

An Intersectional Analysis of Race, Sexuality, and Family Dynamics in *Strange World* (2022)

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Abstract

This study examines *Strange World* (2022) through an intersectional lens to explore how race, sexuality, and family dynamics converge in the characterization of Ethan Clade. Drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality, the analysis identifies key scenes that illustrate how Ethan's biracial identity, queer subjectivity, and intergenerational family relationships shape one another within the film's narrative. Using qualitative textual analysis, this study finds that the film portrays biracial family life through normalized domestic interactions, situates queer desire as ordinary and unexceptional, and foregrounds intergenerational tensions between Searcher, Jaeger, and Ethan as a site where identity categories overlap. While *Strange World* offers one of Disney's most explicit representations of queer identity to date, the analysis also highlights the film's limitations as a mainstream animated text, including its tendency to simplify complex sociocultural issues. Overall, this research contributes to existing discussions on representation in animation by demonstrating the value of intersectional analysis for understanding multidimensional identity construction in children's media.

Keywords

Intersectionality; Representation; Queer Studies; Race in Animation; *Strange World* (2022)

Analisis Interseksional atas Ras, Seksualitas, dan Dinamika Keluarga dalam Strange World (2022)

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji *Strange World* (2022) melalui perspektif interseksional untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana ras, seksualitas, dan dinamika keluarga berinteraksi dalam pembentukan karakter Ethan Clade. Dengan menggunakan kerangka interseksionalitas dari Kimberlé Crenshaw, analisis ini mengidentifikasi sejumlah adegan kunci yang menunjukkan bagaimana identitas birasial Ethan, subjektivitas queer-nya, dan hubungan antar generasi dalam keluarganya saling membentuk di dalam narasi film. Melalui analisis tekstual kualitatif, penelitian ini menemukan bahwa film tersebut merepresentasikan kehidupan keluarga birasial melalui interaksi domestik yang dinormalisasi, menempatkan hasrat queer sebagai sesuatu yang wajar dan tidak luar biasa, serta menonjolkan ketegangan antargenerasi antara Searcher, Jaeger, dan Ethan sebagai ruang tempat kategori identitas saling beririsan. Meskipun *Strange World* menawarkan salah satu representasi queer paling eksplisit dalam sejarah produksi Disney, analisis ini juga menyoroti keterbatasannya sebagai teks animasi arus utama, termasuk kecenderungannya untuk menyederhanakan isu-isu sosio-kultural yang kompleks. Secara keseluruhan, penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi pada diskusi mengenai representasi dalam animasi dengan menegaskan pentingnya analisis interseksional dalam memahami konstruksi identitas multidimensional dalam media anak.

Kata Kunci

Interseksionalitas; Representasi; Kajian Queer; Ras dalam Animasi; *Strange World* (2022)

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Introduction

In recent years, animated films have increasingly incorporated diverse characters and complex social themes to reflect contemporary cultural realities. As one of the most widely consumed forms of family entertainment, animation plays a significant role in shaping young audiences' understandings of identity categories such as race, gender, and sexuality. Representations in children's media can reinforce long-standing stereotypes or challenge them by offering more nuanced and inclusive portrayals (Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2020; Vlad, 2017). This cultural shift places pressure on major studios, particularly Disney, which is the most globally influential producer of children's animation, to depict marginalized identities in ways that are socially responsible, authentic, and aligned with evolving expectations regarding diversity (Tyner-Mullings, 2023).

Disney's *Strange World* (2022) occupies a distinctive position within this broader landscape. The film centers on Ethan Clade, a protagonist who is both biracial and openly gay. This combination remains uncommon in mainstream animation, where racial and queer identities have typically been represented separately or through minimal, peripheral gestures (Rude, 2022). Although *Strange World* performed poorly at the box office (Lang, 2023), it remains culturally significant for its attempt to merge multiple forms of marginality within a single family-oriented narrative. The film intertwines themes of identity, intergenerational tension, and ecological crisis, situating Ethan within a narrative shaped by both personal identity and complex family dynamics (Grandi, 2025).

