018-32 Visibility matters: Media, culture and identity in mass media targeted at children (New Zealand and Brazilian perspectives)**

Thank you for submitting a document advising of amendments to your original research.

Having considered your suggested amendments, I am pleased to offer formal approval for you to amend your research to include the following:

- interview members of school staff, including teachers.

We encourage you to contact the committee should issues arise during your data collection, or should you wish to make further changes to your project as it unfolds.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'C. McLeay'.

Colin McLeay, on behalf of the  
*Human Research Ethics Committee of the Division of Arts, Law, Psychology and Social Sciences*

*Appendix 3: Research Information Sheet (Phase One)*

## Research Information Sheet

Human Research Ethics Committee  
(Te Kura Kete Aronui)  
(Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences)

Private Bag 3105  
Hamilton 3240  
Phone: 02108436338  
E-mail: asdof1@students.waikato.ac.nz



### *Visibility matters: representations of ethnicity and gender in media targeted at children in Aotearoa New Zealand*

#### Research Information Sheet

##### Kia ora whānau,

What do you and your child think about animation films? Do they love dressing up, singing, pretending to be Elsa, Anna, Moana, Maui, Woody or other characters? Alternatively, do they (or you) prefer to get their role models from somewhere else? If your child is passionate about engaging with media productions, and if he or she is between 5 - 8 years old, then your child is ideal for this research!

My name is Annelore Finger, and I am also part of Te Ao Mārama whānau as my 6-year-old daughter is studying in Kererū room. I am a PhD student at the University of Waikato and want to invite you and your child(ren) to participate in my research. My Doctorate study will explore the ways children relate their identities to media productions targeted at them. My PhD is in the Screen and Media Studies Programme, and it's entitled "Visibility matters: representations of ethnicity and gender in media targeted at children in Aotearoa New Zealand".

One important reminder: this research has received **ethics approval** from the Ethics Committee of the University of Waikato, and it is not sponsored by any party or institution. All subjects involved will remain anonymous (tamariki and whānau).

##### **This study will develop in two stages:**

1) The first stage will be with the children. They will be gathered by similar age groups and will engage in focus groups discussions and play activities during class time, **between 20 and 21 August**. This meeting will take around 60 minutes, and will be held inside Te Ao Mārama School premises. Drawing, playing with cards, action figures, dolls, costumes and songs are some activities children are going to engage along with their peers. Those activities do not present any harm to your child, physically, psychologically, spiritually or emotionally.

2) The second stage will be a one-on-one interview with whānau, inside Te Ao Mārama School premises, for those families who would like to participate. It is not compulsory to participate in a one-on-one interview, but it would be much appreciated.

As a thank you, all participants will go in the draw to win one \$50 MOVIE E-GIFT CARD voucher from HOYTS Cinemas (Te Awa - The Base).

##### **The data collection recording:**

The meetings with children will be audio and video recorded with prior permission from all participants. Meetings with parents/whānau will be audio recorded only, with permission too. During these stages, all the data collection will occur within school premises.

##### **Your choices and rights:**

1. As a participant, you and your child will remain anonymous. Nobody besides the principal researcher (Annelore Finger) will have access to your real names and data.

2. The data collected from this research will be stored securely on a password-protected personal computer and Google drive account for a period of 5 years at least, after which the data will be deleted.
3. If you wish, you may request to view transcript of your and/or your child's meetings.
4. You and your child may also ask a summary of the research findings.
5. You and your child have the right to decline to answer any particular question or to engage in any activity at any moment.
6. You and your child have the right to withdraw from this project up to three weeks after the data collecting has taken place.
7. You and your child have the right to ask any further question during your participation.
8. You have the right to see the outcomes from the data collection in a meeting booked between you and the primary researcher.

**The identity of all participants (adults and children) will remain strictly confidential in writing up and presentation of the research.**

The outcomes of the research will be published in a print publication thesis and an online version of the same document. There is also the possibility of the study be disclosed in conferences and further publications such as papers, book chapters or a book.

Whether or not you decide to participate in the research, I would like to thank you very much for taking the time to read this message and help in making this study possible. If you wish to contact me to learn more about the research, please feel free in doing so by the email addresses and telephone numbers below.

Kind regards,

Annelore Finger

PhD Student - Screen and Media Studies Programme  
 Te Kura Kete Aronui - Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences,  
 Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato - The University of Waikato  
 Private Bag 3105  
 Hamilton, New Zealand  
 Email: [asdf1@students.waikato.ac.nz](mailto:asdf1@students.waikato.ac.nz)  
 Phone: 021 084 36 338

For any queries regarding ethical concerns, please contact my chief supervisor:

Dr Ann Hardy

Senior Lecturer - Screen and Media Studies Programme  
 Te Kura Kete Aronui - Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences,  
 Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato - The University of Waikato  
 Private Bag 3105  
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*"This research project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Any questions about the ethical conduct of this research may be sent to the Secretary of the Committee, email [fass-ethics@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:fass-ethics@waikato.ac.nz), postal address, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Te Kura Kete Aronui, University of Waikato, Te Whare Wananga o Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton 3240."*

*Appendix 4: Participant Consent Form (Phase One)*

## Participant Consent Form

Human Research Ethics Committee  
(Te Kura Kete Aronui)  
(Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences)

Private Bag 3105  
Hamilton 3240  
Phone: 02108436338  
E-mail: [asdof1@students.waikato.ac.nz](mailto:asdof1@students.waikato.ac.nz)



### *Visibility matters: representations of ethnicity and gender in media targeted at children in Aotearoa New Zealand*

#### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Name of the child: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of the family member: \_\_\_\_\_

I have received a copy of the Information Sheet describing the research project. Any questions that I have, relating to the research, have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can ask further questions about the study at any time during my participation and that I can withdraw my engagement or my child's participation at any time up to three weeks after the data collecting.

During the data collecting, I understand that I and/or my child do not have to answer questions or do any activity unless we are happy to talk about the topic or engage with the activity. We can stop the data collecting at any time, and we can ask to have the recording device turned off at any time.

I understand that the outcomes of the research will be published in a print publication thesis and an online version of the same document. There is also the possibility of the study be disclosed in conferences and further publications such as papers, book chapters or a book. I understand that the data collected from this research will be stored securely in the researcher's personal computer and Google Drive account, both protected by passwords for a period of 5 years at least, after which the data will be deleted.

When I sign this consent form, I will retain ownership of my and my child's data, but I give consent for the researcher to use it for the purposes of the research outlined in the Information Sheet.

You have the right to access your data and correct personal information if you like.

I understand that my identity will remain confidential in the presentation of the research findings, and no one else, besides the researcher, will have access to this personal information.

Please complete the following checklist. Tick [✓] the appropriate box for each point.	YES	NO
I wish to view the transcript of my data collected.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I wish to view the transcript of my child's data collected.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I wish to receive a copy of the summary of the research findings.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I wish to see the outcomes from the data collection in a meeting booked between me and the main researcher.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Participant's name :		Researcher's name :	Annelore Finger
Participant's Signature :		Researcher's Signature :	
Date :		Date :	
Contact Details :		Contact Details :	Phone: 02108436338 E-mail: <a href="mailto:asdof1@students.waikato.ac.nz">asdof1@students.waikato.ac.nz</a> Te Kura Kete Aronui (Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences) Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato (The University of Waikato)

*Appendix 5: Tamariki's Participant Consent Form (Phase One)*

## Participant Consent Form

Human Research Ethics Committee  
(Te Kura Kete Aronui)  
(Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences)  
E-mail: asdof1@students.waikato.ac.nz




Private Bag 3105  
Hamilton 3240  
Phone: 02108436338



### *Visibility matters: representations of ethnicity and gender in media targeted at children in Aotearoa New Zealand*

#### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM [TAMARIKI]

Child's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Please complete the following checklist. Tick [✓] in the appropriate box for each option.	Device	Yes	No
I am okay with having my photo taken.			
I agree to be recorded on video.			
I agree to have my voice recorded by a microphone.			

Participant's name:		Researcher's name :	Annelore Spieker
Participant's Signature:		Researcher's Signature :	
Date:			

*Appendix 6: Tamariki's Research Instruments (Phase One)*

# 2019 Research Instruments (Phase One)

Annelore Spieker

## Introduction

Hello, everybody. Thank you for joining me today.

I am here to study what do you think about different races and ethnicities and if you can observe these in characters that you probably already know. We are going to talk about some questions that I will ask you. There is no right or wrong. Just let me know what you think.

My name is Annelore, you can call me Anne and I come from Brazil. Will show them on the map.

