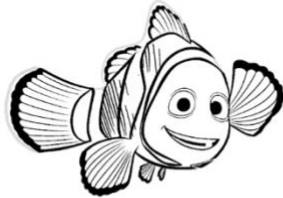


# Once upon a dystopian time...

Audience perception of environmentalism in Disney Pixar's  
*Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*



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ONCE UPON A DISTOPYAN TIME... AUDIENCE PERCEPTION OF  
ENVIRONMENTALISM IN DISNEY PIXAR'S *FINDING NEMO* AND *WALL-E*

**ABSTRACT**

With the growing pervasiveness of environmental problems, research has increasingly turned to the potential of mass-media products to raise the public awareness necessary to collectively address these issues. Situated within this field are eco-cinema studies which point to the possibility of cinematic texts to channel environmental messages to a wide public. The body of films researched includes animated features, which are especially interesting subjects of analysis due to their appeal to both young and adult audiences. Animated features are not only strong in their aesthetics, but also in incorporating educational messages. This study examines environmental messages in Disney Pixar's *Finding Nemo* (2003) and *Wall-E* (2008). As a dominant player in the market, Disney products are especially relevant because they are present in many people's lives, while Pixar has received widespread acclaim for its animation and original storytelling. The study takes an audience perspective towards *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*, aiming to answer the research question 'How is environmentalism in Disney Pixar's *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E* perceived by audiences?'. First, the depiction of environmentalism in *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E* is analyzed by means of a qualitative content analysis focusing on four themes: anthropomorphism, human-nature relationships, consumerism, and displacement. The qualitative content analysis answers the sub-question 'How is environmentalism conveyed in Disney Pixar's *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*?'. Building on this analysis to construct an interview guide, this study employs in-depth interviews to gain insights into audience perceptions of environmentalism in these films. Eight interviewees selected from Disney audiences were asked about their perception of the four environmental themes and the general messaging of the films. The study reveals that all four themes are present in both *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*, and that consumerism is presented as a facet of human-nature relationships while anthropomorphism strengthens these two themes. Displacement, on the other hand, diminishes the importance of environmental messages. As a result of displacement, environmental messages were observed but not perceived as key in *Finding Nemo*. In *Wall-E*, displacement was more limited as audiences perceived and critiqued the environmental messages more strongly. Specifically, the audience perceived this film as a call to humanity to improve their efforts in restoring the environment. The research contributes to existing theory by bridging the prevalent gap in Disney studies between textual analyses and audience research.

**KEYWORDS:** *Disney, Pixar, environmentalism, eco-cinema, audience studies*

## **Preface**

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Environmental awareness through animated feature films

The global environment is under increasing pressure. Mankind is depleting the Earth's resources at a fast pace throughout all ecosystems, illustrated, for example, by the disappearance of rainforests, the extinction of species and the pollution of water and air (Crutzen, 2002; WWF, 2020). The 2015 Paris Agreement underscored the urgency of global environmental action; however, in order to address environmental issues, widespread public awareness is imperative (Paris Agreement, 2015).

Mass-media is commonly used to attract public attention to environmental issues (Sampei & Aoyagi-Usui, 2009). Within this mass-media arena, scholars have started to direct their attention to cinematic texts as ways to raise public environmental awareness (MacDonald, 2004). Eco-cinema studies have shown that cinematic texts are rich in their possibilities for communication about the state of the environment (Rust, 2012; Todd, 2015). Environmental messages “are critical to public perception of environmental issues” (Todd, 2015, p. 250) and frequent subjects of cinematic features. The present study focuses on animated features in particular as their capacity to combine comic narratives and aesthetic visuals with educational messages provides a unique opportunity to address audiences of all ages and thus achieve widespread public awareness on environmental issues (Caraway & Caraway, 2020; Todd, 2015).

Arguably the largest and most influential producer and distributor of animated feature films is the Walt Disney Company (Disney). Disney has been producing cartoons since the company's inception in 1923 and has grown to become dominant in the entertainment industry in the past century to the extent that Wasko (2020) speaks of a ‘Disney Multiverse’ as the collection of Disney-owned companies that make up the Disney brand. One of these companies is Pixar Animation Studios (Pixar) that Disney acquired in 2006. As part of the Disney multiverse, Pixar has enjoyed the extensive capabilities that Disney offers due to its global omnipresence, including merchandising opportunities (Wasko, 2020). The studio is praised for its original screenplays and animation capabilities and has won ten Academy Awards for Best Animated Feature Film (Oscars, 2021).

