



The Semiotic Representation of Gay Identity in Pixar's *Out* (2020)

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Abstract

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This study aims to examine the representation of gay identity in the animated short movie *Out* (2020) by applying Peirce's (1932) semiotic theory and Cass's theory (1979). A qualitative descriptive method is used to interpret verbal and non-verbal signs related to sexual identity. The data are taken from twenty scenes containing relevant signs. Each sign is analyzed using Peirce's triadic model, which consists of the representamen, the object, and the interpretant to explain how meaning is formed in the movie and later connected to Cass's theory of gay identity stages. The findings showed that gay identity in *Out* (2020) was expressed through visual and verbal elements such as gestures, expressions, and dialogues that reflected Greg's internal struggle and his developing self-acceptance. Greg was found to experience five stages of Cass's identity formation model: confusion, tolerance, acceptance, pride, and synthesis. In summary, this study revealed that animated movie can effectively present topics related to sexual identity. It also highlights how signs in a movie can help explain personal experiences, family dynamics, and the emotional journey of LGBTQ+ characters.

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INTRODUCTION

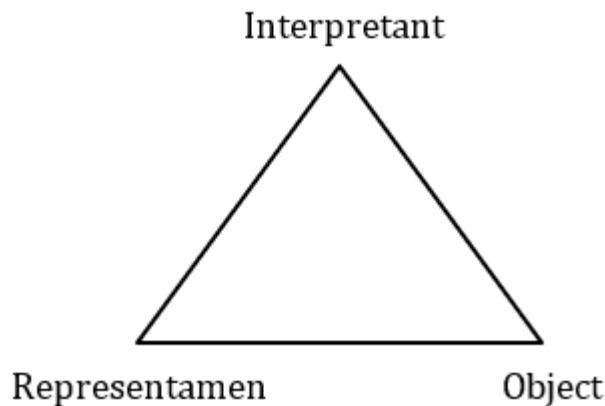
In recent years, the visibility of the LGBT community has increased significantly as individuals have become more open in expressing their identities and experiences. This development is also reflected in contemporary media, where LGBT representation appears more frequently across films, television, and digital platforms. The acronym *LGBT* refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender identities. According to the American Psychological Association (2008), the terms *gay* and *lesbian* describe individuals who experience emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to members of the same sex, while *bisexual* refers to attraction to more than one gender. The American Psychological Association (n.d.) further defines *transgender* as an umbrella term for individuals whose gender identity or gender expression differs from the sex assigned to them at birth. Some individuals who do not identify strictly as male or female may prefer terms such as *gender nonbinary* or *genderqueer*. Within this broad spectrum, the present study focuses specifically on the representation of gay identity.

Gay identity encompasses both personal self-recognition and a sense of belonging within the broader LGBT community. It often involves shared cultural experiences, symbolic expressions, and in some cases, engagement in social or political advocacy. Cass (1979) proposes a model of homosexual identity formation that includes several developmental stages—identity confusion, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis. These stages illustrate how individuals gradually come to understand and integrate their sexual orientation into their sense of self.

The LGBT community frequently expresses identity through symbolic representations. For instance, the rainbow, once merely a natural phenomenon, has evolved into a widely recognized symbol of LGBT pride and solidarity. Such symbols underline the importance of accurate interpretation, as signs may hold multiple meanings depending on context.

The capacity to interpret symbols meaningfully is central to the field of semiotics, which examines how signs convey meaning. Chandler (2007) defines semiotics as the study of how signs represent ideas and how those representations are understood by individuals. Peirce's semiotic theory introduces a triadic model consisting of the Representamen (the form of the sign), the Object (the referent), and the Interpretant (the meaning produced). Meaning emerges through the interaction of these components rather than being inherent in the sign itself. This framework provides a useful lens for analyzing how gay identity is constructed and communicated through visual and narrative signs in film.

Figure 1
The Triadic Model of Sign by Peirce



Note. Peirce's semiotic triangle. From *Semiotics the Basics*, by Daniel Chandler, 2007, Routledge.