Please, tell us your name and where do you come from.

Do you allow me to collect data from you? Please see this form - show Participant Consent Form for Tamariki (Phase One)

## Drawing



### 1) [Drawing] Activity description and questions

1. I would like you to imagine yourself as being a character that you would see on the TV, movies, YouTube, etc. It could be anything, a hero, a superhero, a princess, a cartoon character, whatever you'd like.

**OR**

1. I would like you to create a character that doesn't exist, and you would see her/him on the TV, movies, YouTube, etc. It could be anything, a hero, a superhero, a princess, a cartoon character, whatever you'd like.
2. Now, can you share with me what did you draw and why?

## Cards



## 2) [Cards] Questions

1. What are these? What types of people do you think they are?
  2. Do you know real people like these?
  3. Have you ever met people like these before?
  4. Do you see people like these around you? Maybe in your neighbourhood, school or family?
  5. What kind of place do you think they live in?
  6. And where do you think they work?
  7. Is any of these **special** for you? Why?
  8. Is any of these **similar** to you? / Who's like you? Why?
1. What do you think about having a Disney character/princess that is similar to you?
  2. Is any of these **similar** to someone from your family? Why?
  3. Would you like to see any **different** character among these? What would it be?
  4. Do you have a favourite Disney character? Which one? Why?
  5. And what about Moana? Do you think she is or has something these other characters don't have or aren't?

## Toys (dolls & action figures)



### 3) [Toys] Questions

1. What do you think about these toys?
2. Do you know them?
3. What comes up to your mind when you look at them?
4. Do you think they are similar or different from each other? Why?
5. Would you pick one of these to be your **best friend**? Why?
1. If you could choose one of them to be your **neighbour**, who would you choose? Why?
2. If you could choose one of them **to study** with you who would you pick? Why?
3. If you could **be** one of them, who would you be? Why?
4. Is there any of these you think **represents** you or looks like you? Why? And what do you think about this?
5. Is any of these toys **similar** to someone from your family? Why?
6. Is any of these toys **similar** to a friend of yours? Why?

## Costumes & Songs



### 4) [Costumes & Songs] Activity description

1. I will let them choose a costume and suggest them to dress up if they like.
2. Then, I will play Disney's main songs themes.
3. I will tell them they can dance and do whatever they want to. I'll observe.
4. I will play songs and see their reaction. After a while, we will seat together and talk about *what* and *why* they did during the activity.

#### 4) [Costumes & Songs] Questions

1. Would you like to pick one of these costumes? You dress up if you wish.
2. What costume did you choose? Why?
3. Can you tell me something about this character?
4. Do you think this character has something that relates to you? In what ways?
5. What do you think about wearing something that is not from your culture, or not part of your family?
6. Is there any of these songs we've just heard you like the most? Why?
7. What do you think about watching a movie in your mother tongue (the language that you speak at home with your family)?
8. What do you think about watching a Disney movie in your language? Your family's language.

*Appendix 7: One-on-One Interview with Whānau (Phase One)*

## Interview with whānau (Phase One)

### Topics about Culture & Family & School:

1. Can you tell me a little bit of your child's cultural background?
2. Would you say your child is aware of their cultural identity?
3. Is there anything you do to keep your culture connected to your children? E.g. language, food, folklore, talking about legends, myths, songs, clothing, events, etc.
4. Do your children have contact with media content about their culture?
5. (If so) What do they access?
6. Who makes those choices?
7. Do you use another family language (besides English) when speaking with your child?
8. Did you choose this school for some specific reason?
9. Is there any connection between this school and your child's cultural background?
10. Do you think teachers and staff members do activities to explore children's identities at school?
11. Did you know this school (Te Ao Māorama School) has more than 35 ethnicities among students? What do you think about this?

### Topics about Culture & Disney's *Moana*

1. Did you watch Disney's *Moana*?
2. (If so) What did/do you think about it?
3. Did you know Disney had the help of several professionals from the Polynesia region to create the *Moana*'s story? What do you think about this?
4. Did you know *Moana* was dubbed in te reo Māori, Tahitian and Hawaiian?
5. What do you think about a corporation as Disney translating a global movie in local Indigenous languages?
6. What do you think about media content for children being the same globally speaking?

7. Do you think people from specific ethnicities should be the ones who can write and create stories about themselves?

**Topics about Culture & Media (general)**

1. When you were a child, do you remember having cultural representations on media about your culture?
2. (If so) How was it like?
3. Currently, how would you describe the way media represents people who comes from the same cultural background as you?
4. Do you think media influences how children build their identities, depending on what they watch or listen to?
5. Is there anything you would like to be different regarding representations on media targeted at children?

*Appendix 8: Data collection with Kaiako (Phase One)*



Interview with kaiako

### Interview with kaiako (teachers)

1. How would you describe your group of students in terms of cultural diversity?
2. Do your students experience any challenges when settling into a New Zealand school environment?
3. What kinds of classroom activities help children feel a sense of belonging in Aotearoa New Zealand?
4. Are there particular activities or exercises that help students feel connected to their homeland?
5. Do you use any media resources in your classroom to support tamariki in feeling both a sense of belonging in Aotearoa New Zealand and a connection to their culture of origin (e.g., maps, costumes, toys, events, songs)?
6. Why do you think these practices are important for children?

### Interview with kaiako (teachers)

1. What do you observe when children participate in activities related to their identities or ethnicities? Does it affect interactions among students?
2. Have you observed any instances of conflict or teasing among students that seemed related to cultural differences?
3. Have you observed any instances of conflict or teasing among students that seemed related to gender differences?
4. Do boys and girls express themselves differently in class or when choosing activities?

### Interview with kaiako (school principal)

1. How would you describe the school?
2. What are the school's core values?
3. Are these values practised daily at the school?
4. Why is it important for the school to have students from different ethnic backgrounds?
5. What is the significance of identity awareness for both tamariki and kaiako?
6. Does Aotearoa New Zealand's official bicultural identity influence the activities and topics developed in class?
7. How does the presence of ethnicities beyond Māori and Pākehā shape classroom topics or school practices with students and their families?
8. Do you think it is important to discuss students' identities? If so, in what ways?
9. Given that students today have more access to media compared to 10–15 years ago, what are your thoughts on using media content in class? Do you believe media influences children's identities?

*Appendix 9: PhD Research Communication for Participant Recruitment (Phase Two)*



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
WAIKATO  
*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*

## PhD research participants wanted: parents/whānau & children/tamariki

Kia ora. My name is Annelore Spieker. I am a PhD student from the University of Waikato (Screen and Media studies). I am Brazilian, and I have two beautiful and loving daughters between 4 and 8 years-old. I love spending time with my family and friends making yummy meals and playing fun games.

I am looking for participants for my doctoral research.

### What is the research about?

I am interested in how children in New Zealand develop ideas about cultural identities by watching movies (mainly in Disney animated films).

### Participants needed:

- 1) Children between 6 and 12 years old that already watched Disney's Moana.
- 2) Parents [or any family member close to the child].

### The data collection:

The completion will be online (Google forms/Zoom). Ends on 28 May 2021.

This research has approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee from the University of Waikato. Reference number FS2018-32.

Online  
completion

Rewards for  
all  
participants

To register online and learn more, please, click on the link  
<https://forms.gle/a3Gu5b4zkxyHecA7>



*Appendix 10: Participant Online Recruitment, Participant Consent Form, and Research  
Information Sheet (Phase Two)*



## PhD research participants wanted: parents & children/whānau & tamariki

Is your child between 6 and 12 years old and had previously watched Disney's Moana?  
Would they share their thoughts about Disney characters?  
Would you be willing to complete an online survey about media, culture and childhood?

Please, complete this short form so you may learn more about the research and enrol to participate.  
Thank you :)

Annelore.

In case you have any questions, please do not hesitate in contacting me:  
[asdof1@students.waikato.ac.nz](mailto:asdof1@students.waikato.ac.nz)

\* Indicates required question

Your full name: \*

Your answer

Where do you live? (city/town) \*

Your answer

Olá! My name is Annelore Spieker. I come from Brazil. I have two amazing daughters between 4 and 8 years old. And I am studying my PhD at the University of Waikato in the Screen and Media department.



ABOUT THE RESEARCH: I am looking for whānau and tamariki to participate in my PhD research. I'm interested in how children develop ideas about cultures by watching movies (mainly in Disney animated films). On the following pages, you will learn more about the research. Thank you for making time in reading this.




