

EMPOWERED FEMININITY: THE EVOLUTION OF FEMALE STRENGTH IN DISNEY'S *MOANA*

Galuh Citra Julia Pramesty^{1*} & Nurhidayat²

^{1,2}Department of English Education, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta

Corresponding Author: Galuh Citra Julia Pramesty, E-mail: a320210244@student.ums.ac.id

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 01-06-2025 Revised: 09-09-2025 Accepted: 10-10-2025 Published: 15-10-2025 Volume: 9 Issue: 3 DOI: https://doi.org/10.33019/lire.v9i3.461	This research examines how the animated film <i>Moana</i> (2016) by Disney illustrates the concept of empowered femininity through a liberal feminist lens, particularly drawing on Betty Friedan's theoretical framework. The study analyzes how Moana, as the central character, challenges conventional portrayals of women in media by embodying traits such as independence, leadership, and emotional strength. Using qualitative content analysis, the research identifies Moana's narrative as a departure from traditional Disney princess tropes, highlighting her journey as one driven by self-determination rather than romantic or male-driven motives. Moana stands out as a proactive and capable figure who redefines what it means to be a female hero in popular culture. Her role as a decision-maker and voyager showcases a shift in gender representations, aligning with liberal feminist ideals that emphasize equal opportunity, personal agency, and the rejection of limiting gender roles. The study also considers how supporting characters and the storyline reinforce these themes, painting a fuller picture of feminine empowerment. Ultimately, the film serves as an example of evolving gender narratives in children's media, presenting a progressive image of femininity that aligns with the goals of liberal feminism.
KEYWORDS	
<i>Moana, liberal feminism, femininity, Disney</i>	

1. INTRODUCTION

Film is a visual communication medium that uses moving images and sound to convey stories, information, or emotions to its audience. Typically produced in an audiovisual format, movies can combine elements of the arts such as acting, cinematography, music, and production design to create an engaging experience. As a form of popular entertainment, movies are often used to entertain, educate, or convey social messages to a wide audience (Viegas, 2023). Disney animated films have long played a central role in shaping cultural perceptions of gender roles and ideals of femininity. From early portrayals of passive princesses awaiting rescue, Disney has gradually shifted toward more independent heroines who challenge traditional gender norms. This evolution reflects broader social movements toward gender equality and the growing demand for female characters who embody empowerment and agency in popular media.

Within this trajectory, *Moana* (2016) stands out as a significant milestone in the representation of empowered femininity. Unlike earlier Disney princesses such as Snow White, Cinderella, or Aurora, Moana is not defined by romance or dependency on male characters. Instead, she emerges as a leader of her people, guided by courage, resilience, and determination.



Her character reflects a more progressive image of female power, one that aligns with modern feminist ideals and resonates with global audiences seeking authentic representations of women.

Liberal feminism provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding this transformation. Emphasizing equality, independence, and freedom of choice, liberal feminism argues that women should have access to the same opportunities as men in education, leadership, and social participation (Pandeewari & Hariharasudan, 2022). In line with Betty Friedan's (1963) ideas, Moana's story illustrates how women can break free from restrictive traditions while maintaining their identity as women. Through her leadership and self-discovery, Moana embodies the values of liberal feminism by rejecting stereotypes and redefining what it means to be a heroine.

The shift represented in *Moana* also mirrors wider cultural and social transformations. At a time when gender equality is a global concern, Disney's portrayal of Moana symbolizes a movement toward inclusivity and recognition of diverse forms of female strength. Her narrative not only emphasizes independence and bravery but also celebrates cultural identity by grounding her story in Polynesian traditions, offering audiences a more inclusive and representative vision of femininity.