The representamen is the vehicle for conveying meaning. It can be words, images, symbols, or any means by which people represent or communicate the semiotic object. The interpretant is the mental or cognitive representation that a person forms when they encounter a sign. This is the object in the world to which the sign refers. It can be a physical object, a concept, an idea, or anything that a sign can represent. Semiotics studied symbols, signs, and the meanings they conveyed, as well as how people interpreted and understood them. It involved examining the creation, interpretation, and use of signs in different cultural contexts such as language, art, media, and popular culture. Therefore, this study used semiotics to interpret signs in an animated movie.

Animated movies usually contained moral values, educational messages, and entertainment elements. In some cases, they also included signs that showed gay behavior or representation. Yuan et al. (2025) stated that LGBT movies helped to form identity by presenting stories that people could relate to and that represented personal experiences. The purpose of including LGBT themes in movies was to convey messages and meanings related to the desire for social acceptance. For instance, movies that told stories about the coming-out process could help LGBT individuals understand and accept themselves. Such movies often included specific signs that indicated LGBT themes. The LGBT community also used various symbols to represent their sexual orientation. One of the animated short movies that included signs of gay identity is *Out* (2020).

Out (2020) is an animated short movie released by Pixar Animation Studios under the SparkShorts project and directed by Steven Clay Hunter. The movie was distributed through Pixar's YouTube channel and Disney+ Hotstar. *Out* was an important milestone in animation because it was Pixar's first movie that explicitly represented a gay character. The movie featured emotional character portrayals, celebrated diversity, and aligned well with the theory used in this study.

This study was supported by several previous studies that were related to this topic. These studies all used Peirce's theory to analyze signs but examined different objects. Josoef and Andallisman (2023) used Peirce's semiotic theory to analyze sign relationships in the movie *IT* and explored the types of signs represented in the movie. Suryana and Merrita (2021) also used Peirce's theory to identify and analyze the meanings of icons, indexes, and symbols in lipstick advertisements. Meanwhile, Absharina (2023) used Peirce's semiotic theory to describe and analyze the meaning of signs in the movie *A Quiet Place*. The differences among these studies lay in their research objects and findings. The first study analyzed icons, indexes, and symbols in *IT*, the second study examined representamen, objects, and interpretants in advertisements, and the third study analyzed signs in *A Quiet Place*. Meanwhile, the present study focused on the representamen, object, and interpretant of signs that represented gay identity.

In addition, this study combined two theories: Peirce's semiotic theory (1932) and Cass's theory (1979) of Homosexual Identity Formation: A Theoretical Model. Peirce's theory was used to analyze the representamen, object, and interpretant of the signs, while Cass's theory was used to discuss the stages of gay identity represented in the short movie *Out* (2020). Therefore, this study aimed to analyze the signs of representamen, object, and interpretant that represented gay identity in the short movie *Out* (2020), and to identify the stages of gay identity represented in the short movie *Out* (2020).

METHOD

This study used qualitative methods as an approach to the study in analyzing data. The study aimed to explore and describe the representation of gay identity in the short movie *Out* (2020). Qualitative methods were considered appropriate because this study focused on interpreting the signs, dialogues, and visual elements contained in the movie. Cresswell & Cresswell (2018) described that qualitative methods rely on various forms of data, including text, images, and other visual materials. They also emphasized that qualitative methods typically collect data directly through interviews, observations, documents, and visual sources. Based on this statement, movie can be considered a suitable type of data for qualitative analysis. The research method used in this study is a qualitative approach. In its application, the qualitative approach used data collection and analysis methods.

