

Robert Iger is named Time's business person of the year

Late last year, Disney's inimitable CEO, Robert Iger, was made Time's Businessman of the Year. This came as no surprise to myself and many others. In 2019 alone, Disney released six of the year's eight highest grossing films; launched its own 'Disney+' streaming platform to which 10 million people had signed up in the first 48 hours; and boasted a record \$10 billion in global box office sales. Having been in Belinda Luscombe's words, 'Western Culture's Secretary of Stories' for over 20 years, Iger has long had responsibility for not only the financial prosperity of his company, but for creating a world where every child feels represented through Disney's stories.

Yet, despite Disney's efforts to diversify their characters, they have fallen short of representing an important and ever-growing demographic of children worldwide - those who wear glasses. The effect of this was best articulated by 9-year-old Lowri Moore who, last year, wrote to Iger highlighting that no Disney princess has ever worn glasses. As a glasses-wearer herself, this made her feel she was "not beautiful enough".

In addition to pointing out the lack of bespectacled princesses, Lowri complained that all Disney characters who wear glasses are presented as nerds or are elderly. Lowri is right. When I think of Disney characters wearing glasses, my mind gravitates towards *Peter Pan's* bumbling Smee, Merlin, the elderly wizard from *The Sword in the Stone*, the dopey Toby the Turtle from *Robin Hood*, and the fiery but bizarre Edna Mode from *The Incredibles*. Though endearing characters in their own right, presenting glasses-wearing characters as eccentric, slow-witted, elderly or geeky is unfair to the many children around the world who do not want to confine themselves to these roles just because they wear spectacles.

This is a problem that is not restricted to Disney narratives. At Clearly's Sightgeist event in March, Ogilvy's Rory Sutherland joined Lowri Moore on our stage to talk about the widespread nature of the stigma against glasses. He showed the distinction between the results of a google search for 'nerd' vs. 'cool person'. When you Google the former, you are bombarded with photos and cartoons of an archetypal nerd, donned with a crooked bow-tie, braces, and of course, thick-framed reading glasses. Yet when you Google the latter, the first results are a series of photos of suave James Bond-like figures, suited and booted with a pair of *sunglasses*.

Why is it that glasses are the most common signifier of nerdy-ness while sunglasses represent coolness? Is the transparency of your shades really enough to swing you from one social archetype to another? Perhaps sunglasses afford its wearer a level of anonymity and mystery that glasses, in their essential utilitarian purpose to magnify and reveal, do not.

I know that some people will say that there are more pressing diversity issues that Disney needs to address. But with an estimated 310 million short sighted children around the world, which

could rise to 500 million by 2050 without urgent action, this is an issue that needs cultural attention. Clearly, the world is not in short of children who wear or need glasses. This provides ever more reason to promote glasses-wearers positively across our screens, so that children no longer feel embarrassed to wear their own specs. Once children who need glasses have and wear them, they can see the faces of their friends and family, participate better in school and fulfil their potential. In the Global South this can have a profound impact on the chances of alleviating a family's risk of poverty.

I praise Robert Iger for his business feats - he is well-deserving of Time's prestigious title. I hope he can emulate these efforts by ensuring his company's future films are as diverse as possible. Children learn from the pop culture they unconsciously absorb. With Disney exerting greater influence on our cultural lines of vision than any of its competitors, it is important that figures like Iger take great strides to tell the stories of as many children as possible. This means granting Lowri's wish of getting a bespectacled Disney princess to grace our screens. Showing children worldwide that glasses-wearers are strong, beautiful, courageous and without limitations.