Existing scholarship on representation in children's animation frequently analyzes race and LGBTQ+ identities in isolation. Studies of Disney often critique racial stereotyping, colorblind ideologies, or the simplification of cultural difference (Breux, 2010; Lester, 2010; Daniels, 2020). Meanwhile, research on queer representation highlights implicit coding, subtextual queerness, or brief acknowledgments rather than centrally positioned queer characters (Ng, 2017; Thomson, 2021). These bodies of research rarely intersect. Only a small number of scholars apply intersectionality to media analysis, and when they do, they tend to address social categories separately rather than examining how multiple marginalized identities operate simultaneously within a single character (Cho et al., 2013; Costanza-Chock, 2018). As a result, scholarship has yet to fully explore how mainstream animated films construct layered experiences for characters who occupy multiple marginalized positions.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality framework (1989, 1991) provides a critical lens for addressing this gap. Intersectionality theorizes how systems of power, including racism, sexism, and heteronormativity, interlock to shape lived experiences in ways that cannot be understood through single-axis categories. Scholars have expanded this framework to media studies, emphasizing how intersectional approaches reveal both the complexities and the limitations of representational practices (Cho et al., 2013; Costanza-Chock, 2018; Tinner et al., 2023). Applying this framework to *Strange World* allows for an examination of how Ethan's racial identity, sexuality, and familial relationships are constructed not as discrete categories but as interconnected dimensions shaping his portrayal.

Given the scarcity of intersectional analyses in animation studies, *Strange World* offers a unique opportunity to explore how a queer, biracial protagonist is represented within a mainstream children's film. Ethan's interactions with his father and grandfather, each of whom embodies distinct generational values and cultural assumptions, create narrative spaces where multiple identity categories converge. These intersections reveal

how the film simultaneously challenges, negotiates, and at times reinforces dominant norms surrounding race, sexuality, and family.

Therefore, this study analyzes how *Strange World* represents race, sexuality, and family dynamics through the character of Ethan Clade using Crenshaw's intersectionality framework. This research aims to determine whether the film presents a substantive form of intersectional representation or performs surface-level diversity. By identifying the narrative and visual strategies through which Ethan's identity is constructed, this study contributes to broader discussions on inclusive storytelling in children's media and underscores the importance of portraying multidimensional characters whose experiences reflect the complexity of real-world identities.

Method

This research employs qualitative textual analysis to examine how *Strange World* (2022) constructs race, sexuality, and family dynamics through the character of Ethan Clade. Qualitative textual analysis is widely used to interpret meaning within cultural and media artifacts, including films, because it treats audiovisual materials as "texts" that can be systematically coded and analyzed (Kuckartz, 2019; McKee, 2003). This method focuses on identifying patterns of representation, symbolic structures, and thematic elements that emerge from close engagement with the material. Following this approach, the film was analyzed through close reading, a technique commonly applied in film and cultural studies to explore narrative structures, cinematic framing, dialogue, character interactions, and visual design (Bordwell & Thompson, 2016; Gill, 2011).

To contextualize the film's representational strategies, the study incorporates paratextual materials, such as filmmaker interviews, production notes, reviews, and public responses. Paratexts provide interpretive frames that shape how audiences understand a media text, making them relevant for examining how intersectional identities are positioned both within the film and within its broader reception (Gray, 2010; Genette, 1997). These materials complement the textual analysis by revealing how Disney and surrounding publics framed Ethan's racial and queer identities.

The analytical process followed a multi-stage coding procedure. First, all scenes featuring Ethan were identified and categorized into three primary analytic categories derived from the research focus: race, sexuality, and family dynamics. Such coding procedures are commonly used in qualitative research to trace thematic patterns and representational strategies (Flick, 2014; Kuckartz, 2019). Second, the scenes were re-coded through an intersectional lens, guided by Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) conceptualization of overlapping systems of power such as racism and heteronormativity. Scholars argue that intersectionality-based media analysis enables deeper interrogation of how multiple identity positions interact rather than function independently (Cho et al., 2013; Costanza-Chock, 2018; Tinner et al., 2023). Ethan's interactions with his father and grandfather, who each represent distinct generational and cultural values, were key data points that illuminate how identity categories converge within family structures.

Finally, coded data were synthesized to produce an interpretive evaluation of the film's representational strategies. Consistent with established approaches in qualitative film studies, the analysis focused on how the film challenges, negotiates, or reinforces dominant cultural norms surrounding race, sexuality, and family (Rose, 2016). Altogether, these methods offer a rigorous and theoretically grounded approach for examining how a queer, biracial character is represented within a mainstream children's animated narrative.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

The findings of this study are presented through a set of key scenes identified in *Strange World* (2022) that illustrate how race, sexuality, and family dynamics intersect within the narrative. These scenes were selected based on their relevance to the research focus and their contribution to understanding Clade's family identity construction and relational positioning. The table below summarizes the scenes that form the primary data for the subsequent analysis.

