

Progression of female leadership representation in disney Princess films through Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis

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Abstract:

This study examines the progression of female leadership representation in Disney Princess films through the lens of Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. The phenomenon addressed is the global circulation of princess narratives and the problem is how repeated visual constructions in children's media may shape early gender schemas and assumptions about leadership. Using a qualitative content analysis, the study purposively sampled three representative films *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Frozen* selected to reflect Pre-Transition, Transition, and Progression phases of Disney princess narratives. Primary data were drawn from key scenes identified through repeated viewings; visual units (costume, framing, props, gesture, and spatial composition) were coded and analyzed across denotative, connotative, and mythic levels following Barthesian procedures. Findings indicate a clear visual progression: early films privilege domesticity and appearance, transitional films introduce intellectual agency yet maintain social constraints, and contemporary films normalize female authority via symbolic markers of institutional power. The study concludes that Disney's visual constructions have shifted from naturalizing female passivity toward legitimizing women's leadership in the public sphere. Implications include the need for media literacy interventions for educators and parents, and recommendations for content creators to design more inclusive visual narratives that support gender-equal leadership models. The research contributes to visual communication and gender studies by demonstrating how semiotic reading of cinematic visuals reveals the gradual normalization of female leadership across historical phases of films.

Introduction

Gender awareness emerges in early childhood, as children gradually learn to distinguish between male and female identities. During early and middle childhood, children's understanding of gender stereotypes becomes more structured, and their gender identity grows more stable, influencing their behavioral preferences (Salkind, 2005). As one of the world's most influential entertainment corporations, Disney significantly contributes to how social values particularly gender roles are communicated to mass audiences. For over a century, Disney's works have become part of popular culture that shapes young generations' perceptions of values, behaviors, and social roles. Young people in various countries receive social cues from their favorite animated films and imitate the behaviors of the princes and princesses they admire (Garabedian, 2014).

Disney is known for creating boundless imaginative worlds and exerts great influence on children and adults alike. However, in its early history, several Disney films contained subtle messages that tended to be anti-feminist and reinforced traditional female roles as passive and dependent on men

(Xu, 2021). With media globalization, Disney films became one of the widest forms of Western cultural penetration. Through advances in communication technology, Disney content reaches many countries, including Indonesia, and is accepted as part of everyday local entertainment consumption.

The increasing circulation of global media content also raises questions about how gender values embedded in visual narratives are interpreted by audiences in different cultural contexts. Children's media does not only function as entertainment but also acts as a symbolic medium that introduces social norms and expectations regarding gender roles. When certain gender portrayals are repeatedly presented through popular media, these representations may gradually become normalized as cultural expectations regarding how women and men should behave in society.

The impact of gender stereotypes in Disney films on children has drawn attention in various studies. Continuous exposure to specific gender portrayals in media can influence how children interpret socially acceptable roles and behaviors. Several studies have found that girls' attachment to Disney Princess characters correlates with tendencies to adopt conventional gender roles in their behavior and preferences. This condition shows how popular media narratives can indirectly internalize social constructions about women.

Repeated exposure to such representations can implant the belief that leadership belongs to men, while empathy and caring often attached to women are considered less relevant to leadership. Research indicates that by around five years of age, children already internalize stereotypes that associate agency with masculinity and caregiving with femininity (Banse, 2010), so it is unsurprising they internalize leadership stereotypes. These stereotypes are reinforced by media and popular culture that often equate power with male figures (Aley, 2020).

However, the narrative journey of the Disney Princess shows Disney's evolving view of female roles through three major phases: Pre-Transition, Transition, and Progression (Garabedian, 2014). In the Pre-Transition phase, early princess figures such as Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty are constructed as figures with minimal agency, their happiness depending on male intervention. The Transition phase shows change when characters like Ariel and Belle begin to defy social norms and demonstrate courage and independence, although their motivations remain centered on romantic love and recognition from male figures. Only in the Progression phase, through films like *Brave*, *Frozen*, and *Moana*, does Disney portray women with full agency, focused on self-discovery, and active as leaders who drive change in their communities (Garabedian, 2014). In this phase, women are measured not by how graceful or desirable they are, but by courage, empathy, and the ability to lead authentically. This evolution marks an important shift in popular culture, where the Disney Princess becomes a medium for voicing gender-equal values in children's stories.