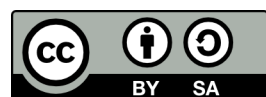
Based on this context, the present study seeks to analyze the representation of femininity in Moana's character, identify the moral values embedded in her portrayal, and compare her representation of female power with that of earlier Disney heroines. By situating Moana within the framework of liberal feminism, this research highlights how empowered femininity is constructed in the film and explores its broader implications for understanding changing narratives of women in popular culture.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theory of Liberal Feminism

Liberal feminism provides the theoretical foundation for analyzing empowered femininity in *Moana*. Emerging as one of the most influential strands of feminist thought, liberal feminism emphasizes gender equality within the existing social framework through legal, political, and cultural reform (Mohajan, 2022). Liberal feminism is a branch of feminism that focuses on gender equality through legal, political, and social reform within the existing framework of society. It emphasizes individual rights, personal freedom, and equal access to opportunities in various spheres of life, including education, employment, and family life. Femininity is often associated with characteristics such as care, emotional sensitivity, and compromise. The media portrays fragmented images of femininity, including career-focused singles, unhappy housewives, and materialistic consumers (Москаленко & Пугач, 2020).

Liberal feminism also emphasizes that gender differences should not be a barrier for women to obtain basic rights, freedom, and recognition of their abilities (Panambunan et al., 2022). Although called liberal, liberal feminism itself remains opposed to the concept of complete equality between men and women (Ulva et al., 2025). Betty Friedan's seminal work *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) further argues that women's subordination is reinforced by cultural and institutional barriers that restrict their participation in the public sphere (Warianik, 2018). By advocating for women's right to pursue self-actualization beyond domestic roles, liberal feminism provides a useful lens for examining how Moana challenges traditional gender expectations.



Building on this foundation, liberal feminism also rejects restrictive gender stereotypes, particularly the assumption that women are naturally suited only for domesticity (Winarti, 2023). Instead, it stresses the importance of freedom of choice, where both men and women are entitled to shape their identities and roles without limitation. In the context of media analysis, this perspective allows scholars to explore how female characters disrupt cultural narratives that confine women to passive or secondary positions. For this reason, Moana's journey of leadership and independence reflects the values of liberal feminism, particularly in demonstrating that female power can emerge through resilience, autonomy, and agency.

2.2 Prior Studies on Disney Princesses and Feminist Readings

Prior studies on Disney princesses have explored how these characters reflect evolving feminist ideals. Some research highlights that modern portrayals, such as Merida in *Brave*, challenge traditional gender norms by embodying independence and adventurousness, though they still face contradictions between empowerment and traditional expectations (Furo et al., 2016). Similarly, scholars have examined how recent films like *Tangled*, *Brave*, and *Frozen* balance post-feminist narratives of autonomy with lingering attachments to romantic resolutions (Wilde, 2014). These works suggest that while Disney has adapted to feminist critiques, the company continues to rely on formulas that reinforce traditional cultural values.

Other research provides broader analyses of feminist progress and limitations in Disney princess films. Studies emphasize that while female characters have gradually shifted from passive figures awaiting rescue to more independent and outspoken heroines, underlying stereotypes and patriarchal structures persist (Yu, 2024). Thematic examinations of Disney's 20th and 21st-century films show how feminism has influenced portrayals of princesses, promoting gender equality while also raising concerns about body image and superficial empowerment (Yi, 2023). Overall, these studies demonstrate that Disney princesses remain powerful cultural symbols at the intersection of feminist progress and commercial storytelling.

Recent studies highlight *Moana* as a turning point in this evolution. Unlike her predecessors, Moana's narrative is not defined by romantic interest but by her responsibilities as a leader and her determination to save her community (Hollowell, 2020). Scholars argue that this represents a broader cultural shift toward empowered femininity in media, where female characters embody leadership, independence, and cultural representation (Streiff & Dundes, 2017). By situating Moana within this trajectory, the present research underscores how liberal feminism helps explain the ideological and cultural significance of her character.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative-descriptive content analysis with a feminist approach to examine the representation of empowered femininity in Disney's *Moana* (2016). The concept of "empowered femininity" in this study is defined as the depiction of female strength that integrates independence, leadership, agency, and resilience, while simultaneously challenging traditional gender stereotypes. These dimensions are analyzed in relation to Moana's actions, decisions, and narrative development within the film.

The primary data consists of the *Moana* film itself, including transcripts of key dialogues, descriptions of significant scenes, and visual framing that highlight moments of femininity and



female power. Secondary data include scholarly articles, books, and critical essays on feminism, Disney princess representations, and prior studies of female empowerment in animated films.

