

Constructing Emotional Complexity: A Comparative Semiotic Analysis Of Childhood And Adolescent Emotions In Pixar's Inside Out Posters

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ABSTRACT

Mental health and emotional development have received increasing attention across various fields, including popular media, which plays a significant role in shaping public understanding of human emotional experiences. The studies examining the visual construction of emotional complexity in film posters, particularly those comparing different developmental stages within the same film franchise, remain limited. This study aims to analyze how emotional complexity is represented in the official posters of *Inside Out* (2015) and *Inside Out 2* (2024) using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. Employing a qualitative approach, the study analyzes two official posters through three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. The findings reveal a transformation in emotional representation, marked by a shift from Joy to Anxiety as the central visual focus. While the *Inside Out* poster constructs childhood as an optimistic and emotionally balanced stage dominated by basic emotions, the *Inside Out 2* poster portrays adolescence as a more complex phase characterized by emotional diversity, uncertainty, identity negotiation, and psychological complexity. This shift reflects broader cultural constructions of emotional development and mental health. The findings extend the application of Barthesian semiotics in visual culture studies and demonstrate that emotional meanings are constructed from the promotional stage through film posters, which function as cultural texts shaping public understanding of human emotional development.

Keywords: Emotional Complexity, Visual Representation, Film Posters, Roland Barthes' Semiotics, Multimodal Discourse

ABSTRAK

Kesehatan mental dan perkembangan emosional telah mendapatkan perhatian yang meningkat di berbagai bidang, termasuk media populer, yang memainkan peran penting dalam membentuk pemahaman publik tentang pengalaman emosional manusia. Studi yang mengkaji konstruksi visual kompleksitas emosional dalam poster film, khususnya yang membandingkan tahap perkembangan yang berbeda dalam waralaba film yang sama, masih terbatas. Studi ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana kompleksitas emosional direpresentasikan dalam poster resmi *Inside Out* (2015) dan *Inside Out 2* (2024) dengan menggunakan kerangka kerja semiotika Roland Barthes. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, studi ini menganalisis dua poster resmi melalui tiga tingkat makna: denotasi, konotasi, dan mitos. Temuan menunjukkan adanya transformasi dalam representasi emosional, yang ditandai dengan pergeseran dari Joy (Kegembiraan) ke Anxiety (Kecemasan) sebagai fokus visual utama. Sementara poster *Inside Out* mengonstruksi masa kanak-kanak sebagai tahap yang optimis dan seimbang secara emosional yang didominasi oleh emosi dasar, poster *Inside Out 2* menggambarkan masa remaja sebagai fase yang lebih kompleks yang dicirikan oleh keragaman emosional, ketidakpastian, negosiasi identitas, dan kompleksitas psikologis. Pergeseran ini mencerminkan konstruksi budaya yang lebih luas mengenai perkembangan emosional dan kesehatan mental. Temuan ini memperluas penerapan semiotika Barthesian dalam studi budaya visual dan menunjukkan bahwa makna emosional dikonstruksi sejak tahap promosi melalui poster film, yang berfungsi sebagai teks budaya yang membentuk pemahaman publik tentang perkembangan emosional manusia.

Kata kunci: Kompleksitas Emosional, Representasi Visual, Poster Film, Semiotika Roland Barthes, Wacana Multimodal

A. Introduction

In recent years, mental health has become a major concern across various fields, including education, psychology, and popular media (Fisher, 2025; Starvaggi et al., 2024; Ulfadhilah & Nurkhafifah, 2025). Growing public awareness of the importance of psychological well-being has stimulated extensive discussions on emotions, emotion regulation, and the dynamics of emotional development among children and adolescents. This concern has intensified alongside the increasing prevalence of anxiety, psychological distress, and various emotional difficulties experienced by young people across different countries. Within this context, popular media no longer functions merely as a source of entertainment but also serves as a representational space that shapes public understanding of human emotional experiences (Mittmann et al., 2024; Tudehope et al., 2024). Animated films, in particular, have evolved from children's entertainment into a medium capable of communicating psychological issues in ways that are both accessible and engaging to broader audiences (Lu, 2025). One prominent example is *Inside Out* (2015) and

its sequel, *Inside Out 2* (2024), which position emotions as central characters and emotional experiences as the core of their narratives. The popularity of these films demonstrates how contemporary popular culture increasingly seeks to represent the complexity of human emotions while reflecting changing societal perspectives on emotional development from childhood to adolescence.