From the perspective of visual communication studies, these narrative transformations are not only conveyed through storytelling but also through visual construction. Elements such as costume design, spatial composition, camera framing, gestures, and symbolic objects function as signs that communicate meaning to audiences. These visual elements contribute to shaping how female characters are perceived, whether as passive subjects, intellectual individuals, or authoritative leaders within the narrative world.

In this context, semiotics becomes an important analytical approach to interpret how visual elements produce meaning. Semiotic theory proposed by Roland Barthes explains that media texts contain multiple layers of meaning, including denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotation refers to the literal meaning of an image, while connotation represents cultural or symbolic associations embedded in the representation. At the deepest level, myth functions as a cultural narrative that naturalizes certain ideological meanings, making them appear as common sense within society. Through this framework, visual elements in films can be analyzed as a system of signs that construct and legitimize certain gender representations.

Several previous studies have examined gender representation in Disney Princess films. Garabedian (2014) explored how Disney redefines modern princess roles through narrative transformation, while Maity (2014) analyzed gender stereotypes present in early Disney Princess films.

More recent research by Clarke et al. (2024) demonstrates that contemporary Disney protagonists increasingly display behaviors associated with leadership, competence, and independence. Other studies have also examined the influence of these representations on audience perception, particularly among children and adolescents.

Despite these contributions, most previous studies primarily focus on narrative interpretation or feminist critique, with limited attention to how visual elements function as sign systems that construct leadership meanings. Furthermore, studies discussing the reception and interpretation of these visual representations within non-Western contexts, including Indonesia, remain relatively limited. This gap highlights the importance of examining how visual framing in Disney Princess films constructs gender representation and leadership symbolism through semiotic analysis.

Therefore, this research seeks to analyze the progression of women's leadership representation in Disney Princess films by examining visual elements through Barthesian semiotic analysis. The study focuses on three films representing different phases of Disney Princess development: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Frozen*. Through this approach, the research aims to understand how visual framing contributes to the transformation of gender representation across different periods of Disney animation.

This study is expected to contribute theoretically to the fields of visual communication design and gender studies by demonstrating how visual storytelling in animated films participates in shaping cultural understandings of gender and leadership. Practically, the findings may provide insights for educators, parents, and creators of children's media regarding the importance of balanced gender representation in visual narratives. By understanding how visual elements construct meaning, stakeholders can become more aware of the role media plays in shaping children's perceptions of leadership, agency, and gender equality.

Methods

A qualitative content analysis was employed in this research to explore how gender representation and women's leadership are constructed in Disney Princess films. Content analysis allows researchers to examine media messages in a structured manner, making it possible to identify recurring representational patterns in both visual and narrative elements (Holsti, 1969). This approach enables an in-depth analysis of narrative elements, gestures, cinematography, and visual composition that contribute to the construction of meaning in film narratives.

The analytical framework of this study is based on semiotic theory proposed by Roland Barthes, which explains that visual texts contain multiple layers of meaning consisting of denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotation refers to the literal meaning of the visual elements presented on screen, while connotation represents the cultural associations or symbolic interpretations embedded in those visuals. Myth functions as a broader cultural narrative that naturalizes ideological meanings within society. Through this framework, visual elements in films are interpreted as a system of signs that construct and reinforce certain cultural understandings of gender and leadership.

The objects of this study are three Disney Princess films produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Frozen*. These films were selected using purposive sampling based on their representation of three different developmental phases of Disney Princess narratives as identified in previous literature (Garabedian, 2014), namely the Pre-Transition phase, the Transition phase, and the Progression phase. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* represents the early phase where female characters are portrayed with limited agency and closely associated with domestic roles. *Beauty and the Beast* reflects the transitional stage where female characters begin to demonstrate intellectual agency and independence, although still within

certain social constraints. *Frozen* represents the modern phase in which female characters are depicted with stronger autonomy and leadership roles within the public sphere.

Primary data in this research consist of visual and narrative elements related to female leadership representation found in key scenes of the selected films. The scenes were selected based on moments that explicitly depict aspects of leadership behavior, decision-making processes, expressions of agency, conflict resolution, and interactions with other characters that indicate authority or influence. These scenes were identified through repeated viewing of each film in order to ensure accurate observation and interpretation of visual details.

The data collection process involved systematically watching each film and documenting relevant scenes that contain significant visual signs related to gender representation. During this process, visual elements such as costume design, camera framing, body gestures, spatial positioning, lighting, props, and interaction patterns between characters were recorded as units of analysis. These elements were then categorized based on recurring themes that relate to the representation of women's leadership.