Data collection follows three steps. First, the film is viewed repeatedly to ensure a comprehensive understanding of its narrative and visual elements. Second, crucial scenes are documented through transcripts and screenshots, focusing on instances where Moana demonstrates traits associated with empowered femininity. Third, relevant academic sources are consulted to provide theoretical support and comparative insights.

For systematic analysis, coding categories are established based on liberal feminist principles. These categories include: (1) Independence, instances where Moana makes decisions and takes action without reliance on male validation; (2) Leadership, scenes that emphasize her responsibility and role as the future leader of her people; (3) Toughness and Courage, moments that highlight her resilience, bravery, and determination when facing challenges; and (4) Relationships with Tradition, dialogues or visuals that illustrate her negotiation with cultural expectations, showing both respect for heritage and the courage to challenge restrictive norms. Each selected scene is examined in terms of narrative function, character development, and visual framing to reveal how these traits are constructed.

For example, when Moana chooses to sail beyond the reef despite her father's prohibition, the scene illustrates independence as she asserts her own decision; during her journey to restore the heart of the ocean, her role as a navigator and problem-solver reflects leadership; her persistence in confronting dangerous obstacles such as storms and sea creatures demonstrates toughness and courage; and finally, her decision to embrace her ancestors' legacy as voyagers while redefining her role as chief shows her complex relationship with tradition, balancing respect for cultural heritage with the need to break limiting boundaries. These coded examples ensure that the analysis remains systematic and directly tied to the framework of liberal feminism.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Femininity Analyze by Betty Friedan's Liberal Feminism Theory

"Moana" is an animated film produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios released on November 23, 2016 with a duration of 1 hour 47 minutes. This movie tells the story of a girl who struggles to save her people by using her female power. This research uses Betty Friedan's Liberal Feminism Theory by analyzing four categories, namely independence, leadership, toughness and courage, and relationships with tradition in each scene in this film.

4.1.1 Femininity Through Independence



Figure 1. Femininity Through Independence (Scene 18:57)



Moana's independence is most clearly revealed in moments where she resists the roles imposed on her and insists on defining her own identity. In an early scene, she struggles between fulfilling her father's expectations as heir to the tribal leadership and following her passion for the ocean (Scene 18:57). Her refusal to be reduced to "the chief's daughter" reflects what Betty Friedan described as "*the problem that has no name*"—the sense of emptiness women experience when their roles are entirely predetermined by others (Lahinda et al., 2023). By choosing to explore the sea, Moana rejects a static life dictated by patriarchal structures and embraces a journey of self-actualization. This act of independence aligns with liberal feminism, which emphasizes women's right to pursue education, careers, and life paths that are not restricted by tradition.

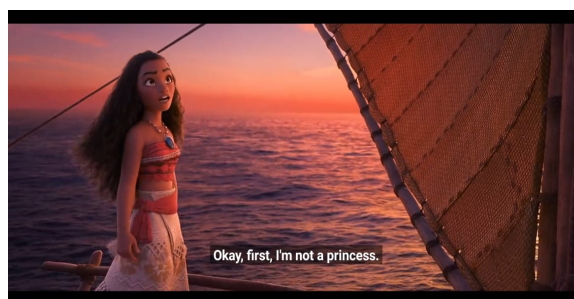


Figure 2. Moana's awareness of the social stereotypes (Scene 52:08 – 52:12)

A second significant moment occurs in her dialogue with Maui: "*Okay, first, I'm not a princess. I'm the daughter of the chief*" (Scene 52:08–52:12). This exchange highlights Moana's awareness of how female leaders are often reduced to symbolic "princess" figures. She resists this stereotype and insists on being recognized for her responsibility and capability, not for an ornamental title. According to Friedan, women must detach from identities shaped by patriarchal expectations and pursue authentic selfhood (Ashraf, 2025). In rejecting the passive roles assigned to her, Moana actively asserts her agency, positioning herself as a capable leader rather than a decorative figure.

Moana's independence also gains meaning in contrast to Maui. While Maui initially embodies arrogance and dismisses Moana as unqualified, her determination to steer the voyage and challenge his dominance redefines the power dynamic between them. Rather than being rescued, she compels Maui to acknowledge her worth, thereby inverting earlier Disney patterns where male heroes validated female characters. Compared to Ariel (*The Little Mermaid*) or Belle (*Beauty and the Beast*), whose agency was still tied to romance, Moana demonstrates a more radical independence by rejecting love as the center of her narrative. Her self-discovery is not about pleasing others but about leading her people and finding meaning on her own terms.