Emotional experiences undergo significant development throughout the human lifespan. Childhood is generally characterized by relatively simple emotional responses and the ability to recognize basic emotions such as happiness, sadness, fear, anger, and disgust (W.-B. Jiang et al., 2025; Y. Jiang et al., 2022). In contrast, adolescence involves more complex emotional experiences shaped by cognitive maturation, identity formation, social demands, and increasingly extensive interpersonal relationships (Crocetti, 2026; DiRiL & Yetkin, 2025). Consequently, adolescents often experience multiple emotions simultaneously, including emotions that may appear contradictory, making emotional complexity a crucial concept for understanding human emotional

development. In contemporary society, such complexity is increasingly represented through popular culture and visual media, including animated films and their promotional materials. Beyond their marketing function, film posters serve as visual communication media that convey meanings, narratives, and emotional expectations through imagery, color, typography, character placement, and visual composition. As visual texts, posters communicate not only explicit messages but also symbolic meanings that shape audience perceptions of characters, conflicts, and emotional experiences (Sosnytskyi, 2025). Understanding how these meanings are constructed requires an analytical framework capable of uncovering both visible and underlying messages. In this regard, Roland Barthes' semiotic theory offers a relevant approach through its distinction between denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings. From this perspective, visual elements such as character expressions, color schemes, spatial arrangements, and symbolic objects can be interpreted as signs that communicate particular meanings about emotional life. Therefore, Barthesian semiotics provides an appropriate theoretical foundation for examining how emotional complexity is culturally constructed and represented in the posters of *Inside Out* and *Inside Out 2*.

Semiotics is understood as the study of the process of representation (*semiosis*), which explains how something functions as a sign that refers to a particular meaning for its audience, helping explain how messages are constructed and understood in communication (Kevinia et al., 2024). According to Saussure, semiotics is the study of sign systems and how meaning is produced and communicated through the relationship between the *signifier* and the *signified*, which together form a sign (Jumiati et al., 2026; Nisak & Muyassaroh, 2022). Barthes (1977) further developed semiotics as an approach for analyzing cultural texts and visual media through two levels of meaning: denotation, which refers to the literal meaning, and connotation, which refers to meanings shaped by social and cultural contexts. Connotative meanings may further develop into *myth*,

which naturalizes cultural ideologies. Barthes also argued that signs in visual media are deliberately designed with specific characteristics to communicate particular messages to audiences. Therefore, meanings in visual media are not neutral but are socially constructed to represent values, emotions, and ideologies. This framework is relevant for analyzing film posters as multimodal texts that combine linguistic and visual elements to build narratives, represent emotions, and shape audience expectations. Therefore, this study applies Barthes' dimensions of denotation, connotation, and *myth* to examine the representation of emotions in the posters of *Inside Out* and *Inside Out 2*.

Previous studies have extensively employed Barthesian semiotic approaches to examine film posters as multimodal forms of visual communication that construct meanings beyond their literal representations. Visual elements such as color, composition, character expressions, typography, and layout function as signs that communicate narratives, ideologies, cultural values, and audience expectations (Barata & Fadigas, 2025; Chaysalina & Nadya, 2022; Güzel, 2023; Weking et al., 2025). Barthesian semiotics has also been applied to other multimodal texts, including song lyrics to examine representations of mental health and hope (Rais & Fadillah, 2025), social media discourse to explore Palestinian cultural identity through visual symbols (Abu-Ayyash, 2024), and movie trailers to reveal denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings in audiovisual narratives (Mazeree et al., 2023). Research on the representation of emotions in visual media has likewise shown that emotional experiences are communicated through symbols, cultural codes, and visual strategies that shape audience understandings of human emotions (Gurung et al., 2025; Indra & Sutarman, 2025). Meanwhile, studies on *Inside Out* have primarily focused on its educational, moral, psychological, and emotional dimensions, including psychological conflict, emotion regulation, emotional intelligence, moral values, and emotional meaning-making. Nevertheless, limited attention has been given to how emotions are represented through visual and symbolic signs in the

official *Inside Out* film posters (Caves & Basu-Roy, 2022; Jumiati et al., 2026; Mirzaei & Safoora, 2025; Saefudin et al., 2025; Sinarawerdhi & Utami, 2023).

