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# Parental pressure, puberty, and red pandas: a thematic analysis of audience reviews to *Turning Red*

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## ABSTRACT

Creative goods like films are interpreted based on personal and cultural experiences. This study focuses on audience reviews of Pixar's *Turning Red*, analyzing how people attribute values to the film's portrayal of girlhood and motherhood. Using thematic analysis, two main themes emerged: "It Feels Realistic," where reviewers find the film authentic and relatable through their own experiences and identities, and "Not Age Appropriate," criticizing the film for promoting stereotypes and being part of a woke agenda, suggesting moral concerns over its suitability for younger audiences. These themes illustrate the ways these reviewers construct relatability and assess appropriateness, shaping interpretations of girlhood and motherhood.

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## Introduction

Creative products, such as films, are imbued with non-monetary values: prompting hedonistic reactions in audiences, shaping aesthetic meanings, and aiding reflection on their own identities (Radbourne et al., 2010). As Caves (2000) argues, how audiences will receive a creative product (like a film) is unknown until that product is consumed. It is at that point that the creative product will produce positive and surprising responses (Radbourne, 2014) or be dismissed in favor of better products and new trends (Hirsch, 1972). Such subjectivity is particularly noticeable when it comes to films because, as Jacobs et al. (2015), 91) contend, "[t]heir uses and worth are subjective and idiosyncratic for each member in their audience." Because films are experiential, people use their personal preferences, individualized experiences, and intersectional identities to interpret the messages that are promulgated. These responses become socially shared and disseminated through reviews, which are not only written by professional film critics who are often in paid positions (e.g. journalists) but also by amateurs who choose to review a film simply to share their "emotional and experiential styles of evaluation" (Beaudouin & Pasquier, 2017, 1825). For this study, we approach reviews as sites of representation that reveal societal constructions and dominant ideologies. Accordingly, this study examines audience reviews of the Pixar film *Turning Red* (Shi, 2022) on social media to explore perceptions of girlhood and motherhood and how reactions are discursively

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constructed. We consider audience reviewers as “empowered consumers” (Beaudouin & Pasquier, 2017, 1811) who evaluate films according to “emotional feeling” rather than “aesthetic disposition” (p. 1812)

Set in the early 2000s, *Turning Red* tells the story of Meilin (referred to as Mei), a Chinese Canadian thirteen-year-old who finds herself turning into a giant red panda when she experiences strong emotions. It is revealed that the women of her family, including her mother Ming, were cursed and their perceived punishment is the transformation. The narrative, then, hinges on explorations of mother–daughter relationships, generational guilt, and coming-of-age stories, with the red panda constructed as a metaphor for puberty and the awkward experiences that are encountered by girls (Shi, 2022). The film is based on director Domee Shi’s personal experience growing up in Canada.<sup>1</sup>

Regarding box office success, *Turning Red* did not do well financially. Developed with a USD\$175 million budget, the film went on to only USD\$1,399,001 in the US domestic market and USD\$20,414,357 at the international box office IMDb, n.d.a). As Walters (2023) points out, *Turning Red*’s box office success was adversely impacted by its simultaneous release in theaters and on the streaming platform Disney+, with many opting to watch the film through the latter platform cutting into potential profits: film topped the Nielsen streaming figures at 227.2 billion minutes of viewing in its first 28 days of release (Hayes, 2022). In terms of who was watching the film, the streaming audience was considered 40% multicultural, with Venkatraman (2023) emphasizing that the film was amongst the top films consumed in minority and white households during its year of release.

Despite being considered a financial failure, the film did receive a generally positive critical reception, but this was marred by controversy when Sean O’Connell (2022) of CinemaBlend accused Pixar and Shi of making a film he deemed unrelatable and too “adult” for children. Subsequent critics highlighted that the film did feature storylines that could perturb parents, such as puberty and adolescent rebellion, but they maintained that the film was worthwhile (Moniuszko, 2022; Wenner Moyer, 2022). Although the film critics were in consensus that *Turning Red* should be positively received, our concern was with the reviews uploaded by audience reviewers because those could reveal the ways ordinary people were affected by the film, especially when it came to the underpinning girlhood and motherhood discussions that the film was premised on.

In the following sections, we explore contemporary constructions of girlhood and motherhood as presented in the literature to provide context for the discourses that reviewers may reference. We then describe our methodology for collecting and analyzing reviews, before presenting the two main themes that emerged from our analysis that address how reviewers engage with girlhood and motherhood in the film. The first theme, “It Feels Realistic,” highlights how reviewers perceive the film as authentic, drawing on their own experiences and identities to establish relatability. The second theme, “Not Age Appropriate,” examines how other reviewers critique the film’s representations, expressing concerns about stereotypes and framing the selection of themes as part of a “woke” agenda, thus perpetuating social anxieties. Throughout these themes, we pay close attention to the discursive strategies used by reviewers to make claims and justify their responses to the film, noting how people negotiate their positionality within their reviews.

## Navigating girlhood

Following Barnett (2019), we approach girlhood as a cultural construct, focusing on its articulation within a postfeminist, neoliberal context. While girlhood is open to interpretation, it is often ideologically understood in contemporary Western society as a stage that girls pass through on their way to womanhood. This journey typically involves moving from childhood to the tween years, experiencing puberty, and undergoing sexual maturation during adolescence before being recognized as a woman. Consequently, girlhood is defined as “a separate, exceptional, and/or pivotal phase in female identity formation” (Wald, 1998, p. 587). This understanding is reinforced by media representations, which have established a dominant view of girls as vulnerable, naïve, lacking autonomy (Mendes et al., 2009), and in need of protection (Kennedy, 2018).

