

## Self-Acceptance of The Main Character in *Turning Red* Movie: A Self-Acceptance Theory Approach

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the process of self-acceptance in the 2022 film *Turning Red* by examining the journey of the protagonist, Mei Lee, a Chinese-Canadian adolescent navigating puberty, cultural expectations, and familial pressures. Employing a qualitative content analysis approach grounded in self-acceptance theory, the research examines pivotal scenes, dialogues, and symbolic elements to analyse Mei's psychological and emotional development. The analysis of the text reveals several key findings. First, the transformation of Mei into a red panda functions as a metaphor for the chaos of adolescence. Second, this transformation reflects her struggle to reconcile her identity with her mother's rigid cultural expectations. The analysis underscores the role of peer support, rebellious acts, and intergenerational conflict in shaping her journey toward self-acceptance. The study emphasizes the significance of supportive relationships and personal agency in overcoming societal pressures, particularly within the context of immigrant family dynamics. By portraying the red panda as both a literal and symbolic representation of emotional turmoil, the film illustrates universal adolescent challenges while addressing culturally specific narratives. This research contributes to broader discussions on adolescent psychology, multicultural identity, and the role of the media in portraying self-acceptance, offering insights into the intersection of cultural norms and personal growth.

**Keywords:** self-acceptance, adolescence, cultural identity, *Turning Red*

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## 1. Introduction

The *Turning Red* movie is a Disney movie released in 2022. The movie tells the story of a teenager named Mei Lee who is struggling with self-acceptance during puberty. It illustrates self-acceptance, which is an important process in human development. Self-acceptance also involves validation or recognition of one's own uniqueness, such as weaknesses and strengths. In the *Turning Red* movie, there is a conflict experienced by Mei Lee that reflects the general picture experienced by most teenagers today in their self-acceptance in the midst of pressure in the surrounding environment. This research aims to find out how Mei Lee, the main character, experiences a process of self-acceptance.

Self-acceptance serves to reduce insecurity and try to realize one's abilities and destiny (A. Grace, 2021; Noble, 2023). Self-acceptance certainly requires a short time to realize that the self is enough for everything (H. A. Grace, 1953; White, 2011). This time is usually filled with reflections and flashbacks to events, and it requires assistance so that the reflection does not deviate into the negative. If self-acceptance is successful, a person will begin to be confident and can ignore insults or even make the insults a motivation for himself and focus on himself.

Self-acceptance is an important process in psychology that involves an individual's ability to accept all aspects of themselves, both strengths and weaknesses. This process begins with introspection, where

individuals make observations and reflections about themselves. According to Hurlock (1974) and Triningtyas & Muhayati (2019), self-acceptance reflects a positive attitude towards the self, which allows one to live with their personal characteristics without rejection.

Self-acceptance, a pivotal concept in psychology, entails an individual's capacity to embrace all dimensions of their being, encompassing both their strengths and weaknesses. The process commences with introspection, wherein individuals engage in self-observation and introspective reflection. According to Hurlock's (1974) seminal work, as cited in Triningtyas et al.'s (2019) study, self-acceptance is defined as a positive attitude toward oneself, enabling individuals to embrace their unique characteristics without experiencing rejection.

Self-acceptance is imperative for optimal mental and emotional well-being. In the absence of adequate self-acceptance, individuals may encounter sentiments of low self-esteem, dissatisfaction, and potentially even depression. This phenomenon can lead to challenges in navigating life's demands and engaging effectively with others. Self-acceptance serves as a foundational element in the development of self-esteem and self-confidence, which are crucial for achieving life objectives and attaining contentment. In the field of psychology, the concept of self-acceptance has garnered significant attention as a pivotal criterion in psychological therapy. Rogers (1957) posited that self-acceptance serves as an indicator of progress in the therapeutic process, underscoring the pivotal role that this aspect plays in the comprehensive development of the individual (Bernard, 2013).

Self-acceptance theory from (O'Kelly, 2013) is the theory chosen by the researcher because self-acceptance theory is a theory that can be connected to the process of self-acceptance, especially for the main character in *Tuning Red*, named Mei Lee. Self-acceptance is considered to be important in mental health and well-being. According to this theory, someone who is able to accept themselves tends to have a level of self-confidence as well as being able to undergo life challenges.

In the film *Turning Red*, directed by Domee Shi (Auleri & Dahlan, 2024), the viewer is presented with an in-depth exploration of self-acceptance. This exploration is facilitated by the journey of the film's main character, Meilin Lee. The film, set in Toronto in the early 2000s, chronicles the journey of 13-year-old Mei as she navigates the complexities of her identity and the expectations imposed by her family. The film's primary theme centers on Mei's metamorphosis into a giant red panda under the influence of intense emotions, thereby symbolizing the tumultuous nature of adolescence and the endeavor to attain self-acceptance. This transformation functions as an allegory for puberty, wherein Mei learns to embrace her emotions rather than suppressing them, reflecting an essential component of self-acceptance theory.

The dynamic between Mei and her mother, Ming, introduces an additional layer of complexity to her personal journey (Nurul Hidayah et al., 2024). The tension between the characters can be attributed to the disparity between Ming's overprotectiveness and Mei's own values. This rift is further exacerbated by the conflict between Mei's familial obligations and her own inclinations, particularly her affection for the boy band 4TOWN. This conflict underscores the prevalence of intergenerational trauma within Asian families, a phenomenon characterized by the suppression of emotional expression. The film offers a poignant illustration of how Mei's acceptance of her panda form signifies not only personal growth but also a reconciliation with her family's cultural heritage and expectations.

In the context of academic discourse, research such as that conducted by Mei analyzed character through Maslow's hierarchy of needs, identifying her development towards self-actualization as she fulfills various psychological needs, including self-esteem and belongingness (Olivia Tanzil & Andriano, 2024). Concurrently, research published in the *English Language, Linguistics, Literature, and Education Journal* accentuated the conflicts Mei confronts in achieving self-acceptance and their congruence with Kurt Lewin's conflict theory. This analysis underscores the notion that *Turning Red* functions as a significant narrative for adolescents in the process of navigating their identity in the context of societal and familial pressures.