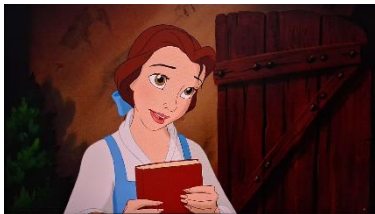
Data analysis was conducted through several stages. First, leadership-related visual elements were identified and categorized from the collected scenes. Second, the denotative meaning of the visual elements was described by examining the literal representation of characters, settings, and actions. Third, the connotative meaning was interpreted by analyzing the symbolic and cultural associations conveyed through those visual elements. Finally, the myth level was examined to understand how these representations contribute to broader cultural narratives about women's roles and leadership within society.

Through this analytical process, the study seeks to reveal how visual framing in Disney Princess films constructs evolving representations of female leadership and how these representations reflect broader social and cultural changes regarding gender roles.

Results and Discussion

This study analyzed gender framing in the storytelling of Disney Princess films through three titles representing three developmental phases of Disney: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Pre-Transition), *Beauty and the Beast* (Transition), and *Frozen* (Progression), as suggested by Garabedian (2015). The analysis focused on aspects related to how female leadership is constructed in these films, discussed below.

Analysis 1: Early-stage narratives formed around female characters

Snow White	Beauty and The Beast	Frozen
Denotative Meaning		
 Figure 1.1. <i>Snow White and Seven Dwarfs</i> (minute 03.43)	 Figure 1.2. <i>Beauty and the Beast</i> (minute 4.35)	 Figure 1.3. <i>Frozen</i> (minute 19.35) Elsa's visuals are staged with monarchical symbols such as crown, ceremonial attire,

Visually, Snow White is placed within a domestic mise-en-scène: simple costume, household props (bucket and rag), and warm lighting that emphasizes a domestic role.	Visually, Belle is presented through attributes of literacy (books), a simple but neat costume, and shots that place her within the village landscape.	palace balcony, and vertical framing that emphasize authority. Cold lighting and open space reinforce the signification of her formal position as a holder of power.
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Connotative Meaning

Domestic activities position women as private subjects without access to public power.	Women are permitted intellectual capital but have not gained structural legitimacy in power.	Women possess formal authority and social legitimacy.
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Myth

Women are naturally situated in the domestic sphere and are not destined to become leaders.	Women’s intelligence can be socially acceptable as long as it does not directly challenge power structures.	Women’s leadership in the public sphere is legitimate and normal.
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This representation is reflected in Snow White being central to the story mainly because of her status as a beautiful princess. In patriarchal cultures, male figures typically occupy greater social resources and higher status, which causes female characters to be depicted as passive(Ding et al., 2024). Clear progression in social status representation is evident from Snow White to Elsa. Belle occupies public space but is positioned as a marginal figure not fully accepted, while Elsa obtains formal social legitimacy as a queen. This change is reinforced not only narratively but also through visual framing such as choice of space, costume, and power symbols that emphasize the shift from private to public roles for women.

Analysis 2: The context of problems faced by women

Snow White	Beauty and The Beast	Frozen
Denotative Meaning		
 Figure 2.1. <i>Snow White and Seven Dwarfs</i> (minute 02.56)	 Figure 2.3. <i>Beauty and the Beast</i> (minute 24.40) The negotiation scene is visualized through interior castle framing, the contrast between Belle’s clothing and	 Figure 2.4. <i>Frozen</i> (minute 9.43) Conflict is visualized through symbols of failed power (chaotic movements, palace interior, and isolation of Elsa), and use of long shots to show social impact. This visual



Figure 2.2. *Snow White and Seven Dwarfs* (minute 03.40)

her new environment, and close-ups on expression when she makes decisions. Props and spatial arrangement reinforce sacrifice as a narrative choice.

centers the problem on the relation between the individual and political structures.

Visually, conflict is marked by close-ups on Snow White's face and beauty attributes, as well as the mirror artifact acting as a narrative trigger. The composition emphasizes body/appearance as the core issue.

Connotative Meaning		
Women’s value is reduced to body and appearance.	Women have moral agency but within the frame of familial sacrifice.	Women are positioned as political subjects with collective responsibility.
Myth		
Women’s existence is determined by physical attractiveness.	Women’s negotiation is acceptable so long as it is based on sacrifice and empathy.	Women are expected to shoulder leadership and social stability.