Building on the extensive opportunities that animated features offer to foster awareness for environmental issues and the extensive dominance of the Disney Pixar brand, the present study poses the following research question:

*“How is environmentalism in Disney Pixar’s Finding Nemo and Wall-E perceived by audiences?”*

Environmentalism is a relatively broad term that can be defined in many ways. As will be elaborated in the theoretical framework, this study considers four theoretical concepts as underpinnings of environmentalism in animated features: anthropomorphism, human-nature relationships, consumerism, and displacement. The study adopts in-depth interviews to uncover how environmental concepts in *Finding Nemo* (2003) and *Wall-E* (2008) are interpreted by audiences. To that end, the study first establishes the environmental concepts portrayed in the films, so a sub-question is used: “How is environmentalism conveyed in Disney Pixar’s *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*?”. To answer this sub-question, a qualitative content analysis is adopted.

## 1.2 Scientific importance

This study builds on two converging research areas. Firstly, it contributes to the extensive body of Disney studies. Research on the Disney brand is abundant, covering aspects such as analyses of its films and audiences (Wasko, 2020; Wasko et al., 2001). Disney audiences have been studied extensively by Wasko et al. (2001) by means of the ‘Global Disney Audiences Project’ which analyzes the ways in which audiences view Disney across the world. With regards to content analyses, the present study builds on analyses of Disney films, specifically by analyzing concepts of environmentalism in *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*. Numerous authors have previously analyzed concepts of environmentalism in Disney films, including *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*. For example, Murray and Heumann (2011) deliver an ecocritical analysis of *Wall-E* that focuses mostly on the film’s dystopian premise and nostalgia. Whitley (2012) also offers an analysis of *Wall-E*, as well as of *Finding Nemo*, elaborating on the depiction of natural environments in these films. Caraway and Caraway (2020) study various environmental concepts in *Wall-E*, including anthropomorphism and displacement which are also addressed in the present study. Hence, this research aims to extend these analyses by offering new insights.

Despite the extensive body of analyses of Disney features, research on audience interpretations of these films remains limited. Although textual analyses of Disney films can provide interesting insights into the ideological messages they convey, Buckingham (1997) notes that the underlying question is “the extent to which any of the covert ideological messages allegedly revealed by this kind of analysis – be they ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ – actually connect with what might be going on for the children who represent their [Disney’s] primary audience” (p. 291). Wasko (2020) adds to this that “it might also be argued that the entire Disney audience has been neglected” (p. 216). Textual analyses may provide a good starting point, but audiences may hold different interpretations of the messages conveyed in a film. By taking the content analysis as a starting point but moving beyond it by adding an audience focus through interviews, this

study aims to contribute by bridging this gap in the existing literature outlined by Buckingham (1997) and Wasko (2020). In doing so, it also extends traditional audience theories as proposed by Fiske (1986) and Morley (2006).

Secondly, with its focus on environmentalism, this study also adds to eco-cinema studies. One of the first notions of eco-cinema was made by MacDonald (2004), who mainly described it as the portrayal of natural landscapes to foster a sense of respect and awe for nature. Since then, eco-cinema has evolved into the understanding that environmentalism in cinematic texts has the potential to create awareness for environmental issues (Rust, 2012). Rust (2012), for example, highlights the effects of ecocritical cinematic texts on behavioral intentions while Todd (2015) concludes that environmental cartoons in particular are an important medium to communicate environmentalism. The present study converges Disney studies and eco-cinema and aims to contribute to both these research areas.

### **1.3 Societal importance**

Films packaged with eco-criticism present themselves as “calls for humanity to alter its deeply dysfunctional relationship with the planet” (Rust, 2012, p. 204). Cinema allows audiences to grasp difficult issues, such as global warming, by presenting them in a visual, albeit sometimes hyperbolic way, and thus is critical to shaping public awareness of environmental issues (Murray & Heumann, 2009; Rust, 2012; Todd, 2015). Rust (2012) has shown that cinematic features with environmental themes have previously managed to raise public awareness on environmental issues. Films such as *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) even managed to favorably affect behavioral intentions and voting intentions among their audiences (Rust, 2012). Thus, previous research indicates the potential of environmental messages in cinematic texts. This study explores whether the environmental messages in *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E* are also understood by audiences.