A number of studies have previously adopted theoretical approaches in order to analyse the character of

Mei Lee in *Turning Red*. For instance, (Auleri & Dahlan, 2024) employed Maslow's hierarchy of needs, while (Juliana, Liza, Fatimahtuzzahra, & Hilmi Imel (2023) utilised Lewin's conflict theory. However, a significant gap remains in the exploration of her self-acceptance process through the specific lens of Self-Acceptance Theory. This theory, which focuses on the stages of introspection, validation of self-uniqueness, and transformation towards self-confidence, has not yet been applied to analyse Mei Lee's psychological journey. However, from a narrative perspective, the film presents the red panda metaphor as a symbol of puberty that is highly relevant to the concept. Furthermore, while collectivist cultural pressures in Asian families have been alluded to, no study has yet connected the dynamics of intergenerational trauma and emotional repression with self-acceptance mechanisms in Asian diasporic adolescents like Mei. This discrepancy underscores the necessity for a more targeted theoretical approach to elucidate the intricacies of self-acceptance within cultural and developmental contexts.

The urgency of this research is multi-faceted (Motulsky, 2021). Firstly, the increasing levels of anxiety and insecurity experienced by adolescents worldwide necessitate the utilisation of narrative models of self-acceptance, such as Mei Lee's story, as a pivotal educational instrument for parents and educators. Secondly, the film's distinctive depiction of the internal conflicts experienced by Asian diasporic adolescents in collectivist cultures serves to underscore the imperative to deconstruct prevailing stigmas associated with immigrant family dynamics. This, in turn, contributes to the expansion of our understanding of cross-cultural psychology. Thirdly, the research findings have the potential for practical application by mental health practitioners in the development of media-based adolescent counselling modules, particularly regarding the role of self-reflection and external support in therapy. Finally, the failure to achieve self-acceptance has been shown to be a risk factor for depression. Therefore, this study also serves as a preventative strategy to mitigate the risks of adolescent psychological development through the learning process from popular media.

In this study, the researcher explores what the main character, Mei Lee, does in her process of self-acceptance using the theory of self-acceptance. By understanding Mei Lee's life journey, the study aims to highlight the importance of self-acceptance, especially during adolescence or puberty. This research is motivated by environmental factors and a strong desire to prevent excessive insecurity, thus providing a relatable example of self-acceptance through the character of Mei Lee. In this study, the researcher focuses on the main character, Mei Lee, from the animated film *Turning Red* as the primary object of analysis. Mei Lee is a 13-year-old girl navigating the emotional turbulence of adolescence, where she experiences significant physical and psychological changes. These changes are symbolized by her transformation into a red panda, a metaphor for the emotional chaos and inner conflict that many adolescents face during puberty. The story centers around Mei's struggle to reconcile her own identity with the cultural and familial expectations imposed on her, particularly by her mother, Ming. Using O'Kelly's theory of self-acceptance, the researcher examines Mei's journey as she learns to accept and integrate the various aspects of herself, including the red panda, into her identity.

The film provides a rich context for exploring the developmental stages of self-acceptance, with Mei's emotional growth, resilience, and assertion of her authentic self being key focal points of analysis. By examining Mei's experiences, the study seeks to uncover the psychological and social factors that contribute to her eventual acceptance of her true self. To achieve this goal, the study addresses several key research questions. First, what needs to be developed in Mei Lee's process of self-acceptance in the *Turning Red* movie? Second, why is self-acceptance necessary for Mei Lee in the movie? And third, how does Mei Lee build a strong and meaningful sense of self-acceptance as she navigates the challenges and changes of adolescence? These questions form the foundation for analyzing Mei Lee's character and the broader significance of her journey for teenage audiences.

## 2. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative content analysis approach grounded in self-acceptance theory to explore the psychological dimensions of self-acceptance exemplified by the protagonist, Mei Lee, in Disney's *Turning Red* (2022). The present study utilizes a qualitative analysis of dialogues, expressions, and narrative situations that reflect self-acceptance to investigate the alignment between Mei's emotional and psychological journey centered on her symbolic transformation into a red panda and theoretical frameworks of self-acceptance. The material object of analysis is the film itself, with a focus on Mei's evolving narrative, while the formal object is the application of self-acceptance theory to dissect her internal growth. This methodology prioritizes depth over quantification, emphasizing the interpretation of character experiences to understand how self-acceptance is constructed and negotiated amidst cultural and familial pressures. The qualitative approach facilitates a structured, scientific examination of Mei's psychological development, emphasizing the interplay between individual identity, societal expectations, and emotional resilience (Aspers & Corte, 2019).

This study employs a qualitative content analysis approach, with primary data derived from direct observation of *Turning Red*, focusing on the protagonist Mei Lee's dialogues, actions, expressions, and interactions to trace her self-acceptance journey. These elements, derived directly from the film, function as foundational evidence for the analysis of psychological phenomena associated with self-acceptance. Secondary data encompasses scholarly theories, literature, and prior research on self-acceptance theory, as well as studies on character analysis and media representations of self-acceptance. Academic articles, books, and journals provide the theoretical framework, thereby enabling a robust interpretation of observations and contextualizing Mei's experiences within broader psychological discourse. The qualitative methodology prioritizes depth over quantification, emphasizing narrative and symbolic analysis to uncover how self-acceptance is constructed through the film's plot, character dynamics, and emotional arcs.

The material object of analysis is the film itself, specifically the narrative arc of the protagonist Mei, which exemplifies the emotional and psychological struggles of self-acceptance that are characteristic of adolescence. The framework of object self-acceptance theory guides the examination of her transformation, conflicts, and resolutions, anchoring the study in a structured psychological framework (Manisha Khadga Yadav, 2025). The present study employs content analysis to systematically identify themes and patterns, such as the symbolism of Mei's red panda metamorphosis and her interactions with family and peers. This methodological approach enables a nuanced exploration of qualitative data, establishing a linkage between cinematic elements (e.g., dialogue, visual metaphors) and theoretical constructs. The study's findings, derived from an analysis of these layers, demonstrate the emergence of self-acceptance through Mei's navigation of cultural expectations, familial pressures, and personal identity. This analysis underscores the study's contribution to the intersection of narrative art and psychological theory.