Figure 1. Jaeger and Searcher's early conflict during the expedition.



Scene 1 depicts the moment when Jaeger and Searcher disagree during their original expedition, establishing the generational conflict that frames later events. As the group moves deeper into an icy mountain region, Searcher discovers a glowing plant specimen and stops to examine it. Jaeger insists on continuing the climb toward the summit, dismissing Searcher's interest in the plant. The tension escalates as Searcher chooses to prioritize the discovery, while Jaeger physically continues forward alone. This scene establishes the foundational separation between father and son, showing their contrasting values and priorities.

Figure 2 & 3. The Clade family's biracial household.



Scene 2 presents the everyday life of the Clade family that consist of Searcher, Meridian, and Ethan, in their home environment. The sequence shows the three engaged in casual conversations, cooperative work, and shared tasks, illustrating a stable biracial family unit. Visual elements include the warm interior of their home and the agricultural surroundings where they work together. Ethan is shown comfortably interacting with both parents, while Searcher and Meridian appear supportive and engaged with him. The scene establishes Ethan's family context before larger narrative conflicts emerge.

Figure 4 & 5. Ethan and Diazo's flirtatious interaction in a casual social setting.



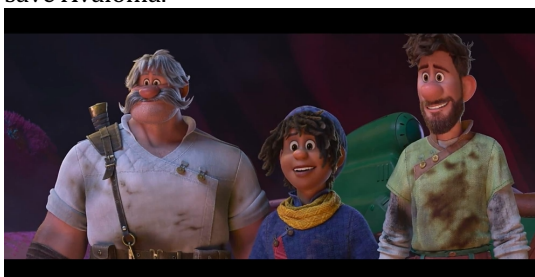
Scene 3 highlights Ethan's interaction with Diazo, shown through light, humorous, and flirtatious dialogue. Set within a casual gathering of Ethan's peers, the moment features Ethan visibly nervous while attempting to speak with Diazo. His friends react playfully, while Diazo responds warmly, indicating mutual interest. The tone is relaxed, with no dramatic emphasis placed on Ethan's sexuality. This scene presents queer adolescent affection as an ordinary part of social life.

Figure 6. Searcher's supportive reaction to Ethan's interest in Diazo.



Scene 4 depicts a conversation between Ethan and Searcher in which Searcher acknowledges Ethan's feelings toward Diazo. Rather than responding with discomfort or disapproval, Searcher expresses enthusiasm and curiosity about Ethan's crush. Ethan appears slightly embarrassed, while Searcher's tone remains positive and encouraging. The scene focuses on familial warmth and openness, emphasizing an atmosphere of acceptance within the family.

Figure 7. Jaeger, Searcher, and Ethan cooperate during the mission to save Avalonia.



Scene 5 shows the moment when Jaeger, Searcher, and Ethan work together during the mission to protect Avalonia. The characters are positioned collaboratively within the frame as they coordinate efforts to confront the threat facing their homeland. The visuals emphasize cooperation and physical proximity among the three generations. Searcher and Jaeger display clear shifts from earlier tension, while Ethan acts as a bridge between them. The scene represents a shared goal that brings the characters into alignment during the story's resolution.

These scenes constitute the primary data for this study and serve as the basis for the discussion presented in the following section.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that *Strange World* (2022) constructs Ethan Clade's identity through an interplay of racial background, queer sexuality, and intergenerational family relationships, offering a form of representation that is rare within mainstream animated narratives. The depiction of the Clade family as a biracial household with stable, affectionate dynamics marks a notable shift from Disney's long history of idealized whiteness and racially coded archetypes. Unlike earlier animated films that either erased racial specificity or relied on stereotypical characterizations (Breux, 2010; Lester, 2010), *Strange World*

normalizes racial diversity by embedding it into everyday family life. Ethan's biracial identity is not framed as a source of conflict or difference but instead appears integrated into the family's routine interactions. This approach aligns with recent scholarly arguments that children's media should move beyond tokenistic diversity toward more nuanced portrayals that reflect lived experiences (Daniels, 2020). Even so, the film's colorblind narrative tendencies suggest ongoing limitations, as Ethan's racial identity is visually acknowledged but seldom addressed narratively.