Although these studies have contributed to understanding visual symbolism and the representation of emotions in animated media, several research gaps remain. Existing studies tend to focus on film narratives, character development, and moral messages, while the visual dimension of promotional materials has received relatively limited attention. Furthermore, semiotic studies of film posters generally examine posters as isolated texts, providing limited insight into how visual representations evolve within a film franchise over time. More importantly, only a few studies have investigated how the transition from childhood to adolescence is constructed through visual representations of emotions in film posters. These limitations reveal theoretical, empirical, and conceptual gaps in understanding emotional complexity across different stages of human development. Therefore, a comparative semiotic analysis of the official posters of *Inside Out* and *Inside Out 2* is needed to examine how emotional complexity is constructed and represented across distinct developmental phases.

Based on these research gaps, this study aims to investigate how emotional complexity is visually constructed in the official posters of *Inside Out* and *Inside Out 2* through the lens of Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. The analysis focuses on the denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings embedded in the visual signs of both posters and on how these meanings reflect the transition from childhood emotional experiences to the more complex emotional landscape of adolescence. By comparing two posters that represent different stages of psychological development, this study seeks to explain how emotional complexity is represented through visual elements and how such representations contribute to broader cultural understandings of human emotional development.

The novelty of this study lies in its object of analysis, conceptual focus, and analytical approach. Unlike previous studies that primarily concentrated on film

narratives, characters, or moral messages, this research positions the official posters of *Inside Out* and *Inside Out 2* as its primary objects of inquiry and places emotional complexity at the center of understanding shifts in emotional representation across developmental stages. Methodologically, the study applies Barthes' semiotic framework to uncover how denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings contribute to the visual construction of emotional complexity. Theoretically, the findings extend the application of Barthesian semiotics in visual culture and film promotion studies by demonstrating how visual signs can represent the development of human emotions. Practically, this study is expected to deepen understanding of how popular media shape public perceptions of emotions, psychological development, and adolescent mental health in contemporary society.

B. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using Roland Barthes' semiotic method to examine the construction of emotional complexity in the official posters of *Inside Out* (2015) and *Inside Out 2* (2024). A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it focuses on exploring patterns, structures, and the ways in which meanings are constructed and represented within a particular phenomenon (Litosseliti, 2018 as cited in Saefudin et al., 2023). The research data consisted of two official posters obtained from the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), which were purposively selected because they serve as the primary promotional media for each film. Data were collected through documentation and systematic observation of the posters' visual elements, including characters, facial expressions, colors, composition, and other visual symbols. The data were then analyzed manually through three stages of Barthes' semiotic framework: denotative analysis to identify literal meanings, connotative analysis to uncover cultural and emotional meanings, and myth analysis to interpret the underlying ideologies embedded in the representation of emotions. Through these stages, the study sought to reveal how

emotional complexity is visually constructed and how such representations reflect the transition from childhood emotional experiences to adolescence. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, theoretical triangulation and peer debriefing were employed to strengthen the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the analysis.

C. Result and Discussion

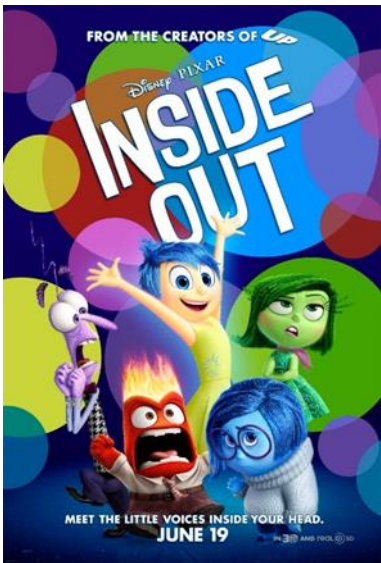


Figure 1 Inside Out (2015) Poster
Source: IMDB.com



Figure 2 Inside Out 2 Poster
Source: IMDB.com

Table 1. Semiotic Analysis of the Official Posters of Inside Out (2015) and Inside Out 2 (2024)

Semiotic Dimension	Inside Out (2015)	Inside Out 2 (2024)
Visual Signs	Joy occupies the central position; five primary emotions; bright color palette; spacious composition	Anxiety occupies the dominant position; additional emotions; darker colors; crowded composition
Denotation	Five basic emotions coexist in the mind of a child.	A broader range of emotions coexist in the mind of an adolescent.
Connotation	Joy symbolizes happiness as the core of childhood emotional life, while the bright colors suggest optimism, curiosity, and emotional balance.	Anxiety symbolizes increasing emotional complexity, uncertainty, identity formation, and internal conflict during adolescence.
Myth	Childhood is represented as a happy, innocent, and emotionally stable stage of life.	Adolescence is represented as a period of emotional complexity, uncertainty, and psychological negotiation.
Overall Representation	Emotional development is portrayed as relatively	Emotional development is portrayed as increasingly diverse, multidimensional