To validate the data, the researcher employed a triangulation method, cross-referencing multiple sources to ensure the reliability and accuracy of the findings. First, the primary data from *Turning Red* was analyzed in relation to O'Kelly's theory of self-acceptance, ensuring the theoretical framework adequately aligned with the character's journey (Zahrah & Melky Ayu Wijayanti, 2023). Additionally, the researcher reviewed recent academic literature on self-acceptance, identity development, and adolescence to verify that the patterns observed in Mei Lee's transformation were consistent with existing theories and empirical research. Peer feedback and expert reviews were also solicited to assess the interpretations and conclusions drawn from the data, providing an external check on the validity of the analysis. Finally, a comparative analysis with similar coming-of-age narratives was conducted to determine if the identified themes and stages of self-acceptance aligned with broader cultural and psychological trends in adolescent identity development. This multi-layered validation approach reinforced the credibility and robustness of the study's findings.

In this research, data analysis followed a systematic approach to ensure a comprehensive understanding of Mei Lee's self-acceptance journey in *Turning Red*. The analysis began with identifying key scenes and

dialogues that reflected significant emotional and psychological moments in Mei's character development. Using O'Kelly's theory of self-acceptance as a guiding framework, each scene was coded to highlight the stages of emotional awareness, resilience, and identity assertion. This was followed by categorizing these scenes into thematic groups, such as emotional growth, social rejection, and peer validation. After grouping the data, a qualitative analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns and relationships between the scenes, dialogues, and Mei's psychological transformation. This process allowed for a deeper understanding of the symbolic elements, such as the red panda, and their connection to Mei's evolving sense of self. Finally, the analysis was validated by cross-referencing with recent theoretical literature on adolescence, self-acceptance, and identity development to ensure the findings were supported by existing research.

### 3. Result and Discussion

Key findings based on the three research purposes

Research Purpose	Key Findings	Symbolic Elements/Consequences
Understanding the Self-Acceptance Process	Mei Lee's emotional growth involves increasing self-awareness, gaining peer support, and asserting identity.	Red panda as a symbol of emotional and physical transformation; external validation from friends
Analyzing the Necessity of Self-Acceptance	Mei's self-acceptance is a survival mechanism against cultural, social, and familial pressures.	Cultural suppression, humiliation, and rejection lead to emotional instability and self-worth challenges.
Examining the Building of a Qualified Self-Acceptance	Mei's self-acceptance develops through rejection of conformity, peer support, and self-assertion	Panda as a tool for self-exploration and empowerment, transforming from a burden to a strength

This research uncovers Mei Lee's journey toward self-acceptance, which consists of three main components. First, the process of self-acceptance begins with Mei's emotional awareness and understanding of her bodily changes, as seen in Scene 1, where she is confused by her transformation into a red panda. As the story progresses, Mei discovers that peer support (Scene 3) and emotional resilience (Scene 4) play vital roles in shaping her identity. Ultimately, Mei achieves self-acceptance when she proudly embraces her identity, including the red panda, as part of herself (Scene 8). The red panda evolves from a source of shame to a symbol of pride in her identity.

Second, the research also highlights that self-acceptance is a crucial psychological mechanism for Mei, considering the social, cultural, and familial pressures she faces. Without self-acceptance, Mei experiences various negative consequences, such as social rejection and feelings of inadequacy (Scene 4), leading to emotional instability and identity conflict. The pressure from her mother to uphold family traditions becomes a significant barrier to Mei's self-identity development, as seen in Scene 2, where Mei risks losing her emotional stability and healthy relationships without self-acceptance.

Third, Mei's self-acceptance is built through a series of decisions and deep relational dynamics. Initially, Mei rejects conformity by refusing the ritual of sealing the red panda (Scene 5), which symbolizes her resistance to societal norms. Peer support provides the confidence Mei needs to continue her journey toward self-acceptance. Scene 6 shows Mei taking independent action by prioritizing her desires, despite her mother's objections. These steps lead Mei to full self-acceptance, achieved when she

fully integrates her unique identity, blending both individual aspects and family traditions.

Overall, this research emphasizes that self-acceptance is not merely an endpoint but an active journey where an individual must confront challenges from both within and from the surrounding social and cultural environment. Mei Lee's self-acceptance in *Turning Red* serves as an important symbol in understanding how identity is shaped through a process that involves embracing both strengths and weaknesses, as well as every aspect of oneself.

### 3.1. Result

This section applies the observation, capture, and note-taking methods to the film *Turning Red*. Relying on O'Kelly's theory of self-acceptance, the character of Mei is explained and described as follows.

**Table 1.** What Needs to Be Built in Mei Lee's Process of Self-Acceptance

Scene	Dialogue	What Needs to Be Built	Symbolic Element
Scene 1	"What is happening to me? I'm a giant red panda!"	Emotional awareness and understanding of body changes	The red panda is a symbol of puberty
Scene 3	"We love the panda! It's so cool!"	Positive peer validation	Friendship and external support
Scene 4	"You're just a freak! Look at you!"	Emotional resilience and self-worth	Humiliation as a trigger for emotional growth
Scene 5	"I don't want to seal my panda! I want to be me!"	Self-assertion and identity autonomy	Refusal of suppression tradition
Scene 8	"I'm proud of who I am, red panda and all!"	Wholeness and self-pride	Full acceptance of self-identity

This table reveals that in Mei Lee's journey of self-acceptance, she must build several crucial emotional and psychological foundations. First, she needs awareness and understanding of the emotional chaos and physical transformation she undergoes (Scene 1). As the story unfolds, Mei discovers that external validation (Scene 3) and emotional resilience (Scene 4) play an essential role in forming her core identity, especially during moments of social rejection.

Additionally, the development of self-assertion (Scene 5) and pride in her authentic self (Scene 8) become key pillars. Each of these moments signifies a stage in the construction of her self-acceptance from confusion and insecurity to assertiveness and inner peace. The symbolic red panda grows from being a source of shame to a representation of unique strength and individuality.

**Table 2.** Why Self-Acceptance Is Necessary for Mei Lee

Scene	Dialogue	Reason for Needing Self-Acceptance	Consequences of Rejection
Scene 2	"You're just a little girl! You don't understand the responsibilities of our family!"	Cultural pressure & generational expectation	Suppression of individuality
Scene 4	"You're just a freak! Look at you!"	Social rejection & peer bullying	Emotional instability and shame
Scene 7	"You're not my daughter anymore!"	Fear of familial rejection	Identity conflict and emotional rupture

Self-acceptance is portrayed as a psychological necessity for Mei Lee because she faces immense pressure from both cultural and social forces. In Scene 2, her mother's insistence on tradition over personal freedom reveals how deeply ingrained expectations can suppress individuality, leaving little room for self-expression. Similarly, Scene 4 exposes the cruelty of peer judgment, which triggers intense emotional breakdowns if one's sense of self remains fragile. Scene 7 represents the emotional climax, showing how the absence of self-acceptance might lead to devastating consequences such as losing one's perceived place within the family. These instances reveal that without embracing her true self, Mei risks being crushed by external demands and internal guilt. Self-acceptance is thus presented not merely as a desire but as a survival mechanism to maintain emotional stability and autonomy.

