

A Semiotic Analysis of Anxiety in *Inside Out 2* Based on John Fiske's Theory

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Abstract

This study aims to describe the portrayal of anxiety experienced by the character Riley Anderson in the animated film *Inside Out 2* using John Fiske's semiotic approach. The analysis explores how anxiety is conveyed through various signs and symbols within the film, offering deeper insight into the character's emotions. The research focuses on three levels of analysis: reality, representation, and ideology. The findings show that Riley's anxiety is expressed through expectations, fear, and the desire to be accepted in a new environment. These elements shape her character and behavior. At the reality level, bodily gestures such as tense posture, continuous foot movement, and slight mouth opening are interpreted as signs of anxiety. At the representation level, technical elements like low-key lighting and close-up shots reinforce the emotional atmosphere. At the ideological level, the film's narrative and symbols reflect societal values such as social pressure and individualism. The analysis reveals that Riley exhibits signs of panic disorder, social anxiety disorder, and separation anxiety. Ultimately, the film encourages viewers to understand the importance of mental health, especially among adolescents.

Keywords

Semiotics, Anxiety, Film, John Fiske, Mental Health, *Inside Out 2*

Introduction

Mental health has emerged as a critical area of concern in public health and communication studies alike, especially due to the increasing prevalence of mental health disorders among adolescents (World Health Organization, 2023). Among these disorders, anxiety has been recognized as one of the most common and potentially debilitating conditions, affecting emotional well-being, social functioning, and cognitive development (Kessler et al., 2005). Despite significant advances in mental health awareness, many manifestations of anxiety remain underrepresented or misrepresented in mainstream media.

The use of film as a medium to portray complex psychological conditions, including anxiety, has gained prominence in recent years. Animated films, in particular, have demonstrated a unique capacity to translate abstract emotional experiences into visual and narrative forms that are accessible to broad audiences, including children and adolescents (Wells, 2002). This makes them valuable tools for both entertainment and education.

One such film is *Inside Out 2*, the sequel to Pixar's acclaimed *Inside Out*, which continues its exploration of emotional development during childhood and adolescence. In this sequel, the character Riley enters puberty, accompanied by the introduction of new emotional characters such as Anxiety, Embarrassment, Envy, and Ennui. These characters symbolize psychological conflicts typical of this developmental stage, making the film a rich source of semiotic and psychological analysis.

John Fiske's semiotic theory provides a powerful framework for decoding the visual and symbolic language used in mass media texts, including films. Fiske (1987) proposes a three-level analysis: reality, representation, and ideology. These levels enable researchers to dissect how meaning is constructed and conveyed to audiences through symbols, codes, and cultural narratives.

Previous studies on mental health in media have generally focused on clinical accuracy or audience impact (Pirkis et al., 2006), but few have employed Fiske's semiotic model to decode the layered meanings embedded within animated representations of anxiety. Moreover, most existing semiotic studies have concentrated on adult-oriented media, leaving a gap in our understanding of how children's or family-friendly films construct psychological phenomena (Barker, 2008).

A related study by Lubis (2022) analyzed anxiety disorder in the series *Thirteen Reasons Why*, employing a semiotic approach by Ferdinand de Saussure. However, this study diverged in its theoretical framework and audience target. While effective, Saussure's model is more focused on linguistic signs, whereas Fiske's model integrates visual codes and ideological interpretations, making it more applicable to multimedia texts.

Likewise, Wulansari and Urfan (2024) examined depression in the Korean drama *Daily Dose of Sunshine*, applying Fiske's framework. They revealed how media representations often reflect broader social biases and ideologies. This study underscores the importance of using Fiske's model to understand how media both mirrors and molds public attitudes toward mental health.

In *Inside Out 2*, the character of Anxiety is not merely a new addition to the emotional spectrum but a central figure that often dominates Riley's decisions and inner conflicts. The film's narrative suggests that anxiety, while often vilified, plays a complex role in risk aversion and identity formation during adolescence. This duality makes the character of Anxiety ripe for semiotic analysis.