We contend that *Turning Red* epitomizes the postfeminist landscape. Its discussion of periods, sanitary pads and rebellion may speak of young girls being “empowered and liberated” (Little, 2025, p. 9) given these topics have been taboo in mainstream media culture (Kissling, 2002). Yet, by stereotyping the characters as “boy crazy” and prescribing what it means to be a girl, the film inevitably maintains “patriarchal structures and power dynamics” (p. 9). Postfeminism is a significant aspect of contemporary Western life, with girls and young women positioned as its ideal subjects (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). The term “postfeminism” emerged in the 1990s to describe the “paradoxes and contradictions in the representation of women,” including the simultaneous embrace and rejection of feminism and girl power. It refers to a set of circulating ideas, images, and meanings (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p. 4). Postfeminism creates specific expectations for how girls should feel and behave, particularly regarding the cultivation of a sexy body through practices of surveillance, self-optimization, aesthetic labor, and the display of sexual subjectivity. It also emphasizes the expression of “right feelings” such as self-confidence, self-esteem, and happiness.

Girls are thus encouraged to conform to normative constructions, which are communicated through popular culture and require them to navigate various regulatory demands. For instance, while girls are expected to maintain sexual innocence, they simultaneously develop crushes and become increasingly aware of their desires (Vares & Jackson, 2015). Failing to adhere to normative ideals can result in being labeled as “slutty, aggressive,” or “out of control” (Pomerantz, 2009, p. 149). As Kennedy (2018) notes, adolescent girls are expected to negotiate their identities within the feminine and masculine paradigms that permeate society, all under constant surveillance. These expectations are framed within postfeminist and neoliberal rhetoric, which falsely suggests that girls are empowered (Beail et al., 2018; Kennedy, 2018). In contemporary society, girlhood contrasts with the prevailing views of second-wave feminism and is instead characterized by an emphasis on independence and agency, which leads girls to be held responsible for their circumstances, make their own choices, and reject the notion that they require parental and societal control (Alexandersson & Kalonaityte, 2020; Beail et al., 2018; Pomerantz, 2009).

However, this perception overlooks the fact that girlhood is increasingly being exploited as a means of controlling girls (Alexandersson & Kalonaityte, 2020). The media, for example, sends messages that enforce the need to make the “right” choices regarding appropriate behavior and attitudes to be recognized as a girl (Kennedy, 2018). Girls are discouraged from challenging gender norms because doing so “comes at a price, whether as

a threat to young men or in terms of heterosexual attractiveness and/or popularity” (Nairn & Wyn, 2015, p. 827). These contradictions that girls are expected to navigate have led scholars to argue that confining and binary constructions of girlhood serve as barriers to development. They suggest that girlhood should not be viewed as “a transitional period” but rather as consisting of multiple transitions that are “repeatable or reversible,” culturally specific, and shaped by power structures (Driscoll, 2022, p. 58). To be a girl is to recognize the existence of two narratives that shape her place in the world: “Opportunity and choice, and crisis and risk” (Nairn & Wyn, 2015, p. 825), but this should not deter her from resisting these constructions, standing up for her beliefs, and expressing her opinions (Mazzearella & Pecora, 2007). Therefore, being a girl means navigating a liminal space that is subject to change, ultimately making girlhood a lifelong project (Kennedy, 2018).

The discussion so far has primarily framed girlhood through a Western perspective. However, since Mei is a thirteen-year-old Chinese-Canadian, it is essential to explore how the experiences of Asian girls growing up in Westernized cultures have been understood. As children of immigrant parents, these girls often navigate the expectations of their cultural heritage alongside the norms of their host society. Tokunaga (2018) challenges dominant narratives that focus on stereotypes – such as gender roles, body image concerns, and the model minority myth – by emphasizing how young Asian girls actively cultivate a sense of belonging. Rather than being passive recipients of societal pressures, she argues that they shape their identities by creating what she calls “Asianized spaces” (p. 2), allowing them to navigate between their cultural background and, in her study, the American context. This process of negotiation situates them within what Bhabha (1990) describes as a “third space,” where, according to Tokunaga (2018), Asian American girls assert agency in constructing their identities despite the tensions they encounter.

In the context of Chinese Canadian girls, Costigan et al. (2009) assert that these youth seek ways to integrate their Chinese heritage into their self-concept and cultural belonging, which contributes to more positive psychological outcomes. Similarly, Chen and Tse (2010) suggest that Chinese Canadian girls develop in ways comparable to their European Canadian peers in terms of “social competence and peer relationships” (p. 331), with the primary difference being that the former often exhibit greater shyness and lower levels of aggression. While some scholars highlight the structural pressures these girls face – such as high parental expectations and the challenges of being a minority in the Global North (Blackburn et al., 2024) – scholars’ perspectives suggest that these factors do not merely constrain these young girls. For instance, Thakurta (2025) argues that young Asian girls in Western societies develop intersectional identities through interactions with diverse social groups, allowing them to challenge the prevailing stereotypes that Player (2021), describes as portraying Asian girls as “subservient, docile, and in need of saving.” These perspectives indicate that these girls engage in a dynamic process of self-definition, actively responding to and reshaping the social and cultural forces that influence them.

## Monstrous motherhood

Telling stories about girlhood often raises questions about the mother–daughter relationship. As Creed (1986, p. 72) notes, this relationship is frequently depicted as one where “the child struggles to break free but the mother is reluctant to release it.” This portrayal reinforces the ideology that a “good” mother prioritizes her child’s needs not out of habit

or duty, but “because she wants to” (Feasey, 2017, p. 6). The concept of the good mother is tied to intensive mothering, where she subordinates her own needs to her child’s and is typically seen as an “intuitive nurturer” (Goodwin & Huppertz, 2010, p. 6). Deviating from this norm often results in mother blaming (Karlyn, 2011) or being labeled as villainous (Gibson, 2020). The “villainous” or “monstrous” mother not only fails to meet societal expectations but actively defies normative understandings of motherhood (O’Reilly, 2021). These ideas are commonly portrayed in media depictions of mother–daughter relationships, where the mother is often shown as an obstacle to her daughter’s full female agency (Gibson, 2020).