This independence is also rooted in Moana's Polynesian identity. Unlike Western feminist narratives that often center on individual liberation, Moana's journey reflects an interdependence between selfhood and community, where independence is exercised not in isolation but in relation to cultural responsibility. Her decision to voyage beyond the reef is both a personal act of defiance and a communal duty to restore balance for her people. This nuance reflects how feminism in non-



Western contexts integrates collective identity, heritage, and leadership into the pursuit of empowerment (Arora et al., 2024).

Through these key scenes, Moana exemplifies liberal feminism by demonstrating that independence does not mean abandoning femininity but redefining it. She embodies a modern vision of female power that challenges stereotypes, resists imposed roles, and balances individual agency with cultural responsibility. This independence marks a significant departure from earlier Disney heroines, positioning Moana as a model of empowered femininity in contemporary animated cinema.

4.1.2 Femininity Through Leadership

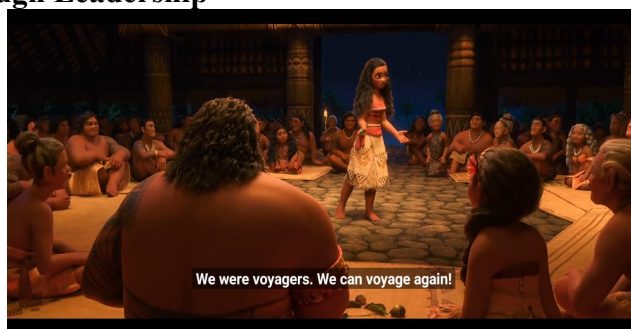


Figure 3. Moana has learned of her origins through the help of her grandmother (Scene 28:20)

Moana's leadership emerges not as an inherited title but as a dynamic process shaped by cultural responsibility and relational empowerment. A pivotal scene occurs when Grandmother Tala reveals the ancestral history of Motunui as voyagers (Scene 28:20). The framing visually contrasts Moana's awe with the darkness of her father's prohibitions, emphasizing her shift from passive heir to active cultural leader. Encouraged by Tala, Moana does not simply assume her father's authority but reclaims a suppressed tradition, inviting her people to revive their identity as sailors. In Betty Friedan's view, this is evidence that women can not only participate but also lead social and cultural transformation (Meladze, 2025). Moana's leadership is not about replacing men in power but redefining what leadership entails vision, empathy, and community connection values rooted in Polynesian traditions of collective survival rather than Western models of individual dominance.

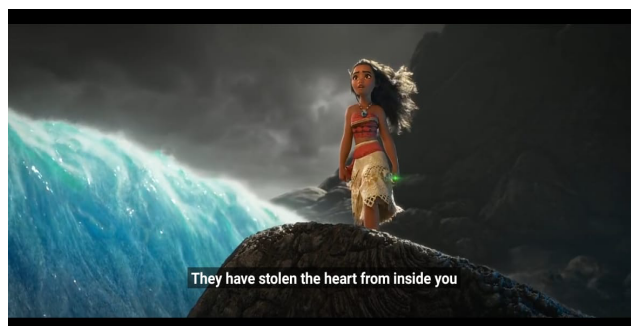


Figure 4. Moana demonstrates a form of leadership based on empathy and deep understanding when dealing with Te Kā (01:29:12 – 01:29:38)



The culmination of Moana's leadership is seen in her encounter with Te Fiti (disguised as Te Kā) at the climax (01:29:12–01:29:38). Instead of defeating her through violence, Moana approaches with empathy: *"They have stolen the heart from inside you. But this does not define you. This is not who you are."* The camera frames her walking steadily toward the monstrous figure while the ocean parts, visually underscoring her as a mediator chosen by both her people and nature. In Betty Friedan's perspective, women deserve recognition in public leadership roles, especially when they bring alternative, humanistic approaches to power (Dewi, 2024). Moana's strategy of restoration rather than domination contrasts sharply with Maui, who initially attempts to solve conflict through force and bravado. Unlike earlier Disney heroines such as Ariel or Belle, who were primarily validated through romance, or even Mulan, who adopts masculine-coded war strategies, Moana models a distinctly feminine leadership style rooted in empathy and healing.