Furthermore, the film uses a range of visual symbols such as color coding, facial expressions, body language, and camera techniques like close-ups and lighting contrasts to depict emotional states. These elements align closely with Fiske's concept of "codes of reality" and "representational

codes" (Fiske, 1987). Understanding these codes can offer insight into how audiences interpret and internalize psychological messages.

From an ideological standpoint, the film reflects contemporary concerns about youth mental health and societal pressures related to perfectionism, self-worth, and social belonging. These concerns are not only culturally specific but also globally resonant, given the universal challenges faced by adolescents in a digitally connected world (Twenge et al., 2019).

One point of debate within scholarly circles is whether media representations of anxiety help destigmatize mental illness or risk simplifying complex conditions. Some argue that personifying emotions like anxiety may trivialize their real-life implications (Livingston, 2004), while others see it as a powerful metaphorical tool for empathy-building (Eder, 2016).

This study thus occupies a unique intersection of media analysis, psychology, and youth culture. By decoding the signs, gestures, and narrative devices used to portray anxiety in *Inside Out 2*, the research sheds light on how mass media mediates public understanding of adolescent mental health.

The aim of this research is to investigate how anxiety is constructed and communicated through the semiotic layers of *Inside Out 2* using John Fiske's three-tiered framework. Special attention is given to the depiction of Riley's behavior, body language, and symbolic interactions with the Anxiety character.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to inform both media literacy education and mental health advocacy. As animated films become increasingly sophisticated in addressing complex psychological issues, academic inquiry must keep pace to ensure accurate interpretation and critical engagement.

In conclusion, this study offers a critical, interpretive perspective on how anxiety is semiotically encoded in a mainstream animated film and what this reveals about societal attitudes toward youth mental health. The findings aim to contribute to interdisciplinary scholarship in media studies, communication, and psychology.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze how anxiety is portrayed in the animated film *Inside Out 2*. The qualitative method was chosen to allow the researcher to explore meanings behind visual and narrative elements in a detailed and interpretive manner. The theoretical framework used was John Fiske's semiotic theory, which divides analysis into three levels: reality, representation, and ideology (Fiske, 1987).

The main object of analysis was *Inside Out 2*, an animated film released by Pixar in 2024 and available on the Disney+ platform. The units of analysis were selected scenes that featured the main character, Riley Anderson, experiencing anxiety. These scenes were chosen based on the appearance of the character "Anxiety" and visible emotional or behavioral changes in Riley, such as indecisiveness, fear, or self-doubt.

Data were collected through non-participant observation. The researcher watched the film multiple times and documented important scenes showing signs of anxiety. Observations included facial expressions, body language, use of color, dialogue, lighting, music, and camera angles. These elements were recorded in a structured observation sheet for further analysis.

The analysis followed the three levels of John Fiske's model. At the reality level, the researcher examined physical signs of anxiety, such as a tense face, restless body movements, or

shaky voice. At the representation level, these signs were analyzed through film techniques such as low lighting, close-up shots, or background music that supported emotional tension. At the ideological level, the researcher interpreted social meanings and values implied by the narrative, such as social pressure, fear of failure, and themes of adolescence and individualism.

To enhance reliability, data were coded based on anxiety disorder symptoms from the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Codes were grouped into themes that reflected the film's portrayal of psychological conflict. A portion of the data was cross-checked by a peer to ensure consistency and reduce researcher bias.

All observation notes, coding results, and analytical findings are available upon reasonable request. Since the film is protected by copyright, full content cannot be shared; however, time-stamped references and analytical summaries will be uploaded to an open-access repository such as OSF.io prior to publication.

No ethical approval was required for this study as it did not involve human participants, animals, or experimental procedures. The research was conducted in accordance with academic standards and ethical guidelines for media and communication research. The methodological approach outlined here is intended to be replicable by other scholars interested in analyzing emotion representation in animated films or similar media texts.