REWARDS: 1) Every parent will get a one scratch off lottery ticket for filling out the survey. 2) Every parent that opt in to participate in the one-on-one online interview will get a \$10 gift card from The Warehouse. 3) Every child will get a \$10 gift card from The Warehouse for participating in the one-on-one online interview. 4) All participants (parents and children) will go in a draw to get a \$50 gift card from The Warehouse at the end of the data collection (after 28 May). There will be two prizes.

[Next](#)[Clear form](#)

How is the research going to work?


Mandatory:



**1) First, you will receive a link to an online survey for you to complete.**

Back Next Clear form

How is the research going to work?

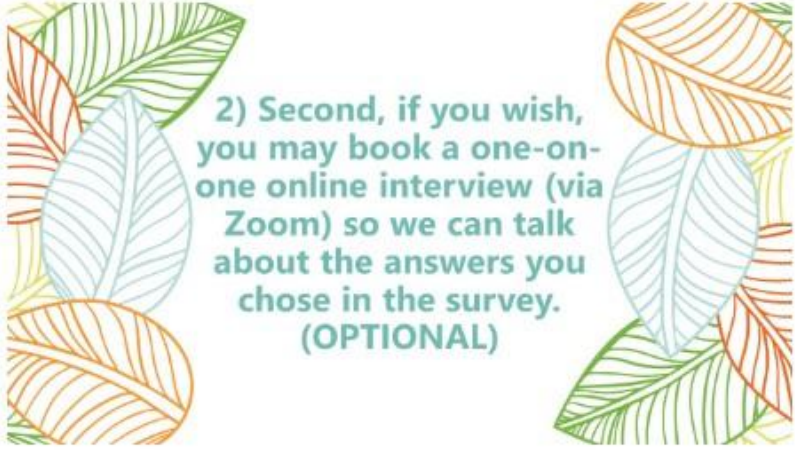


**The survey focuses on your opinions and perceptions about cultural representations through media targeted at children.**

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How is the research going to work?

Optional:



**2) Second, if you wish, you may book a one-on-one online interview (via Zoom) so we can talk about the answers you chose in the survey. (OPTIONAL)**

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How is the research going to work?

Mandatory:

Important: I can adapt the data collection to suit your family needs. E.g. collecting data face-to-face, parent collecting data directly from the child, etc.




**3) Third, I will interview your children in a one-on-one online interview (via Zoom) so we can talk about their perceptions of Disney and Pixar characters.**

Back Next Clear form

**Important**

All participants will remain anonymous.



**This research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee from the University of Waikato (reference number FS2018-32).**

[Back](#) [Next](#) [Clear form](#)

### Terms and conditions of responsibility and privacy:

Please, read carefully all the information below

#### RESEARCH INFORMATION (you will receive a copy of this form in your email): VISIBILITY MATTERS: MEDIA, CULTURE AND IDENTITY IN MASS MEDIA TARGETED AT CHILDREN

Dear Parents and Whānau,

This is a PhD research from the Screen and Media Studies Programme at Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato (The University of Waikato).

I'm interested in how children develop ideas about cultural identity by watching movies (mainly in Disney animated films).

I am inviting you AND your children/tamariki to participate in my study.

Children must be between 6 and 12 years old (boys and girls) and must have already watched Disney's Moana (2016).

ANY PARTY OR INSTITUTION DOES NOT SPONSOR THIS RESEARCH.

#### THE DATA COLLECTION PROCESS:

All the meetings will be online (via Zoom).

After completing this form, you will receive a link with a survey to be filled by you.

This data collection will be taken place in three steps:

- 1) Online survey completed by the parent/whānau. (Mandatory).
- 2) One-on-one interview (in case the parent opts to) via Zoom (online). (OPTIONAL).
- 3) One-on-one interview with tamariki via Zoom. (Mandatory).

#### THE DURATION OF THE DATA COLLECTION:

a) Survey completed by the parent/whānau: up to 30 minutes (depending on the participant).

b) One-on-one interview with parent: between 30 to 60 minutes (depending on the participant).

c) One-on-one interview with tamariki: between 30 to 60 minutes (depending on the participant).

ALL THE MEETINGS WILL BE RECORDED.

**YOUR CHOICES AND RIGHTS:**

1. As a participant, you and your child will remain anonymous. Nobody besides the main researcher (Annelore Spieker) will have access to your real names and data.
2. The data collected from this research will be stored securely on a password-protected personal computer and Google Drive account for a period of 5 years at least, after which the data will be deleted.
3. If you wish, you may request to view meetings transcripts you and your child have participated.
4. You and your child may also ask a summary of the research findings.
5. You and your child have the right to decline to answer any particular question at any moment.
6. You and your child have the right to withdraw from this project up to three weeks after the data collected during your meetings.
7. You and your child have the right to ask any further question before, during and after your participation.
8. You have the right to see the outcomes from the data collection in a meeting booked between you and the main researcher after the integral text has been written up.

**PARTICIPANTS IDENTITY DISCLOSURE:**

The identity of all participants (adults and children) will remain strictly confidential in writing up and presenting the research.

**THE RESEARCH'S OUTCOMES:**

The outcomes of the research will be published in an online thesis. The research may be presented in conferences and further publications such as papers, book chapters or books.

**REWARDS:**

- a) Every parent will get a one scratch off lottery ticket for filling out the survey.
- b) Every parent who participates in the one-on-one online interview will get a \$10 gift card from The Warehouse.
- c) Every child will get a \$10 gift card from The Warehouse for participating in the one-on-one online interview.
- d) All participants (parents and children) will go in a draw to get a \$50 gift card from The Warehouse at the end of the data collection (after 28 May). There will be two prizes.

The data collection ends on 28 May 2021.

All gift cards will be sent via email.

**ETHICS APPROVAL:**

This research has ethical approval by the Human Research Ethics Committee from Waikato University (reference number FS2018-32). This research has been tested in two trials in a Primary School in Hamilton.

Whether or not you decide to participate in the research, I would like to thank you for making time in reading this message.

If you wish to learn more about the research, please feel free in contacting me by email and/or telephone numbers below.

Ngā mihi,  
Annelore Spieker.

PhD Candidate [Screen and Media Studies Programme]  
Division of Arts, Law, Social Science and Psychology  
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato - The University of Waikato  
Hamilton, New Zealand  
Email: [asdof1@students.waikato.ac.nz](mailto:asdof1@students.waikato.ac.nz)

For any queries regarding ethical concerns, please contact my supervisors and/or the Human Research Ethics Committee:

Dr Ann Hardy [Chief Supervisor]  
Email: [ann.hardy@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:ann.hardy@waikato.ac.nz)

Dr Gareth Schott [Supervisor]  
Email: [gareth.schott@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:gareth.schott@waikato.ac.nz)

Dr Nathan Cooper [Chair of the Human Research Ethics Committee - University of Waikato]  
Email: [nathan.cooper@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:nathan.cooper@waikato.ac.nz)

PhD research reference number FS2018-32.

I accept the research's terms and conditions:

- Yes  
 No

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Do you allow your child to participate in this research? [Please note it is fundamental the child's participation in the data collection].

- Yes  
 No

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Would you (or any other family member) participate in this research? [Please note it is fundamental the parent's participation in the data collection, at least filling out the online survey].

Yes

No

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**CHILD/TAMARIKI'S INFO**

If you have more than one child who would like to participate in this study, you can fill out as many forms as needed.

Child's first name:

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

Child's last name (family name):

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

Child's age:

- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11
- 12

Child's gender:

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary

Child's ethnicity (apply as many as necessary):

- Māori
- Pacific Peoples
- European
- Asian
- Middle Eastern
- Latin American
- African
- Unknown
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Can your child speak in English?

- Yes
- No

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**Language/s spoken at home**

Please, write the language your child uses to communicate:

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

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**Technology access**

Because this research is online, it is important to know some details about technology access.

---

Do you and/or your child have access to a computer, tablet, smartphone, or cellphone?

Yes

No

---

Do you and/or your child have access to an internet connection (wi-fi or mobile data)?

Yes

No

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You'll receive a link to complete the online SURVEY shortly.

The online survey takes around 30 minutes to be completed.



