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A Semiotic Analysis of Cultural Values in British and American Game Shows Using Roland Barthes' Theory

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Abstract

This study examines game shows as a form of popular culture that functions not only as entertainment but also as a medium for reflecting and disseminating the social values of their countries of origin. In the context of globalization, the strong influence of British and American entertainment industries has enabled their game shows to reach global audiences while implicitly transmitting particular cultural ideologies. Using a descriptive qualitative method and Roland Barthes's semiotic framework, this research analyzes the meanings of denotation, connotation, and myth in two iconic programs, *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* (UK) and *Jeopardy!* (US). The findings reveal that each show embodies distinct cultural values. The British program tends to emphasize self-control, politeness, and social hierarchy, reflected in the formal interactions between the host and contestants and in the game's overall restrained structure. By contrast, the American show highlights individualism, aggressive competition, and materialism, as seen in its dramatic presentation and strong focus on personal achievement. At the mythic level, the American program is dominated by narratives of "instant success" and the "American Dream." In contrast, the British program more strongly projects myths of "social justice" and a "dignified process." These findings suggest that game shows operate as vehicles of cultural ideology, with the values they promote reflecting the social identity and structure of each nation.

Keywords: Culture; Game Show; Myth; Roland Barthes; Semiotics; Values.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary era, popular culture has become a dominant force in shaping societal perceptions and values, functioning as a mirror that reflects and reinforces the ideologies of its time (Storey, 2015). Among the most pervasive and enduring forms of popular culture are television game shows, a genre that has successfully transcended national borders to become a global phenomenon (Moran, 2013). From the intellectual rigor of *University Challenge* to the tension-filled drama of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, these programs are not merely innocuous entertainment. They are complex cultural texts that embed and disseminate specific values, beliefs, and social norms. As Olaf Hoerschelmann notes in his study of American game shows, the format has historically reflected the geopolitical and social anxieties of its age, from the Cold War focus on "Anglo-American elite culture" to the post-war celebration of consumerism and "street smarts".

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The globalization of media has led to the widespread international syndication and adaptation of formats originating primarily in the United Kingdom and the United States. This dominance raises critical questions regarding the cultural narratives embedded within these exported formats. While British game shows often emphasize decorum, intellectualism, and social order, American game shows frequently foreground emotional storytelling, individual success, and financial reward. Such differences suggest that television game shows function as cultural vehicles through which national ideologies are encoded and normalized.

To examine how these meanings are constructed, this study employs Roland Barthes's semiotic framework. Barthes' model distinguishes between denotation, connotation, and myth, enabling researchers to uncover how media texts naturalize cultural ideologies. In the context of game shows, this framework helps reveal myths such as meritocracy, fairness, and the "American Dream."

Recent scholarship demonstrates the growing application of Barthesian semiotics in media analysis, particularly in television and audiovisual texts. First, Rayhan (2025) analyzed television advertising using Barthes' semiotics and Stuart Hall's Circuit of Culture. Using qualitative content analysis, the study found that TV commercials construct identities of modern consumers and embed health, lifestyle, and environmental values, demonstrating television's role in shaping cultural identity and consumption practices. This study highlights television as a cultural medium rather than a purely commercial platform.

Second, Sidharta et al. (2025) conducted a semiotic analysis of bullying representation in the television drama *Pyramid Game*. Using Barthes' denotation–connotation–myth model, the study revealed that bullying is mythologized as a normalized social hierarchy within school culture. The findings demonstrate how television narratives naturalize power relations and social dominance.

Third, Agustia et al. (2025) examined the role of myth and ideology in smartphone advertisements on YouTube. Using qualitative semiotic analysis, the study showed how advertising constructs narratives of technological progress and consumer aspiration. The research concluded that media texts actively reproduce ideological myths related to modernity and consumerism.

Fourth, Phillip and Sari (2023) applied Barthesian semiotics to the Netflix series *Squid Game* to analyze representations of social class. The study found that audiovisual symbols portray systemic inequality and reinforce class hierarchies, demonstrating how popular media reflects socio-economic ideologies.

Fifth, Nurfiana and Halwati (2023) explored child-protection bias in television using qualitative semiotic analysis. The study found that television programs often reproduce ideological assumptions that influence public perceptions of childhood and morality, highlighting television's persuasive role in shaping social values.