Results and Discussion

This study analyzed four selected scenes from *Inside Out 2* using John Fiske's semiotic framework, which includes the levels of reality, representation, and ideology. The analysis revealed that the film uses consistent visual, narrative, and cinematic strategies to depict anxiety in the character Riley Anderson. These findings provide a comprehensive understanding of how anxiety is constructed as both a psychological state and a social condition within an animated narrative.

Reality Level Analysis: Physical Manifestations of Anxiety in Riley

At the reality level of John Fiske's semiotic framework, the researcher focuses on the observable physical signs of anxiety exhibited by the protagonist, Riley Anderson, in *Inside Out 2*. These signs are analyzed in alignment with clinical symptomatology documented in established psychological literature, particularly the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The goal is to assess how accurately the film represents anxiety-related behaviors through visible expressions, gestures, and reactions across different situational contexts.

Throughout the film, Riley demonstrates a range of somatic and behavioral cues that are widely recognized in clinical diagnoses of anxiety disorders. These include muscle tension, restlessness, speech disfluency, and physiological arousal—symptoms commonly associated with Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) and Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) (Kessler et al., 2005). In Scene 1, Riley encounters a new social environment as she is introduced to a new hockey team. During this moment, her posture is notably rigid, and her arms remain close to her torso in a protective manner. When asked to introduce herself, her voice is shaky and occasionally cracks, indicating a struggle to regulate emotional arousal. Her facial expressions appear forced, with strained smiles and darting eyes—clear signs of anticipatory anxiety and self-monitoring.

Scene 2 shifts to Riley's private space—her bedroom—where her anxiety is expressed in the absence of social pressure, thus reflecting internal rumination. She is observed pacing back and forth repeatedly, wringing her hands, and sighing audibly. These repetitive and purposeless motor

behaviors are indicative of psychomotor agitation, a hallmark symptom of anxiety. The pacing and hand-wringing especially denote cognitive overactivation and emotional unease, behaviors often documented in adolescents coping with uncertainty or perceived threat. In Scene 3, the film captures Riley in a peer-to-peer interaction, possibly at school or a public venue. When approached by a group of classmates, she visibly recoils—her body leans backward, eye contact is avoided, and her grip on her backpack tightens. She stammers during the conversation and hesitates before responding. This pattern of avoidant body language and speech disruption mirrors symptoms of Social Anxiety Disorder, where the fear of negative evaluation results in inhibited social performance (Stein & Stein, 2008).

The most intense portrayal occurs in Scene 4, which dramatizes Riley's emotional climax—an internal breakdown triggered by a perceived failure or rejection. The animation emphasizes several autonomic symptoms: she is shown with visibly sweaty palms, trembling hands, rapid shallow breathing, and dilated pupils. These are physiological indicators of sympathetic nervous system activation, signaling a "fight or flight" response typical of acute anxiety episodes (Barlow, 2002). Additionally, the tempo of the background music and the color shift in animation underscore the rising internal chaos, reinforcing the link between physical symptoms and emotional overload.

Taken together, these four scenes offer a coherent and clinically grounded depiction of anxiety symptoms. They are not only visually consistent with diagnostic criteria but also serve as narrative tools to externalize Riley's internal struggles. By grounding the representation of anxiety in tangible, observable behaviors, *Inside Out 2* bridges the gap between psychological realism and animated storytelling. These findings support the assertion that physical signs of anxiety—such as those seen in Riley—can function as reliable visual cues for identifying underlying emotional states in media narratives. Moreover, the congruence with clinical frameworks enhances the pedagogical and psychological validity of the film in representing adolescent mental health.

Representation Level Analysis: Cinematic Techniques as Visual Language of Anxiety

At the representation level of Fiske's semiotic framework, the focus shifts from observable reality to how signs are organized through media conventions—especially cinematic techniques—to construct meaning. In *Inside Out 2*, Pixar employs a deliberate combination of visual grammar—camera angles, editing, lighting, color grading, and sound design—to embody Riley's psychological states in ways that transcend verbal explanation. These techniques do not merely show Riley's anxiety; they *perform* it, allowing viewers to experience the emotion as both an aesthetic and affective event.