The data source for this study taken from the gay identity sign contained in the animated movie *Out* (2020). *Out* (2020) is an animated short movie released by Pixar Animation Studios under the SparkShorts project and directed by Steven Clay Hunter. The duration of this movie is 9 minutes was distributed on Pixar's Youtube and Disney+ Hotstar. The data were collected by watching the movie repeatedly to understand its storyline, characters, and context. The writer took notes and captured screenshots of scenes that showed signs of gay identity. Each sign was then classified according to Peirce's (1932) triadic model. In this model, the representamen refers to the form of the sign appearing in the movie, the object refers to the actual reference or meaning of the sign, and the interpretant refers to the meaning that emerges in the viewer's mind. These signs were also connected to the stages of gay identity

described by Cass (1979).

The data were analyzed using the steps suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2017), including organizing, coding, categorizing, and interpreting the data. The coded signs were grouped into categories that represented gay identity and its stages. The results were then described narratively, supported by relevant scenes, dialogues, and visual evidence from the movie.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

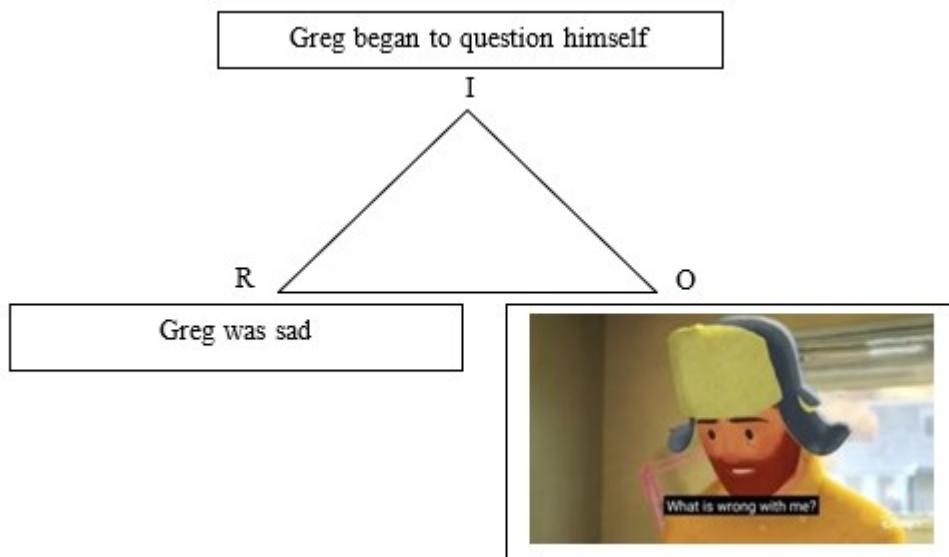
1. Finding

In this study, the writer analyzed data collected from the short movie *Out* (2020). This study analyzed signs representing gay identity using Peirce's triadic model of signs. A triadic model of sign consists of three main elements, namely the representamen, the object, and the interpretant. Through the triadic model of sign, each sign in the short movie *Out* (2020) can be interpreted to reveal how gay identity is represented symbolically through visual and narrative elements. The writer found twenty pieces of data that indicate signs of gay identity in the movie. Five of these data indicated that the signs were included in the stages of gay identity described by Cass (1979).

Datum 7

The expression of Greg (O) in the datum 7 showed that Greg was sad (R). In this situations, Greg began to question himself (I). The attitude showed by Greg in this scene was Greg has not had the courage to come out to his parents.