Supporting characters are crucial in framing this relational leadership. Grandmother Tala functions as a mentor who legitimizes Moana's spiritual authority, while the ocean itself acts as a symbolic ally, literally lifting Moana when she falters and guiding her toward her destiny. These figures reinforce the notion that Moana's empowerment is not achieved in isolation but through dialogue with her cultural environment and ancestral legacy. The symbolism of the ocean and the Heart of Te Fiti reflects a feminine cosmology: the sea as nurturing yet powerful, the heart as life-giving and restorative. Both metaphors strengthen the idea that Moana's authority is inseparable from her Polynesian heritage, where leadership emphasizes harmony between people, nature, and tradition (Aydın, 2018).

Thus, Moana demonstrates that women's leadership is neither weak nor derivative but transformative. By rejecting domination and embodying empathy, cultural restoration, and spiritual courage, she redefines femininity in leadership. This resonates with liberal feminist ideals of equal access to the public sphere while also expanding them through a non-Western lens, where leadership is relational, communal, and restorative.

4.1.3 Femininity Through Resilience and Courage



Figure 5. Moana comes face-to-face with Maui (Scene 36:33 – 37:30)

Moana's resilience and courage are most clearly illustrated in her confrontation with Maui, the demigod, where she asserts her mission despite his belittling her as *"just a little girl"* (Scene 36:33–37:30). Visually, the scene frames Moana as physically smaller and overshadowed by Maui's towering presence, reinforcing the imbalance of power. Yet, her determined tone, *"I am Moana of Motunui. You will board my boat, sail across the sea, and restore the heart of Te Fiti"* defies that imbalance and challenges patriarchal stereotypes. In the context of liberal feminism,



this moment reflects resistance to social expectations that women should remain passive or deferential. Betty Friedan highlights how society often forces women into safe and weak roles (RajKumari, 2022), but Moana demonstrates that resilience and courage are not exclusively masculine traits. By refusing to be intimidated by Maui's mockery, she embodies female agency and the confidence to command authority in male-dominated spaces. Compared with earlier heroines such as Ariel or Belle, whose struggles were often framed through romance or dependence on male partners, Moana asserts her identity and mission without external validation.

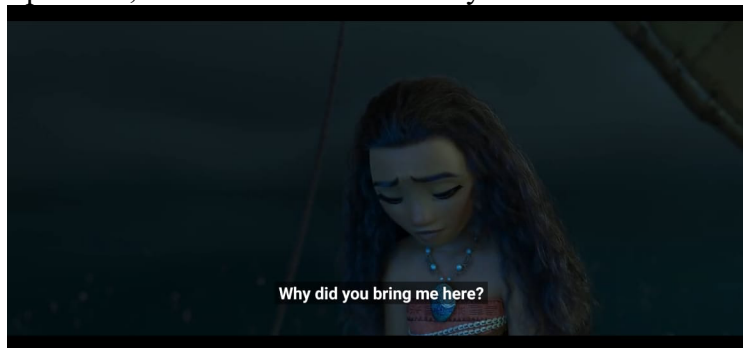


Figure 6. Maui has just left Moana (Scene 01:18:00 – 01:18:22)

A deeper layer of resilience is revealed when Maui abandons her, leaving Moana in despair (Scene 01:18:00–01:18:22). The camera frames her in isolation, dwarfed by the vast ocean, emphasizing her vulnerability as she pleads, “*Why did you bring me here? I’m not the right person. You have to choose someone else.*” This moment of crisis is significant because it acknowledges vulnerability as part of true strength. According to Betty Friedan, women’s empowerment does not require them to be invulnerable at all times, but lies in their ability to rise from adversity and social pressure, continuing their struggle with renewed vigor (Bhusal, 2024). Moana’s resilience here is emotional and spiritual, not only physical. Her turning point comes when she recalls the voyaging legacy of her Polynesian ancestors, visualized through symbolic imagery of canoes sailing across the ocean. This connection between cultural memory and personal identity reaffirms her courage and determination. In this sense, Moana’s resilience is uniquely framed within a non-Western feminist context: her strength is not only about individual achievement but also about honoring and continuing her people’s collective heritage.