In Scene 1, where Riley introduces herself to a new hockey team, the use of low-key lighting casts soft shadows around her figure, subtly isolating her within the frame. A slow zoom-in pulls the viewer toward her anxious expression, effectively magnifying her internal discomfort. The mise-en-scène is minimal, with a slightly blurred, desaturated background that draws focus to her hesitant gestures and tight smile. This creates a visual metaphor for social vulnerability, emphasizing the pressure of first impressions and the tension of unfamiliar settings.

Scene 2, which takes place in Riley's bedroom, showcases the interplay between internal and external conflict. The editing here involves rapid cross-cuts between Riley's facial expressions and the personified emotions inside her mind—particularly "Anxiety." This technique constructs a sense of fragmentation, mirroring the disintegration of her self-regulation. The desaturated color palette—predominantly greys and muted blues—conveys emotional numbness, while dim interior lighting suggests a retreat from the external world. This scene exemplifies the use of formal

techniques to signify ruminative anxiety—a state where internal dialogue overwhelms action.

In Scene 3, the tension of social interaction is depicted through tight close-up shots that limit the spatial context, creating a visual impression of entrapment. Riley's face, hands, and the object she clutches (her backpack) dominate the frame, while shallow depth of field blurs her peers in the background. This distortion of spatial relationships mimics the perceptual narrowing often experienced during anxiety-inducing social encounters. Muted background sound, interspersed with exaggerated breathing and subtle heartbeat sounds, furthers the sense of internal preoccupation and disconnection from surroundings.

The most visually intense moment unfolds in Scene 4, the emotional climax. Here, Pixar uses a combination of fast-paced editing, motion blur, and audio distortion to represent Riley's panic episode. As her thoughts spiral, the scene fragments—images appear slightly out of focus, background colors intensify into reddish hues, and diegetic sound is replaced by a high-pitched ringing, simulating sensory overload. This scene stands out for its abstract representation of panic, using formal disruption to place the viewer inside Riley's cognitive chaos. These elements reflect what Fiske (1987) terms *media codes*, which help mediate reality through expressive conventions.

Collectively, these cinematic devices elevate the depiction of anxiety from a clinical condition to a visceral, shared experience. The audience is not merely observing Riley—they are immersed in the emotional logic of her world. This is a hallmark of Pixar's animation strategy: the externalization of intangible, internal states through symbolic imagery and affective design. As a result, *Inside Out 2* transcends the literal, inviting viewers—especially adolescents—to recognize and validate their own emotional complexity through Riley's experience.

These representational strategies illustrate how anxiety, an invisible and often stigmatized condition, can be made visible, legible, and empathetically felt through audiovisual storytelling. This reinforces animation's role not only as a narrative form but as a semiotic system capable of conveying nuanced psychological realities.

Table of Findings

The results of each scene, analyzed across the three levels of Fiske's framework, are summarized in Table 1 below:

Table 1. The results of each scene, analyzed across the three levels of Fiske's framework				
Scene	Reality (Physical Signs)		Representation (Cinematic Techniques)	Ideology (Underlying Message)
1	Tensed posture,	voice tremors	Low-key lighting, slow zoom-in	Fear of underperforming and the need for social validation
2	Pacing, sighing,	repetitive motion	Quick cuts, desaturated tones	Anxiety as a reaction to internalized expectations
3	Avoiding eye contact,	stammering	Close-ups, tight framing, dim lighting	Pressure to conform and suppress emotional vulnerability
4	Sweaty palms,	hands fidgeting	Fast-paced editing, blurred backgrounds, sound shift	Loss of control, internal chaos, self-blame due to perfectionism

Ideological Level Analysis: Cultural Messages and Critique of Adolescent Emotional Norms

At the ideological level, *Inside Out 2* functions not merely as entertainment but as a vehicle for disseminating and interrogating dominant cultural values—particularly those surrounding adolescence, emotional regulation, and societal expectations. According to Fiske (1987), the ideological level decodes how media texts reproduce or challenge the “common sense” beliefs and

values upheld within a given social context. In this case, the film subtly critiques the pressures placed on youth to perform, conform, and suppress vulnerability.