Figure 9
The expression of Greg

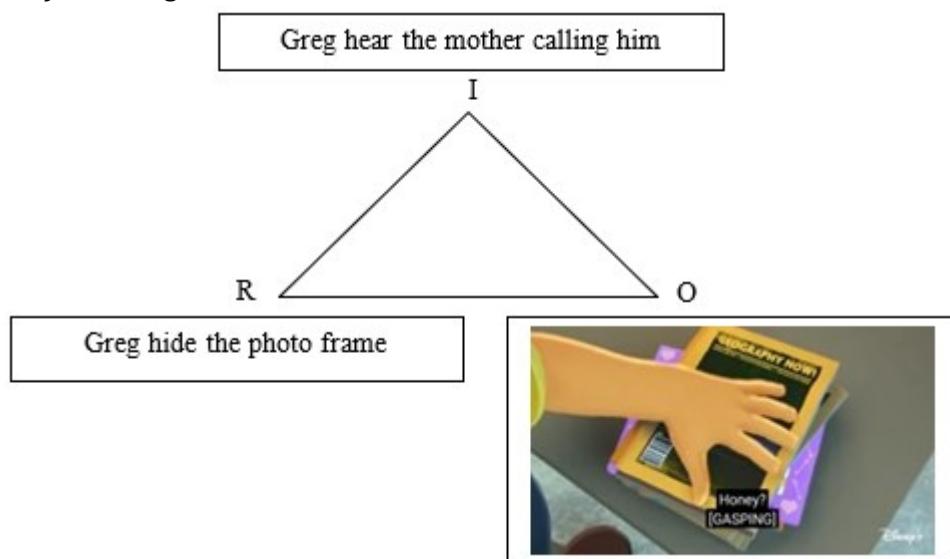


This was reinforced by the sentence spoken by Greg, namely "*He thinks it's so easy. Just look at them in the eyes, and say "Mom, Dad, I'm- He is my boyfriend, manuel.", what is wrong with me?*". According to Greg, it is not easy to tell his parents about his sex orientation. Greg felt that revealing his sexual identity was a big decision. He had to prepare himself for the response that his parents would give when they found out that he was gay. He realized that his sexual identity was not easily accepted by people. Therefore, he was not ready for the rejection and disappointment from his parents. Greg's attitude represented the stage of identity confusion. In this stage, a person experiences reactions such as denial, fear, and confusion. A person realizes that they are sexually attracted to the same sex but they are afraid to admit that they are gay in front of other people. This scene showed Greg's confusion as he was not yet ready to reveal his identity as gay to his parents. He felt that there was something wrong with him, both in terms of his sexual orientation and his inability to be open with his family.

Datum 6

The representamen of datum 6 showed that Greg hide the photo frame (R) of him and Manuel. It was Greg's response (O) when Greg heard the mother calling him (I). It showed that Greg felt that he was not ready to be opened about his sexual orientation to his parents.

Figure 8
A response from Greg



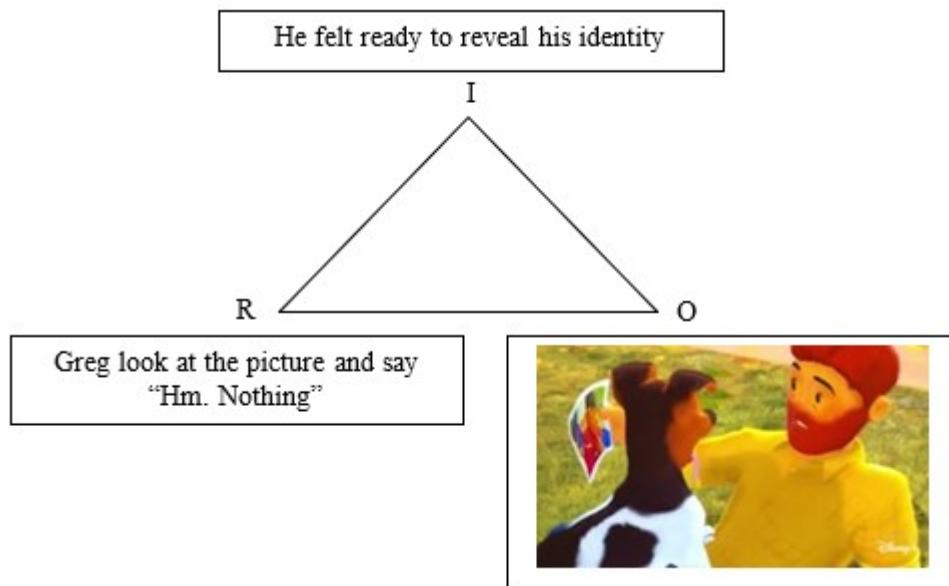
The reason why Greg was still not ready to come out was not because he did not love his boyfriend. Greg's attitude showed that he was afraid of his parents' response when they found out that he was gay. Greg felt that he was not sure enough of himself to be able to handle the situation when his parents did not accept that he had a sexual attraction to the same sex. Greg needed time to prepare himself and convince himself to make such a big decision. Greg's reaction on datum 6 is included