**Table 3.** How Mei Lee Builds a Qualified Self-Acceptance

Scene	Dialogue	Method/Strategy	Outcome
Scene 3	"We love the panda! It's so cool!"	Acceptance through friendships	External support and confidence
Scene 5	"I don't want to seal my panda! I want to be me!"	Rejecting conformity	Choosing personal truth
Scene 6	"I'm going to the concert! I won't let anyone stop me!"	Acting on personal desires	Reclaiming agency and joy
Scene 8	"I'm proud of who I am, red panda and all!"	Integrating all aspects of identity	Full self-acceptance achieved

Mei Lee's path to self-acceptance is not linear but marked by conscious choices and relational dynamics. Scene 3 shows how peer support helps her view her uniqueness as something worthy of admiration. This early affirmation plants the seed of confidence that blossoms into defiance of suppression in Scene 5, where she openly rejects the sealing ritual, a metaphor for societal conformity. Following this, Scene 6 presents a bold act of independence where Mei prioritizes her joy and values, a necessary application of her evolving self-identity. Finally, Scene 8 captures her culmination of growth: pride in every part of herself, symbolized by the red panda. Through these progressive steps, Mei constructs a strong, qualified sense of self rooted in agency, validation, and integration of emotion, body, and personal values.



*Scene 1: The Transformation Revelation (00:15:30)*

Dialogue:

*Mei Lee: "What is happening to me? I'm a giant red panda!"*

This pivotal scene, which occurs at 00:15:30, features the character Mei Lee awakening to discover her transformation and exclaiming, "What is happening to me? I'm a giant red panda!" It is a poignant depiction

of the profound disorientation and trepidation that characterise the nascent stages of adolescence. The abrupt and uncontrollable physical metamorphosis into a large, conspicuous creature can be interpreted as a direct metaphor for the onset of puberty. In a manner akin to Mei's encounter with an unfamiliar body, young individuals encounter perplexing physical metamorphoses that can evoke a comparable sense of disorientation and estrangement. Furthermore, the red panda is a metaphor for the surge of intense, chaotic emotions – excitement, anxiety, anger, embarrassment – that accompany this life stage. These emotions are often characterised as feeling wild, overpowering, and impossible to contain. Mei's expression of profound fear and uncertainty mirrors the common experience of many adolescents as they grapple with the process of self-discovery and the sense of losing autonomy over their bodies and emotions. This moment of self-discovery, precipitated by a state of shock and disorientation, serves as a significant turning point in the narrative.



*Scene 2: The Mother's Overreaction (00:25:45)*

Dialogue:

*Ming: "You're just a little girl! You don't understand the responsibilities of our family!"*

This scene is characterised by Ming Lee's emphatic assertion, "You're just a little girl! You do not comprehend the obligations inherent to our familial unit", vividly exemplifying the profound discord between generations and the onerous cultural legacy Mei is compelled to grapple with. Ming's reaction, stemming from fear and a desire to protect tradition, goes beyond the typical parental concern, revealing the immense pressure often placed on children in immigrant families. Her words explicitly tie Mei's identity and actions to upholding deep-seated family duties, suggesting that Mei's burgeoning individuality and personal experiences are secondary to, or even incompatible with, these inherited obligations. This moment underscores how cultural expectations, while rooted in love and history, have the potential to become stifling, creating a conflict between honoring one's heritage and the essential adolescent journey of discovering and expressing one's unique self. Ming's insistence on this point underscores the specific challenge that Mei faces in her personal development, namely the need to reconcile her personal growth and desires with the profound responsibilities associated with her family's legacy.





*Scene 3: Embracing the Red Panda (00:40:10)*

Dialogue:

*Mei's Friends: "We love the panda! It's so cool!"*

At the pivotal moment indicated at 00:40:10, when Mei's companions exclaim, "We love the panda! It's so cool!" represents a significant turning point in her journey of self-acceptance. This spontaneous and enthusiastic peer support can be considered an effective counteragent to the pressure and shame previously instilled by her mother, Ming. The subjects' genuine and admiring acceptance of Mei's red panda, a symbol of her wildest emotions, passions, and uniqueness, provides Mei with much-needed validation. The scene offers a vivid contrast between the restrictive influence of family and the positive influence of friendship, thereby emphasising the importance of peer relationships in shaping adolescent identity. It is through the provision of support that Mei comes to perceive her family (her pandas) as a source of strength and attraction, rather than a disgrace or burden. The affirmation and acceptance from her peers not only provided solace but also fortified her resolve, instilling her with the initial courage to contemplate the prospect of embracing her distinctive identity rather than suppressing it. This event subsequently served as the foundation for Mei to cultivate self-love.



*Scene 4: The Birthday Party Incident (00:50:20)*

Dialogue:

*Tyler: "You're just a freak! Look at you!"*

Tyler's cruel exclamation, "You're just a freak! Look at you!" is the poignant culmination of the bullying and social pressure that Mei endures throughout the party. This public humiliation, specifically the dehumanising label "freak" and the judgmental command to look at herself, delivers a shattering blow to Mei's already fragile adolescent self-esteem, voicing her deepest fears of rejection and amplifying her sense of being an outsider. The profound emotional upheaval evoked by Tyler's utterances, characterised by a sense of shame, anger, and distress, serves as a catalyst for the narrative's intensity. The phenomenon of Mei's uncontrolled transformation into the giant red panda is attributable to the flooding of her developing capacity for emotional regulation. This involuntary metamorphosis can be interpreted as both a literal and metaphorical explosion of her repressed internal conflict and turmoil. The scene vividly illustrates the profound impact of peer rejection and bullying on a teenager's psyche, highlighting the extreme difficulty of managing intense, complex emotions during adolescence, especially when compounded by the overwhelming desire for external validation and social acceptance. This distressing episode, while undoubtedly harrowing, marks a pivotal moment in Mei's personal journey, compelling her to confront the untenable nature of perpetuating a false self, thereby initiating a strenuous journey towards self-acceptance.