The findings demonstrate a clear shift in how women’s challenges are framed across the three films, moving from personal to structural concerns. In *Snow White*, female conflict is reduced to physical appearance, framing women’s existence as an aesthetic issue. In *Beauty and the Beast*, the problem evolves into moral negotiation where Belle has agency but remains constrained by familial sacrifice and empathy. *Frozen* positions women within structural and political conflict, with Elsa as a subject bearing collective responsibility. This progression shows that visual framing plays a significant role in shifting women's issues from personal realms to broader social domains.

Analysis 3: Women’s dreams

Snow White	Beauty and The Beast	Frozen
Denotative Meaning		



Figure 3.1. *Snow White and Seven Dwarfs* (minute 04.30)

In visual representation, Snow White’s dream is depicted through montage and romantic symbols (soft light, pleading close-ups). Through the song “I’m Wishing,” Snow White dreams of a prince who will “find her”.

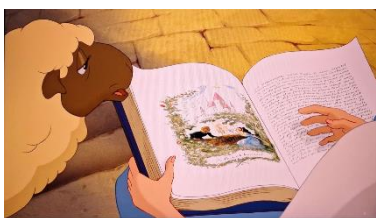


Figure 3.2. *Beauty and the Beast* (minute 06.12)

Belle’s aspirations are visualized through book motifs and camera angles that highlight reading activities. These attributes explicitly show the character’s cognitive and imaginative orientation.



Figure 3.3. *Frozen* (minute 9.43)

Elsa’s aspirations are communicated through scenes of transformation (expanded space and choreographed movement). In the song “Let It Go,” Elsa declares a desire to live without rules and demands, expressed in the lyric “no right, no wrong, no rules for me, I’m free.”

Connotative Meaning		
Women’s happiness depends on romantic relationships.	Intellectual aspirations appear but remain linked to romance.	Women have the right to determine their own life goals.
Myth		
A woman’s life goal is marriage.	Romance is the ultimate horizon of female happiness, even when wrapped in intellectualism.	Self-actualization stems from mastery of self, not from romantic relationships.

Princesses’ dreams also reflect their level of independence. Snow White in the classic film only dreams of meeting a handsome prince who will save her (Dyah Berlianti, 2021), showing a passive life vision. Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* is portrayed as longing for adventure and knowledge, like her love of books, though her story still ends in love (Karma, 2023). From a leadership perspective, Elsa’s dream foregrounds autonomy, freedom, and high aspirations rather than waiting for true love.

Analysis 4: Gesture and movement space of women

Snow White	Beauty and The Beast	Frozen
Denotative Meaning		



Figure 4.1. *Snow White and Seven Dwarfs* (minute 06.03)

Snow White’s body language is visually communicated through a bowed posture, delicate hand movements, and medium framing that reduces her bodily scale in space. This body language visualizes traditional femininity.



Figure 4.2. *Beauty and the Beast* (minute 54.40)

Belle’s gestures are visualized through active facial expressions, communicative hand movements, and blocking that provides space for her verbal action. These visuals show tension between individual expression and social norms regulating feminine gestures.



Figure 4.3. *Frozen* (minute 33.08)

Elsa’s gestures are represented visually through dynamic movements, expansive use of space, and cinematography that highlights physical force. This body language functions as an indicator of authority and control.

Connotative Meaning		
It reinforces women as obedient objects without physical agency.	Women begin to crack norms of femininity while remaining within social bounds.	The female body becomes a medium of power.
Myth		
The ideal woman is obedient and non-confrontational.	Women may move freely as long as they remain controlled.	Authority does not contradict femininity.

Gestures and non-verbal expressions also reflect leadership and gender dynamics. Visual communication studies of Disney find that male characters often display dominant gestural behavior, while female characters are more frequently passive (Maity, 2014). For example, Snow White is shown with gentle and submissive gestures, whereas Belle and Elsa have more assertive and freer movements. In the context of female leadership, gestures such as open hands and confident posture are often associated with charismatic leaders. Although not explicitly analyzed here, a shift is visible: modern princesses tend to use more expressive and dominant body language to show authority while maintaining warmth.