### **1.4 Chapter outline**

The theoretical concepts that this study builds on are elaborated in Chapter 2. Specifically, this theoretical framework chapter discusses existing eco-cinema research and the concept of environmentalism, by breaking it down into anthropomorphism, human-nature relationships, consumerism, and displacement. Several connections to previous findings of these concepts in Disney films are made in this section. The theoretical framework also discusses audience studies and pays special attention to Disney audiences.



Next, the study's methodology is discussed in Chapter 3. This chapter discusses the appropriateness of the methods and presents an overview of the data collection process including sampling, operationalization, data analysis and ethics.

In Chapter 4, the results of the study are presented. This chapter is split up according to the sub-question and the main research question and first presents the findings of the qualitative content analysis before outlining the findings of the in-depth interviews.

Finally, Chapter 5 summarizes the findings of the study and draws conclusions while answering both the sub-question and main research question. This chapter also highlights the study's theoretical and societal contributions, as well as limitations and recommendations for further research.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Eco-critical readings of animated features

The industrialization of modern society has brought with it numerous environmental issues that increasingly threaten the Earth and its delicate, intrinsically connected ecosystems (Crutzen, 2002). Temperature levels continue to rise, pollution degrades the air and marine ecosystem, and biodiversity rates are declining (IPCC, 2014; WWF, 2020). The growing pressure of environmental issues underscores the importance of public awareness and collective action to address and tackle them; as humans have induced these issues, human commitment is required to solve them (IPCC, 2014). But despite the need for widespread public perception of environmental issues, it is often difficult to wholly grasp these issues and their urgency because for many people they are not (yet) directly observable. In this arena, mass communication outlets such as cinema are increasingly considered an important tool to build environmental awareness. Cinema, being a popular culture medium, has the capability to reach large audiences due to its wide appeal (Todd, 2015). Analysis of cinematic texts can give an insight into the dominant environmental perceptions of the time in which they were produced (Murray & Heumann, 2009). It also allows for “understanding how we encounter environmental communication in our daily leisure pursuits” (Todd, 2015, p. 250). As has been argued previously, such an analysis is relevant as it provides insights in the processes through which public awareness for environmental issues is shaped.

Although concerns for environmental issues have only really come to the fore in recent decades, eco-cinema is not a new concept. Murray and Heumann (2009) argue that films containing eco-criticism have been around since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when *Oil Wells of Baku: Close View* (1896) displayed the devastating effects of drilling for oil. Since then, environmental messages have appeared in films and become especially prevalent in the past two decades: Sometimes explicitly, through documentaries such as *An Inconvenient Truth*, and other times more hidden or embedded such as in *The Fast and the Furious* (2001) (Murray & Heumann, 2009; Rust, 2012). To the latter category belong also animated feature films. Animated features are an especially interesting focus of analysis because they combine comic narratives and an aesthetically pleasing visual appeal with educational messages and warnings, providing a unique opportunity to address audiences of all ages (Caraway & Caraway, 2020; Todd, 2015). Animated films have frequently been subject to eco-critical analysis. Murray and Heumann (2011), for instance, provide an extensive reading of a wide variety of animated shorts and features, produced by a number of different studios throughout the past century. As Disney has

positioned itself as the leading animation studio, it is not surprising that Disney animations in particular receive eco-critical attention from Murray and Heumann (2011) as well as other authors such as Whitley's (2012) overview of the different natural environments portrayed in Disney features and Bruckner's (2010) comparison of Disney's early eco-cinematic efforts with more contemporary ones.

With environmentalism as a distinctly complex topic, the question arises of how it can be depicted and observed in animated features. This question lies at the heart of the qualitative content analysis of this study, and as such a theoretical framework is needed to guide the analysis of *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*. Four environmental concepts have been abstracted from previous eco-critical analyses of animated features: anthropomorphism, human-nature relationships, consumerism and displacement. These concepts are discussed in detail next, along with examples from Disney films in which they have been identified.

