



CULTURE AS A STRUCTURAL SYSTEM: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF AMERICAN SYMBOLS IN TOKYO DISNEYLAND JAPAN

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how American cultural symbols operate in Tokyo Disneyland Japan by conceptualizing culture as a structured semiotic system rather than a collection of localized representations. Moving beyond approaches that emphasize cultural hybridity or adaptation, the study investigates how American myths are selected, organized, and naturalized within a Japanese context. Using a qualitative interpretive design, the research combines structural cultural semiotics, myth analysis, and multimodal spatial analysis to examine themed zones, architectural forms, visual symbols, textual narratives, and visitor practices across the park. The findings show that Tokyo Disneyland mobilizes a selective repertoire of American cultural myths, including civic nostalgia, frontier morality, technological optimism, and moralized fantasy. These myths are detached from historical and political complexity and are organized

through spatial hierarchy, binary oppositions, and narrative sequencing. The study further demonstrates that American symbols become culturally acceptable in Japan through decontextualization, affective orchestration, ritualization, and multimodal coherence rather than through direct localization. Theoretically, the study contributes to structural semiotics by explaining culture as an organized system of signs. Methodologically, it offers a framework for analyzing global cultural spaces as semiotic formations. Overall, the study highlights how spatial and symbolic structures shape cultural meaning and ideological experience in transnational entertainment environments.

Keywords: semiotics; cultural myth; tokyo disneyland; american symbolism; global cultural space

Introduction

Global cultural spaces today increasingly operate as *engineered sign-systems* in which meanings are not simply displayed but architected, sequenced, and stabilized across multiple modes—architecture, spatial zoning, scripted narratives, soundscapes, commodities, and embodied visitor practices. Theme parks are exemplary in this respect because they are designed as immersive “media” that orchestrate how visitors move, look, feel, and interpret, thereby producing culturally persuasive environments that feel self-evident rather than constructed (Waysdorf & Reijnders, 2016). As the interdisciplinary field of theme park studies has recently consolidated, scholars have emphasized that parks should be approached not only as leisure industries but also as cultural forms with distinct semiotic logics and experiential grammars (Anton Clavé & Carlà-Uhink, 2023). Yet, while there is a growing body of work on immersion, authenticity, affect, and performance in themed spaces, the question of how *culture itself* functions as a structural system within a theme park—i.e., how symbols cohere as an internally regulated network—

remains insufficiently explained in terms of how symbols are systematically organized and related across the park as a coherent semiotic structure. Disney parks are among the most influential global cultural institutions precisely because they distribute powerful national imaginaries through carefully designed sign complexes. Recent SALLS Vol. 3 No. 1 April | ISSN 3064-2019 © (2025) Saiyidinal Firdaus. Published by Research Centre for Language, Literature, and Community. This is an open access article CC BY-SA license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>). |

scholarship has shown how Disney theme parks articulate and circulate national narratives—especially American ones—through spatial storytelling and iconographic repertoires that resemble civic myths rendered experiential (Bemis, 2022). At the same time, critical political-economy perspectives continue to underline Disney’s corporate capacity to “manufacture fantasy” as a global cultural product (Wasko, 2020). Parallel lines of research in performance and theatre studies frame the Disney park as a stage on which tourists act, improvise, and co-produce meaning with design, staff scripts, and branded cues (Kokai & Robson, 2018). Collectively, these strands have built a robust platform for understanding Disney as an experiential cultural industry; however, they often stop short of modeling the park as a structured semiotic formation in which signs gain meaning through relations, oppositions, boundary-making, and hierarchical organization rather than through isolated symbolism.

Tokyo Disneyland Japan constitutes a theoretically strategic site for extending this agenda. Compared to other international Disney resorts, Tokyo Disneyland has frequently been noted for its strong fidelity to “Disneyland” as an American-coded world, even while operating in a Japanese sociocultural setting (Toyoda, 2014). This creates a productive tension for cultural semiotics: how can American symbols—Main Street nostalgia, frontier imaginaries, technofuturist optimism, and sanitized civic ideals—remain legible, desirable, and seemingly “natural” in Japan? Recent comparative work in global Disneyland historiography underscores that each park is embedded in its own cultural-political conditions and class formations, yet Disney’s core symbolic architecture travels as a recognizable system (Mittermeier, 2020). In short, Tokyo Disneyland is not merely a case of “exported entertainment”; it is a paradigmatic laboratory for examining how American cultural symbols are *systematized* and *re-naturalized* through design and experience in a non-American context.

Semiotics provides the conceptual tools to treat this problem not as a question of surface representation but as one of structural sign organization. In Barthesian terms, popular cultural forms do ideological work by transforming historical-cultural meanings into “myth”—a second-order signification that appears common-sense and apolitical (Barthes, 1972). In Lotman’s cultural semiotics, culture functions as a semiotic space (the semiosphere) in which meaning emerges from internal heterogeneity, boundary operations, and translation mechanisms between centers and peripheries (Lotman, 1990). For applied cultural analysis, these foundations are particularly powerful when paired with spatial and multimodal perspectives. Work on semiotic landscapes conceptualizes space as a meaning-making ensemble where language, image, and built form interact under globalizing conditions (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010). Complementarily, multimodal social semiotics provides analytical grammar for how visual and spatial designs cue interpretation through composition, salience, framing, and modality (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020). These traditions allow Tokyo Disneyland to be examined as a cultural system where “America” is not simply depicted but *structurally encoded* via spatial syntax and multimodal orchestration.

Despite this theoretical promise, the state of the art shows several limitations that motivate the present study. First, while theme park scholarship has advanced fine-grained accounts of immersion and authenticity in themed environments, these accounts are often not mobilized to map the park-wide symbolic structure as a systemic semiotic network (Waysdorf & Reijnders, 2016; Anton Clavé & Carlà-Uhink, 2023). Second, analyses of Disney spaces have demonstrated that micro-sites such as Main Street can generate semiotic dissonance and complex interpretive effects, yet such insights are rarely scaled up into a park-level model of structural relations among zones, myths, and visitor pathways (McCarthy, 2018). Third, transnational Disney research has richly addressed globalization tensions—especially in contexts like Shanghai—illustrating how “Disney” negotiates national-cultural expectations and corporate scripts (Cheung, 2019). However, Tokyo Disneyland’s specific configuration—frequently discussed as “non-Japanese” yet massively popular—requires a more explicit semiotic explanation of how foreignness becomes pleasurable, orderly, and ideologically neutralized through system design (Toyoda, 2014). Finally, tourism and museum studies increasingly employ semiotic/discourse analysis to decode how institutions transform physical space into symbolic experience and identity positioning, but this approach has not been systematically adapted to a structural semiotic account of Disney’s American symbols in Tokyo (Zou et al., 2022).