simple and stable.	al, and complex.
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The semiotic analysis of the official posters of *Inside Out* (2015) and *Inside Out 2* (2024) reveals a significant shift in the representation of emotions from childhood to adolescence. Based on Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, the findings show that both posters function not only as film promotional media but also as representational spaces that construct particular understandings of human emotional development. In the *Inside Out* poster, emotional complexity is represented through the dominance of basic emotions centered on Joy as the main character, creating an image of childhood as a relatively simple, optimistic, and emotionally stable phase of life. In contrast, the *Inside Out 2* poster presents a denser visual structure with the introduction of new emotions, particularly Anxiety, indicating the increasing complexity of emotional experiences during adolescence. At the denotative level, the two posters display differences in character composition, color schemes, and visual focus. At the connotative and mythological levels, these differences reflect changing ways of understanding and representing emotions in contemporary culture. Based on these findings, the discussion is organized into three main sections: emotional construction in *Inside Out*, emotional construction in *Inside Out 2*, and the visual transformation of emotional complexity from childhood to adolescence.

The official poster of *Inside Out* presents five primary emotional characters, Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust with Joy occupying the central and most visually dominant position. Joy is depicted with a cheerful expression and raised hands, while the other emotions display distinctive expressions associated with sadness, anger, fear, and disgust. The poster is dominated by bright overlapping colors, including yellow, blue, green, red, and purple, creating a vibrant and visually appealing atmosphere. At the denotative level, the poster literally portrays five emotions coexisting within the mind of a child. At the connotative level, Joy's central placement, larger size, and energetic

expression suggest that happiness functions as the core of a child's emotional system, while the other emotions contribute to overall emotional balance. The use of bright colors further associates childhood with optimism, curiosity, creativity, and emotional positivity. At the mythological level, the poster reproduces the cultural belief that childhood is a period characterized by happiness, innocence, and emotional stability. Happiness is constructed as the ideal emotional condition, whereas other emotions are acknowledged but not positioned as threats to psychological well-being. From Barthes' perspective, this representation extends beyond aesthetic design and develops into a cultural narrative that portrays childhood as a relatively simple and emotionally balanced stage of life. Consequently, the poster constructs childhood as an early phase of emotional development in which positive emotions remain dominant and emotional experiences are understood within the boundaries of basic emotions that can be recognized and managed relatively easily.

The official poster of *Inside Out 2* presents both the original emotions, Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust and several new emotions, including Anxiety, Envy, and Embarrassment. Unlike the relatively simple composition of the first film's poster, this poster appears visually denser, with characters occupying nearly the entire visual space. Anxiety emerges as the most dominant figure through its larger size, central upper position, and panicked facial expression, while Joy appears smaller and calmer at the center of the composition. The dominance of purple, orange, and darker color tones creates a more intense visual atmosphere. At the denotative level, the poster depicts a broader range of emotions coexisting within the mind of an adolescent. At the connotative level, the visual prominence of Anxiety signals a shift in emotional focus from happiness to anxiety, suggesting the growing influence of complex emotional experiences during adolescence. The crowded composition, diverse character expressions, and introduction of new emotions reflect increased emotional diversity associated with identity formation,

social acceptance, and uncertainty about the future. At the mythological level, the poster constructs anxiety as a normal and inseparable part of adolescent life, reflecting contemporary cultural understandings that place mental health and psychological experiences at the center of everyday discourse. Unlike the first poster, which promotes childhood as a period of happiness and emotional simplicity, *Inside Out 2* presents adolescence as a stage characterized by emotional complexity, internal conflict, and identity negotiation. From Barthes' perspective, the dominance of Anxiety functions not merely as a visual element but as a cultural sign that symbolizes broader psychological and social changes associated with adolescence. Consequently, the poster constructs emotional development as a transition from a relatively stable emotional world toward a more complex, multidimensional, and uncertain emotional landscape.