Back

Submit

Clear form

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*Appendix 11: Tamariki's One-on-One Interview Questionnaire and Online Survey (Phase Two)*

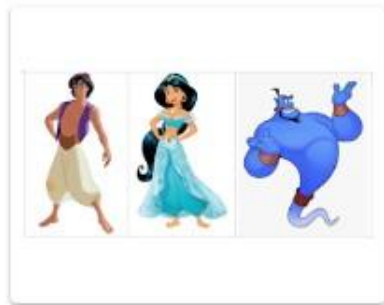


## Children's interviews

Child's name

Your answer

1. Have you watched any of these stories before? Mark as many as you watched.



Aladdin



Brave



Cinderella



Coco



Elena



Frozen



Moana



Mulan



Pocahontas



Sleeping Beauty



Snow White



Tangled



The Beauty and The Beast



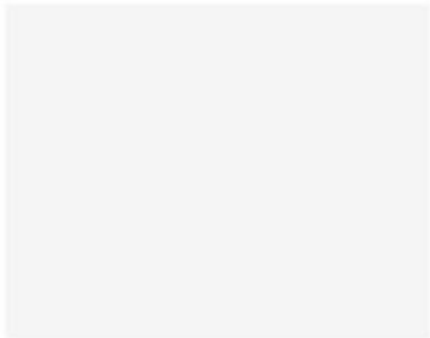
The Little Mermaid



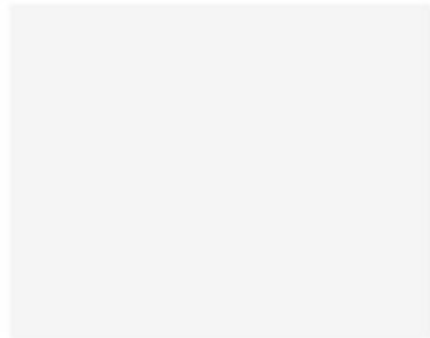
The Princess and The Frog



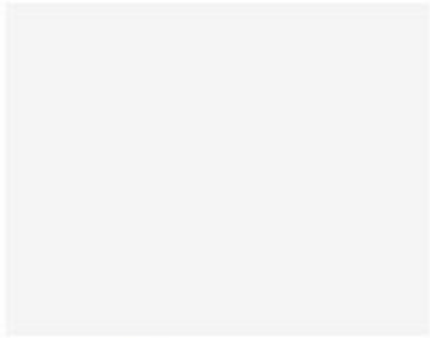
Toy Story



None of them



All of them

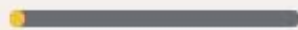


I don't know

Observation:

Your answer

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Clear form

**IF YOU COULD CHOOSE TO BE A CHARACTER, WHO WOULD YOU PICK?**

Now we're going to see those characters again. If you could be any of these characters, which ones would you choose?

2. If you could **be** any of these guys, which one would you choose? (You may select more than one)



Aladdin



Anna



Ariel



Aurora



Beast



Belle



Buzz



Cinderella



Elena



Elsa



Genie



Jasmine



Kristoff



Maui



Merida



Miguel



Moana



Mulan



Pocahontas



Prince Adam



Rapunzel



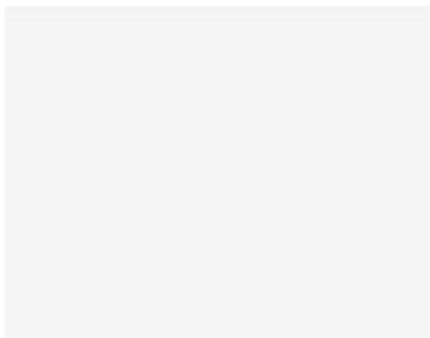
Snow White



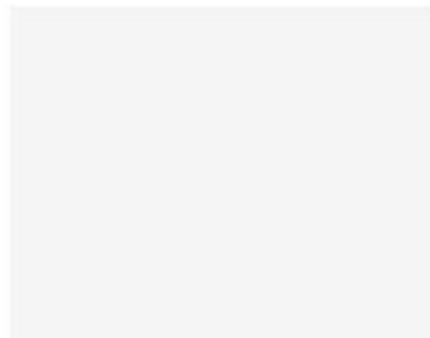
Tiana



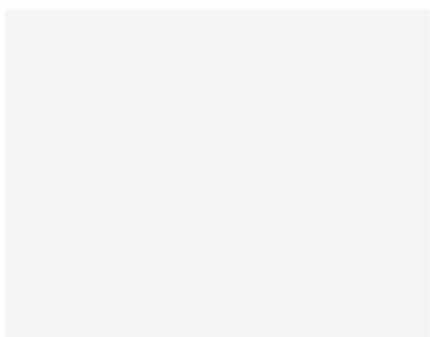
Woody



None of them



All of them



Don't know

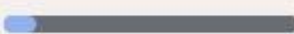
Observations

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

---

You chose them because:

- Their personality (E.g. nice, bold, funny, friendly, protective, good person, etc.)
- Because they're beautiful
- The way they dress up (gown, skirt, accessories, shoes, pants, jackets, etc.)
- Hair colour or hair style
- The place where they come from
- Skin colour
- Body shape
- Their face (eyes, mounth, nose, etc)
- The way they sound (accent)
- Their ethnicity
- Landscape/architecture
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

[Back](#) [Next](#)  Page 2 of 18 [Clear form](#)

## FRIENDSHIP

3. a) If you could choose someone of these guys to be friends with, who would you choose? b) Which one of these guys would be a good friend? c) Which one of these guys would be your best friend? You may choose more than one.

 Aladdin Anna Ariel Aurora Beast Belle



Buzz



Cinderella



Elena



Elsa



Genie



Jasmine



Kristoff



Maui



Merida



Miguel



Moana



Mulan



Pocahontas



Prince Adam



Rapunzel



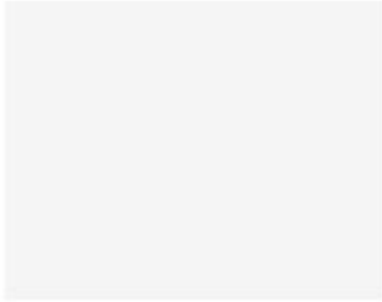
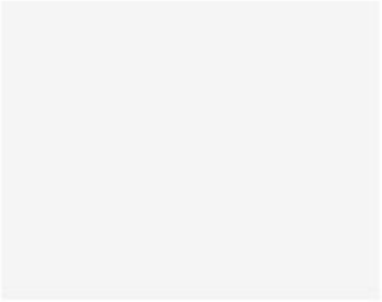
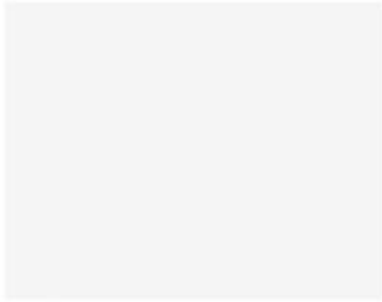

Snow White



Tiana



Woody

	
<input type="checkbox"/> None of them	<input type="checkbox"/> All of them
	
<input type="checkbox"/> Don't know	
<hr/>	
<b>Observations</b>	
Your answer _____	
<hr/>	
<b>You chose them because:</b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Their personality (E.g. nice, bold, funny, friendly, protective, good person, etc.)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Because they're beautiful	
<input type="checkbox"/> The way they dress up (gown, skirt, accessories, shoes, pants, jackets, etc.)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Hair colour or hair style	
<input type="checkbox"/> The place where they come from	
<input type="checkbox"/> Skin colour	
<input type="checkbox"/> Body shape	
<input type="checkbox"/> Their face (eyes, mounth, nose, etc)	
<input type="checkbox"/> The way they sound (accent)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Their ethnicity	
<input type="checkbox"/> Landscape/architecture	
<input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____	
<input type="button" value="Back"/>	<input type="button" value="Next"/>  Page 3 of 18 <input type="button" value="Clear form"/>

## FAMILY MEMBER

4. Are any of these people like your family [similar to your family]? Does any of these characters resemble your family?



Aladdin



Brave



Cinderella



Coco



Elena



Frozen



Moana



Mulan



Pocahontas



Sleeping Beauty



Snow White



Tangled



The Beauty and The Beast



The Little Mermaid



The Princess and The Frog



Toy Story

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> None of them	<input type="checkbox"/> All of them
<input type="checkbox"/>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Don't know	

---

Observations

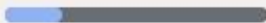
Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

---

You chose them because:

- Their personality (E.g. nice, bold, funny, friendly, protective, good person, etc.)
- Because they're beautiful
- The way they dress up (gown, skirt, accessories, shoes, pants, jackets, etc.)
- Hair colour or hair style
- The place where they come from
- Skin colour
- Body shape
- Their face (eyes, mounth, nose, etc)
- The way they sound (accent)
- Their ethnicity
- Landscape/architecture
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

---

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## DISNEY CHARACTERS AND YOU

5. Would you like to see a Disney character like you?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- I don't know

How would they be?

Your answer

What are the things they would do?