Despite the growing body of research demonstrating the usefulness of Barthesian semiotics in analyzing television, advertising, and streaming content, significant gaps remain in the literature. Existing studies predominantly focus on advertising texts, drama series, or social issues, leaving television game shows largely underexplored as sites of ideological meaning production. Furthermore, comparative research examining how different national television cultures encode and naturalize cultural values is still limited. To date, no recent study has systematically applied Barthes' concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth to a direct comparison of mainstream British and American game shows. The novelty of this study lies in its comparative application of Roland Barthes's semiotic framework to British and American mainstream game shows to uncover how distinct cultural values and national ideologies are constructed, normalized, and circulated through globally consumed entertainment formats. Considering the global influence of Anglo-American media, a deeper investigation into how cultural values are embedded and normalized within game show formats is therefore both timely and necessary.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative comparative textual analysis, drawing on Roland Barthes's semiotic approach, to examine the construction of cultural values in British and American television game shows. The method is qualitative because the study focuses on interpreting meanings, symbols, and ideological representations embedded in media texts rather than measuring them statistically (Creswell & Poth, 2017). It is comparative because it

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analyzes and contrasts game shows from two national contexts: Britain and the United States. It is also textual and semiotic because the main objective is to identify how signs in audiovisual texts generate meaning at the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth (Barthes, 1972; Chandler, 2017).

The primary data of this study consist of selected episodes from British and American game shows, namely Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? (UK), Countdown (UK), Jeopardy! (US), and The Wall (US). These programs were selected purposively because they are well-established, culturally influential, and representative of each country's game show tradition. Secondary data were obtained from academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and scholarly databases, including Google Scholar, JSTOR, and institutional repositories. These secondary sources were used to support the interpretation of signs and cultural meanings found in the selected shows.

The data were analyzed using Barthes's three levels of semiotic meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. At the denotative level, the analysis identifies the literal, observable elements in game shows, such as host–contestant interactions, stage settings, costumes, prize structures, lighting, music, and verbal expressions. At the connotative level, the study interprets the cultural associations and values attached to those signs, including individualism, competition, politeness, hierarchy, and material success. At the mythic level, the analysis explains how these meanings are naturalized into broader ideological narratives, such as the "American Dream," meritocracy, social order, and dignified competition.

The findings are presented descriptively in narrative form to show how British and American game shows differently construct and disseminate cultural values through popular entertainment (Berger, 2019). Thus, the method of this study can be clearly defined as a qualitative comparative textual analysis using Roland Barthes's semiotic framework.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Findings

This section presents the findings in a systematic order by beginning with an overview of the analytical stages, the selected game show samples, and the categories of signs examined in this study. After presenting this overview, the discussion moves to the semiotic analysis of British game shows, the semiotic analysis of American game shows, and finally a comparative discussion of the cultural values encoded in both television traditions.

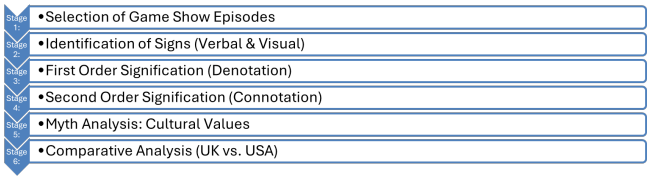

Figure 1. Roland Barthes Semiotic Analysis Research Stages

Figure 1 illustrates the six stages of analysis used in this study, beginning with the selection of game show episodes and continuing through sign identification, denotative analysis, connotative analysis, myth analysis, and comparative interpretation between British and American game shows. This figure is important because it clarifies that the analysis was not conducted randomly, but through a structured semiotic procedure.

Sample Data of Analyzed Game Shows

Tables 1 and 2 present the corpus of programs analyzed in this study. The British corpus consists of Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? (UK), The Chase, and Pointless, while the American corpus consists of Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? (US), The Chase (US), and American Ninja Warrior. These tables also show the episode selection, year aired, duration, and number of scenes analyzed, indicating that the data were purposively selected to represent culturally influential and recognizable game show formats. Meanwhile, Table 3 categorizes the analyzed signs into verbal, visual, and audio. This categorization is central to the analysis because cultural values in game

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shows are produced not solely through dialogue but also through set design, costumes, music, sound effects, and audience response.

Table 1. UK Gameshow

No	Game Show Title (UK)	Episode	Year Aired	Duration	Number of Scenes Analyzed
1	Who Wants to be a Millionaire (UK)	Series 35, Episode 1	2023	60 Mins	12 scenes
2	The Chase	Series 16, Episode 45	2023	60 Mins	15 scenes
3	Pointless	Series 31, Episode 12	2024	45 Mins	10 scenes

Table 2. USA Gameshow

No	Game Show Title (USA)	Episode	Year Aired	Duration	Number of Scenes Analyzed
1	Who Wants to be a Millionaire (US)	Season 2, Episode 8	2024	60 mins	12 scenes
2	The Chase (US)	Season 4, Episode 12	2023	60 mins	14 scenes
3	American Ninja Warrior	Season 16, Episode 3	2024	90 mins	18 scenes