*Scene 5: The Ritual Conflict ( 01:10:00)*



Dialogue:

*Mei: "I don't want to seal my panda! I want to be me!"*

Mei's defiant declaration that she does not wish to seal her panda is indicative of a reluctance to engage in the practice, which is a common occurrence in the field of animal welfare. "I want to be me!" she exclaimed during the sacred ritual intended to suppress her red panda spirit. This moment marks the culmination of her internal struggle and a powerful assertion of autonomy. This pivotal moment cannot be considered as merely a manifestation of teenage rebellion; rather, it is a conscious rejection of generations of familial tradition that demanded the concealment of this core aspect of identity for the sake of conformity and perceived protection. Confronted with the act of concealing her true self, both literally and metaphorically, Mei consciously opts for self-acceptance over compliance. Her cry, "I want to be me!", explicitly links the red panda not to a curse or a source of shame, but to her fundamental identity. This decision powerfully embodies the broader theme of embracing one's authentic self against immense societal and familial pressures that dictate who one should be. By prioritising her own voice and desires ("I don't want to...") over external expectations, Mei underscores the critical importance of personal choice in the complex and often painful journey of identity formation. Her refusal to undergo the ritual can be interpreted as indicative of her hard-won understanding that true wholeness does not come from suppressing parts of oneself in order to fit in, but rather from integrating all aspects, even the messy,

powerful, or unconventional ones, to become authentically "me".



*Scene 6: The Concert Decision (01:20:15)*

Dialogue:

*Mei: "I'm going to the concert! I won't let anyone stop me!"*

Mei's definitive assertion that she is going to the concert is worthy of note. "I won't let anyone stop me!" is indicative of a transformative moment of active self-assertion and the concrete application of her newfound commitment to her identity. In the aftermath of her pivotal rejection of the sealing ritual (Scene 5), this scene undergoes a transition from symbolic defiance to practical rebellion. The decision to attend the concert, a quintessential teenage desire representing personal joy, social connection, and normalcy, constitutes Mei's inaugural deliberate act of prioritising her own happiness and aspirations over the suffocating weight of her mother's expectations and control. The emphatic declaration, "I won't let anyone stop me!", underscores the subject's fierce determination to exercise personal agency, explicitly rejecting.

The external limitations that previously defined her life. This resolution cannot be attributed merely to the capriciousness of adolescence; rather, it signifies a substantial and perceptible progression towards self-acceptance. By claiming this ordinary yet profoundly meaningful experience for herself, Mei demonstrates her readiness to integrate her authentic desires into her daily existence, transcending the internal conflict of the ritual and proactively shaping her own reality. The scene is a poignant encapsulation of the fundamental conflict between the pursuit of personal aspirations and the adherence to long-standing familial commitments, exemplified by Mei's valiant decision to carve out an identity that is both in harmony with and, at times, in defiance of the expectations of her family.



*Scene 7: The Final Confrontation (01:30:40)*

Dialogue:

*Ming: "You're not my daughter anymore!"*

The film's denouement is marked by the profound emotional impact of Ming's disquieting revelation, "You are no longer my daughter." This line, articulated in the midst of intense anger, fear, and perceived

betrayal, elucidates the catastrophic emotional consequences of Mei's journey towards self-acceptance. Ming's words can be interpreted as representing the ultimate rejection and the terrifying consequence that Mei had instinctively feared all along. This consequence was the potential loss of her mother's love and her place within the family for embracing her true self. This confrontation, however, is not solely about Mei's defiance; it becomes a crucible that compels both characters to confront their deepest fears and rigid expectations. It is imperative that Ming confronts the oppressive nature of her authority and the anguish engendered by her prioritisation of tradition and her own apprehensions over her daughter's identity. Mei, while wounded, must stand firm in her newly acquired self-understanding. The raw intensity of their argument – filled with years of unspoken hurt, misunderstanding, and clashing desires – viscerally highlights the profound emotional turmoil inherent in the quest for self-acceptance, especially when it directly challenges deeply ingrained familial bonds and expectations. This painful rupture, while seemingly destructive, becomes necessary. The film's narrative style is notable for its absence of artifice, which engenders a candid authenticity between the mother and daughter. This, in turn, facilitates a more profound and genuine connection between the two characters.



*Scene 8: The Resolution (01:40:00)*

Dialogue:

*Mei: "I'm proud of who I am, red panda and all!"*

The affirmation "I'm proud of who I am, red panda and all!" by Mei can be regarded as the culmination and emotional zenith of her transformative journey. This unassuming yet profound statement encapsulates the core message of the film: the liberating power and fundamental necessity of embracing one's authentic self, unconditionally. Mei's explicit use of the word "proud" signifies a radical shift from the shame and fear that once defined her relationship with her red panda spirit. This moment is indicative of complete integration, signifying a departure from the previous perspective of the panda as a separate, monstrous flaw to be hidden or sealed away. Instead, it is now regarded as an inseparable and valued part of the subject's whole identity ("red panda and all"). The subject's self-declaration, articulated with conviction and self-possession, signifies the pinnacle of self-acceptance, forged through the crucible of confronting societal expectations, familial pressures, and personal internalised doubts. This notion is employed to reinforce the film's central theme, which posits that attaining true personal growth and inner peace is contingent upon an individual's courageous acceptance of all facets of their being. This encompasses the acceptance of those aspects that are regarded as unconventional or imperfect according to external standards. The film further emphasises the necessity of living authentically, defying the constraints imposed by these limiting norms.

## **3.2. Discussion**

### **3.2.1. Theoretical Framework of Self-Acceptance**

Self-acceptance is a critical aspect of psychological well-being, particularly during adolescence, a

period marked by significant emotional and physical changes. According to (Trimurti et al., 2023), self-acceptance involves recognizing and embracing all facets of oneself, including strengths and weaknesses. In "Turning Red," Mei Lee's journey exemplifies this concept as she navigates the complexities of her identity amidst familial expectations and societal pressures. The film illustrates that self-acceptance is not merely about acknowledging one's traits but also about embracing them, even when they conflict with external expectations. Mei's transformation into a red panda serves as a metaphor for the chaotic emotions that accompany adolescence. This transformation is not just a physical change; it symbolizes the internal struggle many young people face as they grapple with their identities. The film effectively portrays how Mei's journey toward self-acceptance is fraught with challenges, including the pressure to conform to her mother's expectations and the fear of rejection from her peers.