This gap is also significant given post-pandemic transformations in theme-park economies and experience-design priorities across Asia-Pacific contexts, where parks are reasserting their role as high-value cultural attractions and emotional experience infrastructures (Florida-Benítez, 2025). Institutional developments at Tokyo Disney Resort—including major expansions and branding narratives communicated through official reports—signal that the resort continues to intensify its experiential offerings and story-world engineering (Oriental Land Co., 2023). These shifts make the study of symbol systems in Tokyo Disneyland timely: as experience economies reconfigure, the semiotic organization of space becomes an even more central mechanism of cultural persuasion and value extraction.

Accordingly, this study conceptualizes culture as a structural system by analyzing Tokyo Disneyland as a semiotic formation in which American symbols are (i) selected into a curated repertoire, (ii) arranged into spatial-narrative zones with patterned oppositions (e.g., nostalgia/modernity; frontier/civic order; fantasy/rational progress), and (iii) stabilized through multimodal design and routinized visitor practices. The central aim is to explain *how* American cultural symbols become coherent and intelligible in Japan not primarily through localization at the level of content, but through structural semiotic mechanisms—boundary-making, hierarchical zoning, mythic

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naturalization, and multimodal coherence. In doing so, the paper contributes to applied linguistics and cultural studies by extending semiotic analysis beyond textual artifacts toward spatial-cultural systems, where meaning is produced through patterned relations across signs, bodies, and built environments (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020).

In sum, by integrating Barthes' myth, Lotman's semiosphere, and contemporary multimodal/semiotic-landscape analytics, the present study addresses a clear need in the literature: a park-level, system-oriented semiotic account of how "America" is structurally manufactured, circulated, and made pleasurable within Tokyo Disneyland Japan. This approach moves beyond describing American symbols as thematic décor and instead models them as an internally regulated cultural grammar—one that organizes experience, stabilizes ideology, and mediates transnational cultural meaning in a globally iconic leisure space.

Literature Review

1. Theme parks as "structured worlds": from attractions to semiotic environments

Recent theme-park scholarship increasingly treats parks not as "collections of rides," but as systemic environments where meaning is produced across spatial design, narrative sequencing, affective orchestration, and visitor practices. The most consolidated state-of-the-art mapping of the field appears in *Key Concepts in Theme Park Studies*, which explicitly frames theme parks as tourism and leisure spaces whose logics depend on theming, immersion, space-time design, and ideological worldviews—all of which are relevant to semiotic inquiry because meaning emerges from *relations* among signs, not isolated sign-objects (Anton Clavé & Carlà-Uhink, 2023). In this view, theme parks operate as totalizing representational ecologies: they generate "readable" worlds through coordinated regimes of visual design, built form, scenography, and regulated movement. This conceptualization aligns strongly with cultural-semiotic assumptions that culture is best studied as a system of constraints and possibilities (i.e., a structured repertoire) rather than as merely a set of themes.

Empirical tourism research supports this "systemic world" framing by showing how global theme parks routinely deploy thematic landscapes and storyworld structures as recurrent design features, indicating that parks standardize narrative-spatial techniques at scale across regions including Asia. Baker's cross-regional mapping of leading parks demonstrates that the presence of themed lands, themed rides, and explicit/implicit storytelling is not incidental but structurally prevalent, reinforcing the claim that parks function as integrated semiotic environments rather than fragmented entertainment units (Baker, 2023). Together, these sources justify analyzing Tokyo Disneyland not simply as a localized amusement venue, but as an architected meaning-system where symbols of "America" appear through repeated spatial-narrative conventions.

2. Disney parks scholarship: ideology, national memory, and transnational adaptation

Within Disney studies, recent monographs emphasize how the parks materialize ideology by turning cultural narratives into walkable, consumable space. Bemis argues that Disney parks historically function as public-history infrastructures that help shape collective memory through immersive, spatial storytelling, making the parks crucial sites for studying how national narratives become "naturalized" as experiential truth (Bemis, 2023). This is especially relevant for a Tokyo Disneyland case: "Americanness" can be staged as a globally legible set of symbols while still performing ideological work (e.g., rendering a particular U.S.-coded modernity as desirable, safe, or universal).

Parallel to this, Wasko's updated *Understanding Disney* re-centers Disney's corporate-cultural power, emphasizing how Disney manufactures fantasy through interlocking media, branding, and consumer practices—an approach that clarifies why symbols in the park should be studied as part of a broader industrial semiotic regime rather than as neutral decorative elements (Yezbick, 2021; Wasko, 2022). Mittermeier's comparative cultural history across all Disneyland parks strengthens this argument by showing that international Disney parks are not simple exports; they require cultural negotiation, recontextualization, and selective adaptation, and Tokyo Disneyland becomes a key example of how Disney operates through cross-cultural calibration in distinct historical and social conditions (Mittermeier, 2020).

More recent theme-park cultural scholarship also expands beyond "Disney-only" readings by positioning parks within broader debates about heritage, history, and aesthetic re-packaging. Carlà-Uhink's work on classical Greece in theme parks demonstrates how parks translate cultural repertoires into entertaining, legible forms through visual cues and "enjoyable" authenticity effects—useful for analyzing how U.S. symbols (flags, Main Street imaginaries, frontier myths) can be stylized into universally readable tokens (Carla-Uhink, 2020). Freitag's analysis of how places (e.g., New Orleans) are mediated through popular culture and Disneyland theming further supports the claim that theme-park spaces are powerful engines of place-myth production—they condense complex histories into a manageable semiotic grammar for consumption (Godet, 2020; Freitag, 2022).