Media representations of motherhood are problematic as they construct and reinforce often unattainable standards (Walters & Harrison, 2014). For example, Heffernan and Wilgus (2018, p. 4) describe media portrayals of mothers as:

... idealized, depicted almost exclusively as white, middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual and married; they are usually of the “right” age (neither too old nor too young) and have the “right” number of children (neither too few nor too many). Moreover, these “perfect” mothers inevitably appear blissfully happy, to “have it all together” and love every moment of their motherhood.

These depictions regulate mothers’ behaviors (Goodwin & Huppertz, 2010) and can create feelings of maternal ambivalence as mothers struggle to meet these unrealistic expectations (O’Reilly, 2021). The portrayal of intensive mothering in the media has led to a lack of relatable fictional mothers, as noted by the mothers in Feasey’s study (Feasey, 2015). These “perfect” mothers are not allowed to be flawed; when they do make mistakes, they are heavily condemned and portrayed as bad. Fictional mothers are often labeled as “helicopter parents” or “tiger moms,” who are either hyper-involved in their children’s lives or possessive and manipulative, possibly using their children for their own needs (Walters & Harrison, 2014). There seems to be no middle ground, assuming mothers are represented on screen at all. Karlyn (2011, 8) found that movies, in particular, “dispatch mothers with a vengeance, relegating them to sentimentality, hysteria, monstrosity, or mere invisibility,” which Heffernan and Wilgus (2018) argue marginalizes and silences mothers in favor of giving voice to their daughters.

As suggested above, one common characterization of Asian parenting styles is the concept of the “tiger mom,” a term popularized by Chua (2011) that reflects a stereotypical perception of strict and demanding parenting. Shin and Wong (2013) describe tiger parenting as closely aligned with authoritarian parenting, where parents are “highly controlling ... combined with a relative lack of warmth” (p. 104). A tiger mom, therefore, is understood as a “demanding mother with high expectations for her children’s academic success” (Xie & Li, 2019, p. 284). The children of such parents often conform to these expectations due to the influence of filial piety, which emphasizes obedience and respect for elder generations (Ko & Wei, 2018). While authoritarian parenting is often criticized in Western discourse, what is frequently overlooked is that Chinese parenting traditions are deeply rooted in Confucian values that prioritize unity, cohesion, and the avoidance of shame. Within this cultural framework, parents are expected to dedicate themselves to their children’s success (Lui & Rollock, 2013). The perceived strictness of tiger parenting is not necessarily seen as oppressive; rather, it is an expression of love and governance, known as *guan*, which signifies parental concern and protection. In this



context, children can interpret their parents' high expectations as a form of support rather than control (Russell et al., 2010).

Research on mother–daughter relationships, particularly between Asian mothers and their second-generation immigrant daughters in the Global North, highlights the complexities of this dynamic. Schultermadnl (2009) describes these as “difficult relationships” (p. 10), where conflict arises as daughters strive for individuality while mothers seek to preserve their collective culture and maintain continuity with their own sense of self. In essence, this relationship is shaped by generational tensions, with daughters often diverging from the expectations set by their mothers due to misunderstandings and cultural dissonance. This misalignment in values can lead to acts of rebellion, particularly as daughters navigate choices unfamiliar to their immigrant mothers. For instance, Chin (2000) discusses how the ability to choose a career over the traditional expectation of becoming a housewife is a shift that many Chinese immigrant mothers struggle to comprehend. Contrastingly, as Ho (1999) suggests, the mother can also serve as a source of stability, helping her daughter feel secure enough to embrace her often-subordinated racial identity while assimilating into Western culture. Furthermore, Ko and Wei (2018) argue that when daughters feel emotionally connected to their Asian mothers, they are more comfortable engaging in conflict, ultimately fostering open communication rather than estrangement.

It is against this backdrop that, much like Feasey (2017, p. 12), we aim to explore the “recurring themes and debates that exist in user reviews” to understand how audience reviewers discuss representations of girlhood and motherhood in the film *Turning Red* (2022).

## Method

To gauge people's attitudes on the representation of girlhood and motherhood in the film, and what their reactions could reveal about contemporary society, we applied thematic analysis to 9683<sup>2</sup> reviews and comments on Reddit,<sup>3</sup> Common Sense Media (2022), Internet Movie Database (IMDb, 2022), Tomatoes Rotten (2022) and Google Reviews (2022) audience reviews that were uploaded after the March 11th 2022 streaming platform and theatrical release date until the 20<sup>th</sup> of September 2022 (just over six months after its initial release).

We selected these review platforms due to their influence, accessibility, and relevance to audience engagement. IMDb, with approximately 250 million visitors per month (IMDb, n.d.b), is one of the most widely used movie websites. Rotten Tomatoes, having provided reviews for over 25 years, has established itself as a leading platform for both audience and critic opinions (Tomatoes Rotten, n.d.). When searching for *Turning Red* on Google, one of the most widely used search engines, audience reviews are among the first pieces of information available, highlighting their prominence in shaping public perception. Common Sense Media was included due to one of the authors' familiarity with the platform as a parent who regularly relies on it to evaluate film content before allowing her daughter to watch. Finally, Reddit remains one of the top social media platforms, with approximately 2 billion website visits per month (Statistica, n.d.), making it a significant space for public discourse and audience reactions. Thus, these platforms were chosen for their popularity and familiarity. Additionally, where film ratings were observable, there

was notable consistency across platforms. On Rotten Tomatoes, the film held a 67% audience approval rating; on IMDb, it received a 6.9 out of 10; on Common Sense Media, it averaged 3.5 out of 5; and on Google Reviews, it had a 74% approval rating.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a qualitative method that allows researchers to identify and uncover patterns of meaning within a data set. This approach is flexible, making it effective for analyzing large amounts of text and finding meaning within it. We employed both inductive and deductive approaches, recognizing that it is often challenging to use one approach exclusively (Byrne, 2022). Our goal was to identify and interpret codes as they emerged from the data.

We followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps for thematic analysis, starting with becoming deeply familiar with the data to ensure an in-depth analysis beyond just surface-level interpretations. This immersion involved repeatedly reading the data, rigorously reflecting on the codes we identified, and systematically comparing our codes for accuracy. This process allowed us to uncover both semantic (explicit) and latent (implicit) meanings in the comments and reviews (Byrne, 2022).

In the second step, we generated codes by assigning descriptive labels to ideas that were recurring, repeated, and expressed with particular intensity in our data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). We developed 27 codes, 14 of which formed the basis for the two themes discussed in this article. They included *controlling parenting*, *sexual content*, *Pixar films*, *coming-of-age*, *periods/menstruation*, *personal anecdotes*, *Asian/Chinese*, *age-appropriate*, *education*, *awkwardness*, *character likeability*, *disliked storyline*, *trauma*, and *target audience*. It was not uncommon for some reviews to have multiple codes which helped to form our prevailing themes. In the third step, we developed themes by comparing and contrasting our codes to identify overarching themes and subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This process required us to interpret the relationships between codes and assess the significance of the themes. For example, naturally overlapping codes such as *periods* and *coming-of-age* were immediately grouped, while others, such as *Asian/Chinese* required splitting the reviews in the code between positive and negative perceptions of ethnicity. Acknowledging the subjectivity involved in generating themes, we consciously reflected on our decisions to create what Byrne (2022) describes as a "coherent and lucid picture of the dataset."

Step four involved reviewing our potential themes to answer critical questions, such as, "Is this a theme?," "What is the quality of this theme?," and "Is there enough meaningful data to support this theme?" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 63). In step five, we defined and named our themes, which required a detailed analysis of what each theme represented. As Byrne (2022) notes, defining a theme involves making decisions about which data extracts will best illustrate the theme in the final report. These extracts are not just included to demonstrate what a reviewer said but are analyzed deeply to interpret the underlying theme. Finally, step six involved writing up the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

We developed six themes: *Aesthetics*, exploring animation techniques; *Location Representation*, discussing Canadian landmarks; *Nostalgia*, focusing on 1990s depictions; *Disney vs. Pixar*, debating the superior studio; *It Feels Realistic*, examining audience connections to girlhood portrayals; and *Not Age Appropriate*, detailing objections to the film. The last two themes directly inform our discussion. Overall, 54% of reviewers were coded as positive, 34% negative, and 12% neutral.



## Data analysis

### *It feels realistic: assertions of authenticity and relatability*

We begin by examining the positive comments of reviewers who signaled that *Turning Red* was a film that was relatable due to the perceived authentic portrayal of experiences and characters. In this theme “It feels realistic,” we have grouped descriptions of experiences of girlhood such as finding oneself, puberty, menstruation, and mother–daughter dynamics. Across these assertions, we argue reviewers make visible how their lived experiences and intersectional identities are used as a resource to make sense of the film. As such, perceptions of the value of the film become intertwined with claims of authenticity and relatability, which are not only culturally constructed but also deeply personal as reviewers weave narratives of their identities into their review of the film.

Of the 3485 reviewers who used terms such as “relatable,” “believable” or “realistic” to describe the storyline, 522 drew attention to how characters in the film were authentic by constructing normative, generic identities. In these instances, reviewers shifted from the specificity of film characters to generalize about what it is like to be a teenager and as such, present relatability as a desirable film quality. For example, reviewers praised how “It nails the awkwardness and hardships of finding yourself” (#6726 Rotten Tomatoes); addresses “knowing when to individuate and find out who you are in relationship to your family, your peers, and by yourself” (#3682 Google Reviews); “feels realistic to what being a teenager is really like: painfully awkward and hilariously cringey [sic]” (#4534 Rotten Tomatoes); and “makes all those uncomfortable/curious moments of our preteen age seem normal and comfortable like it should be” (#7083 Google Reviews). What is striking across these excerpts is how the figure of the teenager is constructed through common experiences related to identity and agency regardless of other aspects of identity such as race or gender, which along with age, intersect to shape identity formation. The use of the impersonal “you” and plural “our” reinforce the generalizing claims of normativity by reviewers, exemplifying Kanai’s (2019) argument that the production of relatability involves positioning the personal as general.

In 2973 reviews, individuals directly reference their own experiences to justify the relatability and authenticity of the film. In doing so, they demonstrate not only how aspects of the film act as a catalyst in the processes of remembering (Keightley & Pickering, 2012) but also how such relatability is worthy of being mobilized when reviewing a film. In other words, subjectivity goes beyond interpretation to make connections between *Turning Red* and reflective accounts of being a teenager as demonstrated by the following reviews:

Also, watching Mei discovering so many things about herself reminded me of several funny or embarrassing situations I also experienced as a child. (#6669 Rotten Tomatoes)

Of course, this movie will make you cringe, feel awkward, and maybe experience second-hand embarrassment! It’s about teenagers understanding who they are! I often remember growing up . . . awkwardly expressing my interests, and hiding some things from my parents. (#2067 IMDb)

While parents watching the film have issues with the film’s message, the “demonized” mom, and the maturity, they are all perfectly relatable to me as a tween. (#5752 Rotten Tomatoes)

The identified relatability of themes in the film of feeling awkward and embarrassed, navigating parent–child relationships, and discovering personal identity is anchored in the experiences of the reviewer through the use of the personal pronoun “I” as well as the preposition “as,” which indicates the time of being (a child or a tween). In many ways, the reviewers’ comments align with societal understandings of teenagers, and by extension, how *Turning Red* constructed them.