The film powerfully operationalises (Trimurti et al., 2023) the concept by demonstrating that authentic self-acceptance requires confronting and integrating one's entire being, even aspects perceived as disruptive or "unacceptable" by others. The journey undertaken by Mei is not merely an acknowledgement of her identity; rather, it is an active process of reclaiming agency over her identity. Initially depicted as an undesirable burden to be subdued, the red panda is progressively revealed not as a shortcoming but as an intrinsic component of her emotional essence and heritage, symbolising passion, authenticity, and generational connection. "Turning Red" thus illustrates the generational impact of suppressed self-acceptance: Ming's personal history of unresolved trauma and rigid conformity is rooted in her struggle to integrate her panda, resulting in cycles of control and fear. The choice of Mei to retain her panda can be interpreted as a manifestation of the theory's proposition that authentic well-being is derived from wholeness rather than from fragmentation. Her experience thus serves to illuminate the critical task confronting adolescents in navigating the tension between societal and familial demands and their own inner truth, thus demonstrating that self-acceptance is not merely an outcome but an active and courageous choice that is essential for psychological resilience and authentic living. The film lends support to the framework by demonstrating that the adoption of a multifaceted self, in the face of external pressures, is essential to achieving maturity and fostering healthy relationships.

### **3.2.2. The Role of Transformation in Self-Discovery**

The transformation into a red panda is a pivotal element of Mei's self-discovery. This physical manifestation of her emotions highlights the tumultuous nature of adolescence, where feelings can often feel overwhelming and uncontrollable. As noted by Efendi et al. (2023), the red panda becomes a symbol of Mei's burgeoning independence and the emotional chaos that accompanies it. Each time Mei transforms, it reflects her struggle to manage her emotions, illustrating the broader theme of self-discovery during adolescence. The initial shock of her transformation (Scene 1) captures the confusion and fear that many adolescents experience when confronted with their changing identities. This moment resonates with viewers who have faced similar feelings of uncertainty during their own developmental stages. The film effectively uses Mei's transformation to explore the complexities of growing up, emphasizing that self-discovery is often a messy and nonlinear process.

The journey of Mei and the red panda thus transcends mere symbolic representation, becoming instead the crucible of her self-discovery. Each transformation, rather than being a passive eruption, compels Mei to engage in a dynamic process of experimentation and negotiation with this newly emergent aspect of her being. Initially, the panda was a source of terror and shame (Scene 1), but she gradually evolves through lived experience, as evidenced by her tentative control during the rooftop conversation with Ming or the purposeful, albeit chaotic, use of her abilities to help her friends reach the concert. This progression mirrors Efendi et al.'s (2023) observation of the panda symbolising burgeoning independence, but the film concretely shows how mastering the transformation becomes synonymous with mastering her own emotional landscape and asserting agency. The "messy and nonlinear process" is not merely an experience of chaos; rather, it is

an active navigation and redefinition of it. The character's decision to retain the panda (Scene 5 & 8) can be seen as the culmination of this journey, as she not only acknowledges the panda as an element of her chaos, but also recognises it as a fundamental source of her strength, passion, and unique identity. This profound realisation leads to a fundamental reshaping of her understanding of who "Mei" truly is. It is evident that the transformation represents the literal and figurative mechanism through which Mei moves from a state of confusion and suppression to a state of profound self-knowledge and authentic self-definition.

### **3.2.3. Familial Expectations and Cultural Identity**

The film poignantly addresses the intergenerational conflict within immigrant families, particularly the expectations placed on children to uphold family traditions. Ming's overprotectiveness and insistence on responsibility create a significant barrier to Mei's self-acceptance (Scene 2). This dynamic reflects the experiences of many children from immigrant backgrounds, who often feel torn between their cultural heritage and their desire for individuality. Ming's character embodies the traditional values that can stifle personal expression, creating a tension that is relatable to many viewers. As Hidayah et al. (2024) suggest, the pressure to conform to familial expectations can lead to feelings of inadequacy and internal conflict. Mei's struggle to balance her desires with her mother's expectations is a common experience among adolescents, particularly those from culturally rich backgrounds. This theme resonates deeply with audiences, highlighting the challenges of navigating cultural identity in a modern context.

The relationship between Mei and Ming exemplifies the prevalent generational tensions, while also shedding light on the impact of cultural heritage and intergenerational trauma within immigrant families. Ming, propelled by a sense of dread and a profound responsibility to uphold his family's traditions in the new environment, exemplifies how inflexible cultural values can metamorphose into a debilitating instrument of control, unwittingly compromising Mei's personal identity development in the pursuit of perceived stability (Scene 2: Obligation at the Temple). This pressure, as observed by Hidayah et al. (2024), gives rise to feelings of inadequacy and profound inner conflict in Mei, who finds herself torn between her loyalty to her family and her intrinsic desire to express herself and assimilate into the culture of her Canadian peers. However, the film goes further by showing that the source of Ming's own rigidity stems from her non-acceptance of her red panda, thereby emphasising incomplete cultural identity that is passed down as trauma. The culminating confrontation depicted in Scene 7 materialises as a convergence of two disparate cultural perceptions: In the context of the discussion, Ming's perspective can be characterised as one of unwavering commitment to tradition, perceiving it as a bastion of identity that must be upheld with unconditional fidelity. In contrast, Mei's approach is marked by a shift in perspective, wherein tradition is viewed not as an immutable entity, but rather as a malleable and adaptable framework. The film's resolution, in which Mei finds a way to maintain her connection to her heritage and her red panda, offers a hopeful model of integration. This suggests that cultural and personal identities are not mutually exclusive dichotomies, but can be synthesised into new, authentic forms when space for self-acceptance and intergenerational understanding is created.

### **3.2.4. The Importance of Supportive Relationships**

Mei's friends play a crucial role in her journey toward self-acceptance (Scene 3). Their acceptance of her red panda form provides the validation she needs to embrace her identity. This highlights the significance of positive peer relationships in shaping one's self-acceptance during adolescence. As Zahrah & Melky Ayu Wijayanti (2023) note, supportive friendships can empower individuals to embrace their unique traits and foster a sense of belonging. The contrast between Mei's friends' acceptance and Tyler's bullying (Scene 4) underscores the duality of adolescent social dynamics. While peer pressure can lead to negative experiences, positive reinforcement from friends can significantly enhance an individual's self-acceptance journey. The film illustrates that having a supportive social network is essential for adolescents as they navigate the



complexities of identity formation.