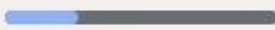
Your answer

Observations

Your answer

Back

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Clear form

## People and places

Let's talk about people. Are we different from each other? Are your friends and family similar or different? Do they come from the same places?

Now, think about your family, your friends, your teachers, your neighbours, and your classmates.



6. Are you different from each other?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- Don't know

6. Are you different from each other?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- Don't know

Observations

Your answer

7. Do you come from the same places or countries?

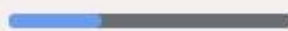
- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- Don't know

Observations

Your answer

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## People and places

8. What makes people different from each other? [Choose as many as you want].



The language they speak



The way they sound (accent)



Family traditions they celebrate (e.g. Chinese New Year, Matariki, Diwali, Ramadan, Christmas, Easter, etc.)



The way they dress up

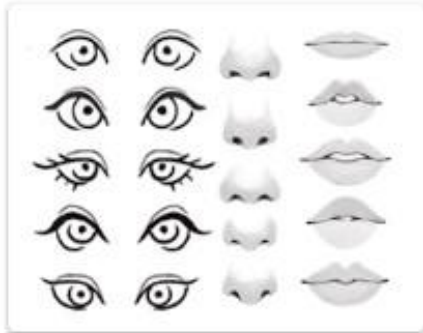


The food they eat

## Observations

Your answer

9. What makes people different from each other? [Choose as many as you want].



The way their face looks like (eyes-nose-mouth shape)



Their hair colour, hairstyle, things they put over their heads



Their skin colour



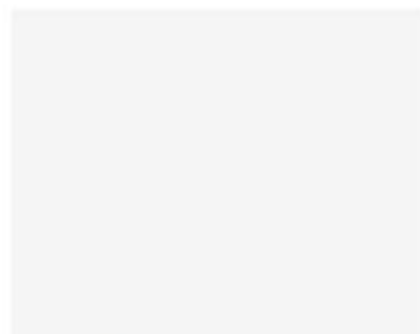
The songs they listen to



The dance moves they make

Other:

\_\_\_\_\_



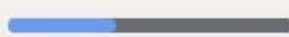
Don't know

Observations

Your answer

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## AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

New Zealand's flag



10. Who could come from Aotearoa New Zealand? (You may choose more than one character).

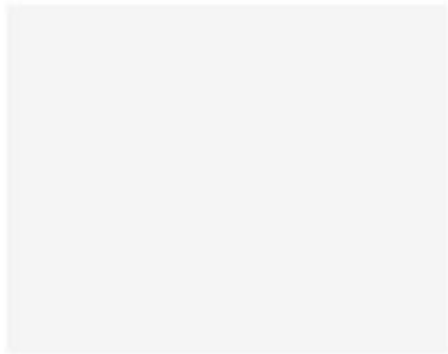
 1 Elena 2 Jasmine 3 Moana 4 Mulan



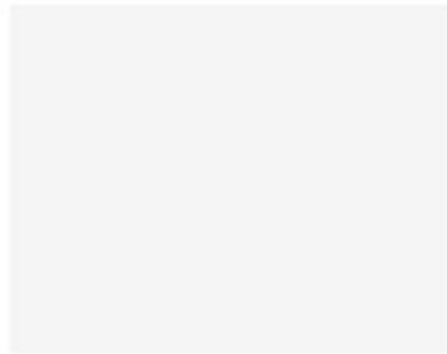
5 Pocahontas



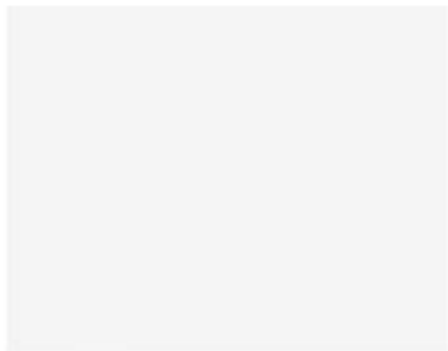
6 Tiana



None of them



All of them



I don't know

**Observations**

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

You chose them because:

- Their personality (E.g. nice, bold, funny, friendly, protective, good person, etc.)
- Because they're beautiful
- The way they dress up (gown, skirt, accessories, shoes, pants, jackets, etc.)
- Hair colour or hair style
- The place where they come from
- Skin colour
- Body shape
- Their face (eyes, mounth, nose, etc)
- The way they sound (accent)
- Their ethnicity
- Landscape/architecture
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

11. Who could come from Aotearoa New Zealand? (You may choose more than one character).



1 Anna



2 Ariel



3 Aurora



4 Belle



5 Cinderella



6 Elsa



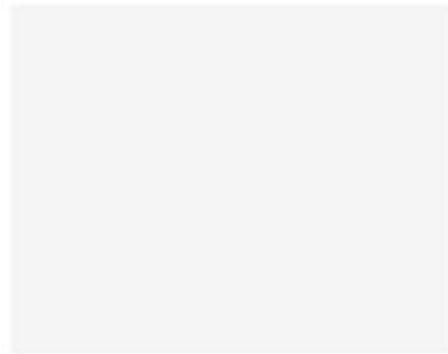
7 Merida



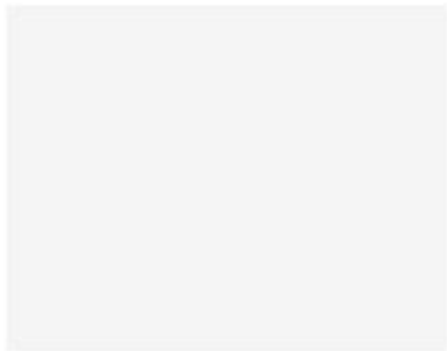
8 Rapunzel



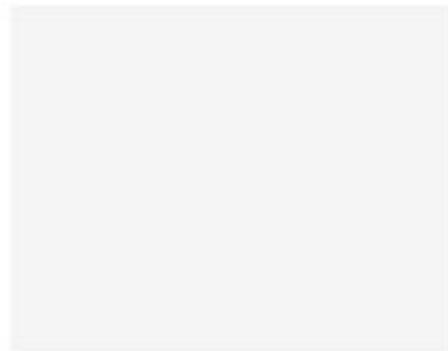
9 Snow White



None of them



All of them



I don't know

**Observations**

Your answer: \_\_\_\_\_

---

You chose them because:

- Their personality (E.g. nice, bold, funny, friendly, protective, good person, etc.)
- Because they're beautiful
- The way they dress up (gown, skirt, accessories, shoes, pants, jackets, etc.)
- Hair colour or hair style
- The place where they come from
- Skin colour
- Body shape
- Their face (eyes, mounth, nose, etc)
- The way they sound (accent)
- Their ethnicity
- Landscape/architecture
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

12. Who could come from Aotearoa New Zealand? (You may choose more than one character).



1 Aladdin



2 Beast



3 Buzz



4 Genie



5 Kristoff



6 Maui



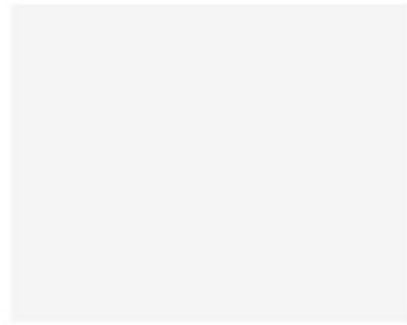
7 Miguel



8 Prince Adam



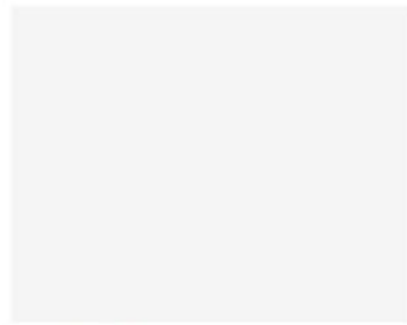
9 Woody



None of them



All of them



I don't know


Observations

Your answer

---

You chose them because:

- Their personality (E.g. nice, bold, funny, friendly, protective, good person, etc.)
- Because they're beautiful
- The way they dress up (gown, skirt, accessories, shoes, pants, jackets, etc.)
- Hair colour or hair style
- The place where they come from
- Skin colour
- Body shape
- Their face (eyes, mounth, nose, etc)
- The way they sound (accent)
- Their ethnicity
- Landscape/architecture
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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## AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