Queer representation in *Strange World* further demonstrates a meaningful departure from the subtle coding and fleeting inclusions characteristic of earlier animated works. Prior analyses of queer visibility in children's animation highlight that LGBTQ+ characters are typically positioned as peripheral, ambiguously coded, or included in ways that allow for plausible deniability (Ng, 2017; Thomson, 2021). In contrast, Ethan's sexuality is explicit, narratively embedded, and treated with openness by the characters around him. His interactions with Diazo, particularly scenes showcasing mutual affection and teenage awkwardness, position queer desire as ordinary rather than exceptional. Searcher's supportive response to Ethan's crush reinforces this normalization by modeling an affirming parental stance seldom portrayed in family-oriented films. While this representation signals substantive progress, it also remains carefully contained within the constraints of mainstream animation, which tends to sanitize queer intimacy to ensure broad market acceptability.

Family dynamics emerge as a crucial site where Ethan's identities converge, particularly through the contrasting masculinities embodied by Jaeger and Searcher. Their longstanding conflict that is rooted in divergent values related to exploration, ambition, and emotional expression, shapes the environment in which Ethan negotiates his sense of self. Jaeger represents a traditional model of heroic masculinity grounded in risk-taking and physical endurance, while Searcher embodies a more nurturing, domestic orientation anchored in care, agriculture, and relational stability. Ethan's position between these figures illustrates Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) concept of interlocking systems: identity is not shaped solely by personal attributes but by relational forces, generational expectations, and social norms embedded within family structures. Through these interactions, the film demonstrates how familial relationships function as mechanisms through which race and sexuality gain meaning, rather than as separate categories influencing Ethan independently.

The intersection of race, sexuality, and family within a single character constitutes the core contribution of *Strange World* to contemporary animated representation. Very few mainstream animated films center protagonists who occupy multiple marginalized identities simultaneously, and even fewer situate these identities within a multigenerational narrative. The film positions Ethan not merely as a queer character or a biracial character, but as an individual whose experiences are shaped through the convergence of these identities within a family lineage marked by differing cultural values and models of masculinity. This integrated portrayal addresses a gap in existing literature, where analyses of race and queer representation in animation tend to appear in separate scholarly conversations (Cho et al., 2013; Costanza-Chock, 2018). By foregrounding intersectionality, the film offers insight into how identity categories operate relationally and simultaneously, thereby illustrating the analytical necessity of approaching media representations through multidimensional frameworks.

Despite these strengths, *Strange World* also demonstrates the constraints of attempting intersectional representation within a mainstream, corporate-controlled film. Although the movie introduces a groundbreaking protagonist, its treatment of race and sexuality remains somewhat subdued, often overshadowed by the adventure-driven narrative and ecological themes. Ethan's racial identity is visually clear but rarely discussed, and his queer romantic storyline receives limited emotional depth compared to heterosexual romances featured in other Disney works. These limitations underscore

broader challenges faced by major studios when integrating progressive representations while maintaining commercial viability. Nevertheless, the film's willingness to position an openly queer, biracial teenager at the center of a family-oriented story represents a significant development within children's media, one that highlights the value of intersectional approaches in understanding both the potential and the constraints of representational changes.

Conclusion

This study examined how *Strange World* (2022) constructs race, sexuality, and family dynamics through an intersectional lens, focusing on how these identity categories converge in the character of Ethan Clade and the relationships surrounding him. By analyzing key scenes from the film, the findings show that representation in *Strange World* operates not through isolated identity markers but through their interactions within narrative, relational, and cultural contexts.

The film's portrayal of the Clade family offers a meaningful depiction of a biracial household that normalizes cultural hybridity while simultaneously engaging with an openly queer protagonist. Ethan's expressions of attraction, his comfort within his family, and Searcher's acceptance contribute to a depiction of queer identity that is integrated rather than peripheral. At the same time, the intergenerational tension between Jaeger and Searcher highlights how familial expectations and inherited ideals shape, complicate, or restrict individual identity formation. These dynamics reinforce the need for analyses that account for how race, sexuality, and kinship simultaneously structure a character's lived experience.

Overall, *Strange World* advances representational diversity within mainstream animation by centering an intersectional protagonist whose identities are embedded in narrative relationships rather than treated as tokenistic features. However, the film's commercial and genre constraints result in some limitations, including simplified character development and a tendency to resolve conflict through idealized reconciliation. These limitations emphasize why intersectional readings remain essential: they reveal both the progress made and the structural boundaries that continue to shape representation in family-oriented media. This study demonstrates that intersectionality provides a productive framework for understanding how animated films construct identity and that Ethan Clade offers a rare but significant example of genuinely integrated diversity in contemporary animation.

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