Mei's journey towards self-acceptance is profoundly catalysed and sustained by the unconditional acceptance and active support of her close-knit friend group, comprising Miriam, Priya, and Abby (Scene 3: Revealing the Panda). The subjects' immediate and enthusiastic embrace of her red panda form, far from the revulsion or ridicule she fears, provides a critical counter-narrative to the shame instilled by her family's tradition and external bullying. This validation, as Zahrah & Melky Ayu Wijayanti (2023) emphasise, is foundational; it enables Mei to begin perceiving her unique trait not as a monstrous flaw but as a distinctive part of her identity, fostering an essential sense of belonging and safety. The marked difference between the unwavering support observed in her friends and the vicious bullying exhibited by Tyler (Scene 4) serves to illustrate the dualistic nature of adolescent peer influence. In this regard, negative peer pressure, as exemplified by Tyler, has the capacity to devastate self-esteem and trigger internal conflict. Conversely, positive, affirming peer relationships have been shown to serve as a vital sanctuary and a source of strength. It is noteworthy that the friends of Mei do not merely passively accept her; rather, they actively celebrate and utilise her panda (for example, by employing her size and abilities to achieve their objectives, such as acquiring concert tickets). This practical solidarity helps Mei to integrate this aspect into her social self. This active collaboration transforms their support from mere tolerance into a co-creative force in the subject's identity formation, enabling the subject to experiment with and eventually own their authentic self in a safe relational space. The film thus puts forward a compelling argument that such supportive networks are not merely beneficial but essential for adolescents navigating the turbulent process of self-discovery. These networks provide the relational security needed to withstand external pressures and internal doubts, ultimately allowing the individual to flourish.

### **3.2.5. The Conflict Between Individual Desires and Familial Obligations**

The internal struggle between individual desires and familial obligations is a central theme in "Turning Red." Mei's refusal to seal her panda form during the ritual (Scene 5) represents her desire for autonomy and self-acceptance. This moment encapsulates the broader conflict many adolescents face when asserting their identities against familial pressures. The ritual serves as a metaphor for the expectations placed on Mei, highlighting the tension between her personal aspirations and her family's traditions. This conflict is relatable to many viewers, particularly those who have experienced similar struggles in their own lives. The film effectively captures the emotional stakes involved in the quest for self-acceptance, illustrating that the journey is often fraught with challenges and difficult choices. As Olivia Tanzil & Andriano (2024) point out, the struggle for autonomy is a common theme in coming-of-age narratives, and "Turning Red" effectively portrays this tension.

Mei's defiant cry of "I don't want to seal my panda!" is indicative of a resistance to the process. "I want to be me!" In Scene 5, entitled 'The Ritual Conflict', the film's thematic core is brought to the fore, with a focus on the fundamental existential struggle between the formation of an individual identity and the weight of familial and cultural obligations that are inherited from previous generations. This pivotal refusal transcends the confines of teenage rebellion; it is a profound assertion of autonomy against a generations-old tradition that symbolises suppression and conformity. The ritual itself is a potent metaphor for the crushing expectations placed upon Mei – the demand to sacrifice her authentic self, her complex emotions (embodied by the panda), and her personal desires at the altar of familial duty and perceived cultural preservation. This moment encapsulates the universal, yet intensely personal, anguish experienced by adolescents, particularly those from collectivist or immigrant backgrounds such as Mei, who find themselves torn between honouring their roots and forging their own path. (Olivia Tanzil & Andriano, 2024) correctly identify the struggle for autonomy as a central theme in coming-of-age narratives. However, *Turning Red* distinguishes itself by heightening the emotional stakes by framing this conflict not just as a personal choice, but as a potential rupture in the sacred mother-daughter bond and lineage. Mei's decision is characterised by

visceral fear and guilt, poignantly illustrating that the path to self-acceptance often necessitates agonising choices between self-betrayal and perceived familial betrayal. The film adeptly portrays this tension not as a binary choice to reject family, but as a necessary, painful step towards renegotiating her place within it, ultimately seeking a synthesis where personal authenticity and familial love can coexist. This conflict highlights the notion that authentic self-acceptance necessitates the fortitude to assert one's identity, even when it confronts the profound underpinnings of obligation and belonging.

### **3.2.6. Rebellion as a Path to Self-Acceptance**

Mei's decision to attend the concert despite her mother's objections (Scene 6) represents a critical act of rebellion. This moment is emblematic of the adolescent desire for autonomy and self-expression. The film captures the complexities of rebellion as a means of asserting one's identity, illustrating that such acts can be both empowering and fraught with consequences. Mei's rebellion is not merely an act of defiance; it is a necessary step in her journey toward self-acceptance. By prioritizing her desires over her mother's expectations, she takes a significant step toward embracing her true self. This theme resonates with many adolescents who often feel the need to assert their independence in the face of familial pressures. The film effectively portrays rebellion as a natural and essential part of the self-acceptance process. Resolution and Embracing Identity The film's resolution (Scene 8) emphasizes the importance of embracing one's identity, including aspects that may be viewed as flaws. Mei's final acceptance of her red panda form signifies the culmination of her journey, highlighting the importance of self-acceptance in the face of societal expectations.

Mei's definitive assertion that she is going to the concert is worthy of note. "I will not allow anyone to prevent me from achieving my goals!" As illustrated in Scene 6, the act of defiance exhibited by the protagonist is not merely a reflection of teenage rebelliousness; rather, it symbolises a deliberate and critical act of rebellion that is pivotal to her journey of self-acceptance. This moment encapsulates the adolescent quest for autonomy and self-expression, encapsulating the intricate duality wherein such defiance is concurrently empowering (asserting agency over her life and desires) and fraught with substantial repercussions (giving rise to the climactic confrontation with Ming). It is important to note that Mei's rebellion does not represent a static conclusion, but rather a crucial step in her personal development. By demonstrating a clear prioritisation of her own joy, as evidenced by her concert attendance, over her mother's overly restrictive expectations, she exhibits a significant step towards living her authentic self. This advancement is further emphasised by the internal declaration she makes during the ritual in Scene 5, marking a substantial progression from her previous state. This resonates profoundly with adolescents grappling with the universal tension between familial obligations and the formation of their personal identity. The film adeptly portrays this rebellion not as destructive rejection, but as an indispensable catalyst that compels both Mei and Ming to undergo essential growth. This progression ultimately culminates in the resolution (Scene 8), where Mei's triumphant assertion, "I'm proud of who I am, red panda and all!", signifies the completion of her journey into full integration. Her embrace of the panda, a perceived flaw that was previously considered to be a weakness, symbolises the film's central theme, which asserts that true self-acceptance necessitates the unapologetic assertion of all aspects of one's identity, particularly those that are marginalised by societal or familial standards. The rebellion paves the way for this profound resolution, demonstrating that the courage to defy limiting expectations is fundamental to achieving wholeness and authentic selfhood.