Such responses to the resonance of the film by drawing on lived experiences were not always framed as positive as indicated below – although this was less frequent in our dataset (only 127 comments):

It’s like Pixar decided to replay all my ABC Millennial trauma right back at me. Even the embarrassing mother, you forgot your past, doodling your crushes parts. Love the movie but man, it brought up a lot of repressed childhood trauma. (#2630 Reddit)

As a Chinese Canadian this movie hit home way too hard. All the intergenerational trauma and emotional damage was too real. I think this movie will definitely resonate with any Western Chinese person with immigrant parents. (#421 IMDb)

The mother is a villain in this story, absolutely overbearing and doesn’t let her teenager be a teen . . . This movie brought up a lot of unresolved overbearing abusive mother issues for me. (#505 IMDb)

In these two excerpts, the reviewers indicate how the film’s depiction of relationships and experiences invoked negative memories and reflections, demonstrating how affect intersects with relatability. These comments, along with similar ones, suggest that the film serves as a vehicle for exploring trauma – whether by portraying Mei and Ming’s conflicting values, which align with Chin (2000) and Chou et al. (2023) views that Asian American/Canadian mothers and daughters have different perspectives due to their distinct acculturation experiences and intergenerational trauma, or by reflecting the reviewers’ own identity trauma narratives. The latter suggestion reflects Sadoughi’s (2024) argument that overcontrolling parents can lead to negative psychological outcomes in individuals such as anxiety and distress. Critically, the feelings of embarrassment and anger observed in the reviews are often attributed to the representation of the mother figure, which will be unpacked further in the next section. Invoking negative memories and reflections in their reviews extends the work of Kanai (2019) who focused on relatable feelings in the post-feminist landscape through a double articulation of relatability: the identification of “relatable” moments in films by audiences, and (re)circulation and affirmation of “relatable” moments by audiences through reviews.

Beyond the relatability of being a teenager, the film was also deemed authentic and trailblazing in giving voice to the experiences of girls, presenting viewers with an opportunity to reflexively engage with their girlhood.

I can recognize myself in a lot of Mei’s experiences and learned something new about them as well. There are not a lot of movies that normalize other significant parts about puberty like periods and understanding your parents, but this one does. . . (#970 IMDb)

“Turning Red” resonated with me in a lot of ways I wasn’t expecting it to . . . I was pleasantly surprised at how it dealt with things like puberty, self-actualization, mutual respect, heritage, and teenage romance. (#5468 Rotten Tomatoes)

I got my period when I was 12, and I had no clue about it . . . I wish someone talked to me about it, I wish I had a movie like this growing up - to spark a conversation with my mom earlier. (#3209 Rotten Tomatoes)

These reviews, and others like them, reinforce the idea that girlhood is a liminal space (Barnett, 2019; Driscoll, 2002) where people inevitably find that they are negotiating, understanding, and interpreting what it means to be an “authentic” girl in contemporary society. Interestingly, some of the reviewers centered on puberty and periods, topics that people felt had not been given adequate consideration in popular entertainment. We found 2323 comments, like those documented above, that applauded Pixar for discussing a topic that Kissling (2002) argues has long been considered taboo. Puberty is often viewed as shameful and embarrassing, perhaps accounting for why it is rarely depicted on screen (Kissling, 2002). Yet, the evidence from the reviewers suggests they want and endorse realistic narratives that highlight the ordinariness of puberty and periods.

Much like the final reviewer cited above, 319 reviewers felt that *Turning Red* could be educative in ways they felt were lacking in their homelife and, at the very least, could inspire conversations that would better prepare prepubescent girls for the experiences to come. As Bennett and Harden (2014) outline, young girls can struggle with the transition, especially when their parents see the menarche as evidence of their daughters’ “emerging sexuality,” or when, their mothers, as a primary source of education on menstruation, are negative about their daughters’ changes. Therefore, increasing the number of sources and narratives, especially in media offerings such as *Turning Red*, was perceived as welcome based on the attitudes of reviewers. Rather than holding to traditional ideologies that menstruation should be kept secret, it was clear that reviewers were embracing this new and revolutionary approach by Pixar.

Alongside the recognition of gendered experiences, racial identity was also explicitly brought into 756 reviews, presenting a nuanced construction of relatability:

As a Southeast Asian child currently going through puberty it captures what us kids really go through which is periods and hormones and crushes and there is nothing wrong with that. (#744 Google Reviews)

I’m a 2<sup>nd</sup> gen immigrant, and it perfectly captured the ‘caught between two worlds experience, especially with the pressures of family and school life. (#1347 Reddit)

Probably bias [sic] but I really enjoyed the movie alot [sic] since I’m 28, Cantonese immigrant that [sic] grew up and moved to the UK in 1995 till now. (#1922 Reddit)

What is distinctive about these reviews is how the narrative of relatability is framed by racial identity from the outset, unlike earlier examples in which the reference to identity characteristics either follows the description of the relatable experience or remains implicit. This highlights how making claims to relatability relies on a shared identity, revealing what experiences are common to “us” and what “we” relate to (Ask & Abidin, 2018), and the explicit (or implicit) signposting of these identity markers reveals boundaries of “relatable” (un)equal lived experiences. It potentially exposes how the constructions of teenage and girlhood as “relatable” that we discussed earlier might be permeated by whiteness that is rendered invisible.