Analysis 5: Resistance during attack scenarios

Snow White	Beauty and The Beast	Frozen
Denotative Meaning		



Figure 5.1. *Snow White and Seven Dwarfs* (minute 09.02)

Snow White’s response scenes are visualized through framing that shows retreating movement, camera angles that follow her, and composition that places the dominant threat within the frame. These cinematic techniques emphasize a passive position in response to danger.



Figure 5.2. *Beauty and the Beast* (minute 26.45)



Figure 5.3 *Beauty and the Beast* (minute 48.30)

Belle’s resistance is recorded through temporary physical actions (close-up of hands holding a wooden object) but followed by Beast’s compositional dominance. This visual contrast places the climactic rescue on the male figure.

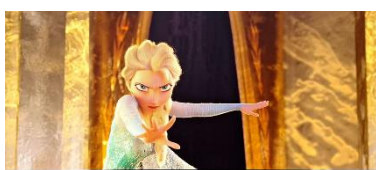


Figure 5.4. *Frozen* (minute 1.11.29)

Elsa’s defensive scenes are visualized with visual effects (ice as a shield), heroic framing, and cinematography that places her at the center of action. This representation affirms the female character’s protective capacity visually.

Connotative Meaning		
Women are passive victims.	Female agency is temporary.	Women are fully empowered subjects.
Myth		
Women need external saviors.	Heroism is primarily masculine.	Women can be protectors of themselves.

Resistance levels of female characters against traditional power increase over time. Classic princesses are rarely shown actively resisting Snow White does not actively oppose the Evil Queen, Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* fights Gaston and defends Beast (Guizerix, 2013). In the modern era, characters like Elsa and Anna in *Frozen* play active roles in overcoming threats. Audiences even view Elsa as a rescuer: “93% of respondents agreed that her character depicts female leadership when she tries to save Arendelle from the spirits”(Anindya, 2021). This confirms that modern princesses are portrayed as able to confront challenges for the greater good, fitting the concept of women leaders who courageously oppose the status quo for justice.

Analysis 6: Abilities possessed by female characters

Snow White	Beauty and The Beast	Frozen
Denotative Meaning		
		
Figure 6.1. <i>Snow White and Seven Dwarfs</i> (minute 39.20)	Figure 6.2 <i>Beauty and the Beast</i> (minute 14.40)	Figure 5.3. <i>Frozen</i> (minute 34.35)
Snow White’s abilities are visualized through domestic objects and activities (cooking, sweeping), close-ups on working hands, and interior home settings. These visuals associate female competence with the domestic sphere.	Belle’s abilities are visualized through book motifs, close-ups while reading, and spatial arrangements that place her at the center of intellectual attention. These elements show cognitive capacity as a character attribute.	Elsa’s strength is visualized through cinematic effects (manipulation of ice), production design of the palace, and mastery of visual space that focuses on her strategic actions. This representation shows capacities linked to structural influence.
Connotative Meaning		
Women’s skills are perceived as limited to repetitive, service-oriented domestic labor.	Women have intellectual capacities that are considered unusual when shown in public.	Women are depicted as having great potential and strength.
Myth		
Women are naturally more suited and competent in domestic tasks than other activities.	Female intelligence is seen as an exception rather than a norm.	Differences in ability between women and men are not innate but shaped by visual representation.

Specific abilities shown by princesses affect their leadership image. Content studies on Disney show that recent female protagonists are depicted as stronger and more competent than male characters in some respects (Clarke et al., 2024). For example, Elsa has extraordinary powers she controls for the good of her kingdom, while Anna demonstrates emotional resilience. Belle is portrayed as intelligent and insightful, for instance leading acts of resistance in the castle. These representations emphasize high competence: women are not only graceful but also possess skills (knowledge, magic, bravery) that support their roles as effective leaders.

Analysis 7: Public image of women

Snow White	Beauty and The Beast	Frozen
Denotative Meaning		
 Figure 7.1. <i>Snow White and Seven Dwarfs</i> (minute 1.19.15) Visually, Snow White is perceived through repeated emphasis on physical beauty shown via close-ups of her face, fair skin, and iconic costume. Even after being rendered unconscious, her body is placed in a glass coffin with soft lighting, making appearance the center of identity representation.	 Figure 7.2. <i>Beauty and the Beast</i> (minute 04.40) Belle is visualized as a “different” figure through book attributes, gestures of reading in public, and simple costume that contrasts with other village women. Framing often isolates her from the crowd, marking a socially deviant identity.	 Figure 7.3. <i>Frozen</i> (minute 27.29)  Figure 7.4. <i>Frozen</i> (minute 27.35) Elsa is represented through ambiguous visual power: queenly costume, cold facial expression, and ice effects associated with danger. Framing and reactions of other characters mark Elsa’s public image as a feared figure.
Connotative Meaning		
Snow White’s identity is constructed through a visual aesthetic emphasizing attractiveness and passivity.	Belle’s personal brand is built through intellectual image and nonconformity.	A powerful woman’s public identity is constructed as a threat.
Myth		
A woman’s value and identity lie in beauty rather than capacity or authority.	Women can build identity through intelligence but risk stigmatization.	Women with power and control tend to be distrusted and labeled negatively.