in the identity tolerance stage. In this stage, a person begins to acknowledge the possibility that they are gay, even though they still feel uncomfortable. This scene showed that Greg began to realize that he was gay and already had a partner, but was still hesitant to face the possibility of rejection from his parents. Greg's act of hiding his photo frame under a pile of books symbolized that he was hiding his identity as a gay in front of his parents. This showed that Greg needed time to convince himself before making such a big decision.

Datum 17

Greg was holding a photo with Jim on top of him at datum 17. Greg looked at the picture and said "*Hm. Nothing.*" (R), Greg expression (O) feels like he was ready to reveal his true self (I). The question from the mother "*What is wrong with you?*" which was actually asking about Greg's condition, but instead made Greg realize something.

Figure 2
Greg's expression



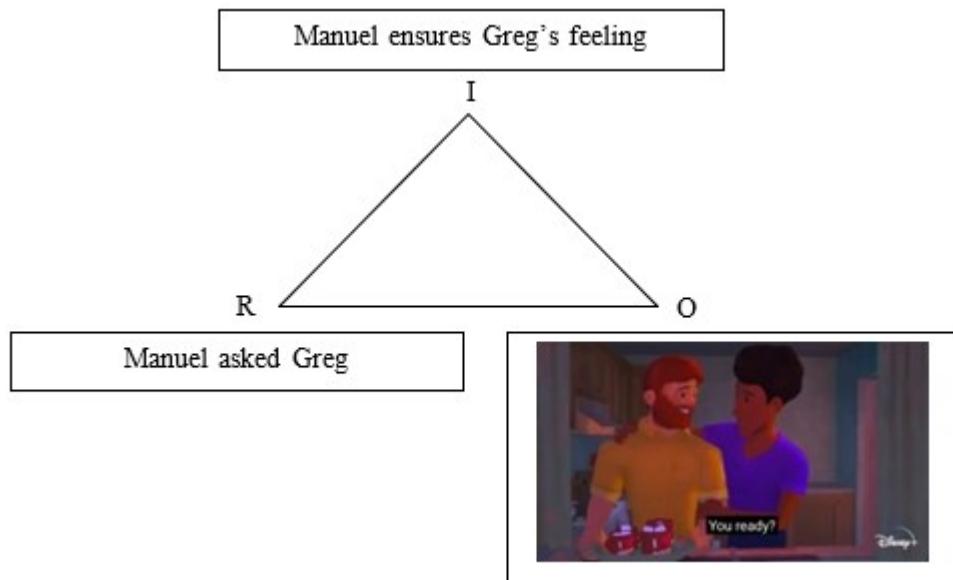
He felt that there was nothing wrong with him. he felt that being gay was not a problem. Therefore he replied "*Hm. Nothing*". The word "*Nothing*" in the conversation was interpreted that Greg realized there was nothing wrong with him and his sexual orientation. The word symbolized Greg's confidence in himself. In this scene, Greg was able to answer questions from himself in datum 7 that there was nothing wrong with him and he had begun to accept himself as gay and was ready to come out to his parents. On datum 17, identity acceptance appeared. This stage marks the full acceptance of one's gay or lesbian identity. individuals acknowledge and embrace their sexual orientation, which often involves coming out to themselves and others. In this scene, Greg managed to answer the confusion he had previously experienced by accepting the fact that there was nothing wrong with him. He began to be able to accept his sexual identity as gay and was ready to tell his

parents.

Datum 18

Datum 18 contained a scene of Greg and Manuel prepared drinks in the kitchen. Manuel asked Greg (R) about his decision. Gesture of Greg and Manuel (O) showed how Manuel ensures Greg's feeling (I).