A desire to relate emerges within reviews that focus on who the film was aimed at. While many reviews found commonality in representations of teenage experiences as we have examined, 2247 reviewers who either supported or opposed the film still proposed the film was suited for a specific demographic rather than a general audience:

It is not a very good movie for general audiences. I doubt most boys or men will like it. (#2896 Rotten Tomatoes)

This movie has the most restricted target audience in a Pixar movie: 13-year-old Chinese girls. (#3177 Rotten Tomatoes)

This film was aimed squarely at young female TikTok users going through hormonal changes. (#425 IMDb)

Across these excerpts, the gender of viewers is emphasized, bringing with it the presumption that the nature of the storyline and characters will only be enjoyed, valued or perhaps relatable to women, particularly young women and girls. Such a belief that the film should be restricted to “older” audiences was particularly evident on the Common Sense Media website where reviewers were inclined to state, “the movie content is too mature for a younger crowd” (#1390) or “With a PG rating and an unclear description, I didn’t expect to have to prescreen a Disney movie. Super uncomfortable for kids under 10” (#1399). Such perceptions are presented as “restrictive” and narrow, and this negative inflection is showcased most strongly through review #425 which deploys a gendered stereotypical framing of who constitutes this group: “TikTok users going through hormonal changes.” Thus, the presence of these perspectives reveals the construction of relatability as gendered and raced along with an entanglement between representation and relatability and reinforces the normative guidelines and expectations that govern and shape how girlhood is to be understood (Kennedy, 2018). Additionally, the reviews read as dismissive of girls and girl culture undermining their value and identities. Furthermore, for some, their response to *Turning Red* – through what they choose to express in an online review – makes visible an underlying assumption that the generic audience is white and male, and assumptions that content should be aimed at those individuals.

### ***Not age appropriate: moral panics and cultural (in)sensitivity***

Although some reviewers were pleased with the portrayal of teenage rebellion, periods, and sexual awakenings, others derided the film for the inclusion of such concepts. Those reviews and the justifications for the criticism leveled at the film make up the theme “Not Age Appropriate.” Unlike the way that the previous section examined the construction of relatability through implicit and explicit references to the self and lived experience, the critique of the same themes and characters is due to the lack of relatability citing their objections were because of the unsuitability or insensitivity of representations. We propose that there is a shift in discourse amongst these reviews from justification through lived, personal experiences to social anxiety and the need to protect others, particularly children, which is often advocated in public debates about children and media (Buckingham & Jensen, 2012). While Jackson and Scott were writing in 1999, their views still hold 25 years later when they elucidated that, “Childhood is increasingly being constructed as

a precious realm under siege from those who would rob children of their childhoods” (p. 86). The reviews that form the basis of this theme tended to hinge on the premise that the messages of *Turning Red* were remiss in acting in the best interests of the film’s target audience.

Although 3694 reviewers found the representation of (gendered) teenage experiences as relatable and authentic to their own, others (1957 reviewers) interpreted these scenes as disseminating and even celebrating the “wrong” message. This was underpinned by the construction of children as vulnerable, susceptible audiences and films as ideologically charged resources nudging behavior as exemplified here:

I found the movie rather distasteful in that it seems to encourage rebelling against your parents because they’ll never understand you, as opposed to appreciating what they do for you and having honest, open two-way communication with them. (#420 IMDB)

This movie literally glorifies disobeying your parents so you can be your true self. (#1079 IMDB)

Within these extracts, reviewers assert “family values” and alternative visions of parent–child relationships that are presented as not only superior but common sense to critique the value of the films. The concern is centered on the endorsement of disobedience against parents and the celebration of rebellion. Not all the negative reviews see connections made to the lives of the reviewers, such as their role as parents or their experience in watching the film with their family. Whilst we are cautious about making assumptions about the identities of the reviewers based on what is absent from their reviews, these articulations nevertheless reveal a different approach to constructing claims about the film: in essence, the film was not relatable. Interestingly, among those that did not find the fun relatable 117 of those openly acknowledged a preference for Pixar film *Luca* for its coming-of-age storyline: a film where the lead character is a young boy. These findings suggest, then, that these reviewers reject the position on girlhood that highlights the need for girls to favor independence and agency, which can produce feelings of empowerment (Alexandersson & Kalonaityte, 2020; Beail et al., 2018; Pomerantz, 2009).

The social concerns about the suitability of the film takes on a gendered dimension among reviews that critique the inclusion of periods and puberty as well as the (over) sexualization of characters:

This movie is highly inappropriate and not family-friendly at all . . . There was no need to have female cycles mentioned in a Disney/Pixar movie. (#997 IMDb)

In general, I’m not a fan of any media where children, namely 13-year-olds are sexualised. (#8428 Google Reviews)

The pictures she drew in her notebook, those were just,- I can’t even explain them and how she also referred to them as “sexy” and that laugh she had while drawing them UNDER HER BED is this appropriate Disney? (#1676 Common Sense Media)

Reviewers of *Turning Red* delineate boundaries of acceptability that echo long-standing moral concerns about the portrayal of girls and young women, reflecting societal anxieties (Ringrose, 2016). Such concerns are not unfounded, as studies by Pacilli et al. (2019), and Slater and Tiggemann (2016) have shown that exposure to sexualized

content can lead to dehumanization and negative body image issues among young viewers. Media often portray girls as vulnerable and in need of protection, suggesting a narrow view of girlhood that emphasizes innocence and discourages expressions of desire (Kennedy, 2018; Mendes et al., 2009; Vares & Jackson, 2015). This narrative, as Pomerantz (2009) describes, stigmatizes girls who deviate from these norms. The critique of *Turning Red* for straying from these conventional portrayals demonstrates the challenges films face when they attempt to present more nuanced understandings of girlhood and sexuality.

Furthermore, the reviews reflect Taylor's (2010) and Thompson's (2010) positions that discussions of the sexualization of children tend to emerge from adults projecting their ideals onto popular culture content. Adults presume that children need to remain innocent and that fuels anxiety that children are being "adultified" by the inclusion of sexualized material in the media (Vares & Jackson, 2015). However, Vares and Jackson suggest that those objecting to such content are assuming that girls are passive and vulnerable to sexualized content which needlessly ignores the fact that girls ascribe any number of meanings to sexualized media texts and do not see the sexualized content through the same lenses as their parents. Similarly, Allen and Ingram (2015) note that the ideologies that exist within society presume girls of all ages are sexually innocent, yet they too suggest that talk of crushes, romance, and desire are commonplace and should be an expected part of growing up in contemporary Western society. There were mixed views amongst the reviewers about the sexual content in the film which shows that people are concerned about the potential corrupting influence of such content on children.