New Zealand's flag



13. Which of these stories could come from Aotearoa New Zealand?



Aladdin



Brave



Cinderella



Coco



Elena



Frozen



Moana



Mulan



Pocahontas



Sleeping Beauty



Snow White



Tangled



The Beauty and The Beast



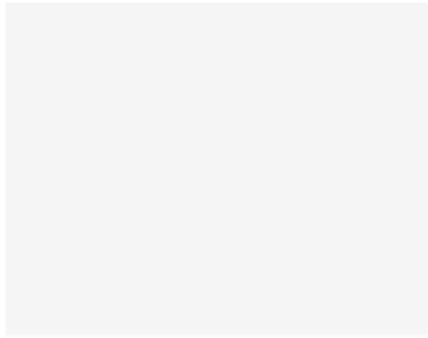
The Little Mermaid



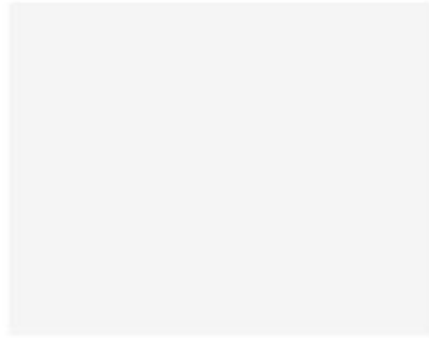
The Princess and The Frog



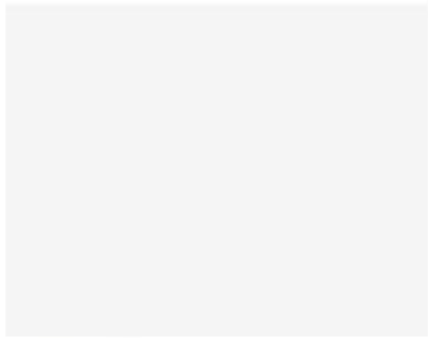
Toy Story



None of them



All of them



I don't know

Observations

Your answer

---

You chose those stories because:

You see people like them around you

People in NZ dress up like them

The landscape/architecture of the movie resembles NZ

People in NZ talk in the same language

Their ethnicity

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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## DISNEY'S MOANA



14. Have you watched Disney's *Moana*?

- Yes
- No

15. What language did you watch Disney's *Moana*?

- Te reo Māori
- English
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

What did you think about the movie?

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

Observations

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

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Clear form

## DISNEY'S MOANA - MAIN CHARACTERS

16. If Moana was a real person, where would she would come from?



Aotearoa New Zealand

Pacific Islands

America/United States

Don't know

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Observations

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

#### Why?

The language she speaks

Her clothes

Her necklace

Her hair

Her skin colour

Her face

Her ethnicity

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

17. If Maui was a real person, where would he come from?



- Aotearoa New Zealand
- Pacific Islands
- America/United States
- Don't know
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Observations

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

Why?

- The language he speaks
- His clothes
- His hook
- His hair
- His skin colour
- His face
- The place he lives
- His tattoos
- His ethnicity
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

18. Where does *Moana's* story come from?



Aotearoa New Zealand

Pacific Islands

United States

Don't know

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Observations

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

Why?

You may find people like them there

People in dress up like them there

The landscape/architecture of the movie resembles this place

People talk in the same language there

Their ethnicity

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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## ETHNICITIES: HAVE YOU HEARD OF THEM?

Now we're going to talk about the characters' ethnicities. Have you heard about these words? Do you know what they mean?



19. Have you heard any of these words before? (Choose the words you have heard before):

- Māori
- Kiwi
- Pacific People
- Polynesian
- Pasifika
- Chinese
- Indian
- Asian
- Middle Eastern
- African
- Latin American
- European
- Pākehā
- Indigenous

Observations			
Your answer			
20. Do you know what they mean?			
<input type="radio"/> Yes			
<input type="radio"/> No			
<input type="radio"/> Some of them			
Observations			
Your answer			
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## ETHNICITY - MĀORI



21. Do you know what a Māori person is? Is any of these characters Māori?



Aladdin



Anna



Ariel



Aurora



Beast



Belle

 Buzz Cinderella Elena Elsa Genie Jasmine



Kristoff



Maui



Merida



Miguel



Moana



Mulan



Pocahontas



Prince Adam



Rapunzel



Snow White



Tiana



Woody

None of them

All of them

Don't know

---

Observations

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

---

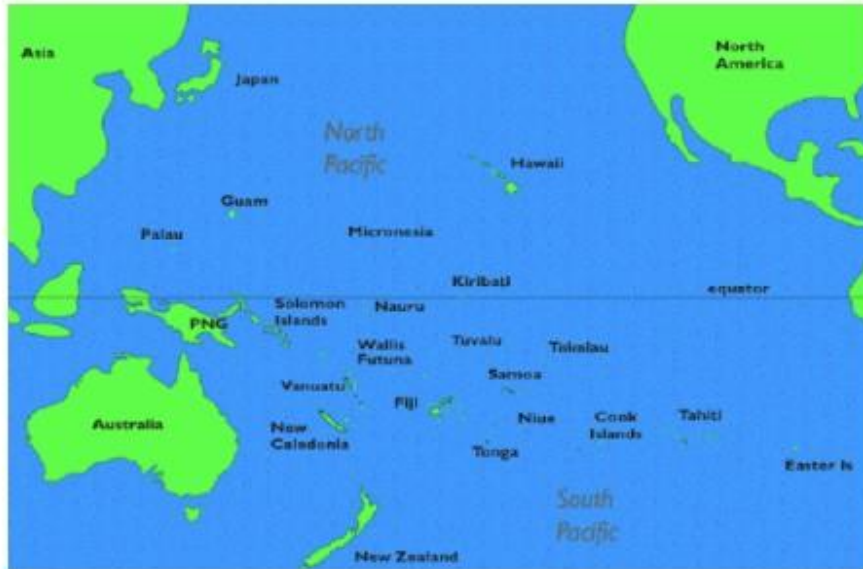
You chose them because:

- Their personality (E.g. nice, bold, funny, friendly, protective, good person, etc.)
- Because they're beautiful
- The way they dress up (gown, skirt, accessories, shoes, pants, jackets, etc.)
- Hair colour or hair style
- The place they they come from
- Skin colour
- Body shape
- Their face (eyes, mounth, nose, etc)
- The way they sound (accent)
- Their ethnicity
- Landscape/architecture
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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### PACIFIC ISLANDS AND POLYNESIA

Now, we have a map of the Pacific Islands. Aotearoa New Zealand right at the bottom.



22. Which one of these characters could come from the Pacific Islands?



Aladdin



Beast



Buzz



Genie

 Kristoff Maui Miguel Prince Adam Woody Elena Jasmine Moana



Mulan



Pocahontas



Tiana



Anna



Ariel



Aurora



Belle



Cinderella



Elsa



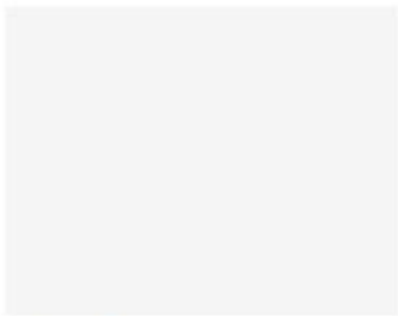
Merida



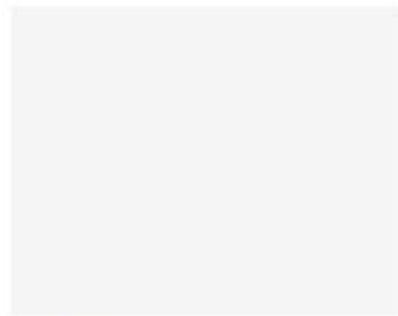
Rapunzel



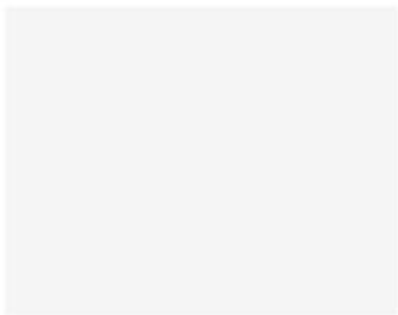
Snow White



None of them



All of them



Don't know


Observations

Your answer

---

You chose them because:

- Their personality (E.g. nice, bold, funny, friendly, protective, good person, etc.)
- Because they're beautiful
- The way they dress up (gown, skirt, accessories, shoes, pants, jackets, etc.)
- Hair colour or hair style
- The place where they come from
- Skin colour
- Body shape
- Their face (eyes, mounth, nose, etc)
- The way they sound (accent)
- Their ethnicity
- Landscape/architecture
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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## CHINA

Here we have the world map with China highlighted in red.



