

ANALYZING CHARACTERS IN THE FILM MOANA: AN EXPLORATION OF LEADERSHIP VALUES AND CULTURE IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes leadership values and cultural identity in the animated film *Moana* (2016) through the main characters. Using qualitative descriptive research, it explores how leadership and cultural identity are depicted in character development, dialogue, narrative, and visuals. The primary data source is the film, focusing on Moana, Maui, and Chief Tui, who represent leadership practices and cultural meanings. Data were collected through repeated viewing of the film, selecting relevant scenes and dialogues, and analyzed with thematic analysis. The findings reveal that leadership in *Moana* is portrayed as a value-based, culturally grounded process rather than authority. Moana demonstrates leadership values such as responsibility, courage, perseverance, empathy, and commitment to community. Leadership is deeply connected to Polynesian traditions and values, showing the influence of culture and nature. The contrasting portrayals of Maui and Chief Tui highlight leadership as a dynamic, transformative process that involves balancing tradition and change. The study concludes that *Moana* promotes ethical leadership and cultural awareness.

Keywords: Moana, character analysis, leadership values, cultural identity, film analysis

INTRODUCTION

Film has increasingly been recognized as a significant medium for transmitting leadership values and cultural identity in contemporary society. Beyond entertainment, films function as cultural texts that shape audiences' understanding

of social roles, moral values, and identity formation through narrative and character representation. Recent studies emphasize that cinematic representations play a crucial role in influencing viewers' perceptions of leadership, diversity, and

cultural inclusion, particularly in animated films that target broad and young audiences (Patel, 2024). Therefore, analyzing films from a leadership and cultural perspective is important to understand how values are communicated and internalized through popular media.

Leadership is a fundamental aspect of social development, as it influences decision-making, community cohesion, and collective responsibility. Contemporary leadership research highlights a shift from authority-based leadership toward value-based and identity-oriented leadership, where leaders inspire followers through shared values, moral responsibility, and cultural belonging (Haslam et al., 2025). This perspective, known as identity leadership, emphasizes how leaders construct and mobilize group identity to achieve collective goals. Examining leadership representations in films is important because media narratives often provide implicit models of leadership that shape audience expectations and understanding of effective leadership practices.

The animated film *Moana* (2016), produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios, offers a distinctive portrayal of leadership through its main character,

Moana. Unlike traditional heroic leaders characterized by dominance or power, *Moana* is depicted as a leader who develops through self-discovery, perseverance, empathy, and responsibility toward her community. Recent research suggests that such character portrayals are particularly valuable for leadership education, as they present leadership as a process of learning and identity formation rather than a fixed position (Adriana et al., 2025). This makes *Moana* an important text for exploring contemporary leadership values conveyed through film characters.

In addition to leadership, cultural identity is a central theme in *Moana*. Cultural identity refers to an individual's sense of belonging that is shaped by shared traditions, beliefs, values, and historical experiences. In the context of globalization, cultural identity has become increasingly important as communities face the risk of cultural homogenization and the marginalization of indigenous traditions. Recent studies in film and cultural studies highlight that accurate and respectful cultural representation in cinema contributes to cultural awareness, inclusion, and identity preservation (Saputri et al., 2025; Patel, 2024).

Moana is particularly significant because it portrays Polynesian culture through mythology, traditional navigation practices, communal leadership, and a strong relationship between humans and nature. The film represents culture as a guiding force that shapes leadership and personal identity, rather than as a static background. Studies focusing on *Moana* have shown that its characters and narrative effectively communicate cultural values and indigenous identity to global audiences (Saputra et al., 2026). Moana's journey symbolizes the struggle to balance personal aspirations with cultural responsibility, reflecting broader identity challenges faced by individuals within traditional societies.