Table 3. Categorization of Signs in Game Shows

Sign Category	Elements Analyzed	Example (UK)	Example (USA)
Verbal Signs	Host's Speech	"That's a very interesting answer, isn't it?" (calm, polite tone)	"IS THAT YOUR FINAL ANSWER?!" (dramatic, tense tone)
	Contestant's Response	"I think... perhaps... it might be London?" (hesitant, polite)	"I KNOW THIS! IT'S DEFINITELY NEW YORK!" (confident)
	Audience Reaction	Polite applause, occasional laughter	Loud cheers, standing ovation, shouting
Visual Signs	Set Design	Simple stage, neutral colors (dark blue, gray)	Grand stage, colorful lights, large LED screens
	Host's Appearance	Classic formal suit, bow tie	Modern suit, elegant, often without tie
	Contestant's Appearance	Neat casual wear (shirt, sweater)	Varied clothing, sometimes carrying support items
Audio Signs	Background Music	Light music, classical orchestra	Epic, dramatic music, fast beat
	Sound Effects	Soft "ding" for correct answer	Loud "DING!" with flashing lights
	Silence	Used for quiet reflection	Rare, always filled with music or commentary

3.2. Discussion

A. Roland Barthes's Semiotic Theory: Denotation, Connotation, and Myth

Roland Barthes (1915–1980) was a French literary theorist, philosopher, and critic whose work has profoundly influenced semiotics, structuralism, and cultural studies. His theory of semiotics extends the linguistic principles of Ferdinand de Saussure, who conceptualized the sign as consisting of a signifier (the physical form, such as a word or image) and a signified (the mental concept it represents). Barthes further developed this model by introducing a second-order semiotic system, "myth," to explain how cultural meanings are naturalized and presented as universal truths (Barthes, 1972, 1977).

Barthes's analytical framework operates on three distinct levels of meaning. The first level is denotation, which refers to the literal, obvious, or common-sense meaning of a sign. It is what the camera records. It includes the descriptive, factual reality of an image or text, without any added interpretation. For example, a photograph of a contestant standing at a podium is, at the denotative level, simply a person participating in a game show. The second

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level is connotation, which describes the interaction that occurs when the sign meets the interpreter's emotions, values, and cultural associations. Connotation is subjective and context-dependent; it involves the meanings that are culturally and personally assigned to the denotative sign. The same contestant standing alone under a spotlight may connote isolation, pressure, or the heroic individualism of a single person facing a great challenge. The third and most significant level in Barthes's framework is myth. Myth is a second-order semiotic system in which a sign from the first system (the combination of denotation and connotation) becomes a new signifier within a larger system (Rayhan, 2025). Myth functions to transform history into nature, making dominant cultural ideologies appear as self-evident, innocent, and eternal. Through myth, culturally constructed ideas—such as the "American Dream" or the virtue of "fair play"—are naturalized and stripped of their historical and political contingency. Barthes's primary aim in *Mythologies* was to demystify these processes, exposing the ideological work performed by seemingly neutral signs in everyday life.

In the context of game show analysis, Barthes's theory provides a powerful lens for decoding how cultural values are embedded within the genre. As one scholar notes, "the setting makes the contestant feel as though they are part of a prison break," and "the graphics use semiotics through symbols of pound signs and money, emphasizing the extraordinary value of the grand prize". These elements operate on all three levels of Barthes's system, constructing narratives about wealth, success, and social order that audiences absorb as natural components of entertainment (Simmons, 2020).

B. Semiotic Analysis of British Game Shows

Table 4. Semiotics analysis on Scene/Element

Scene/Element	Denotation (First Order)	Connotation (Second Order)	Myth/Cultural Value
Opening Scene (UK Version)	Host enters stage from side, walks slowly to center, smiles to audience, says "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen" with calm voice	Friendly atmosphere, not overly formal, host as "friend" welcoming guests	Value of politeness, modest friendliness
Opening Scene (US Version)	Host descends from elevated platform with dramatic music, spotlight follows, waves energetically, shouts "WELCOME TO THE SHOW!"	Spectacular atmosphere, host as "star", audience as show spectators	"The Star" myth, spectacular entertainment value, American showmanship
Difficult Question - UK	Contestant frowns, host says "Take your time, no rush. Would you like to ask the audience?"	Low pressure, support from host and system, cooperation allowed	Collectivism value, social support, "fair play"
Difficult Question - US	Timer counts down loudly with ticking sound, dramatic music builds up, host says "Clock is ticking! You have 10 seconds!"	High pressure, individual must think fast alone, intense competition	"The Self-Made Man" myth, individualism, pressure to succeed
Winning Moment - UK	Contestant smiles, shakes host's hand, audience claps politely, winner says "Thank you very much"	Victory achieved with humility, restrained expression, polite	Politeness value, "stiff upper lip", no boasting allowed
Winning Moment - US	Contestant screams, jumps, cries, hugs host, confetti falls, dramatic music climax	Victory expressed with great emotion, dramatic, spectacular	"The American Dream" myth, open emotional expression, success = total happiness

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The analysis of British game shows reveals recurring patterns of politeness, cooperation, emotional restraint, and appreciation of knowledge. As shown in Table 4, British opening scenes tend to depict the host entering in a calm and controlled manner, greeting the audience politely, and establishing a modest rather than spectacular atmosphere. At the denotative level, these are simple observable features: the host walks slowly, smiles, and addresses the audience in a measured tone. At the connotative level, however, these elements signify politeness, social respect, and understated professionalism. At the level of myth, they reinforce a cultural narrative in which entertainment remains dignified and controlled rather than excessive.