Here is the flag of China



23. Which one of these characters could come from China?



Aladdin



Beast

 Buzz Genie Kristoff Maui Miguel Prince Adam Woody Elena



Jasmine



Moana



Mulan



Pocahontas



Tiana



Anna



Ariel



Aurora



Belle



Cinderella



Elsa



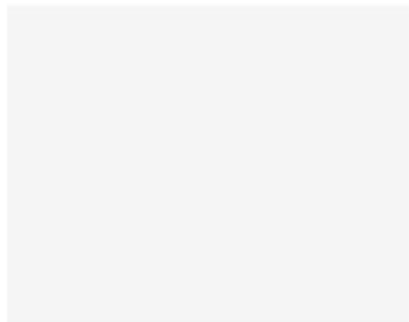
Merida



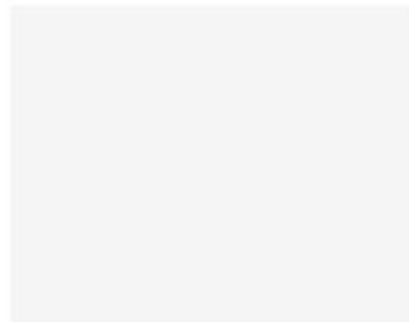
Rapunzel



Snow White



None of them



All of them

Don't know

---

Observations:

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

---

You chose them because:

- Their personality (E.g. nice, bold, funny, friendly, protective, good person, etc.)
- Because they're beautiful
- The way they dress up (gown, skirt, accessories, shoes, pants, jackets, etc.)
- Hair colour or hair style
- The place where they come from
- Skin colour
- Body shape
- Their face (eyes, mounth, nose, etc)
- The way they sound (accent)
- Their ethnicity
- Landscape/architecture
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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**INDIA**

Here we have the world map with India highlighted in green.



Flag of India



24. Which characters could come from India? Which characters could be from India?



Aladdin



Beast



Buzz



Genie



Kristoff



Maui



Miguel



Prince Adam



Woody



Elena



Jasmine



Moana



Mulan



Pocahontas



Tiana



Anna



Ariel



Aurora



Belle



Cinderella



Elsa



Merida



Rapunzel



Snow White

None of them All of them

Don't know

---

Observations:

Your answer

---

You chose them because:

- Their personality (E.g. nice, bold, funny, friendly, protective, good person, etc.)
- Because they're beautiful
- The way they dress up (gown, skirt, accessories, shoes, pants, jackets, etc.)
- Hair colour or hair style
- The place where they come from
- Skin colour
- Body shape
- Their face (eyes, mouth, nose, etc)
- The way they sound (accent)
- Their ethnicity
- Landscape/architecture
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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## DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ETHNICITIES

25. In your opinion, is there any difference between Chinese and Indian people?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- Don't know

Observations:

Your answer

26. In your opinion, is there any difference between a New Zealander, a Kiwi and a Māori?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- Don't know

Observations:

Your answer

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## WHO IS ALLOWED TO CREATE STORIES ABOUT OTHER PEOPLES' CULTURES?



27. Can someone create a story about Aotearoa New Zealand even if they weren't born here? If so, why?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- Don't know

Observations:

Your answer

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*Appendix 12: Whānau's Online Survey (Phase Two)*



## Parents' survey [Phase Two]

Your full name

Your answer

Where do you live? (city/town)

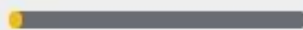
Your answer

Region

Waikato

Auckland

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**Child's information:**

Child's name:

Your answer

---

1) Child's age:

- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11
- 12

2) Child's gender:

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary

3) Child's ethnicity (apply as many as necessary):

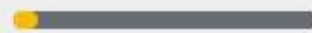
- Māori
- Pacific Peoples
- European
- Asian
- Middle Eastern
- Latin American
- African
- Unknown
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

4) Has your child watched Disney's *Moana* previously?

- Yes
- No

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## UNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT ETHNICITIES



5) What is your understanding of ethnicity and cultural background? Apply as many as necessary.

- a name to call a group of people
- one or more elements of common culture, for example religion, customs, or language
- unique community of interests, feelings, and actions
- a shared sense of common origins or ancestry
- a common geographic origin
- a measure of cultural affiliation
- a self-perceived measure of belonging, and people can belong to more than one ethnic group
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

## UNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT ETHNICITIES

6) What is the country of your child's family roots/ancestry? Write more than one if applicable.

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

7) How aware is your child about their ethnicity and cultural background (family roots)?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very unaware	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very aware

8) What is the main source of information you use to educate your child about their cultural background?

- Being in contact with whānau/relatives
- Friends from the same ethnicity
- School she/he attends
- Media resources (movies, TV channels, books, songs, etc.)
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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## COMPONENTS OF YOUR CULTURE

COMPONENTS OF CULTURE. For instance, in Brazil (my homeland), some of my culture's **VISIBLE** aspects are samba, football, beautiful beaches, summertime, Cristo Redentor, basically things we often see on media. And some of the **INVISIBLE** aspects of the Brazilian culture are very generous and welcoming people, loud and happy gatherings (including in professional environments); friendly and helpful towards other people; we base our daily lives on religion and faith. Now, let's reflect on the aspects of your child's family culture.



9) What are the visible components of your child's family culture?

Your answer

---

10) What are the invisible components of your child's family culture?

Your answer

---

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**TAMARIKI & WHĀNAU LANGUAGES**

11) Besides English, does your child speak any other language connected to their whānau/family?

Yes

No

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**FAMILY LANGUAGE(S)**


11A) What is the language your child speaks at home [besides English]? List more than one if necessary.

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

11B) How important is it to you that your child consumes media resources (movies, songs, books, etc.) in the language spoken at home?

1 2 3 4 5

Not at all important      Very important

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## CHILDHOOD AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND (FAMILY ROOTS)



12) How often do you speak with your child about their cultural background [cultural heritage]?

1      2      3      4      5  
Never                                    Very often

13) How important is it for you that your child knows about their cultural heritage?

1      2      3      4      5  
Not at all important                                    Very important

14) It is the family's responsibility to educate children about their ethnicities and cultural backgrounds.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

15) How aware is your child that people can have different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds?

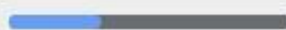
- Very aware (they know a lot about this)
- Aware (they can name and recognize some ethnicities)
- Little aware (their knowledge about ethnicities is limited)
- Not at all aware

16) Would you like to educate your child more about their family roots/heritage?

- Yes
- No

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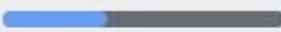
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**Educating about cultural heritage**

16B) Select the reasons why you wouldn't put much effort into educating your child about their cultural heritage. Apply as many as necessary.

- Lack of time
- Disconnection from family background
- It is not important for your family
- Rather not answer
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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**Educating about cultural background**

16A) What would you like to do to educate more your child about their cultural background? (select as many as you want)

- Dedicate more time in educating my tamariki about our family background and culture.
- Select more media resources associated with the family background.
- Enrol my child in a course (language, cultural dance, etc.).
- Encourage my child to attend a cultural group.
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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Educating about cultural background					
17) Who do you think is responsible for educating children about their cultural heritage?					
	Not at all responsible	A little responsible	Neutral	Very responsible	Totally responsible
School	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Whānau/family	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Media	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Friends	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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## SCHOOL &amp; CHILD'S CULTURE



18) What is the school your child attends?

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

19) Did you choose this school because of its medium (Māori, Pasifika, or English medium school)?

- Yes
- No
- I am not aware of this way of categorizing schools

20) Is there any connection between the school your child attends and their cultural background?

Yes

No

21) Would you know if teachers do activities with students to explore children's ethnic and cultural identities during the classes?

Yes

No

I'm not aware of it

22) Does your child feel free to express their family culture at school?

Yes

No

Partly

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**SCHOOL & CHILD'S CULTURE**

22A) What sort of things does your child do at school that relate to their culture?  
(select as many as needed)


- Clothing they wear
- Hairstyle
- Speaking in their family language
- Festivities (Chinese New Year, Diwali, Matariki, etc.)
- Dances
- Songs
- Games
- Playing with toys
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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**ETHNICITY & MEDIA**

23) Does your child consume media resources (movies, songs, books, videos, etc.)  
connected to their family culture?

- Yes
- No

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## ETHNICITY &amp; MEDIA

23A) What sort of media resources (movies, songs, books, videos, etc.) connected to their family culture does your child consume? Check as many boxes as necessary.