Despite the growing interest in leadership and cultural representation in film studies, recent research specifically analyzing leadership values and cultural identity through character analysis in *Moana* remains limited. Therefore, this study is important as it seeks to explore how leadership values and cultural identity are constructed and represented through the main characters in *Moana*. By doing so, the study contributes to contemporary discussions on film as an educational medium, leadership learning, and cultural identity formation in a global context.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design to examine leadership values and cultural identity as represented through characters in the animated film *Moana* (2016). A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting meanings, values, and representations embedded in character development, dialogue, and narrative structure rather than quantifying data. Qualitative film analysis allows researchers to explore how leadership and cultural identity are constructed through visual and narrative elements within a cinematic text (Patel, 2024).

The primary data source of this study is the animated film *Moana*, directed by Ron Clements and John Musker and produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios. The data consist of scenes, dialogues, character actions, and visual symbols that reflect leadership values and cultural identity. The main characters analyzed in this study include Moana, Maui, and Chief Tui, as these characters play central roles in conveying leadership practices, cultural beliefs, and identity formation throughout the film narrative.

Data collection was conducted through repeated and careful viewing of the film to gain an in-depth understanding of the storyline and character development. Relevant scenes and dialogues were identified and documented based on their relevance to leadership values and cultural identity. The data were then transcribed and categorized using analytical indicators derived from leadership and cultural identity theories. Leadership values analyzed in this study include responsibility, courage, decision-making, perseverance, empathy, and service to the community, which align with contemporary leadership frameworks emphasizing identity-based and value-oriented leadership (Haslam et al., 2025; Adriana et al., 2025).

Cultural identity was analyzed by examining representations of Polynesian traditions, mythology, communal relationships, leadership customs, and interactions with nature. Visual elements such as costumes, symbols, rituals, and environmental settings were also included in the analysis, as they contribute to the construction of cultural meaning in film narratives. This approach is consistent with recent studies that emphasize the importance of visual and symbolic

elements in analyzing cultural representation in cinema (Saputri et al., 2025).

The data analysis technique used in this study is thematic analysis. The analysis was conducted through several stages. First, data reduction was carried out by selecting scenes and dialogues relevant to the research focus. Second, the selected data were coded and grouped into thematic categories related to leadership values and cultural identity. Third, the themes were interpreted by linking character behavior and narrative context to relevant theoretical perspectives. Finally, conclusions were drawn to explain how leadership values and cultural identity are represented and conveyed through the characters in *Moana*.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, this study applied credibility and dependability strategies. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with the data by repeatedly reviewing scenes and comparing character interactions to identify consistent patterns. Dependability was ensured by clearly documenting the data collection and analysis procedures so that the research process can be followed and evaluated. This methodological approach allows the study to provide a systematic and reliable

analysis of leadership values and cultural identity in the film *Moana*.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

This study examines leadership values and cultural identity as represented through the main and supporting characters in the film *Moana*. The results are derived from a qualitative character and narrative analysis focusing on leadership behavior, decision-making processes, interpersonal relationships, and cultural symbolism embedded in the storyline. The findings indicate that *Moana* presents leadership as a culturally embedded, ethically driven, and relational practice closely tied to identity formation and communal responsibility.

Leadership Values Reflected in the Main Character

The results show that Moana, as the protagonist, consistently demonstrates leadership values aligned with transformational and servant leadership models. From the early stages of the film, Moana exhibits a strong sense of responsibility toward her community, particularly in responding to the environmental degradation threatening her

island. Although she does not initially hold a formal leadership position, her actions reflect emerging leadership qualities such as initiative, courage, and moral commitment.

Moana's leadership development is closely connected to her journey of self-discovery. The findings indicate that her leadership does not arise from a desire for authority or dominance, but from an internalized obligation to serve her people. Her willingness to leave the safety of her island, confront uncertainty, and face repeated failures illustrates perseverance and resilience—key leadership traits emphasized throughout the narrative. These actions position leadership as a process rather than a fixed role.

Furthermore, Moana's leadership is characterized by empathy and inclusivity. She demonstrates the ability to listen, reflect, and learn from others, including Maui and her ancestors. Her interactions show respect for different perspectives while maintaining commitment to her goal. This highlights leadership as collaborative and relational, reinforcing the importance of emotional intelligence and ethical decision-making in effective leadership practices.