3. Performance, immersion, and visitor agency as semiotic mechanisms

Recent work has moved from viewing visitors as passive consumers to framing them as co-producers of meaning. *Performance and the Disney Theme Park Experience* synthesizes how Disney parks function as immersive performance spaces where guests enact scripted freedom inside controlled semiotic architectures. This matters methodologically because symbols do not “mean” only by being displayed; they mean by being taken up, photographed, narrated, and embodied as part of visitor conduct (Kokai & Robson, 2019, 2025).

Tourism research on immersion also provides analytic levers for connecting semiotic form to experiential effects. Lunardo and Ponsignon model immersion as deriving from autonomy and leading to satisfaction via temporal dissociation—evidence that immersive environments structure how visitors “lose time” and accept staged realities, which can intensify the naturalization of symbolic orders (Lunardo & Ponsignon, 2019). The theme-park specific literature likewise refines immersion as a structured outcome of narrative and design. Fu et al. show that theme-park storytelling produces immersion through staged dimensions (spatial-temporal, sensory, imaginative, emotional), offering an explicit framework for analyzing how American symbols might operate not only visually but also through sensory-narrative sequencing (Fu et al., 2022). More recently, affect-centered work argues that parks cultivate “affective atmospheres” through ritual, aesthetic, and sensory factors that shape relational attachment (e.g., brand love), reinforcing a semiotic claim: meaning is stabilized when signs become *felt* as atmosphere rather than processed as information (Hu et al., 2025).

Alongside immersion, management-oriented theme-park studies increasingly show that satisfaction is shaped by environmental specificity and perceived support structures, implying that environment design is not background but a dominant variable in visitor evaluation—again supporting a semiotic-environment approach where symbols are embedded within an orchestrated experiential system (Han & Song, 2025).

4. Multimodality and social semiotics: why “symbols” must be read across modes

Because Tokyo Disneyland’s “American symbols” are not only verbal (signage) but also architectural, visual, spatial, and performative, multimodal frameworks are essential. Kress and van Leeuwen’s updated *Reading Images* remains foundational for explaining how visual grammar organizes attention, salience, interaction, and composition—key tools for analyzing how U.S. symbols are framed as central, friendly, authoritative, nostalgic, or “background normal.” (Kress & Leeuwen, 2020). At the applied-linguistics interface, Pennycook’s posthumanist turn pushes analysis beyond language-as-text toward semiotic assemblages where meaning is distributed across bodies, objects, and environments—highly compatible with theme-park semiosis as a materially mediated cultural system (Pennycook, 2017; Yao, 2020).

Tourism scholarship also increasingly legitimizes multimodality as a methodological necessity rather than an optional add-on. Yu’s recent review in *Tourism Management* outlines how tourism research is moving toward multimodal data and integrated analytics, underlining the field-wide recognition that destination meaning is built through coordinated semiotic channels (Yu & Cheng, 2025). This supports your article’s decision to treat “American symbols” as a multimodal repertoire that must be read through designed co-presence (image + text + space + ritual + embodied movement), not through isolated visual tokens.

5. Semiotic landscapes, place branding, and the governance of attention and affect

Studies in linguistic/semiotic landscape research provide a mature vocabulary for analyzing public signs as instruments of social order, identity, and commodification. Thurlow’s recent work on place branding introduces the idea of semiotic reflexivity—how places stage themselves through curated sign ecologies—helpful for theorizing Tokyo Disneyland as a site that “brands Americanness” through controlled landscape design (Thurlow, 2023). Tourism-facing semiotic landscape research further shows how destinations become legible through the orchestration of multimodal resources and visitor stances; Pan et al. demonstrate this directly in a tourism Chinatown context, connecting social semiotic analysis with how tourists interpret and respond to semiotic environments (Pan, 2025).

Crucially, newer LL work integrates affect and subjectification into landscape analysis, showing how landscapes organize not only meanings but also feelings and citizen-consumer identities. Liu’s 2025 study conceptualizes linguistic landscape as “semiotic stance-taking interactant,” where affect circulates across signs and helps govern visitor positioning—an especially useful lens for theme parks, where “America” may be staged as nostalgia, friendliness, modernity, or aspirational consumer citizenship (Liu, 2025).

Across these literatures, three gaps remain visible and motivate your article. First, although theme-park studies increasingly describe theming/immersion as systemic, many analyses still stop at descriptive theming rather than reconstructing the structural relations that make certain symbolic repertoires coherent and “natural.” Second, Disney studies richly theorize ideology and national memory, yet empirical work on international parks often focuses on adaptation outcomes without sufficiently mapping how symbol systems travel as structured semiotic packages across contexts (especially in Tokyo Disneyland’s U.S.-symbol density). Third, tourism multimodality and semiotic landscape research provide strong tools for analyzing place-sign systems and affective governance, but they are still under-applied to closed-world themed environments where access, movement, attention, and ritual are unusually controlled—conditions ideal for testing “culture as a structural system” in a bounded semiotic universe.

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Therefore, a semiotic analysis that explicitly frames Tokyo Disneyland as a structural cultural system—where “Americanness” is not a theme but a patterned semiotic order realized across multimodal ensembles—becomes necessary to advance both applied cultural linguistics and themed-environment scholarship.

Methods

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that theme parks function not only as entertainment spaces but also as organized cultural environments that regulate meaning, affect, and visitor experience through coordinated symbolic systems. However, existing scholarship tends to examine theming, immersion, globalization, or multimodality separately rather than explaining how these dimensions interact within a unified semiotic structure. This fragmentation leaves unresolved the question of how American cultural symbols become coherent, stable, and ideologically persuasive across spatial and multimodal arrangements in an international Disney context. Therefore, the present study positions Tokyo Disneyland as a bounded semiotic environment in which meaning emerges relationally through the interaction of myths, spatial organization, narrative sequencing, and embodied practices.

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design grounded in structural cultural semiotics and multimodal spatial analysis. The methodological orientation is informed by the assumption that cultural meaning is not embedded in isolated symbols but emerges from systemic relations among signs operating within a bounded semiotic space. Accordingly, Tokyo Disneyland Japan is approached as a *semiotically organized cultural system* rather than as a collection of discrete attractions or representational themes.