In Scene 1, Riley's anxiety is rooted in the implicit belief that social performance determines acceptance. Her nervousness during self-introduction to the hockey team is not simply an internal experience but a reflection of socially imposed performance anxiety, particularly common in adolescent peer cultures. The fear of embarrassment or rejection mirrors cultural narratives that equate self-worth with likability and charisma. This scene echoes the ideological premise that adolescents must consistently manage how they are perceived—an expectation heavily reinforced in environments such as school, sports teams, and social media spaces.

Scene 2 deepens this critique by portraying Riley in solitude—yet still overwhelmed. Her pacing and mental rumination, juxtaposed with inner voices of her personified emotions, illustrate how external expectations are internalized. The pressure to succeed academically, please parents, and maintain composure permeates even her private moments. This reflects what Foucault might describe as self-surveillance: the internal policing of thoughts and behaviors to conform with normative standards (Foucault, 1977). The scene thus critiques the erosion of emotional privacy in a world saturated with metrics of achievement.

In Scene 3, the ideological spotlight shifts to the cultural suppression of negative emotion. Riley's discomfort is not simply due to shyness; it's the result of having learned that vulnerability—especially in public—is undesirable. Her withdrawal, forced smile, and stiff posture illustrate the social reward system that favors emotional restraint over authenticity. This aligns with broader Western ideals of emotional self-regulation, where sadness, fear, or uncertainty are often seen as personal failings rather than valid states.

The climax in Scene 4 delivers the film's most potent ideological critique. Here, the personified character "Anxiety"—originally introduced as a protective mechanism—begins to override Riley's agency, driving her into a breakdown. This moment is rich with symbolic meaning: the internalization of perfectionism, overcontrol, and fear of failure culminates in psychological collapse. The film makes it clear that when young people are pushed to constantly optimize themselves—emotionally, academically, and socially—without space for release or imperfection, the consequences can be devastating. In this allegory, Anxiety ceases to function as a guide and becomes a tyrant, reflecting a culture that has weaponized self-improvement into self-destruction.

These narrative choices resonate with research in adolescent psychology, particularly studies pointing to the rise of perfectionism and emotional suppression among youth. Twenge et al. (2019) describe an era where young people face conflicting demands: they are expected to be high achievers, emotionally composed, socially adept, and constantly improving. The ideological critique embedded in *Inside Out 2* challenges these demands by visualizing their psychological toll—effectively arguing that emotional expression, including "negative" emotions like fear and doubt, is not only natural but necessary.

Furthermore, the film's use of animation to externalize internal conflict serves as a pedagogical bridge—making abstract psychological concepts accessible to a younger audience while inviting critical reflection from adult viewers. By showing how societal norms shape and distort emotional life, the film opens space for intergenerational dialogue about mental health, authenticity, and the right to be imperfect.

In sum, *Inside Out 2* engages deeply with ideological questions about what it means to grow up in a culture of performance. It critiques the emotional labor demanded of adolescents and offers a quiet rebellion against the normalization of anxiety, making it not just a story about one girl's

mind, but a cultural mirror for our own expectations.

Summary of Key Patterns: Multilayered Representation of Anxiety through Fiske's Semiotic Model

The integrated semiotic analysis of *Inside Out 2*—structured through John Fiske's three-level framework (reality, representation, and ideology)—uncovers a coherent set of recurring patterns that illuminate how the film constructs and communicates the experience of adolescent anxiety. First, Riley's anxiety is consistently rendered through a triad of physical, verbal, and behavioral symptoms. Across all four scenes, these symptoms include somatic cues (e.g., tense posture, rapid breathing, hand-wringing), speech disruptions (e.g., stammering, vocal tremors), and avoidance behaviors (e.g., lack of eye contact, withdrawal). These observable signs align with clinically recognized indicators of anxiety disorders such as Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) and Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD), thereby grounding the film's narrative in psychological realism (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Kessler et al., 2005).