- Animated movies
- Animated series
- Apps
- Books, picture books, comic books
- Costumes
- Games
- Movies
- Series
- Social media
- Songs
- Toys
- TV channels
- Videos
- Videogames
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

23B) Can you name the media your child most connects with (related to their family culture)? For example, Hei Hei app, book series "*Hairy Maclary*"; TV series "*Maya the Brave*"; "*All Blacks*" games, Māori Television, etc.

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

23C) Why does your child engage with these media? Check as many boxes as necessary.

- Because they are popular in your child's culture
- Because they are part of your child's family time
- Because they are more accessible (it's easy to find and/or consume them)
- Because they were chosen by your child
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

23D) Who in your house makes decisions about consuming (reading, watching, listening, etc.) these media resources? Check as many boxes as necessary.

- Parents
- Child herself
- Child's siblings
- Child's friends
- Child's school
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

23E) How often does your child consume these media resources?

- Daily
- Weekly
- Twice a month
- Monthly
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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**MEDIA CONSUMPTION & CHILDHOOD**

24) In general, where does the media (ANY media) consumed by your child come from?

New Zealand

Australia


United States

Europe

From a diverse range of places

I am not aware of this

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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**MEDIA & CULTURAL DIVERSITY**

25) How likely do you think it is that media can influence children's identities (what they watch, read, listen, etc.)?

Very unlikely

Unlikely

Neutral

Likely

Very likely

26) With global productions, children from all around the globe may consume the same media. How supportive are you of this happening?

Very against

Against

Neutral

Supportive

Very supportive

27) What is your opinion about media targeted at children showcasing a diverse range of ethnicities and cultures:

- Not at all important
- Not important
- Neutral
- Important
- Very important

28) In your opinion, how DIVERSE is the global media content targeted at children regarding representations of ethnicities and race?

- Not at all diverse
- Little diverse
- Neutral
- Diverse
- Very diverse

29) In your opinion, how DIVERSE the global media SHOULD BE about representations of cultures, ethnicities and race?

- Not at all diverse
- Little diverse
- Neutral
- Diverse
- Very diverse

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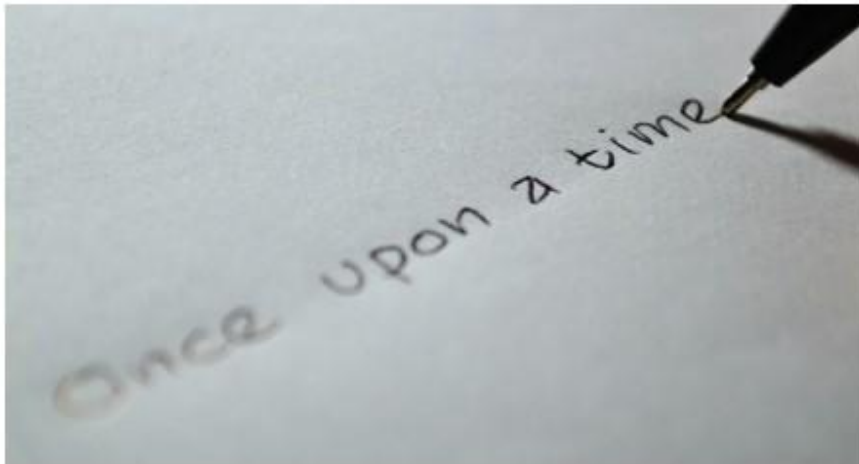
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## WHO IS ALLOWED TO CREATE STORIES ABOUT PEOPLE'S CULTURES?



30) Only people from a specific ethnicity and race should be the ones who can write and create stories about themselves.

1      2      3      4      5

Strongly disagree                  Strongly agree

31) I would be happy to see more representations on media (movies, songs, books, etc.) about my child's ethnicity and race, regardless of who produces it.

1      2      3      4      5

Very against                  Very supportive

32) What is your opinion on Disney creating stories about people from different cultures (apart from the North American)?

1      2      3      4      5

Totally against                  Totally supportive

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## DISNEY'S MOANA AND THE OCEANIC STORY TRUST

Disney's *Moana* production had the help of several professionals from Polynesia region to create the movie. Anthropologists, geographers, linguists, historians, and many others. Such an event has never been done before in all of Disney's history. This group of professionals is called Oceanic Story Trust.



33) How supportive are you of Disney hiring a local team of specialists to create and produce a movie inspired by Polynesian culture?

1      2      3      4      5

Not at all supportive                        Totally supportive

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DISNEY'S *MOANA* & LOCAL LANGUAGES













35) Did you know Disney's *Moana* was dubbed into te reo Māori, Tahitian and Hawaiian?

- Yes
- No

36) What is your opinion about Disney dubbing movies in local indigenous languages?

- 1      2      3      4      5
- Not at all important                        Very important

37) Did you know Disney's *Moana* was dubbed by Polynesian actors?

Photo	Actor	Character	Origin	Image
	Auli'i Cravalho	Moana	Hawaii	
	Dwayne Johnson	Maul	Samoa	
	Rachel House	Grandma Tala	New Zealand (Māori)	
	Temuera Morrison	Chief Tui	New Zealand (Māori)	
	Jemaine Clement	Tamatoa	New Zealand (Māori)	
	Nicole Scherzinger	Sina	Hawaii	

- Yes
- No

38) What do you think about a global movie such as Disney's *Moana* being dubbed by Polynesian actors?

1      2      3      4      5

Very against                  Very supportive

39) The te reo Māori version of Disney's *Moana* was directed and dubbed in Aotearoa New Zealand by a Māori cast and film crew. How important do you think this is?



1      2      3      4      5

Not at all important                  Very important

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### THE SOUNDTRACK OF DISNEY'S MOANA

Disney's *Moana* soundtrack was performed by the group Te Vaka and the Pasifika Voices choir. The songs were written by Opetiaia Foa'i (Samoan - photo below: in the center with the guitar) and Lin-Manuel Miranda. The songs were written in native tongues such as Tokelauan, Tuvaluan and Samoan (besides English).



40) What do you think about Disney hiring local musicians to create Disney's *Moana* soundtrack?

1      2      3      4      5

Not at all important                        Very important

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## DISNEY'S MOANA &amp; MAIN CHARACTERS

41) If Moana was a real person, in your opinion, where would she come from?



Aotearoa New Zealand

Pacific Islands

America/United States

Don't know

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

42) What makes you think Moana would have come from that place?

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

43) If Maui was a real person, in your opinion, where would he come from?



Aotearoa New Zealand

Pacific Islands

America/United States

Don't know

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

44) Why would Maui have come from that place?

Your answer: \_\_\_\_\_

45) Where would you say Disney's *Moana* (2016) story takes place?



- Aotearoa New Zealand
- Pacific Islands
- America/United States
- Don't know
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

46) Why would Disney's *Moana* take place there?

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

47) Have you watched Disney's *Moana*?

- Yes
- No
- Some parts

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50) Cultural appropriation can include exploiting another culture's religious and cultural traditions, fashion, symbols, language, and music. Do you think there was cultural appropriation in Disney's *Moana*? Why?

Your answer

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### Disney's *Moana*

51) Would you use Disney's *Moana* (2016) to educate your child about the Pacific Islands or the Polynesian culture?

Yes

No

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*Appendix 13: One-on-One Interview with Whānau (Phase Two)*

**Open-Ended Questionnaire for Whānau on Family, Culture, and Media**  
**(Phase Two)**

**Family and Background**

1. Can you tell me about your family background and where your relatives live?
2. How do you and your family usually connect with relatives who live in other parts of New Zealand or overseas?

**Cultural Awareness and Identity**

1. How do you think your child understands or experiences their own cultural background?
2. In what ways does your child encounter or participate in Māori or other cultural traditions (at home, school, community)?
3. How does your child respond to differences in culture, language, or skin colour among friends or teachers?

**Parental Perspectives**

1. How has becoming a parent influenced your own views about culture and diversity in New Zealand?
2. How do you decide when and how to talk with your child about other people's cultural or religious backgrounds?

**Language and Education**

1. What role does language play in your family life? Do you encourage your child to learn or use heritage languages?
2. How do you see your child's school supporting cultural diversity and inclusion?

**Media and Representation**

1. What kinds of TV shows, movies, or books does your child enjoy that include cultural or indigenous themes?
2. How do you think these media experiences influence your child's understanding of culture or identity?
3. What are your thoughts on how companies (like Disney) represent cultures in their films?
4. What are your thoughts on how Disney's *Moana* represents Polynesian and Māori culture? How has this influenced your child, if at all?

**Final Reflections**

1. Can you share an example of a cultural or family experience that has had a strong impact on your child's sense of identity?
2. In your opinion, how well does New Zealand society celebrate or respect cultural diversity?