### **2.1.1 Anthropomorphism**

Anthropomorphism is defined by Caraway & Caraway (2020) as “the imbuelement of nonhuman species or agents with human characteristics, motivations, behaviors, and values” (p. 688). Anthropomorphism establishes a natural world in which the central position of humanity becomes the barometer for norms and values (Bruckner, 2010). It has been inherent to the Disney legacy since Walt's earliest creations. Early Disney films are oftentimes described as the ‘Classic Disney’ model and characterized by a package of themes, styles, storylines and characters. From the start, these characters adopted anthropomorphic elements as animators were tasked to ‘keep it cute’ (Wasko, 2020). Perhaps the most iconic example of the early embodiment of anthropomorphism is Mickey Mouse, Disney's first cartoon character with a distinct personality (Wasko, 2020; Whitley, 2012). In a similar fashion, Pixar has also given human characteristics to its characters throughout many of its films. In fact, Pixar's first feature-length film *Toy Story* (1995) already shows non-human toys with human traits, thoughts and emotions (Lanier et al., 2013). Disney's portfolio further includes anthropomorphized animals, technology and even intangible qualities such as emotions (Caraway & Caraway, 2020; Chen et al., 2019; Lanier et al., 2013; Whitley, 2012).

Through anthromorphization of nature, animals receive human characteristics, behaviors, motives and abilities (Manfredo et al., 2020). Lockwood (1986) describes that by adopting anthropomorphism in this fashion, the primary aim is to make animals more appealing. Because the animals have human-like features and behaviors, it becomes easier for audiences to identify and emotionally relate to them (Born, 2019). Indeed, anthropomorphism in animated

features can create a sense of sympathy for the characters (Caraway & Caraway, 2020). Similarly, it has potential to convey sympathy for real animals by portraying that they, like humans, think, feel, and lead complex lives. In this manner, anthropomorphism can establish a connection between people and the natural world (Caraway & Caraway, 2020; Scott, 2007). As anthropomorphism in animated features is adopted primarily with the goal of entertainment and not to portray biological accuracy with regard to animal depictions, Lockwood (1986) argues that it is essentially harmless. However, other authors contest this notion. As Scott (2007) suggests, “in representing an animal as human-like, perception of all animals is altered” (p. 114). Anthropomorphism downplays characteristics of animal species by portraying them as essentially human, and undermines differences among species (Caraway & Caraway, 2020; Scott, 2007). Animal agency is largely removed and instead replaced with human agency (Caraway & Caraway, 2020; Lanier et al., 2013; Scott, 2007).

With regards to environmental action, anthropomorphism has been shown to have a positive effect on protective behavior towards the environment, for example by amplifying consideration of individual animals in wildlife conservation (Manfredo et al., 2020; Tam et al., 2013). Nevertheless, although anthropomorphism can generate compassion and connectedness with animals as individuals, this individualized focus may distract from complex and systemic environmental issues, as well as from the role that humans play in these (Born, 2019). Thus, anthropomorphism may impede environmental action on a wider scale.

Besides nature, other objects such as technology can also be anthropomorphized. Anthromorphization of technology implies that human characteristics, motivations, behaviors, and values are attributed to technological objects, such as cars or robots (Caraway & Caraway, 2020). In doing so, it becomes easier to empathize with the technological object, as it displays emotions and mental states that are similar to our own (Riek et al., 2009). When analyzed through the lens of film studies, it has previously been explained that in animated features, such empathy allows for the creation of relatable characters and aids the narration of an entertaining story. From a technological perspective, however, anthropomorphism has a different goal, namely, technological objects that appear more human-like receive more sympathy and arguably are more likely adopted (Mori et al., 2012).

When sympathizing with technology leads to a greater likelihood of technology adoption, it must be questioned whether this is desirable from an environmental perspective. The relationship between environmentalism and technology is complicated. On the one hand, there is scientific consensus that environmental problems are at least partly human-induced through technological advancements; on the other hand, technological developments, like green energy

solutions, can also contribute to solving environmental issues (IPCC, 2014). A greater sympathy for technology can thus be argued to be both negative as well as positive in relation to environmental issues.