This analysis shows progression from Snow White, who is accepted because of beauty and obedience, to Belle, recognized for intelligence but treated as an outlier, to Elsa, who possesses public power but is framed as potentially threatening. The change confirms that while female representation becomes more complex, visual framing in Disney Princess films continues to negotiate societal acceptance of women’s public roles.

Analysis 8: Women expressing opinions

Snow White	Beauty and The Beast	Frozen
Denotative Meaning		
 Figure 8.1. <i>Snow White and Seven Dwarfs</i> (minute 39.54) Medium framing and the reaction of the dwarf Grumpy show dismissive gestures furrowed brows and shrugged shoulders toward Snow White's voice.	 Figure 8.2. <i>Beauty and the Beast</i> (minute 50.00) Belle voices arguments through rational dialogue visualized with close-ups and shots at eye level with the Beast. This visual staging gives space for two-way exchange.	 Figure 8.3. <i>Frozen</i> (minute 1.30.01) Elsa's opinions are expressed through direct commands within royal authority, visualized with symmetrical framing, central body position, and obedient responses from guards. These visuals affirm institutional authority behind her words.
Connotative Meaning		
Women's voices are positioned as non-authoritative and easily ignored.	Women begin to be recognized as subjects capable of logical argumentation.	Women's voices possess institutional power.
Myth		
Women's opinions lack weight in collective decision making.	Women's voices are accepted when presented rationally and moderately.	Female leadership includes the right to be heard and obeyed.

The ability of female characters to voice opinions increases in modern films. In early eras, princesses are depicted as quiet or softly complaining, while Belle already speaks firmly to the Beast and refuses Gaston (Karma, 2023). Active lines of dialogue for Belle indicate rising female agency. In Frozen, Elsa openly asserts her position through refusal to grant Anna permission to marry hastily. Together, these portrayals confirm that female leaders are shown as more vocal and no longer merely passive listeners.

Analysis 9: Decision-making

Snow White	Beauty and The Beast	Frozen
Denotative Meaning		

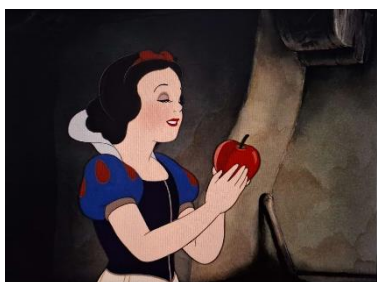


Figure 9.1. *Snow White and Seven Dwarfs* (minute 1.14.57)

Snow White’s choices are visualized as spontaneous actions without risk assessment, shown through naive expressions, hesitant gestures, and quickly changing scenes. This visual emphasizes reactivity over planning.



Figure 9.2. *Beauty and the Beast* (minute 19.24)

Belle makes decisions through dialogue scenes and visual pauses that emphasize reflection, such as close-ups when weighing options. These visuals show deliberation before action.



Figure 9.3. *Frozen* (minute 1.30.01)

Elsa resolutely refuses Anna’s request for blessing of a hasty marriage, marked by the line “you asked my blessing but my answer is no,” delivered with a cold expression and authoritative demeanor.

Connotative Meaning		
Women are portrayed as less rational in decision making.	Women have the capacity to choose consciously and rationally.	Women are positioned as decision-makers with logic and calculation.
Myth		
Important decision-making is not a woman’s domain.	Women can control their personal fate, though not yet at structural levels.	Female leadership is associated with rationality, control, and public responsibility.

Princess characters are increasingly independent in making important choices. For instance, Belle decides to refuse Gaston because she knows what is best for herself. Elsa in Frozen rejects Anna’s request, demonstrating bravery in making decisions not previously shown in Disney princesses. Such choices reflect female leaders who independently act according to conviction and can assess risks before acting.