Mei Lee's process of self-acceptance is predicated on the establishment of three psychological foundations. Firstly, there is the recognition of her physical-emotional transformation (the red panda symbol) as an intrinsic part of her identity, rather than a defect to be hidden (Efendi et al., In 2023, the following three elements were identified: firstly, the reconciliation of the cultural conflict between the subject's Chinese family heritage (represented by the pressure exerted by Ming in Scene 2) and her modern Canadian teenage



identity; secondly, the assertion of self-autonomy through rejection of the panda binding ritual (Scene 5: "I want to be me!"); and thirdly, the aforementioned rejection of the panda binding ritual. The formation of this foundation is facilitated by several pivotal mechanisms. Peer support that validates her uniqueness (Scene 3: panda acceptance by friends) serves as the initial catalyst, followed by significant acts of rebellion such as concert attendance (Scene 6) that affirm self-agency (Olivia Tanzil & Andriano, 2024), as well as reframing perceptions of "weakness" (panda) into a source of strength (Scene 8).

In the context of the psychosocial and cultural risks involved, self-acceptance becomes imperative for Mei. From a psychological standpoint, the rejection of her panda/emotions has the potential to trigger a prolonged identity crisis and emotional management disorder (as evidenced by her uncontrollable transformation when bullied by Tyler in Scene 4), which is in line with Trimurti et al.'s (2023) findings on the link between self-rejection and adolescent mental health disorders. (2023) on the association of self-rejection with adolescent mental health disorders. From a cultural perspective, the failure to embrace self-acceptance can perpetuate intergenerational family trauma (Hidayah et al., 2024), thereby risking the transmission of the cycle of emotional repression to subsequent generations. Furthermore, it is evident that without self-acceptance, she will not achieve full identity integration, as manifested in her final declaration ("I'm proud of who I am, red panda and all!" Scene 8). This would enable reconciliation with her mother and healthy inheritance of cultural values.

#### 4. Conclusion

In order to achieve self-acceptance, Mei Lee must establish three interconnected psychological foundations. Firstly, she must engage in introspection and emotional validation, acknowledging her "red panda" identity (symbolising puberty-driven emotions) as an innate aspect of herself rather than a flaw to suppress (Scene 1, 5). Secondly, she must achieve autonomy in reconciling dual identities, navigating the tension between her authentic desires (e.g., the concept of fanaticism, interpersonal relationships, and familial and cultural obligations are all intertwined in Scene 2, 6). Furthermore, the ability to withstand external criticism is imperative in transforming societal stigma, as exemplified by Tyler's bullying in Scene 4, into self-affirmation. In accordance with O'Kelly's (2013) theoretical framework, this process necessitates the establishment of a framework in which strengths and vulnerabilities coexist without internal conflict. This, in turn, enables Mei to assert, "I'm proud of who I am, red panda and all!" (Scene 8).

For Mei, self-acceptance is of the utmost importance, as it is critical to her psychological survival. Suppressing her emotions, symbolised by the panda, can lead to uncontrollable transformations, which mirror real-world risks to adolescent mental health, such as anxiety and identity confusion (Juliana, Liza, Fatimahtuzzahra, & Imel, 2023) finds herself in a state of internal conflict, stemming from her complex identity as a Canadian adolescent navigating the intricacies of her Chinese familial legacy. This internal discord, characterised by the repression of emotions, is further compounded by her inability to fully accept her hybrid identity, thereby perpetuating intergenerational trauma. The subject's inability to break free from the expectations imposed by her family, as outlined in Scene 2, further hinders her ability to realise her full potential. This situation, as described by Rogers in 1957, is referred to as "conditions of worth," which traps the subject in a state of self-actualisation. Failure would result in lifelong feelings of insecurity, while success would enable her to harness her "panda" as a source of strength (Scene 8), thereby fulfilling Hurlock's (1974) definition of self-acceptance as living authentically without self-rejection.

Mei's process of constructing qualified self-acceptance is achieved through the implementation of four transformative actions: (1) The reframing of her "flaw" by recognising the red panda not as a curse but as a symbol of emotional authenticity (Scene 3: "We love the panda!"); (2) The assertion of autonomy through deliberate rebellion against oppressive traditions (Scene 5: "I want to be me! In Scene 6, the character's decision to attend the concert is consistent with O'Kelly's concept of self-agency. In Scene 3, the character seeks the acceptance of peers, whose approval serves as a foundation for her self-esteem. This counteracts the

influence of maternal pressure. In Scene 5, the character rejects the ritual of 'sealing' her panda, thereby integrating her dual identities and rejecting the practice of self-erasure. Her declaration, "I'm proud of who I am" (Scene 8), serves to crystallise Hurlock's "positive self-attitude", thereby proving that self-acceptance is achieved not by eliminating uniqueness but by embracing it as intrinsic to wholeness.

The present study is subject to a number of methodological and conceptual limitations. Firstly, the analysis is predicated on the interpretation of cinematic scenes as the primary data source. Consequently, the results are constrained to the perspective of the film's creator (the director's intent) and do not encompass the actual psychological responses of adolescent audiences to Mei Lee's character. Secondly, the findings are contextualised to a fictional character, and therefore generalisations to real adolescent populations should be made with caution. However, it should be noted that these findings represent the universal experience of puberty. Thirdly, the application of O'Kelly's (2013) Self-Acceptance Theory does not fully accommodate the collectivist cultural dimensions that influence Mei-Ming's conflict. Thus, integration with cultural psychology theories (e.g., acculturation stress) is required for a more holistic analysis. Finally, the study's scope is limited to the analysis of Mei Lee, excluding a comparison with self-acceptance representations in other contemporary Disney films (e.g., *Encanto*, *Moana*). This may potentially enrich the findings.

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