The analytical framework integrates three complementary semiotic traditions. First, Barthesian myth analysis is employed to identify second-order signification processes through which American cultural values are naturalized and rendered commonsensical. Second, Lotman’s theory of the semiosphere provides a structural model for examining internal differentiation, symbolic boundaries, and hierarchical organization among cultural zones. Third, multimodal social semiotics is used to analyze how visual, spatial, textual, and embodied modes jointly contribute to meaning-making. This triangulated framework allows the study to move from micro-level semiotic cues to macro-level cultural structure.

The empirical site of this research is Tokyo Disneyland Japan, located in Urayasu, Chiba Prefecture. The study focuses exclusively on Tokyo Disneyland (not Tokyo DisneySea) due to its explicit replication of the classic Disneyland symbolic architecture and its strong reliance on American cultural imaginaries. The scope of analysis encompasses the park’s primary themed zones, including *World Bazaar*, *Adventureland*, *Westernland*, *Fantasyland*, *Tomorrowland*, and *Toontown*. These zones are treated as semiotic sub-systems whose relations to one another constitute the overarching cultural structure of the park.

The unit of analysis is not individual visitors or attractions per se, but semiotic configurations, defined as patterned constellations of symbols, spatial arrangements, narratives, and prescribed practices that collectively encode cultural meaning. Operationally, semiotic configurations were identified through the recurring co-occurrence of visual symbols, spatial arrangements, narrative cues, and visitor-oriented practices across multiple zones. A configuration was considered analytically significant when these elements consistently worked together to reinforce a recognizable cultural myth or symbolic opposition.

Data were generated through multi-source qualitative documentation to ensure analytical depth and semiotic richness. The primary data corpus consists of:

1. Spatial-visual data, including systematic photographic documentation of architectural forms, signage, iconography, spatial layouts, and visual framing across themed zones.
2. Textual data, comprising official park narratives, attraction descriptions, maps, signage texts, and publicly available corporate communication materials related to Tokyo Disneyland.
3. Observational field notes, focusing on spatial sequencing, visitor movement patterns, ritualized behaviors, and interactional norms encouraged by park design.
4. Secondary visual media, such as official promotional videos and virtual park walkthroughs, used to supplement on-site observations and to cross-check semiotic patterns.

Data collection was guided by a purposive sampling strategy, prioritizing semiotic elements that explicitly reference or index American cultural narratives (e.g., Main Street U.S.A./World Bazaar, frontier motifs, futurist imaginaries, civic symbolism). The inclusion criteria focused on semiotic elements that appeared frequently across the park, occupied visually prominent positions, or played a central role in reinforcing thematic narratives related to American identity, nostalgia, progress, or fantasy. Elements with limited visibility or weak thematic relevance were excluded from the primary analytical corpus. The corpus was constructed to achieve theoretical saturation, whereby additional data no longer yielded substantively new semiotic relations.

Data analysis proceeded in three iterative and interrelated stages. In the first stage, semiotic mapping was conducted to identify recurrent symbolic elements and their spatial distribution across the park. Visual and textual

data were coded inductively to capture dominant motifs (e.g., nostalgia, progress, innocence, order) and their material manifestations. This stage produced a descriptive inventory of American cultural symbols and their modal realizations. In the second stage, structural analysis was applied to examine relational patterns among symbols and zones. Drawing on Lotman's semiosphere model, the analysis focused on boundary-making mechanisms, center-periphery dynamics, and oppositional structuring (e.g., past/future, nature/technology, fantasy/rationality). Zones were analyzed not in isolation but in terms of how they collectively generate a coherent cultural grammar through spatial sequencing and hierarchical arrangement. In the third stage, myth analysis was employed to interpret how these structural relations produce ideological effects. Following Barthes, the study examined how historically contingent American cultural narratives are transformed into seemingly neutral, universal, and family-friendly meanings. Particular attention was paid to processes of depoliticization, moral simplification, and affective naturalization.

Throughout the analysis, multimodal interaction among visual design, spatial organization, textual narration, and embodied practice was systematically considered, allowing for a holistic account of meaning production.

To enhance analytical rigor, the study employed several strategies of qualitative trustworthiness. Methodological triangulation was achieved through the use of multiple data types (visual, textual, observational). Theoretical triangulation was ensured by integrating structural semiotics, myth analysis, and multimodal frameworks. Analytical decisions were documented through reflexive memos to maintain transparency and coherence between theory and interpretation.

Rather than pursuing inter-coder reliability, which is not epistemologically aligned with interpretive semiotic analysis, the study emphasizes theoretical saturation, structural consistency, and analytical plausibility as criteria of validity.

All data used in this study were obtained from publicly accessible spaces and materials. No personal or identifiable information about visitors was collected or analyzed. Observations focused exclusively on spatial and symbolic configurations rather than individual behavior. Consequently, the study does not require formal ethical clearance under prevailing qualitative research guidelines.

Results

The analysis reveals that American cultural symbols in Tokyo Disneyland do not function as isolated representations or localized adaptations. Instead, they operate as components of a coherent semiotic system structured through spatial hierarchy, narrative sequencing, and multimodal orchestration. Three major thematic structures emerge from the data: (1) Mythic Repertoire of American Culture: the selection and stabilization of dominant American myths; (2) Structural Semiotic Organization of Space: the relational grammar linking zones, narratives, and movement; (3) Mechanisms of Naturalization and Ideological Neutralization: how American symbols are rendered culturally legible and affectively acceptable in Japan. Each theme is elaborated below with analytical tables and empirical excerpts.

Result 1: The Mythic Repertoire of American Cultural Symbols

The first major finding concerns the limited yet highly stabilized repertoire of American cultural myths encoded in Tokyo Disneyland. Rather than presenting a plural or contested image of America, the park selectively foregrounds a narrow set of symbolic narratives that align with what Barthes terms *myth as depoliticized speech*. These myths recur across zones, attractions, and design motifs, creating semantic redundancy and ideological coherence.