### ***2.1.2 Human-nature relationships***

As Whitley (2012) argues, “what nature means to us, the forms in which we perceive what we deem to be ‘natural’, the feelings and the ideas that we bring to bear on our relationship with the natural world, have all become of critical importance at the historical juncture we now live in” (p. 1). It is thus interesting to understand the ways in which these relationships are embedded within films. The relationship between humans and the natural environment has received a variety of typologies. Perhaps the most straightforward classification has been proposed by Taylor (1992), who argues that there are essentially two ways of viewing the human-environment relationship: the expansionist worldview and the ecological worldview. The expansionist worldview is grounded in the belief that nature must be controlled for human ends as nature is seen as collection of resources “to be employed for the satisfaction of ever-increasing material needs” (Taylor, 1992, p. 26). Perhaps paradoxically, the expansionist worldview also encapsulates the ideal of conservation. However, as Taylor (1992) stresses, conservation should not be confused with preservation and merely calls for wise utilization of natural resources. Exploitation is not wrong, but its effects should be assessed carefully so that its repercussions can be wisely managed (Taylor, 1992; Whitley, 2012). The expansionist worldview solely proposes band-aid solutions that mask the need for systemic solutions and, according to Taylor (1992), underpins the environmental crisis.

The expansionist worldview has frequently been represented in Disney features. In these representations, humans are shown as intruders in the natural world (Bruckner, 2010). In *Pocahontas* (1995), for example, the English colonialists are eager to discover new natural territories, motivated by materialism and fixated on the status and wealth it will bestow on them. Nature is perceived by these men as an economic good, something that should be possessed and exploited (Whitley, 2012). In a similar fashion, Gaston in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) exploits the natural world as an avid hunter, and is portrayed as superior to his natural animal rivals that he collects as hunting trophies (Whitley, 2012).

The second paradigm Taylor (1992) observes is the ecological worldview, which assumes that everything in the natural world is interconnected and intrinsically valuable. The ecological worldview rejects the quantitative approach that the expansionist worldview takes towards nature, and instead views nature as a “delicate balance of intersecting ecosystems” (Whitley,

2012, p. 64). Nature should be preserved and protected from human exploitation (Taylor, 1992; Whitley, 2012).

The ecological worldview is portrayed in Disney features through images of pastoral landscapes that represent rural life as innocent and serene (Caraway & Caraway, 2020). The pastoral mode places human beings in an ideal relationship to the natural world (Whitley, 2012). Pastoral landscapes appeared in Disney films since Classic Disney, with a prime example being *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), the company's first animated feature (Wasko, 2020; Whitley, 2012). Snow White lives harmoniously in a pastoral forest shrouded in innocence and beauty. *Snow White* promotes animal welfare and also highlights the interconnectedness and interdependence of humans with the natural world, and the idea that nature should be preserved, thereby illustrating the ecological worldview (Murray & Heumann, 2011). Pastoralism continues to be depicted in more recent Disney features, such as *The Lion King* (1994), which shows a proper order within the natural world that is so harmonious that Whitley (2012) describes it as a 'dreamscape'.

Murray and Heumann (2011) point out that some portrayals of the expansionist worldview may actually be presented to serve as criticism of human exploitation of nature. *Bambi* (1942), for example, shows hunters exploiting the resources of a natural environment by killing animals, but also does so by highlighting the disruption of the harmonious relationships in nature that the hunters cause (Whitley, 2012). It may also be the case that the two worldviews are presented instantaneously, such as in *Pocahontas*, in which Pocahontas on behalf of the Indian tribes challenges the expansionist view of the colonialists by singing of the inherent value that all beings in nature have, and of their interconnectedness (Whitley, 2012).

### **2.1.3 Consumerism**

Consumption encompasses the purchase and use of goods and services; however, scholars have argued that this definition is incomplete as it solely focuses on the economic role of consumption, while in fact it also has a cultural role (Lee, 1993; Miles, 1998). Hence, Miles (1998) adopts the term 'consumerism' to describe the sociological aspect of consumption. Consumerism surpasses the act of consumption and presents a way of life (Miles, 1998). It poses that consumer goods can serve as symbolic resources that, among other things, can help construct identity, signal personal affluence, intelligence and physical attraction and grant access to cultural communities (Lee, 1993).

Consumerism has become constituent to modern life to the extent that Lunt and Livingstone (1992) speak of a consumer culture, in which "mass consumption infiltrates

everyday life not only at the levels of economic processes, social activities and household structures, but also at the level of meaningful psychological experience – affecting the construction of identities, the formation of relationships, the framing of events” (p. 24). For example, Whitley (2012) argues that there is an emotional allure in aesthetics of an earlier era, and these aesthetics are incorporated in products that consumers are inclined to purchase as they offer an illusory connection to the past. Therefore, nostalgia “forms a substantial part of the layered identity that we imaginatively construct for ourselves when we buy or possess things” (Whitley, 2012, p. 153).