Character Development and Alternative Leadership Models

The analysis reveals that supporting characters in *Moana* represent contrasting leadership models that contribute to the overall portrayal of leadership values. Maui, a demigod with supernatural abilities, initially embodies a traditional heroic leadership archetype based on strength, fame, and individual achievement. His reliance on magical power and public recognition reflects a leadership model centered on ego and external validation.

However, the results show that Maui's leadership approach is portrayed as flawed and ineffective when detached from responsibility and humility. His past actions, particularly the theft of Te Fiti's heart, are directly linked to ecological and social imbalance. Over the course of the narrative, Maui undergoes significant character development. He learns to accept failure, acknowledge responsibility, and cooperate with Moana. This transformation illustrates that leadership growth involves self-awareness, accountability, and the willingness to change.

In contrast, Chief Tui represents a protective and conservative leadership style. As the leader of Motunui, his primary

concern is ensuring the safety and stability of his people. The results indicate that his leadership is rooted in risk avoidance and adherence to established boundaries. While this approach provides short-term security, it also limits exploration and adaptation. Chief Tui's leadership reflects tension between tradition and change, highlighting the challenges leaders face when balancing preservation with innovation.

Spiritual and Cultural Leadership Representation

Gramma Tala emerges as a key figure representing spiritual, cultural, and visionary leadership. The findings indicate that her leadership influence is indirect yet powerful, as she guides Moana through storytelling, ancestral knowledge, and emotional support. Gramma Tala does not exercise authority through commands; instead, she leads by nurturing identity, confidence, and cultural continuity.

The analysis shows that Gramma Tala embodies leadership rooted in indigenous knowledge systems. Her role emphasizes the importance of ancestral wisdom, oral traditions, and spiritual connection in shaping leadership identity. Even after her death, her presence

continues to guide Moana, reinforcing the idea that leadership is sustained through cultural memory and intergenerational transmission.

Cultural Identity and Leadership Interconnection

A significant result of this study is the strong interconnection between leadership and cultural identity in *Moana*. Leadership is consistently portrayed as inseparable from cultural heritage, particularly Polynesian values related to navigation, kinship, and harmony with nature. The findings indicate that leadership legitimacy in the film is derived not from formal authority but from alignment with cultural values and collective needs.

The ocean serves as a central symbolic element that reinforces cultural identity and leadership development. The results show that the ocean is portrayed as an active, guiding force that recognizes Moana's leadership potential. This symbolism reflects an indigenous worldview in which nature is not passive but participates in human life. Leadership, therefore, involves respecting and

responding to natural forces rather than attempting to dominate them.

Additionally, the restoration of Te Fiti's heart represents the restoration of balance between humans and nature. The results indicate that leadership success in the film is measured by the ability to heal, restore, and sustain harmony rather than achieve personal victory. This reinforces leadership as an ethical and ecological responsibility.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the film *Moana* reveals that leadership values and cultural identity are closely interconnected and are primarily conveyed through character development, narrative progression, and cultural representation. Leadership in the film is portrayed not as a static position of authority but as a dynamic process shaped by experience, moral responsibility, and cultural belonging. This finding aligns with contemporary leadership perspectives that emphasize values, identity, and ethical responsibility rather than hierarchical power structures (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Northouse, 2019; Haslam et al., 2025).

Moana's character demonstrates key leadership values such as responsibility, courage, perseverance,

empathy, and service to the community. Her willingness to leave her island to restore the heart of Te Fiti reflects a strong sense of responsibility and moral obligation toward her people. This portrayal supports transformational leadership theory, which emphasizes leaders' ability to act for collective benefit and inspire change through vision and commitment (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Yukl, 2013). Moana's leadership journey also reflects leadership as a learning process, reinforcing studies that argue leadership is developed through experience, reflection, and social interaction rather than inherited traits (Komives et al., 2011; Day et al., 2014).