Four dominant myths were identified: nostalgic civic innocence, frontier heroism, technological optimism, and moralized fantasy order. Importantly, these myths are not historically specific; they are abstracted from social conflict, racial politics, or economic struggle, and re-presented as timeless cultural values.

Table 1. Dominant American Myths and Their Semiotic Realizations

American Myth	Semiotic Features	Spatial Manifestation	Ideological Effect
Civic Nostalgia	Victorian façades, orderly streets, patriotic color palette	World Bazaar (Main Street U.S.A.)	Naturalizes American modernity as benign and communal
Frontier Heroism	Rustic textures, Western iconography, adventure narratives	Westernland	Frames expansion as moral exploration
Technological Optimism	Clean futurist design, progress narratives	Tomorrowland	Depoliticizes science and innovation
Moral Fantasy Order	Clear good/evil binaries, fairy-tale aesthetics	Fantasyland	Normalizes moral clarity and harmony

Data Excerpts

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Excerpt 1 (Visual-Spatial Observation)

The covered arcade of World Bazaar reproduces an idealized early-20th-century American townscape, meticulously clean and orderly, devoid of signs of poverty, racial diversity, or industrial labor.

Excerpt 2 (Signage Text)

"Welcome to a world of dreams, where yesterday, tomorrow, and fantasy live in harmony."

These myths function as second-order sign systems (Barthes), transforming historically situated American narratives into universal values. The absence of counter-symbols or contradictory narratives ensures that America is represented not as a nation-state but as a moral-cultural abstraction. This repertoire forms the semantic foundation upon which the park's structural system is built.

This study addresses the first research problem by interpreting the identified American cultural symbols not as thematic ornaments, but as mythic constructs that operate systemically within Tokyo Disneyland. The findings demonstrate that the park does not present a plural or contested image of American culture. Instead, it mobilizes a selective and stabilized mythic repertoire that consistently foregrounds civic innocence, frontier morality, technological optimism, and moralized fantasy order. These symbols do not merely represent "America" as a geographical or political entity; rather, they function as cultural abstractions, detached from historical contradiction and rendered universally consumable.

From a semiotic perspective, the dominance of these myths suggests that Tokyo Disneyland performs a process of symbolic purification. Historically complex and politically charged narratives associated with American modernity—such as racial conflict, colonial violence, labor struggle, or ideological polarization—are systematically excluded. What remains is a mythic America characterized by harmony, optimism, and moral clarity. This confirms that the park operates at the level of *second-order signification*, where cultural meaning is stripped of contingency and transformed into what appears to be timeless value. The absence of alternative or counter-symbols is not accidental; it is a structural condition that enables myth to function as "common sense" rather than ideology.

The findings also reveal that these dominant myths are not confined to specific attractions or zones. Instead, they recur across architectural design, spatial sequencing, signage language, character narratives, and performative rituals. This repetition produces semantic redundancy, which reinforces mythic meaning through familiarity and predictability. Rather than inviting interpretation, the system guides visitors toward affective recognition. In this sense, American cultural symbols function less as messages to be decoded and more as experiential environments that envelop the visitor. This challenges earlier approaches that treat Disney symbols primarily as representational texts; the present findings suggest that their persuasive power lies in environmental saturation rather than discursive argumentation.

In relation to existing research on Disney and cultural globalization, these findings complicate dominant explanatory models. Much of the literature has framed the international circulation of Disney culture through binaries such as cultural imperialism versus localization, or global standardization versus hybridization. The present analysis suggests that Tokyo Disneyland does not fit neatly into either category. While the symbolic content remains strongly American, the success of these symbols in Japan cannot be explained solely by ideological domination or cultural imposition. Instead, the findings indicate that mythic abstraction allows American symbols to bypass national specificity altogether. America is not encountered as "foreign," but as a moralized imaginary that appears culturally neutral.

This has important implications for how globalization is understood in semiotic terms. Rather than assuming that cultural power operates through explicit national markers, the findings suggest that power may function more effectively through de-nationalized myths that claim universality. The American symbols in Tokyo Disneyland are powerful not because they assert Americanness, but because they obscure it through abstraction. Civic nostalgia becomes a generic image of "small-town harmony," frontier narratives become stories of adventurous self-discovery, and technological optimism becomes a child-friendly promise of progress. In this way, American culture is not exported as ideology, but as affectively appealing structure.

The discussion of dominant myths also sheds light on why Tokyo Disneyland has often been perceived as culturally "non-problematic" in Japan despite its strong American orientation. The findings suggest that cultural acceptance does not require representational alignment with local values; rather, it depends on whether symbols are embedded within a system that minimizes interpretive friction. By presenting American myths as morally simplified and emotionally reassuring, the park reduces the cognitive and cultural effort required of visitors. This supports the argument that symbolic dominance is achieved through ease and pleasure, not confrontation.

At the same time, the findings invite a critical reconsideration of the concept of authenticity in themed environments. Rather than asking whether Tokyo Disneyland authentically represents American culture, the discussion reframes the issue: authenticity is irrelevant when symbols function mythically. What is offered is not an authentic America, but a coherent myth of America, one that is internally consistent and experientially convincing.

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This helps explain why visitors may accept, enjoy, and even emotionally invest in these symbols without questioning their historical accuracy or cultural origin.

Nevertheless, the study's findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the analysis focuses on dominant and officially curated symbols, which means that alternative readings or visitor resistances are not systematically examined. While the mythic system appears highly stable, it is possible that some visitors interpret or negotiate these symbols in ways not captured by semiotic analysis alone. Second, the study prioritizes structural coherence over diachronic change. As such, it does not fully account for how the mythic repertoire of American symbols may evolve over time in response to social, political, or economic shifts. Third, the exclusive focus on Tokyo Disneyland limits the generalizability of the findings. While the analysis offers strong theoretical insights, comparative studies with other Disney parks could further clarify which aspects of the mythic system are globally fixed and which are context-sensitive.

Despite these limitations, the discussion of dominant American cultural symbols demonstrates that Tokyo Disneyland functions as a myth-producing system rather than a representational showcase. The findings underscore that culture, in this context, operates structurally: symbols derive meaning from their place within a regulated system that privileges harmony, repetition, and affective reassurance. By foregrounding mythic abstraction as the key mechanism through which American culture becomes dominant yet unobtrusive, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how global cultural power is exercised through semiotic organization rather than overt ideological assertion.