Beyond the representation of gendered identity, reviews also leveled critiques against the film for constructing the "wrong" type of mother. Ming was only considered a worthwhile parent by some when she redeemed herself at the end of the film and allowed her daughter to grow. In short, 1803 reviewers were quick to vilify Ming as a "bad mother" because she did not fulfil the ideals of a good mother. Whether intentional or not, the reviewers contributed to reinforcing the "good" mother stereotype that permeates society. By drawing attention to Ming's flaws, for instance, "She is constantly micromanaging her [Mei] and even stalking her because she can't bear the fact that her daughter is growing up" (#4807 Rotten Tomatoes) and "... is overprotective and a VERY irritating mother," (#2491 Rotten Tomatoes) the reviewers are maintaining the ideology that mothers are expected to be responsible for the well-being of their children (Goodwin & Huppertz, 2010; Heffernan & Wilgus, 2018), and to transgress in any way is to not only be "bad" but monstrous.

In 817 instances (fewer than those concerned with negative representations of girlhood), reviewers expressed concern over the perceived negative stereotypes of Chinese mothers and Chinese culture:

Unfortunately, as most other Western movies in recent years, it is yet another film that attempts to have Asian [sic] representation and somehow achieves the exact opposite. it has all the stereotypical elements of "model minority," the heavily emphasised dedication to religion, ... , an overly-strict "tiger mum" and passive father, who eventually realises the error of her ways through working through her generational trauma caused by the strict upbringing of chinese [sic] culture (#6302 Google Reviews)

As a Chinese person, I felt this film didn't help with the stereotype of Chinese parents. My white friends felt sorry for me. (#321 Reddit)



I'm Asian in Asia ... I thought it's still stereotypical? [sic] My parents aren't uptight and actually very laid back and loving. They never demand straight As, I don't think we have any generational trauma either. (#657 Reddit)

It plays heavily on the high achiever Asian mother stereotype. I am not Asian, so it might touch on some uncomfortable opinions. (#1362 IMDb)

Although only a minority of reviewers' express concern over the representation of Chinese culture and label it as stereotypical or insensitive, a sense of unease can be collectively constructed across these extracts. This potentially draws on the tendency of Hollywood films to appropriate different cultures into a Western paradigm (Davies & Smith, 2000). Interestingly, the concern around cultural insensitivity and stereotyping is frequently attributed to the figure of the mother as exemplified in the extracts above. Ming is seen to violate the normative understandings of motherhood, particularly by adopting an authoritarian parenting style. To act as an authoritarian parent is to make high demands of your child to the point of controlling their behaviors (Joseph & John, 2008). Although not referred to explicitly as an authoritarian parent, reviewers sanctioned Ming for being "unnecessarily controlling," "overbearing," blaming others for corrupting her daughter, and for raising a child who will be dysfunctional, experiencing "shame and self-loathing."

The critique of her problematic parenting style is racialized by the use of the term "tiger mom" or in reference to how her actions are typical of Asian parents, which has been theorized as a typical parenting style in the Chinese collectivist culture (Barton et al., 2021; Lui & Rollock, 2013; Ng et al., 2014). The term "tiger mom" is used explicitly in 153 separate reviews and replies. The interpretations of the mother by reviewers often indicate a condemnation of the "tiger mom" as contrary to the prevailing ideologies of parenting that exist within Western society. Much like the research from Nie et al. (2023), the belief is that the children of Chinese parents would prefer good mothers who guide, are loving, communicate, and are not overbearing, which are often attributes embodied by or at the very least, expected of Western parents, and especially mothers (Feasey, 2015, 2017).

Yet, the cultural context of what a tiger mom is appears to be missing from these reviews because little or no reference is made to how such a parenting style is indicative of an act of love and support in Chinese culture (Russell et al., 2010). Furthermore, the condemnation of Ming's parenting also does not appear to consider that the mother-daughter conflict between these Chinese characters can work as a means of identity negotiation for Mei as she grapples with developing her sense of self in alignment and opposition with Ming's image of her. As suggested above, this mother-daughter tension can work as a means for forging greater clarity, connection and understanding within immigrant families (Ho, 1999; Ko & Wei, 2018). However, the extent to which this telling of family dynamics amongst a specific Chinese-Canadian family is constructed as unnecessarily carrying the weighty burden of representing all Asian communities or perpetuating insensitive stereotypes of "tiger moms" is less clear.

Finally, the appropriateness of the film was also contested within reviews due to the political interpretation of representations. The political or "woke" nature of the film (102 reviewer) was positioned as inherently negative but specific themes or reasons for this characterization were not elaborated on:

If I want to watch politics, I'll turn on MSNBC or Fox. (#1491 IMDb)

What was the message here exactly? To show the parents or family in a bad light who care the most about you?! . . . Just wake up “woke” Disney & stop brainwashing kids by making them watch your woke trash. (#2112 IMDb)

A normative understanding of what is appropriate for films, and in particular Disney films aimed at children, along with what types of messages should be packaged within this media is at stake in these reviews. Potentially, the concerns surrounding the gendered representations of teenage girls coupled with the intersectional identity of the main characters are being understood here as part of “woke culture,” which taps into conservative discourses that perceive struggles for social justice as a threat to “the people” and “the common good” (Cammaerts, 2022). Thus, reviews become another site of contestation over the “woke” agenda of the entertainment industry, which is invoked when audiences perceive the “wrong” messages are embedded in the film and whiteness is not centered.

## Conclusion

Our study of *Turning Red* illustrates how the film has become a focal point in discussions of girlhood, menarche, and mother–daughter relationships, particularly during adolescence. The reviews analyzed reveal deep-seated social anxieties about girlhood and the perceived responsibilities of parenting and motherhood, with reviewers grappling with conflicting expectations – both in terms of what they want from films and how they wish to see themselves represented.