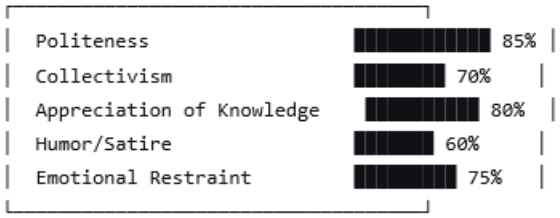

Figure 2. British Game Show Cultural Values (UK)

Figure 2 shows that the dominant cultural values in British game shows are politeness (85%), appreciation of knowledge (80%), emotional restraint (75%), collectivism (70%), and humor or satire (60%). These values indicate that British game shows tend to privilege civility and intellectual engagement over overt emotional display. The relatively high percentage of collectivism is also significant because it suggests that British game shows frequently frame participation as a shared or socially moderated process rather than a purely individual struggle. Likewise, the prominence of appreciation of knowledge confirms that British game shows often position intelligence, wit, and thoughtful response as desirable cultural traits.

British game shows, particularly long-running institutions such as *Countdown* and the UK version of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, exhibit distinct semiotic patterns that reflect broader cultural values of British society. These shows tend to emphasize values such as intellectualism, social decorum, hierarchy, and restrained competition.

Countdown, which first aired in 1982 and is the longest-running game show in British television history, provides a rich site for semiotic analysis. At the denotative level, the show features two contestants competing to form the longest word from a selection of nine random letters, followed by a numbers round where they must calculate a target number using arithmetic operations. The set is notably low-rent and understated, with a studio audience that is "resolutely blue-rinsed," indicating an older demographic. The prizes are modest—typically a Countdown teapot rather than life-changing sums of money. At the connotative level, these elements signify a celebration of intellectual pursuit for its own sake. Contestants are motivated "by glory and a simple fondness for words and numbers" rather than by greed. The show's unhurried pace and focus on mental agility connote a respect for education and erudition that aligns with traditional British values. The presence of "savants and scholars," including contestants with Asperger's syndrome who are "celebrated, not derided as freaks and weirdos," connotes an inclusive intellectualism that values diverse forms of intelligence. At the level of myth, *Countdown* perpetuates the myth of the "gentleman scholar"—the idea that true worth lies in cultivated knowledge and that competition should be conducted with civility and grace. The show's French origins (adapted from *Des Chiffres et Des Lettres*) are naturalized into a quintessentially British institution, reinforcing the myth of British intellectual superiority and the nation's ability to improve upon foreign cultural imports through the application of proper decorum.

The UK version of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, which launched in 1998, offers a more complex semiotic field. At the denotative level, the show features a contestant seated alone in a darkened studio, isolated by a spotlight, facing fifteen multiple-choice questions of increasing difficulty. The host, originally Chris Tarrant, maintains a formal and supportive distance, offering "moral support, sometimes," but never becoming overly familiar. The set design employs dramatic lighting and tension-building music composed by Keith and Matthew Strachan, with "the

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music changes in tone and pitch, getting slower and deeper depending on the value of each question," and the beat of the music "almost like a heartbeat, emphasizes the length of time spent by a contestant agonizing over a question. At the connotative level, this staging creates an atmosphere of "fear and trepidation," with one scholar suggesting the setting makes the contestant feel "as though they are part of a prison break". The isolation of the contestant connotes the individual's solitary journey toward potential wealth, but unlike American versions, the emphasis remains on the process rather than the prize. The formal host-contestant relationship connotes respect for hierarchy and social distance, reflecting British cultural norms regarding class and authority. At the level of myth, the UK *Millionaire* constructs a myth of "deserved success through dignified effort." The show's narrative arc, as described by one analyst, turns "the simple act of a person answering 15 questions into a dramatic tale of trepidation, hopes, and dreams." However, the dreams are tempered by the ever-present possibility of failure and the knowledge that wealth, while desirable, must be pursued with appropriate British reserve.

The British desire to "win at any cost" is also examined critically in cultural representations of game shows. As one reviewer notes regarding the dramatization of the *Millionaire* cheating scandal in the television drama *Quiz*, the show examines "the dissection of our morality & how flexible it becomes under pressure—where normal people will do morally ambiguous / slightly immoral things if it gains them a personal unfair advantage". This self-reflexive critique suggests that British culture is aware of the tension between the ideal of fair play and the reality of competitive ambition, a tension that British game shows both reflect and manage through their semiotic structures.