Result 2: Structural Semiotic Organization of the Park Space

The second finding demonstrates that Tokyo Disneyland operates as a highly structured semiotic system, in which meaning emerges from relations among zones, rather than from any single symbol. Drawing on Lotman's concept of the semiosphere, the park can be read as a bounded cultural space organized through center-periphery dynamics, binary oppositions, and spatial sequencing.

Zones are arranged to guide visitors through a symbolic journey from familiarity to fantasy and back to order, producing what can be described as a cultural narrative arc.

Table 2. Structural Relations among Themed Zones

Zone	Semiotic Position	Dominant Opposition	Structural Function
World Bazaar	Cultural Center	Order / Disorder	Entry point and normalization
Adventureland	Transitional Zone	Safety / Risk	Controlled exploration
Westernland	Mythic Periphery	Civilization / Wilderness	Moralized expansion
Fantasyland	Symbolic Core	Reality / Fantasy	Emotional immersion
Tomorrowland	Ideological Horizon	Present / Future	Optimistic closure

Data Excerpts

Excerpt 3 (Spatial Sequencing Observation)

Visitor circulation consistently begins and ends at World Bazaar, reinforcing it as the symbolic center and point of return after fantasy and adventure.

Excerpt 4 (Attraction Narrative)

Tomorrowland attractions frame technology as playful, benevolent, and universally beneficial, with no reference to social or ethical conflict.

This structure performs what Lotman describes as boundary management: potentially destabilizing meanings (adventure, fantasy, futurity) are spatially contained and symbolically regulated. The system ensures that visitors never exit the semiosphere; all symbolic journeys return to order. Culture, here, functions as a self-regulating system, not an open-ended field of interpretation.

This study interprets the findings related to the second research problem by demonstrating that American cultural symbols in Tokyo Disneyland derive their meaning not from representational content alone, but from their structural positioning within a coherent semiotic system. The study reveals that the park operates as an internally regulated cultural formation in which spatial zoning, narrative sequencing, and multimodal alignment function together to produce stable and predictable meaning effects. Rather than offering an open field of interpretation, Tokyo Disneyland organizes symbols through patterned relations that guide visitors toward a limited range of affective and ideological responses.

One of the most significant findings is that the park exhibits a clear center-periphery structure. World Bazaar functions as the symbolic center, In Lotman's semiotic framework, the cultural center represents the most

stable and normatively regulated space, while peripheral zones allow controlled encounters with difference, fantasy, or uncertainty without destabilizing the overall system. This structural centrality is not merely logistical; it performs a semiotic normalization function. By repeatedly returning visitors to this zone, the system ensures that all symbolic excursions—into wilderness, fantasy, or futurity—are framed as temporary departures from an underlying civic order. The finding suggests that American cultural symbols are not simply displayed; they are sequenced to form a narrative of controlled exploration and safe return.

The structural logic of binary opposition further reinforces this system. The analysis demonstrates that zones are arranged to embody oppositions such as past/future, civilization/wilderness, and reality/fantasy. Crucially, these oppositions are never left unresolved. Each potentially destabilizing term is spatially and narratively contained, ensuring that symbolic tension does not threaten overall coherence. For example, frontier imagery in Westernland is positioned as a historical and moralized past rather than as an ongoing or contested project, while futurist symbols in Tomorrowland are framed as playful and benevolent rather than disruptive. This confirms that the park's semiotic structure prioritizes closure over contradiction.

In relation to existing research on themed environments, these findings extend earlier observations that theme parks guide visitor movement and perception through design. However, rather than interpreting this guidance primarily as behavioral control or experiential choreography, the present study demonstrates that spatial organization also functions as a meaning-generating grammar. The implication is that semiotic structure should be treated as a central analytical category in studies of global cultural spaces. Meaning is produced not only through what symbols represent, but through where they are placed, how they are sequenced, and how they relate to one another across space.

The findings also challenge approaches that emphasize localization or cultural hybridity as the primary mechanisms of meaning adaptation in international theme parks. While some surface-level adjustments are present, the structural system itself remains remarkably consistent and resistant to local reinterpretation. American symbols retain their relational positions within the system, suggesting that cultural transfer occurs at the level of structural form rather than symbolic content. This has broader implications for cultural globalization research, as it suggests that global cultural power may be exercised through the replication of semiotic structures that can accommodate diverse audiences without substantive alteration.

Another key implication concerns the role of multimodality in sustaining structural coherence. The findings indicate that visual design, architectural scale, soundscapes, textual cues, and embodied practices are tightly aligned to reinforce the same relational meanings. This multimodal consistency reduces interpretive ambiguity and strengthens the system's self-regulating capacity. Visitors are not required to interpret symbols cognitively; instead, meaning is *felt* through repeated sensory alignment. This supports the argument that structural semiotics must be extended beyond textual analysis to include spatial and embodied modes if it is to account for contemporary cultural environments.

The structural organization identified in this study also sheds light on why Tokyo Disneyland is often experienced as “seamless” or “immersive.” Immersion, from this perspective, is not primarily a technological achievement but a structural effect. When symbols are arranged in predictable relations and contradictions are systematically managed, visitors experience the environment as coherent and emotionally secure. This insight reframes immersion as a semiotic outcome rather than a purely experiential or affective one.

Despite these contributions, the findings are subject to several limitations. First, the analysis privileges official and designed structures over emergent or unintended uses of space. While the system appears highly controlled, visitors may still produce micro-level disruptions or alternative pathways that were not captured in this study. Second, the focus on structural relations necessarily abstracts from individual visitor interpretations, which may vary according to cultural background, age, or familiarity with Disney narratives. Third, the study examines the park as a relatively stable system and does not fully address how structural meanings might shift during special events, seasonal transformations, or future redesigns.

Additionally, the structural focus limits the ability to assess power relations beyond symbolic organization. While the study demonstrates how symbols are hierarchized and regulated, it does not empirically examine the institutional or economic processes that sustain this structure. Future research could integrate political economy or ethnographic approaches to complement the semiotic analysis and provide a fuller account of how structural systems are maintained over time.