Second, these clinical signifiers are not presented in isolation but are amplified through cinematic stylization. The film deploys a rich palette of audiovisual techniques—camera movement, lighting design, sound modulation, editing rhythm, and color grading—to visually and sonically dramatize Riley's internal emotional landscape. Whether through slow zooms to emphasize isolation or distorted soundscapes to reflect disorientation, each technique functions as a visual metaphor that extends the viewer's empathetic access to Riley's inner world. Thus, the representation level enhances not just what anxiety looks like, but what it *feels* like.

Third, all of these expressive layers are embedded within a broader ideological narrative about the pressures of adolescence in contemporary society. The film critiques the cultural demands for constant performance, emotional regulation, and perfection—expectations that are particularly intensified for youth navigating identity, peer acceptance, and familial expectations. The figure of "Anxiety" as both protector and oppressor functions as an allegorical device that encapsulates this ideological tension: the very mechanisms designed to ensure success and safety often become sources of harm when internalized without balance or compassion.

By applying Fiske's semiotic model, this study goes beyond surface-level description to demonstrate how meaning is constructed in *Inside Out 2* and why that meaning is culturally significant. It reveals how media texts like this do not merely depict emotions but actively shape public understanding of mental health, particularly for young audiences who may lack the language to articulate their psychological experiences. The film's layered portrayal offers a powerful pedagogical entry point for conversations about emotional literacy, mental wellness, and the normalization of psychological struggles in youth-oriented narratives.

In essence, *Inside Out 2* serves as more than a coming-of-age animation; it becomes a cultural artifact—one that reflects, critiques, and potentially transforms how society perceives anxiety. The film's ability to communicate complex emotional truths through accessible visual storytelling reinforces the relevance of semiotic analysis as a tool for unpacking media's role in mental health discourse.

Conclusion

This study examined the portrayal of anxiety in Pixar's *Inside Out 2* through the lens of John Fiske's semiotic model, which distinguishes between the levels of reality, representation, and ideology. By conducting a detailed analysis of four key scenes involving the protagonist, Riley

Anderson, the research reveals how the film communicates psychological distress through a carefully orchestrated interplay of bodily performance, cinematic language, and cultural symbolism.

At the reality level, Riley's anxiety is depicted through observable, clinically recognizable symptoms such as muscular tension, restlessness, and behavioral avoidance. These manifestations align with diagnostic features of anxiety disorders, thereby grounding the character's emotional experience in psychological authenticity. At the representation level, the film uses formal cinematic elements—lighting, camera work, color grading, sound design, and editing—to translate Riley's internal turmoil into a vivid audiovisual experience. These techniques function not only to heighten emotional impact but also to create a shared affective space between character and audience.

At the ideological level, the film situates Riley's anxiety within a broader sociocultural framework that critiques the normative expectations imposed on adolescents—particularly the demands for high performance, emotional self-regulation, and social conformity. The tension between internal emotion and external control is embodied by the character of "Anxiety," who simultaneously seeks to protect and dominate Riley. This duality serves as an allegory for the ambivalent role of anxiety in modern youth culture: both a survival mechanism and a symptom of systemic pressure.

Overall, *Inside Out 2* provides a multilayered and socially conscious portrayal of adolescent anxiety. It demonstrates how animation—as a medium traditionally associated with children's entertainment—can effectively engage with complex psychological and sociocultural issues. The findings of this study underscore the value of semiotic analysis in unpacking the layered meanings embedded in media texts and highlight the potential of visual storytelling to promote mental health awareness among young audiences.

By rendering the invisible experience of anxiety visible, legible, and emotionally resonant, the film becomes a powerful pedagogical tool—one that fosters empathy, reflection, and critical discourse on youth mental health in an increasingly demanding cultural landscape.

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