Supporting characters and symbolism reinforce Moana’s resilience. The ocean, often depicted as a living character, embodies feminine power as both nurturing and testing, lifting Moana when she falters and guiding her back to her mission. This symbolic relationship contrasts with Maui’s reliance on brute force and self-interest, showing that Moana’s resilience derives from harmony with nature and tradition rather than domination. Grandmother Tala’s earlier encouragement resurfaces here as an invisible guide, reminding Moana of her worth when she feels weakest. Unlike Mulan, who gains courage by disguising herself in masculine roles, Moana embraces her femininity and cultural roots to rebuild her strength. Her journey shows that courage is not the absence of fear or failure but the persistence to rise again, grounded in both personal identity and ancestral legacy. Through this, Moana redefines resilience as a distinctly feminine power, one that integrates vulnerability, relational strength, and cultural continuity.



4.1.4 Femininity Through Relationships to Tradition



Figure 7. The relationship between Moana and her grandmother (Scene 29:45 – 29:49)

The relationship between Moana and her grandmother Tala offers a vital redefinition of tradition, positioning it as a liberating force rather than a restrictive one. In the scene where Tala tells Moana, “*You must go. The ocean chose you*” (Scene 29:45–29:49), the framing emphasizes Tala’s calm authority contrasted with Moana’s uncertainty, showing how wisdom from the older generation empowers rather than suppresses the younger. Unlike her father, who insists on maintaining conservative norms of remaining on the island, Tala embodies an alternative vision of tradition: one rooted in ancestral voyaging and freedom. According to Betty Friedan, women are often trapped within traditions that appear noble but in reality limit their capacity for self-development (Kim, 2025). Tala, however, demonstrates how tradition can be reinterpreted in ways that nurture agency rather than constrain it. From a Polynesian perspective, this is significant: voyaging is not only a cultural practice but also a spiritual connection to ancestors, and Moana reclaims this legacy as a source of empowerment. Instead of rejecting tradition entirely, she reshapes it to affirm women’s agency, reflecting the liberal feminist principle of reforming systems from within rather than destroying them outright (Salih & Janoory, 2019).



Figure 8. Moana talk to her father (Scene 28:26 – 28:30)

Moana’s confrontation with her father further illustrates this reinterpretation of tradition. In the scene where she says, “*You told me to help our people. This is how we help our people*” (Scene 28:26–28:30), the camera places her and her father in a direct face-to-face frame,



symbolizing the tension between patriarchal authority and new forms of leadership. Moana expands the meaning of “helping” beyond the passive domestic roles assigned to women, reframing it as active participation in cultural survival. In contrast to earlier Disney heroines such as Belle or Ariel, whose struggles were often framed around individual desires, Moana’s resistance is collective, anchored in her responsibility to her people and her Polynesian heritage. This aligns with Betty Friedan’s critique of patriarchal domesticity that creates identity crises by confining women to limited roles (Chaudhuri, 2023). By reclaiming voyaging and decision-making, Moana asserts that women too can safeguard tradition while leading its renewal.

Symbolism also reinforces the theme of relational empowerment. The ocean, depicted as a sentient force, represents tradition as dynamic rather than static, supportive yet challenging. By repeatedly aiding Moana, it acts as a partner rather than a constraint, symbolizing how cultural heritage can become a source of feminine strength when reimagined. Audience reception studies have noted that Polynesian viewers often read Moana’s journey as an affirmation of indigenous identity, showing how non-Western contexts complicate conventional feminist readings (Belinda, 2019). In this way, Moana’s connection to tradition reflects not only an individual struggle against patriarchy but also a collective resistance to cultural erasure. Through her relationships with Tala, her father, and the ocean, Moana demonstrates that tradition can be a site of transformation where femininity is not silenced but redefined as a force for cultural continuity and empowerment.