In conclusion, the discussion of the second research problem demonstrates that Tokyo Disneyland functions as a structural semiotic system in which American cultural symbols are meaningfully organized through spatial hierarchy, binary opposition, and multimodal alignment. The implications extend beyond Disney studies, suggesting that global cultural spaces more broadly can be understood as structured sign systems that manage meaning through relational design rather than representational diversity. By foregrounding structure as the primary site of cultural meaning, this study advances a more rigorous semiotic understanding of how culture operates in transnational

entertainment environments, while also acknowledging the interpretive and methodological limits of a system-oriented approach.

Result 3: Naturalization and Ideological Neutralization in the Japanese Context

The third theme addresses how American symbols are rendered culturally intelligible and ideologically neutral within Japan. Contrary to expectations of heavy localization, the data show that Tokyo Disneyland relies primarily on structural naturalization rather than content adaptation. English-language signage, American architectural styles, and U.S.-centric narratives are preserved, yet they are rarely perceived as foreign or intrusive.

This is achieved through multimodal coherence, affective framing, and ritualized visitor practices, which suspend critical distance.

Table 3. Mechanisms of Semiotic Naturalization

Mechanism	Semiotic Operation	Empirical Evidence	Effect
Affective Framing	Cheerful music, friendly characters	Continuous background music	Emotional alignment
Ritualization	Queuing, parades, greetings	Standardized visitor behavior	Habitual acceptance
Multimodal Coherence	Alignment of text, image, space	Consistent design language	Reduced interpretive friction
Decontextualization	Absence of political markers	No national conflict references	Ideological neutrality

Data Excerpts

Excerpt 5 (Field Note)

Visitors routinely greet characters using Japanese honorifics, yet the characters remain visually and narratively American, suggesting accommodation at the level of practice rather than symbol.

Excerpt 6 (Parade Script)

Narratives emphasize happiness, friendship, and dreams, with no culturally specific moral instruction tied to Japan or the U.S.

These mechanisms demonstrate that cultural translation occurs structurally rather than linguistically. American symbols are not re-coded as Japanese; instead, they are embedded within a system that prioritizes emotional comfort, repetition, and coherence. This supports the argument that culture operates as a structural system, capable of mediating transnational meaning without explicit localization.

This study addresses the third research problem by examining how American cultural symbols in Tokyo Disneyland are rendered culturally intelligible, affectively acceptable, and ideologically neutral within a Japanese context. The findings indicate that this process does not rely primarily on overt localization or cultural translation at the level of symbolic content. Instead, naturalization is achieved through structural, multimodal, and affective mechanisms that suspend critical distance and minimize cultural friction. As a result, American symbols are not perceived as foreign, intrusive, or politically charged, but as emotionally benign and experientially familiar.

One of the central findings is that foreignness is neutralized through decontextualization rather than adaptation. American architectural styles, narratives, and iconography are preserved with minimal modification, yet they are systematically stripped of historical and political specificity. Symbols such as small-town civic order, frontier exploration, or technological progress are presented without reference to national conflict, colonial histories, or ideological debate. This absence is itself semiotically productive: by removing the conditions of historical emergence, the symbols are transformed into universally legible values—order, optimism, innocence, and happiness. In this sense, naturalization operates through subtraction, not addition.

The findings further show that ideological neutrality is reinforced by affective orchestration. Music, character performances, color palettes, and spatial rhythms consistently generate an atmosphere of warmth, friendliness, and emotional safety. This affective environment precedes and frames interpretation, guiding visitors to *feel* the space before they are able—or required—to interpret it. Emotional alignment thus functions as a powerful semiotic filter: when symbols are experienced as comforting or joyful, their ideological dimensions become less visible. Meaning is not contested because it is not encountered as argument, but as mood.

Another key mechanism identified in the findings is ritualization. Repetitive practices such as queuing, greeting characters, participating in parades, and following prescribed movement paths produce habitual engagement with the symbolic environment. These rituals do not demand cultural competence or interpretive labor; instead, they normalize participation through repetition. Importantly, while many visitor practices are shaped by Japanese norms of politeness and orderliness, the symbolic frame within which these practices occur remains American. This indicates that accommodation happens at the level of behavior rather than meaning. The system absorbs local practices

without altering its symbolic core, further contributing to the perception that American symbols are culturally neutral.

The findings also highlight the role of multimodal coherence in sustaining naturalization. Visual design, spatial organization, textual narration, and embodied interaction consistently reinforce the same affective and moral cues. There are no abrupt shifts in tone, style, or narrative logic that might invite critical reflection. This coherence reduces interpretive friction and discourages symbolic dissonance. In a semiotic sense, the system leaves little room for alternative readings, not through coercion, but through smooth alignment. Ideology becomes invisible because it is everywhere and nowhere at once.

In the context of existing research on Disney and transnational cultural circulation, these findings offer a reframing of how cultural acceptance should be understood. Prior studies have often emphasized localization, hybridity, or negotiation as key mechanisms through which global brands adapt to local contexts. The present analysis suggests that, at least in the case of Tokyo Disneyland, structural naturalization may be more effective than representational adaptation. American symbols do not need to be re-coded as Japanese; they need only be embedded within a system that manages affect, rhythm, and coherence. This shifts the analytical focus from cultural difference to semiotic governance.

The implications of this finding extend beyond Disney studies. They suggest that global cultural power operates most efficiently when it minimizes the visibility of its own origins. By presenting American cultural symbols as morally generic and emotionally universal, Tokyo Disneyland avoids triggering nationalist resistance or cultural defensiveness. Power is exercised not through assertion, but through normalization. This insight contributes to broader debates on soft power by emphasizing the role of semiotic structure and affective design, rather than persuasion or ideological messaging alone.

At the same time, the findings complicate assumptions about audience passivity. While the system strongly guides interpretation, the study does not claim that visitors are unaware of the American origins of the symbols. Rather, it suggests that awareness does not necessarily translate into resistance. The symbolic environment does not ask visitors to *believe* in America; it asks them to *feel comfortable* within a world structured by American myths. Comfort, repetition, and pleasure thus emerge as central mechanisms of ideological neutralization.