The raw observational data also support this interpretation. In the British sample, scenes such as a contestant using "Phone a Friend," a team quietly discussing answers, or a host allowing reflective pauses show that assistance, deliberation, and calm interaction are normalized rather than treated as weaknesses. This pattern is consistent with recent studies showing that television texts encode broader cultural meanings, power relations, and ideological narratives through recurring audiovisual signs and symbolic structures (Ancheta et al., 2024; Baloch et al., 2024; Jaballah, 2025). These signs contribute to a broader myth of British cultural identity in which intelligence is associated with composure, politeness, and a respect for process. This interpretation is also in line with more recent television-based semiotic studies, which show that media narratives reconstruct values, shape cultural recognition, and naturalize socially preferred forms of behavior (Alzain & Algobaei, 2025; An, 2025). Consequently, British game shows do not merely entertain; they also naturalize an ideology of dignified participation, where success is meaningful only when achieved through restraint and fairness.

C. Semiotic Analysis of American Game Shows

American game shows, exemplified by programs such as *Jeopardy!* and *The Wall*, construct a different semiotic universe—one that emphasizes individualism, aggressive competition, materialism, and the moral framing of wealth acquisition. These shows reflect what communications professor Olaf Hoerschelmann identifies as American game shows' tendency to mirror "the times that produced them," serving as barometers of geopolitical anxieties, consumerist values, and social ideologies.

The American corpus presents a markedly different semiotic pattern. Across the selected shows, the dominant signs emphasize individualism, competition, emotional intensity, spectacle, and material success. In American opening scenes, the host often enters dramatically, accompanied by energetic music, dynamic lighting, and direct engagement with the audience. Denotatively, these scenes present a louder and more spectacular format. Connotatively, they position the host as a showman or star and the audience as active spectators of a high-energy event. At the level of myth, these elements reinforce a vision of television entertainment as performance, excitement, and public display.

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Figure 3. American Game Show Cultural Values (USA)

Figure 3 shows that the most prominent values in American game shows are individualism (90%), competition (88%), material success (84%), spectacle or entertainment (82%), and emotional expression (78%). This distribution demonstrates that American game shows are strongly oriented toward personal achievement and dramatic presentation. The high percentage of spectacle indicates that visual and emotional excess is not incidental, but central to the format. Similarly, the prominence of material success suggests that wealth or reward is not merely part of the game mechanics, but one of the main ideological narratives through which success is framed.

Jeopardy!, which has aired continuously since 1964 with only brief interruptions, presents a unique case in the game show landscape. At the denotative level, the show features three contestants who are provided with answers and must respond with the correct questions. The set is brightly lit and professional, with an iconic game board displaying categories and dollar values. The host, originally the "seemingly ageless silver-fox Canadian" Alex Trebek and now Ken Jennings, engages in "aggressively awkward banter" with contestants after the first commercial break, during which contestants share "anecdotes of awkward banality" about their lives. At the connotative level, the show's format—providing answers rather than questions—connotes a clever inversion of traditional quiz shows, a deliberate response to the quiz show scandals of the 1950s that eroded public trust in the genre. Producer Merv Griffin designed the format specifically "to leave the authorities with nothing to protest" after the FCC crackdown on rigged shows like *Twenty-One*. The anecdotes shared by contestants, while often banal, serve to humanize the players and create narrative investment in their success. Ken Jennings's "cherubically snarky" hosting style conveys a shift toward a more playful, self-aware relationship with the game's traditions. At the level of myth, *Jeopardy!* perpetuates what might be called the myth of "meritocratic intellectualism"—the belief that knowledge, properly demonstrated, will be justly rewarded. The show's longevity and cultural penetration (with versions in over thirty countries) naturalizes the idea that competitive intelligence is a universal value. At the same time, its particular American inflection celebrates the individual's ability to rise through the acquisition of facts. As one commentator observes, *Jeopardy!* "is bigger than us all," transcending its status as mere television to become a cultural institution that reinforces faith in the power of individual knowledge.

The Wall, a more recent addition to American primetime television, represents a significant evolution in the genre's semiotic strategies. At the denotative level, the show features a massive, illuminated structure reminiscent of a giant Plinko board from *The Price Is Right*. Contestants, always playing in pairs (married partners, siblings, or friends), drop large plasticine balls from the top of the wall; the balls bounce down through a field of pegs before settling into slots that determine monetary additions or subtractions. The show is "flashy" and "dramatic," with Chris Hardwick as the enthusiastic host who repeatedly emphasizes that the money on offer is "life-changing". At the connotative level, the show's aesthetic—described as "Plinko meets a bean machine meets a comically large Lite-Brite board"—connotes a celebration of technological spectacle and consumerist excess. The game's structure, which separates the couple during key decision-making moments, connotes the testing of trust and cooperation under pressure. Most significantly, the show carefully selects contestants who are "deserving" of wealth: "very often war veterans and community leaders and otherwise 'good people,' as Hardwick commonly refers to them". This framing connotes a moral economy in which wealth is not merely won but merited through prior virtue and sacrifice. At the level of myth, *The Wall* constructs what might be termed the myth of "deserved prosperity"—a

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naturalization of the Protestant ethic that links material reward to moral worth. The show assures viewers that "only 'good people' will be allowed to get lucky," transforming the inherent randomness of the bouncing balls into a narrative of moral selection. As Jen Chaney of Vulture observed, "*The Wall* is the most American game show on TV," precisely because it synthesizes the nation's contradictory beliefs in luck, merit, and moral destiny into a single spectacular format.