4.2 Moral Values are Contained in the Aspects of Femininity in Moana's character

The moral values in Moana’s character emerge most clearly through pivotal scenes that embody Betty Friedan’s liberal feminist ideals. In the moment when Moana stands before Maui and asserts, “*I am Moana of Motunui. You will board my boat...*” (Scene 36:33–37:30), she resists his ridicule and claims her authority. This scene conveys the moral value of courage and self-determination, demonstrating that women can confront male figures of power without compromising their identity. Friedan argues that women must resist the roles imposed by patriarchal norms and pursue authentic selves (RajKumari, 2022). By visually framing Moana as small in stature but resolute in expression against Maui’s towering figure, the film highlights how her moral courage is not diminished by her gender.

Moana’s leadership is equally tied to her moral responsibility toward her people. When she tells her father, “*You told me to help our people. This is how we help our people*” (Scene 28:26–28:30), the framing positions her centrally against her father’s authority, symbolizing a shift from patriarchal leadership to relational, inclusive governance. This reflects the moral value of leadership through equality, where Moana reframes tradition in ways that allow women to actively shape communal destiny. As shown in the study by Murtadho et al. (2024), Moana’s decision to leave the island to restore the heart symbolizes the rejection of passive femininity and the embrace of active responsibility rooted in both self-determination and collective survival.

Another moral value is found in resilience and environmental stewardship. When Maui abandons her and she pleads with the ocean, “*Choose someone else*” (Scene 01:18:00–01:18:22), Moana temporarily falters, but later regains her courage by recalling the voyaging legacy of her ancestors. This moment underscores Friedan’s argument that empowerment is not the absence of vulnerability but the ability to rise again with renewed purpose (Bhusal, 2024). By linking her perseverance to Polynesian ancestral knowledge, the film ties resilience not only to individual growth but also to the preservation of indigenous culture and the natural environment.



The role of supporting characters deepens Moana's moral framework. Grandmother Tala embodies a liberating tradition, urging Moana to follow her destiny rather than conform to restrictive norms, while the ocean symbolizes a dynamic moral compass that guides and tests her. Maui, initially dismissive, becomes a foil through whom Moana proves that leadership is earned by vision and empathy rather than physical power. This relational dynamic echoes Hahn et al.'s (2025) finding that Disney heroes who embody care, competence, and autonomy resonate most with audiences, reinforcing that Moana's moral compass connects with wider social expectations of heroic virtue.

Audience reception further highlights the cultural implications of Moana's moral values. Western audiences often interpret her as a feminist heroine breaking free from patriarchal constraints, while Polynesian viewers see her journey as an affirmation of indigenous resilience and cultural survival. These readings converge in recognizing Moana's empowerment as both individual and collective, underscoring values of courage, leadership, authenticity, and care for the community and environment. In line with Friedan's vision, Moana demonstrates that women's empowerment lies not only in personal freedom but also in the ability to lead ethically, embrace cultural identity, and act for the common good (Chaudhuri, 2023).

4.3 Comparison of the Representation of Female Power in Moana and Previous Disney Female Characters

The representation of female power in Moana reflects a distinct shift from earlier Disney heroines, aligning closely with Betty Friedan's liberal feminist ideals of agency, independence, and equality. One striking example is the scene where Moana stands before Maui and asserts, "*I am Moana of Motunui. You will board my boat...*" (Scene 36:33–37:30). Visually, she is framed as small compared to Maui's towering figure, yet her voice and determination dominate the interaction. This visual contrast underscores how her leadership and confidence subvert traditional hierarchies that favor male authority. By contrast, earlier Disney heroines like Snow White or Aurora were often portrayed in passive stances visually dependent on external forces such as princes or magic to resolve their conflicts Lyu (2024).

Moana's independence is reinforced when she confronts Te Kā in the climactic scene (Scene 01:30:12–01:31:20). Unlike Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*, who achieves transformation through love, or Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*, whose autonomy is constrained by her sacrifice of voice for romance, Moana faces danger directly, guided by empathy and moral courage. In this scene, she parts the ocean and walks calmly toward Te Kā, singing her lineage, which visually positions her as a leader defined not by romance but by heritage, resilience, and communal responsibility. As Murtadho et al. (2024) note, Moana embodies liberal feminism through her enactment of self-determination and her commitment to restoring balance to her community.