Given the subjective nature of film reception (Jacobs et al., 2015), audiences interpret its messages through personal preferences, intersectional identities, and cultural expectations. As Davies and Smith (2010) argue, films function as tools for meaning-making, reinforcing dominant ideologies related to identity, race, gender, and generational relationships. Reviews of *Turning Red* reflect these dynamics, articulating individual reactions while contributing to identity politics and shaping societal constructions.

The polarized responses to *Turning Red* reveal how deeply ingrained ideologies of girlhood and motherhood shape audience perceptions. While some praised its portrayal of puberty, menstruation, and teenage rebellion as authentic and empowering, others deemed these themes inappropriate, aligning with traditional ideals of obedience, passivity, and sexual innocence (Vares & Jackson, 2015). Films that challenge these norms by depicting girls as autonomous and expressive can provoke resistance, reflecting anxieties about shifting gender roles and destabilizing traditional values.

The portrayal of maternal figures, particularly the “tiger mom” trope, was also contested. Some reviewers praised its authenticity, while others criticized it for reinforcing stereotypes of Chinese parenting. Regardless of cultural framing, critiques reflected the expectation that a “good” mother should prioritize her child’s needs above all else – not out of obligation, but as an intrinsic desire (Feasey, 2017). The characterization of Ming challenges conventional maternal expectations, and backlash against her underscores how deviations from traditional roles are often met with criticism. Many saw Ming as an obstacle to Mei’s growth, reflecting broader anxieties about overbearing mothers limiting daughters’ independence (Gibson, 2020). The film’s reception reveals entrenched ideals of self-sacrificing motherhood (Karlyn, 2011) and larger struggles over maternal expectations.

Our findings indicate that discussions of *Turning Red* focused more on girlhood than cultural representation. Reviewers engaged with the film as a coming-of-age story rather than a commentary on Chinese identity. Only a small number, including Asian-identifying individuals, noted stereotypes. Whether this was due to reluctance to engage with racial identity or the perception of girlhood as universal, the emphasis on mother–daughter dynamics was a key trend. However, as our study analyzed Western, English-language reviews, it remains unclear how Chinese audiences perceived their representation.

Ultimately, film reception extends beyond personal taste – it serves as a lens through which audiences negotiate identities and ideological positions. The contested reception of *Turning Red* emphasizes ongoing cultural negotiations around girlhood, agency, and parental authority. Future research could further explore how these tensions shape audience engagement and whether they reflect broader societal shifts in understanding adolescence, representation, and gender identity in media.

## Notes

1. To clarify, while the authors are all cis-gender women, we are not of Chinese descent but felt that Shi's experiences of coming-of-age and generational guilt resonated with our own identities.
2. Approximately 329 reviews were not included in the final analysis because they did not address the concepts of girlhood or motherhood. Instead, these reviewers chose to reflect on the aesthetics of the film (e.g. "The 00s setting and aesthetic was dope" #25 Reddit; "It's got a wonderful color palette, and the voice acting is enthusiastic" #79 Reddit; "It was a joy to watch especially when the colors and the whole picture is just amazing!" #729 IMDB), did not offer any real explanation for their review (e.g. "Wasn't my favorite, but I see the allure for people" #1445 Reddit; "Pixar is definitely [sic] the leading in modern Western animation. But this last movie is really nothing special" #532 IMDB), wrote their review in a foreign language, went on a tangent with the replies (e.g. compared Disney to Pixar; discussed how accurate the film was in its representation of Canada) or they offered a review of the film without having watched it first (e.g. "We're from Toronto and I can't wait to watch it with the kids tonight! My son is old enough now that he will totally recognize the streetcars and stuff" # 444 Reddit). Therefore, although they were coded, they are outside the scope of the discussion that follows.
3. The following makes up the data from Reddit.  
 u/AutoModerator (2022, March 11). *Official/r/Pixar "Turning Red" discussion thread* [Reddit Post]. Retrieved from [https://www.reddit.com/r/Pixar/comments/tb6602/official\\_rpixar\\_turning\\_red\\_discussion\\_thread/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Pixar/comments/tb6602/official_rpixar_turning_red_discussion_thread/)  
 u/LiteraryBoner (2022, March 12). *Official discussion- Tuning Red* [Reddit Post] Retrieved from [https://www.reddit.com/r/movies/comments/tc6wun/official\\_discussion\\_turning\\_red\\_spoilers/Fiction](https://www.reddit.com/r/movies/comments/tc6wun/official_discussion_turning_red_spoilers/Fiction) (2022, April 27). *This might just be me but I HATED Mei's mom in Turning Red* [Reddit Post]. Retrieved from: [https://www.reddit.com/r/Pixar/comments/uccup6/this\\_might\\_just\\_be\\_me\\_but\\_i\\_really\\_hated\\_meis\\_mom/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Pixar/comments/uccup6/this_might_just_be_me_but_i_really_hated_meis_mom/)

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## The data that support the findings of this study are publicly available at the following links

<https://www.common sense media.org/movie-reviews/turning-red/user-reviews/adult>. Accessed 23 May 2022.

<https://www.google.com/search?q=turning+red+reviews&oq=turning+red+reviews&aqs=chrome.69i57j0i512l2j46i512j0i512l3j46i512j0i512l2.4367j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>. Accessed 23 May 2022.

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[https://www.reddit.com/r/movies/comments/tc6wun/official\\_discussion\\_turning\\_red\\_spoilers/](https://www.reddit.com/r/movies/comments/tc6wun/official_discussion_turning_red_spoilers/)

[https://www.reddit.com/r/Pixar/comments/uccup6/this\\_might\\_just\\_be\\_me\\_but\\_i\\_really\\_hated\\_meis\\_mom/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Pixar/comments/uccup6/this_might_just_be_me_but_i_really_hated_meis_mom/)

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