Despite these insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study focuses on designed semiotic structures and does not empirically investigate visitor interpretations through interviews or ethnographic methods. As such, it cannot account for possible moments of irony, detachment, or critical reflection among visitors. Second, the analysis prioritizes symbolic and affective mechanisms over institutional dynamics. While the findings demonstrate how ideology is neutralized at the level of experience, they do not fully address how corporate governance, labor practices, or economic relations contribute to this process. Third, the study treats Tokyo Disneyland as a relatively stable system and does not consider how crises, controversies, or sociopolitical shifts might disrupt naturalization mechanisms over time.

Another limitation concerns cultural specificity. While the findings suggest that structural naturalization is effective in Japan, it remains an open question whether the same mechanisms would function similarly in contexts with different historical relationships to American culture. Comparative research across multiple Disney parks could help clarify the extent to which ideological neutralization depends on local cultural dispositions versus universal semiotic strategies.

In conclusion, the discussion of the third research problem demonstrates that the success of American cultural symbols in Tokyo Disneyland lies not in their adaptation to Japanese culture, but in their structural naturalization as ideologically neutral experiences. Through decontextualization, affective framing, ritualization, and multimodal coherence, American symbols are transformed into emotionally reassuring cultural abstractions. This process allows American culture to circulate transnationally without appearing as cultural domination, reinforcing the central argument of this study: that culture operates most powerfully as a structural system of signs, capable of managing meaning and ideology through design rather than discourse.

Across the three themes, the findings converge on a central insight: Tokyo Disneyland functions as a closed semiotic system in which American cultural symbols are selected, structured, and naturalized through systemic relations rather than representational adaptation. The park's success in Japan lies not in cultural hybridity, but in structural semiotic discipline—the careful orchestration of myths, space, and multimodality to produce ideological smoothness.

These findings directly address the study's research aims by demonstrating (1) the dominant American myths at work, (2) the structural grammar organizing those myths, and (3) the mechanisms through which this grammar renders American culture pleasurable and non-threatening in a Japanese context.

This study advances a distinctive theoretical and methodological contribution by reconceptualizing culture in transnational entertainment spaces as a structural semiotic system rather than a collection of localized representations. Theoretically, it integrates Barthesian myth analysis with Lotman's semiosphere to demonstrate how

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cultural meaning and ideological power operate through relational organization, boundary management, and symbolic hierarchy, offering a structural alternative to dominant globalization frameworks centered on hybridity or cultural adaptation. By empirically modeling Tokyo Disneyland as a coherent semiotic grammar, the study extends applied linguistic and cultural-semiotic inquiry beyond text-based analysis toward spatially embedded, multimodal cultural systems. Methodologically, it introduces a replicable, system-oriented semiotic procedure that combines spatial mapping, multimodal analysis, and mythic interpretation to capture how meaning is stabilized at the level of structure rather than content. This approach provides researchers with an analytical toolkit for examining global cultural environments—such as theme parks, museums, and branded urban spaces—as regulated semiotic formations, thereby contributing a transferable framework for future interdisciplinary research on culture, power, and meaning-making in globalized contexts.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how American cultural symbols operate within Tokyo Disneyland Japan by conceptualizing culture as a structural semiotic system. The findings demonstrate that the symbolic presence of America in Tokyo Disneyland cannot be adequately explained through representational analysis, localization strategies, or surface-level thematic readings. Instead, the park functions as a highly regulated semiotic formation in which meaning is produced through the systematic organization of myths, spatial relations, and multimodal coherence. The importance of these findings lies in showing that cultural power in global entertainment spaces operates less through explicit ideological messaging than through structural orchestration that renders meaning emotionally intuitive and ideologically unobtrusive.

Three key conclusions emerge from this study. First, Tokyo Disneyland mobilizes a selective repertoire of American cultural myths—civic nostalgia, frontier morality, technological optimism, and moralized fantasy—that are abstracted from historical conflict and stabilized as universal values. These myths function as second-order sign systems that depoliticize American culture and transform it into a morally neutral and affectively appealing imaginary. Second, these symbols derive their meaning from their relational positioning within a coherent semiotic structure, characterized by center-periphery organization, binary oppositions, and spatial sequencing. Meaning is thus generated at the level of system rather than individual sign, confirming that culture in this context operates as a structured grammar of signs. Third, the study demonstrates that American symbols are naturalized in Japan not primarily through localization or hybridization, but through structural and affective mechanisms—decontextualization, ritualization, and multimodal alignment—that neutralize foreignness and minimize interpretive friction.

Taken together, these conclusions contribute to a broader rethinking of cultural globalization and soft power. Rather than viewing transnational cultural circulation as a process of negotiation between global and local identities, this study highlights the role of semiotic structure in mediating cultural meaning. Tokyo Disneyland illustrates how a global cultural system can maintain symbolic consistency across national contexts by abstracting cultural content into emotionally reassuring and structurally coherent forms. In this sense, the park exemplifies how culture functions most effectively as a system when its ideological dimensions are rendered invisible through design, repetition, and pleasure.

Suggestion

Despite these contributions, the study also points toward several avenues for further research. Future studies could adopt comparative designs across different Disney parks to examine the extent to which structural semiotic patterns are globally standardized or context-sensitive. Ethnographic or interview-based research could complement the present analysis by exploring how visitors interpret, negotiate, or potentially resist the symbolic system identified here. Additionally, longitudinal research could investigate how shifts in global politics, corporate strategy, or cultural sensibilities reshape the semiotic structures of themed environments over time. Extending the proposed structural semiotic framework to other global cultural sites—such as museums, heritage parks, or branded urban districts—would further test its analytical robustness and interdisciplinary relevance.

In conclusion, by demonstrating that American cultural symbols in Tokyo Disneyland operate as part of a regulated semiotic system rather than as isolated representations, this study underscores the analytical value of approaching culture structurally. Such a perspective enables scholars in applied linguistics and cultural studies to better understand how meaning, ideology, and affect are organized and circulated in contemporary global cultural spaces.

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