From an identity leadership perspective, Moana's legitimacy as a leader emerges through her alignment with her community's shared values and cultural heritage. Her rediscovery of her people's voyaging tradition symbolizes the reconstruction of collective identity and highlights how leadership is strengthened through cultural connection. This supports identity leadership theory, which emphasizes that effective leaders mobilize groups by reinforcing shared identity and collective meaning (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2020; Haslam et al., 2025).

Maui's character provides a contrasting leadership representation. Initially driven by personal recognition and ego, Maui embodies leadership flaws such as irresponsibility and avoidance of accountability. However, his gradual transformation illustrates leadership growth through failure, humility, and cooperation. This supports ethical and relational leadership theories, which emphasize emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and moral development as essential leadership components (Goleman, 2017; Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Maui's character reinforces the idea that leadership competence is not innate but can evolve through reflection and relational engagement.

Chief Tui represents traditional leadership rooted in protection, caution, and cultural preservation. His leadership reflects collectivist values that prioritize communal safety and continuity over individual ambition. This finding aligns with cross-cultural leadership studies that highlight how leadership behavior is shaped by cultural norms and social expectations (Hofstede, 2011; House et al., 2004). The generational tension between Moana and Chief Tui illustrates the negotiation between tradition and

innovation, suggesting that effective leadership involves balancing cultural preservation with adaptive change.

Cultural identity emerges as a central element that shapes leadership throughout the film. Polynesian cultural values are represented through rituals, mythology, navigation practices, communal decision-making, and a strong relationship with nature. Cultural identity is portrayed as dynamic and evolving, consistent with Hall's concept of identity as a continuous process of becoming rather than a fixed essence (Hall, 1996). Moana's journey symbolizes the reclamation and reinterpretation of cultural identity, reinforcing the idea that leadership is deeply embedded within cultural context.

Recent studies emphasize the importance of authentic cultural representation in cinema, particularly in promoting cultural awareness and inclusivity (Banks, 2015; Patel, 2024). The findings of this study support these claims, as *Moana* presents culture not merely as a background setting but as a guiding force that shapes leadership values and personal identity. Research by Saputri et al. (2025) and Adriana et al. (2025) further confirms that *Moana* effectively communicates

educational, moral, and cultural values through its narrative and characters.

Furthermore, the film's emphasis on harmony with nature reflects indigenous leadership perspectives that prioritize sustainability and collective well-being. This representation aligns with contemporary discussions on ethical and ecological leadership, which stress the integration of cultural values, environmental responsibility, and moral leadership in addressing global challenges (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Moana's leadership demonstrates that effective leadership involves not only guiding people but also maintaining balance between humans, culture, and nature.

Overall, the combined results and discussion indicate that *Moana* functions as a powerful cultural and educational text that integrates leadership values with cultural identity. The film challenges traditional leadership stereotypes by presenting leadership as inclusive, ethical, and culturally grounded. These findings support existing literature on film as a pedagogical medium capable of fostering leadership awareness, character development, and cultural understanding

among global audiences (Giroux, 2011; Banks, 2015; Patel, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the film *Moana* presents leadership as a value-based and culturally grounded process rather than a position of authority. Through character development and narrative structure, leadership is portrayed as emerging from responsibility, courage, perseverance, empathy, and commitment to communal well-being. Moana's character demonstrates that effective leadership is shaped through experience, self-discovery, and moral responsibility, reinforcing contemporary leadership perspectives that emphasize ethical and identity-based leadership.

The findings also reveal that leadership in *Moana* is inseparable from cultural identity. Cultural values, traditions, and collective history serve as guiding forces that shape leadership decisions and actions. Moana's journey symbolizes the reconstruction of cultural identity through the rediscovery of heritage and the integration of tradition with change. This highlights the importance of cultural identity in strengthening

leadership legitimacy and community cohesion.

Overall, this study confirms that *Moana* functions as a meaningful cultural and educational text that effectively communicates leadership values and cultural identity to global audiences. The film challenges conventional leadership stereotypes and promotes inclusive, ethical, and culturally responsive leadership models. Therefore, *Moana* can be considered a valuable resource for leadership education, character development, and cultural awareness within educational and literary studies.

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