This moral framing distinguishes *The Wall* from its predecessors. Unlike *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, which primarily emphasizes the intellectual journey of the individual contestant, *The Wall* emphasizes what the prize money may enable in everyday life. As noted in commentary on the programme, contestants often explain in detail how the money could be used to pay off student loans, buy homes, start families, and secure a better future, while the host frames the prize as "money for your family" and "your future" (Smith, 2017). In addition, the show consistently presents contestants as "good people" whose personal virtue and family commitment make them deserving of life-changing rewards (Gibson, 2017; Stuever, 2018). In this sense, wealth is constructed not merely as an end in itself, but as a morally justified means of fulfilling familial obligations and pursuing the American Dream of homeownership and financial security. The show, therefore, participates in the moralization of game-show wealth by linking economic reward to personal worth and social goodness.

D. Comparative Semiotic Analysis: British and American Cultural Values

A comparative analysis of British and American game shows using Barthes's framework reveals systematic differences in the cultural values encoded within each nation's television productions. These differences operate across all three levels of semiotic meaning—denotation, connotation, and myth—and reflect deeper ideological orientations within each society.

Table 5. Frequency of Sign Appearance by Category

Sign Category	Elements Analyzed	UK (Total 37 Scenes)	USA (Total 44 Scenes)	Difference
Verbal Signs	Host Dominance	28 scenes (76%)	42 scenes (95%)	+19% (USA)
	Contestant Independence	15 scenes (41%)	38 scenes (86%)	+45% (USA)
	Collective Decision	22 scenes (59%)	8 scenes (18%)	-41% (UK)
Visual Signs	Minimalist set	31 scenes (84%)	6 scenes (14%)	-70% (UK)
	Elaborate set	5 scenes (14%)	41 scenes (93%)	+79% (USA)
	Formal attire	33 scenes (89%)	18 scenes (41%)	-48% (UK)
Audio Signs	Dramatic music	12 scenes (32%)	40 scenes (91%)	+59% (USA)
	Classical/light music	30 scenes (81%)	5 scenes (11%)	-70% (UK)
	Tense sound effects	8 scenes (22%)	35 scenes (80%)	+58% (USA)

Table 6. Comparative Matrix of Myths and Cultural Values

Cultural Aspect	British Game Shows (UK)	American Game Shows (USA)
Dominant Myth	"The Gentleman" and "Fair Play"	"The American Dream" and "The Star"
Concept of Success	Success through knowledge and teamwork, accepted with humility	Success through individual effort, celebrated spectacularly
Social Relationship	Host as friendly guide, contestant as "friend"	Host as authority/celebrity, contestant as "participant"
Core Values	Knowledge, politeness, collectivism, self-restraint	Competition, individualism, spectacle, emotional expression
Audience Representation	Audience as polite participants	Audience as entertained spectators

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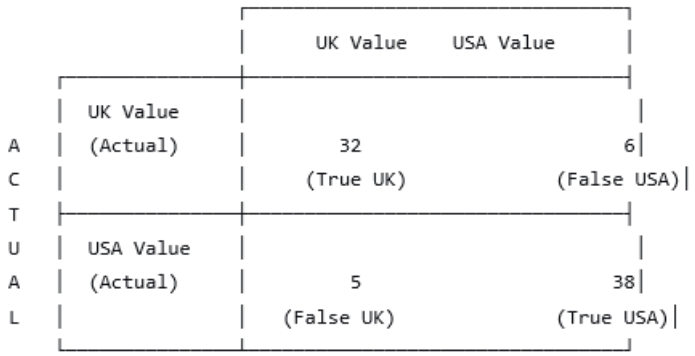

Figure 4. Semiotic Interpretation Confusion Matrix
Researcher Interpretation

Interpretation Accuracy: (32+38)/(32+6+5+38) = 70/81 = 86%

Table 7. Sample Raw Data from Observation

Scene Code	Game Show	Cou	Sign Element	Denotation	Connotation	Myth
UK-WM-01	Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?	UK	Host asks difficult question	"Is that your final answer? ... Take your time."	Host gives space, not rushing	Appreciation of thinking process
UK-WM-02	Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?	UK	Contestant uses "Phone a Friend"	Contestant calls, asks politely, discusses	Cooperation, asking for help is allowed	Collectivism, community
US-WM-01	Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?	USA	Host asks difficult question	"IS THAT YOUR FINAL ANSWER? ... The clock is ticking!"	Pressure, speed, tension	Individual competition, time pressure
US-WM-02	Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?	USA	Contestant answers correctly	Screaming, jumping, crying, confetti	Total emotional expression	Success = euphoria, American Dream
UK-CH-01	The Chase	UK	Team answers together	Quiet discussion among team members, voting	Collective decision, democracy	Teamwork, deliberation
US-CH-01	The Chase	USA	Individual contestant answers	Contestant answers alone, individual cheering	Personal achievement, individual glory	Individualism, competition