Supporting characters also play crucial roles in shaping Moana's empowerment, distinguishing her from earlier heroines who often acted in isolation. Grandmother Tala functions as a mentor who validates Moana's intuition, urging her to embrace her destiny rather than conform to restrictive norms. The ocean, animated as a semi-sentient character, symbolically empowers Moana by both testing and guiding her, reinforcing the moral value that female power is relational rather than solitary. Even Maui, who initially belittles Moana, becomes a foil against whom her resilience and leadership shine more brightly. This relational dynamic strengthens the liberal



feminist reading, showing that empowerment emerges not only from inner resolve but also from navigating unequal power relations (Bhusal, 2024).

Audience reception further highlights the cultural implications of this evolution. Western audiences often interpret Moana as a feminist heroine who rejects the romance-centered narratives of earlier princesses, while Polynesian audiences celebrate her as a reaffirmation of voyaging traditions and indigenous resilience. This dual reception illustrates how Moana represents a globalized yet culturally grounded form of empowerment that extends beyond Friedan's Western framework. Hahn et al. (2025) add that contemporary audiences resonate with heroes who embody care, competence, and autonomy values embodied in Moana's journey.

In contrast, Ariel, Belle, and even Mulan reflect transitional stages of Disney femininity. Ariel's quest for autonomy is compromised by her dependence on romance, Belle's intelligence is framed within domesticity, and Mulan's heroism is achieved by adopting masculine roles. Moana, however, integrates courage, heritage, and community care without subsuming her femininity into male-coded traits. Through this, she redefines empowered femininity as agency rooted in authenticity, cultural identity, and leadership for the collective good, an embodiment of Friedan's liberal feminism that signals a decisive break from earlier portrayals of women as passive, dependent, or romance-driven (Rikhana et al., 2025).

5. CONCLUSION

This study has shown that Moana represents a decisive shift in Disney's portrayal of femininity by foregrounding independence, leadership, and social responsibility rather than romance or dependence on male characters. Viewed through Betty Friedan's liberal feminism, Moana embodies principles of individual freedom, self-actualization, and equality of opportunity, positioning her as a heroine who challenges patriarchal boundaries while remaining deeply connected to cultural heritage. By rejecting passive gender roles and embracing agency, resilience, and communal leadership, Moana signals a new paradigm in which female protagonists are not confined to domestic or supportive roles but emerge as central figures of transformation.

The implications for liberal feminism are significant. Moana validates Friedan's call for women's liberation by demonstrating how a female character can actively shape her destiny while reforming traditions from within, rather than abandoning them entirely. Her journey exemplifies how liberal feminism can be interpreted in non-Western contexts, offering a model of empowerment that balances individual autonomy with collective responsibility. This representation not only strengthens feminist ideals in media but also provides young audiences with role models who challenge traditional stereotypes of femininity.

However, this study also acknowledges its limitations. The analysis is confined to a single theoretical framework, liberal feminism which, while useful, may not capture the full complexity of Moana's cultural and feminist significance. Other perspectives, such as intersectional or postcolonial feminism, could deepen understanding by situating Moana's Polynesian identity within broader discussions of race, colonial history, and indigenous representation. Additionally, the study focuses primarily on textual and visual analysis of the film without incorporating audience reception, which limits insight into how different cultural groups interpret Moana's empowerment.



In conclusion, *Moana* serves as both a milestone in Disney's evolving representation of female characters and a meaningful contribution to the discourse of liberal feminism. Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that future researchers expand their analysis to other Disney films to observe how the representation of empowered femininity continues to develop, particularly by comparing *Moana* with characters from movies like *Frozen* or *Brave*. Further studies could also apply broader feminist frameworks, such as intersectional or postcolonial feminism, to enrich the analysis by considering aspects of race, culture, and tradition. Additionally, examining audience perceptions of *Moana*, especially among young viewers, could offer valuable insights into the influence of media portrayals on gender identity and empowerment. Researchers are also encouraged to explore *Moana*'s cultural background more deeply to understand how her Polynesian roots enhance the film's feminist messages. Lastly, integrating films like *Moana* into educational settings could promote critical discussions about gender equality, leadership, and self-determination from an early age.

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