Figure 3
The gesture of Greg and Manuel

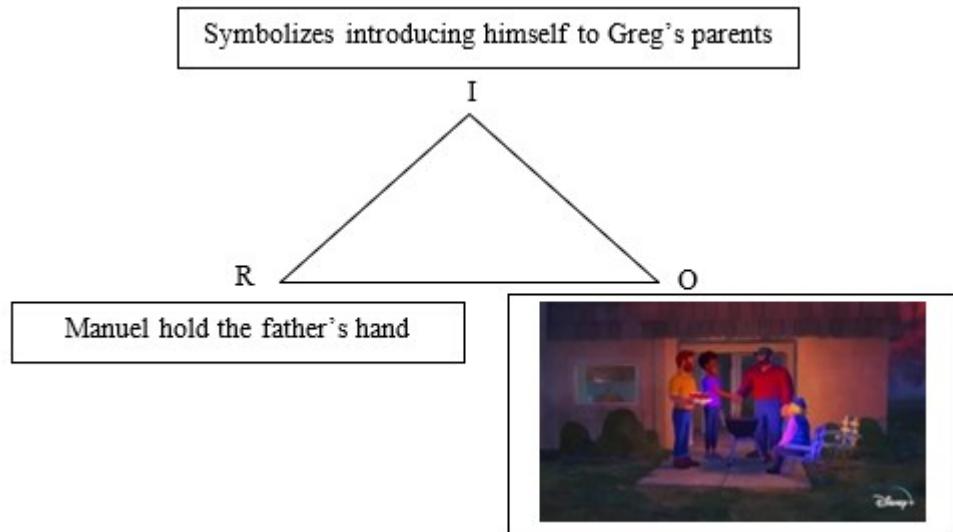


The embrace, kiss, and gaze given by Manuel are a form of support he gives to Greg. Manuel supports Greg emotionally. Then, Greg asked Manuel by said “*are you ready?*”, Manuel response Greg’s question by replied “*are you?*”. The question implied their readiness to come out about their relationship to Greg’s parents. In this movie, Greg began to open up to those closest to him about his sexual identity. It started from introducing himself and his boyfriend to his parents. On datum 18, Greg showed identity pride. This stage is characterized by a sense of freedom, where a person not only accepts their identity but also feels happy, free, and proud to express it. He began to open up to those closest to him, one of which was by introducing himself and his partner to his parents. This stage indicated that he not only accepted himself as gay but also felt proud of that identity.

Datum 19

The meeting scene by Manuel and Greg's parents (R) showed at datum 19. Manuel hold the father's hand. This showed about Greg's family and Manuel (O). It symbolizes that Greg has come out to his parent (I).

Figure 4
Greg's family and Manuel



Greg stood next to Manuel and Manuel introduced himself by shaking the father's hand and saying "Hi!". In this scene, Greg brought Manuel to meet his parents, and Manuel confidently introduced himself as Greg's boyfriend. Manuel's gestured handshake symbolized the beginning of building trust and showed that his arrival was aimed at establishing a positive relationship with Greg's parents. Greg's decision to introduce his partner to his parents showed a stage of identity synthesis. This is the final stage where individuals integrate their gay identity into their entire concept of self. They no longer see themselves only as gay, but as whole individuals with many other aspects. A person no longer feels the need to hide themselves or hide from society. This scene confirmed that homosexuality had become an integral part of Greg's identity, which he fully accepted in his life. This showed that Greg already considered that homosexuality was part of his identity. This also showed Manuel's enthusiasm as Greg's boyfriend. Manuel had been looking forward to this moment, and it finally happened. Greg and Manuel's attitude symbolized that they were a gay couple asking for Greg's parents' blessing.

Thus, this movie showed Greg's process of understanding, accepting, and eventually taking pride in his sexual identity. In conclusion, *Out* (2020) successfully represented the journey of gay identity in a realistic way through the character of Greg, while also emphasizing the importance of self-acceptance in shaping one's identity.

2. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that *Out* (2020) represents Greg's process of recognizing and accepting his gay identity through carefully constructed visual and narrative signs. These signs, when examined through Peirce's semiotic theory, reveal layered meanings that reflect Greg's psychological conflict. For instance, scene 7—where Greg hides a photograph of himself with Manuel—functions as a representamen whose object is Greg's fear of disclosure, while its interpretant points to his emotional uncertainty and lack of readiness to come out

to his parents. When interpreted alongside Cass's (1979) identity formation theory, this action aligns with the stage of identity confusion, illustrating how even subtle gestures in the film effectively communicate the protagonist's inner struggle.

These results align with the broader body of semiotic research in film and media studies. Joesoef and Andrallisman (2023), for example, used Peirce's theory to examine how visual signs in *IT* represent fear, showing that cinematic signs can convey psychological states. While their study focused on the horror genre, the present findings show that the same semiotic framework can effectively illuminate identity conflict in LGBTQ+ narratives. Similarly, Suryana and Merrita (2021) demonstrated how visual signs in lipstick advertisements construct meanings related to beauty and femininity. This parallels *Out*, where visual cues construct meanings related to sexual identity rather than gendered beauty norms. Absharina's (2023) study of *A Quiet Place* illustrates how sound and silence can function as signs of family tension; in contrast, the present study highlights signs that illustrate emotional development and self-acceptance.

The analysis also reinforces Cass's (1979) theory, which posits that the development of gay identity progresses through several psychological stages. Greg's narrative arc reflects five of these stages: confusion, tolerance, acceptance, pride, and synthesis. The semiotic interpretation shows how the film uses visual markers—gestures, facial expressions, color symbolism, and relational cues—to depict Greg's movement through each stage. This suggests that identity formation in animated narratives can be conveyed not only through explicit dialogue but also through symbolic actions and aesthetic elements.

Overall, the findings imply that animated films can serve as meaningful vehicles for exploring complex issues of sexual identity. The use of Peircean semiotics proves effective not only for analyzing fear in horror films or gender representation in advertisements, as shown in previous studies, but also for examining LGBTQ+ themes in contemporary cinema. This study therefore underscores the versatility of semiotic analysis and highlights the capacity of visual signs in media to represent identity struggles, particularly those involving gay identity. Through this lens, *Out* emerges as a valuable cultural text that contributes to broader conversations about representation, self-acceptance, and the visibility of LGBTQ+ communities.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the representation of gay identity in Pixar's *Out* (2020) by applying Peirce's Triadic Model of the Sign and Cass's (1979) Homosexual Identity Formation theory. Through semiotic analysis of selected scenes, the study demonstrated that signs in the film—both visual and verbal—construct meanings that reflect the protagonist's internal struggle and gradual acceptance of his gay identity. Using Peirce's framework, the analysis revealed how representamina such as colors, gestures, and symbolic imagery (for example, the rainbow) function as

signs whose objects relate to LGBT identity, while their interpretants signal pride, self-recognition, and emotional conflict. This illustrates that *Out* conveys meaning not merely through explicit statements but also through subtle symbolic cues embedded within its narrative and animation design.

Cass's identity model further enabled the identification of several stages of homosexual identity formation depicted in the film. Five of the six stages—identity confusion, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis—were reflected through Greg's actions, emotional responses, and evolving relationship with his parents and his partner. These stages collectively portray Greg's psychological journey from uncertainty and fear toward self-acceptance and openness. The film therefore succeeds in presenting gay identity as a developmental process shaped by internal emotions as well as interpersonal interactions.

Overall, the findings indicate that *Out* (2020) offers a meaningful representation of gay identity through its use of signs and symbolic narratives. The combination of semiotic and psycho-social approaches in this study highlights how animated films can communicate complex identity issues in accessible ways. This research also shows that cinema can serve as a valuable medium for promoting understanding, empathy, and visibility for LGBT communities. Future studies may further explore how other animated or mainstream films portray queer identities and how semiotic analysis can deepen public and academic engagement with LGBTQ+ representation.

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