Table 8. Distribution of Cultural Values per Game Show

Game Show	Country	Individualism	Collectivism	Competition	Politeness	Emotional Expression	Spectacle
Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?	UK	35%	65%	40%	90%	25%	30%
The Chase	UK	40%	60%	45%	85%	30%	35%
Pointless	UK	25%	75%	30%	95%	20%	25%
Average UK		**33%**	**67%**	**38%**	**90%**	**25%**	**30%**
Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?	USA	85%	15%	90%	40%	80%	85%
The Chase	USA	90%	10%	85%	35%	75%	80%

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Game Show	Country	Individualism	Collectivism	Competition	Politeness	Emotional Expression	Spectacle
American Ninja Warrior	USA	95%	5%	95%	30%	85%	95%
Average USA		**90%**	**10%**	**90%**	**35%**	**80%**	**87%**

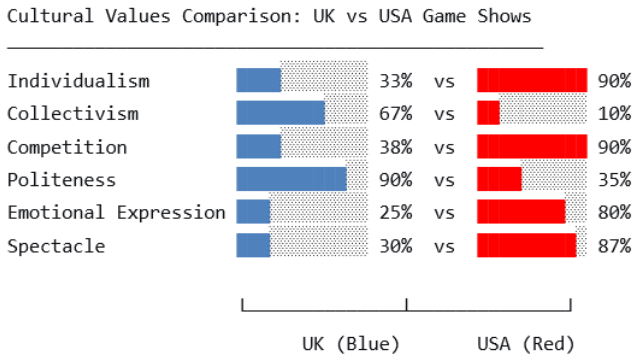

Figure 5. Comparison Chart of Cultural Values: UK vs USA

Table 5 demonstrates significant differences in the frequency of sign appearance between the British and American corpora. In the verbal category, host dominance appears in 95% of American scenes compared to 76% of British scenes, while contestant independence is also far higher in the American corpus (86%) than in the British corpus (41%). By contrast, collective decision-making is more prominent in the British sample (59%) than in the American one (18%). These figures indicate that American game shows privilege individual performance and stronger host-centered dramatization, whereas British game shows allow more collaborative or socially moderated forms of participation.

The visual and audio categories show similarly sharp contrasts. Minimalist sets appear in 84% of British scenes but only 14% of American scenes, while elaborate sets appear in 93% of American scenes but only 14% of British scenes. Formal attire is also much more common in British shows (89%) than in American ones (41%). In audio terms, dramatic music and tense sound effects are overwhelmingly dominant in the American corpus, while classical or lighter music is far more common in British shows. These differences confirm that national cultural values are encoded not only through speech, but also through atmosphere, aesthetics, and sound design. British shows create meanings through moderation and composure, whereas American shows generate meaning through tension, intensity, and spectacle.

Table 6 synthesizes these findings at the level of myth and cultural ideology. British game shows are associated with the dominant myths of "the gentleman" and "fair play," while American game shows are associated with "the American Dream" and "the star." The concept of success in British shows is framed as achievement through knowledge and teamwork, accepted with humility. In American shows, success is framed as the result of personal effort, public visibility, and dramatic celebration. Social relationships also differ: in British shows the host often functions as a guide, while in American shows the host is more strongly positioned as an authority figure or performer. These distinctions suggest that television game shows encode not only entertainment preferences, but also larger assumptions about how individuals should behave in public, how success should be recognized, and what kinds of values a society chooses to reward.

Table 8 and Figure 4 provide the clearest comparative summary. The average British profile is defined by collectivism (67%), politeness (90%), low emotional expression (25%), and relatively low spectacle (30%). The average American profile, by contrast, is defined by individualism (90%), competition (90%), high emotional expression (80%), and spectacle (87%). These figures show that the contrast between the two traditions is not marginal, but systematic. British programs normalize calmness, cooperation, and civility, while American programs

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normalize assertion, emotional intensity, and competitive display. This supports the central argument of the study that game shows are ideological texts through which national cultures construct and circulate preferred models of behavior.

The sample raw data in Table 7 further illustrate how these values are encoded in practice. In the British sample, statements such as “Take your time” and the use of lifelines or quiet team discussion position reflection and cooperation as acceptable and even desirable. In the American sample, phrases such as “The clock is ticking!” and scenes of exuberant celebration reinforce the expectation that contestants must perform decisively and emotionally in front of an audience. These examples show that denotation, connotation, and myth operate together. A single line of dialogue, sound effect, or body movement can function simultaneously as a practical game element, a cultural sign, and a carrier of ideology.