Analysis 10: Female rescue actions

Snow White	Beauty and The Beast	Frozen
Denotative Meaning		



Figure 10.1. *Snow White and Seven Dwarfs* (minute 1.20.19)

Rescue scenes are visualized with motifs of a prince on horseback and lighting that centers attention on the rescuer. Composition places the male actor as the main agent of narrative change.



Figure 10.2. *Beauty and the Beast* (minute 48.30)

Beast’s heroism is shown through action composition (physical confrontation), dramatic lighting, and framing that places him as the protective center. These visuals underscore masculine dominance in heroic moments.



Figure 10.3. *Frozen* (minute 1.30.01)

Anna’s sacrificial act is visualized through close-up emotional shots, staging that highlights bodily interaction, and music and lighting that give dramaturgical weight. These visuals place heroism in the frame of female solidarity.

Connotative Meaning		
Women are objects of rescue and control fully entrusted to men.	Female bravery is present but not climactic, women are still depicted as needing men.	Female solidarity constitutes heroism.

Myth		
Romantic masculine love is the main rescuer.	Heroism centers on men.	Female leadership is relational rather than romantic.

Heroic actions by princesses are increasingly common in modern films. Classic princesses rarely act heroically Snow White is rescued by a prince, whereas in Frozen Elsa takes bold actions to stop environmental chaos for her kingdom (Anindya, 2021) (Clarke et al., 2024). Anna also sacrifices herself for family. Belle helps break the Beast’s curse through courage and love. Thus, recent films depict female leaders as rescuers and heroes willing to face danger for others, consistent with concepts of active and heroic female leadership.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how female leadership is visually represented across three landmark animated films and whether those representations have progressed over time. Using Barthesian semiotic analysis, the research found a clear and consistent progression: earlier representations prioritize domesticity and physical appearance, transitional texts introduce intellectual agency while retaining social constraints, and contemporary texts normalize female authority through visual markers of institutional power. In short, the analysis answers the research question by demonstrating that Disney’s visual constructions of princess characters have shifted from naturalizing female passivity toward legitimizing women’s leadership in public spheres.

These findings explicitly respond to the research problem by showing how and where shifts occur in the visual language of animated films specifically in costume, framing, spatial composition, gesture, props, and lighting—and by tracing that shift across historical phases exemplified by . The

study thus contributes to Visual Communication Design by foregrounding the semiotic mechanisms through which cinematic visuals encode and naturalize gendered leadership myths, offering a concrete analytical model practitioners and researchers can use to deconstruct visual narratives in children's media.

Practically, the research provides actionable implications for three stakeholder groups: educators and parents (who should include targeted media-literacy discussions to unpack visual myths), content creators (who should design visual narratives that model inclusive leadership), and curriculum developers (who can integrate semiotic reading exercises into early media education). The study also aligns with broader social aims—such as improving visibility and legitimacy for women in leadership—by showing how representational change in popular media can support those aims.

In relation to previous studies, the findings of this research are generally in line with earlier studies that show Disney princess narratives have shifted from passive and domestically oriented female figures toward more active, intelligent, and leadership-oriented representations. This supports the arguments of previous research cited in this study, such as Garabedian (2014), Maity (2014), and Clarke et al. (2024), which also indicate a gradual transformation in female character representation. However, this study adds a new contribution by emphasizing the visual semiotic construction of that transformation across three historical phases, showing that the progression is not only narrative, but also strongly built through costume, framing, gesture, props, and spatial composition. In this way, the present research strengthens previous findings while offering a more specific visual communication perspective on how women's leadership is normalized in animated film.

Limitations remain: the sample is limited to three representative films and the analysis is qualitative and interpretive, which constrains claims about audience reception or causality. To build on this work, future research should include: (1) audience reception studies with children to test how visual exposure influences leadership schemas; (2) cross-cultural comparisons to examine how local contexts mediate meaning; (3) quantitative or longitudinal designs to measure changes in attitudes over time; and (4) an expanded sample that includes more recent animated titles and diverse production studios to test the generalizability of the observed progression.

In conclusion, the study answers the central research question by demonstrating a visual progression in the representation of women's leadership across selected animated films, clarifies its contribution to Visual Communication Design through a semiotic reading of cinematic signs, and shows that its findings both support previous research and enrich it with a visual-semiotic emphasis that helps explain how these meanings are constructed.

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