The comparative analysis of the *Inside Out* (2015) and *Inside Out 2* (2024) posters reveals a significant transformation in the visual construction of emotional complexity through a shift in the center of representation from Joy to Anxiety. In the *Inside Out* poster, Joy is portrayed as the dominant character through her central position, larger size, bright colors, and optimistic expression, thereby constructing childhood as an emotionally stable and relatively uncomplicated phase of life. In contrast, the *Inside Out 2* poster places Anxiety as the most prominent figure within a denser composition, darker color palette, and the presence of new emotions such as Anxiety, Envy, and Embarrassment, representing adolescence as a more complex, ambiguous, and uncertain developmental stage. From a Barthesian semiotic perspective, these visual differences function not merely as aesthetic strategies but also as signs that construct meanings about human emotional development. At the connotative level, this transformation signifies a shift from relatively structured emotional experiences to experiences that are more layered and multidimensional. At the mythological level, the *Inside Out* poster reproduces the cultural belief that childhood is associated with

happiness and emotional balance, whereas the *Inside Out 2* poster constructs the idea that anxiety and uncertainty are natural aspects of adolescent development. Therefore, the shift from Joy to Anxiety not only reflects changes in the films' characters but also represents a broader cultural transformation in the understanding of emotional development from childhood to adolescence.

The findings of this study indicate that the representation of emotions in the *Inside Out* and *Inside Out 2* posters functions not only as a promotional device but also as a cultural construction that shapes audience understanding of human emotional development. Through a Barthesian semiotic lens, the shift in visual dominance from Joy to Anxiety represents a transformation in the meaning of emotions, moving from childhood, which is associated with happiness and emotional balance, to adolescence, which is characterized by psychological complexity, uncertainty, and identity negotiation. These findings are consistent with developmental psychology research suggesting that adolescence is marked by more diverse, dynamic, and multidimensional emotional experiences than childhood, while also involving increasing complexity in emotion regulation, socio-emotional adjustment, coping, resilience, and mental health as part of a broader developmental process (Godor et al., 2024; Reitsema et al., 2023; Schreuder et al., 2022; Widiastini et al., 2025). In addition to supporting previous studies that highlight the role of visual media and communication design in shaping audience perceptions, interpretations, and emotional responses, this study extends existing scholarship by demonstrating that the construction of emotions begins at the promotional stage through poster designs that organize visual symbols, narrative cues, and particular emotional atmospheres (Fitriani et al., 2025; Li et al., 2025; Qiu, 2026; Zhang et al., 2026). Accordingly, film posters can be understood as cultural texts that not only represent characters and storylines but also shape how society understands emotional development, mental health, and human psychological experiences.

This study extends the application of Roland Barthes' semiotic framework in visual representation research by demonstrating that film posters function not merely as promotional media but also as sites of meaning production that represent cultural values surrounding human emotional development. Through the analysis of denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings, the study reveals that the representation of emotions in the *Inside Out* and *Inside Out 2* posters reflects a shift in cultural constructions of emotion, from a relatively simple understanding of emotions in childhood to a more complex emotional landscape in adolescence. These findings contribute to the advancement of visual semiotic studies, particularly in understanding the relationship between media representation, emotional development, and contemporary cultural constructions.

From a practical perspective, this study provides insights into how popular media shape public perceptions of emotions and mental health. The representations of Joy and Anxiety suggest that emotions are understood not only as individual experiences but also as social phenomena influenced by cultural values. These findings may serve as a valuable reference for educators, mental health practitioners, and media content creators in utilizing visual representations as a means of enhancing emotional awareness and fostering a deeper understanding of the complexity of emotional development among children and adolescents.

This study is limited to the analysis of two official posters from *Inside Out* and *Inside Out 2* and employs a semiotic approach that focuses on the interpretation of visual meanings without incorporating audience perspectives. Future studies may therefore expand the scope of analysis to include film trailers, digital promotional materials, or character posters, while also integrating semiotic analysis with audience reception studies or multimodal analysis. Such approaches may provide a more comprehensive understanding of how emotional meanings are represented, interpreted, and negotiated across different cultural contexts.

D. Conclusion and Suggestion

This study aimed to examine how emotional complexity is visually constructed in the official posters of *Inside Out* (2015) and *Inside Out 2* (2024) through Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. The findings reveal that the two posters represent different stages of emotional development through distinct visual constructions. The *Inside Out* poster places Joy at the center of emotional representation, portraying childhood as a phase characterized by optimism, emotional balance, and relatively simple emotional experiences. In contrast, the *Inside Out 2* poster positions Anxiety as the center of the visual composition, representing adolescence as a stage marked by emotional diversity, uncertainty, and greater psychological complexity. Through denotative, connotative, and mythological analyses, the two posters collectively illustrate a transformation from basic emotions to a more complex emotional landscape.

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