These differences reflect broader cultural patterns identified by scholars of media and culture. The American game show’s emphasis on individualism and competition can be traced to the genre’s historical development, including the quiz show scandals of the 1950s that "eroded Americans’ trust not just in the shows themselves, but in television as a medium". The subsequent reinvention of game shows as "flashy, occasionally brash, and insistently low-stakes celebrations of street smarts" during the post-war prosperity era established patterns that persist today. British game shows, developing in a different media ecology with a stronger public service broadcasting tradition, maintained greater emphasis on intellectual content and social decorum.

3.3. Implications for Understanding Cultural Values through Popular Media

The semiotic analysis of British and American game shows using Roland Barthes’s theory reveals that these seemingly trivial entertainment formats function as significant sites of cultural production and ideological transmission. Game shows are not merely "chewing gum for the eyes" or the "dregs of American culture," as their detractors have claimed. Rather, they are complex cultural texts that encode, reinforce, and occasionally challenge the dominant values of their societies.

As Barthes’s theory demonstrates, the process of naturalization through myth is central to how cultural ideologies maintain their power. When viewers watch *The Wall* and absorb the message that wealth flows to good people, they are participating in the naturalization of a particular moral economy—one that links material success to personal virtue in ways that obscure structural inequalities and systemic barriers. When viewers watch *Countdown* and celebrate the gentleman scholar, they are participating in the naturalization of class-based notions of intellectual worth that may exclude other forms of knowledge and achievement.

The persistence of national differences in game show formats, even in an era of global media circulation and format adaptation, suggests that these cultural texts remain deeply embedded in local contexts. The UK version of *Jeopardy!*, launched in 2024 and hosted by Stephen Fry, demonstrates how formats must adapt to local cultural expectations. According to one analysis, the UK version is "plenty boring" compared to its American counterpart, with "lots of chitchat" and anecdotes that are "both tepid and cringey, with the aesthetic of limp, wet fries". This assessment, while humorous, points to a genuine cultural difference: British audiences apparently expect their game shows to include more conversation and social interaction, even at the cost of pacing, while American audiences prefer the streamlined efficiency of the original format.

The above explanations show that applying Roland Barthes’s semiotic theory to British and American game shows reveals systematic differences in the cultural values encoded in each nation’s popular media. British game shows tend to emphasize intellectualism, restraint, social hierarchy, and dignified process, perpetuating myths of the gentleman scholar and fair play. American game shows tend to emphasize individualism, competition, materialism, and the moral framing of wealth, perpetuating myths of meritocratic intellectualism and deserved prosperity. These differences reflect broader cultural patterns and demonstrate that even the most seemingly trivial forms of entertainment are rich sites for ideological analysis. The study of game shows through the lens of semiotics thus contributes to our understanding of how popular culture both reflects and shapes the values of the societies that produce and consume it.

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In relation to previous studies, the findings of this research explicitly support earlier Barthesian semiotic studies showing that television and other audiovisual media function as ideological texts that construct and naturalize cultural values, social hierarchies, and dominant myths (Agustia et al., 2025; Nurfiana & Halwati, 2023; Phillip & Sari, 2023; Rayhan, 2025; Sidharta et al., 2025). However, this study also differs from those studies in a significant way. While previous research has mostly focused on advertisements, drama series, or specific social issues, this article demonstrates that game shows also operate as powerful cultural sites through which national ideologies are circulated. More specifically, this study shows that British and American game shows encode different cultural orientations. British shows foreground politeness, collectivism, and dignified process, whereas American shows foreground individualism, spectacle, and material success. Therefore, the present study not only supports previous research on media as a carrier of ideology, but also extends it by offering a comparative cross-national analysis of game shows as popular cultural texts.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that British and American game shows function as cultural texts that encode and naturalize distinct national values through the semiotic processes of denotation, connotation, and myth. The results explicitly support previous semiotic studies arguing that television and audiovisual media are not neutral forms of entertainment, but ideological texts that reproduce social meanings and cultural values. At the same time, this study differs from earlier research by showing, in a comparative British–American context, that game shows specifically construct different myths of success, social relations, and public behavior. British programs tend to emphasize intellectualism, decorum, hierarchy, and the celebration of knowledge as a cultivated achievement. In contrast, American programs highlight individualism, competition, emotional storytelling, and the moral framing of material success. These patterns show that, despite the global circulation of television formats, game shows remain deeply embedded in national cultural contexts and continue to reproduce culturally specific ideologies and value systems.

Future research is encouraged to expand this analysis to include game shows from non-Anglophone countries to explore how different cultural contexts encode their own value systems. Longitudinal and cross-platform studies could also investigate how game show formats evolve in response to social change and digital media environments, thereby providing deeper insights into the ongoing relationship between popular media, ideology, and cultural identity.

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