From an environmental perspective, consumerism most closely fits within the previously discussed expansionist world view because it allows for the satisfaction of material needs at the expense of natural resources and the natural environment.

Before assessing notions of consumer culture adopted in Disney films, it should be noted that Disney itself is ingrained in consumer culture. The rise of consumerism in the 1980s saw a leisure society begin to take shape, illustrated by the increasing popularity of themed experiences such as the Disney parks (Lee, 1993). The Disney parks epitomize consumerism as they “construe the good life as being directly equated with our identities as consumers and what we buy” (Miles, 1998, p. 65). Beyond theme parks, Disney extends its hand in consumer culture through merchandising activities and corporate partnerships (Wasko, 2020).

In cinema, images of consumerism are reflective of trends within a society moving towards a consumer culture. Examples of these images include suburbia, fast food and car culture (Rust, 2012). Consumerist themes have appeared across Disney films, for example in the *Toy Story* films. Previously, it was outlined how the toys in *Toy Story* are anthropomorphized as they have received human qualities and personalities. This use of anthropomorphism, Lanier et al. (2013) argue, “offers a glimpse into the world of human-object relations from the perspective of the object” (p. 41), stressing the value we place upon commodities that we purchase in a consumerist society. Albeit in a different fashion, *Zootopia* (2016) also glorifies consumerism according to Fritz (2020), who observes that the film displays life in the commercialized metropolis as exciting and fulfilling as compared to life in the countryside.

#### ***2.1.4 Displacement***

The Classic Disney model presents a set of familiar narrative elements that have been employed throughout much of Disney’s filmography (Wasko, 2020). Disney films are usually focused on individual characters who have clear goals and must confront antagonists or other obstacles to achieve them. Ultimately, the main characters triumph and the film receives closure

through a happy ending (Wasko, 2020). Wasko (2020) also describes the focus on individualism in Disney films, entailing that it is through work ethic, optimism, and individual solutions that the main characters achieve their goals.

Hence, what can be observed in Disney films is a focus on individual storylines as they revolve around individual main characters who must overcome conflict with or posed by other characters to achieve their goal. Such a way of storytelling is not original to Disney. In fact, it fits the traditional paradigm of a screenplay as outlined by Field (2005), and the method of an individual character being central to the story told.

This individualistic narrative has evidently proven to be successful for Disney and for Hollywood more generally (Field, 2005; Wasko, 2020). When applied juxtaposed to larger environmental issues, however, Caraway and Caraway (2020) argue that the individualist narrative such as introduced in the Classic Disney formula becomes problematic. The focus on individual storylines often obscures larger societal issues, such as those related to environmentalism. This maneuver has been described by Caraway and Caraway (2020) as ‘displacement’. Displacement in this context does not refer to the movement of people or animals to a different location, but instead to “the process by which films approach volatile social issues by drawing attention away from the most controversial aspects to more palatable representations” (Caraway & Caraway, 2020, p. 689). Those palatable representations refer to the journeys of individual characters which are completed towards the end of a film, satisfying the audience but largely leaving grand environmental problems unaddressed. Hence, although scientific consensus shows that environmental problems are at least partly human-induced, such a connection is often unclear in (animated) features (IPCC, 2014). As a result, displacement limits our response to environmental issues (Caraway & Caraway, 2020).

## **2.2 Audience studies**

The present study not only examines how environmentalism is displayed in *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*, but also focuses on audience perception of these depictions. Thus, this study relies on audience theories as elaborated in this section.

### ***2.2.1 Polysemic meaning making by the active audience***

Audiences have been a subject of analysis in media studies for almost a century and have received a variety of typologies (Livingstone, 2013). Recently, audience work has largely followed two assumptions. Contemporary scholars argue that firstly, audiences are always active, and



secondly that media content is polysemic in the interpretations that it yields (Evans, 1990; Morley, 2005). These notions will be further explored in this section.

As Biocca (1988) describes, there is a fundamental dichotomy at the center of mass communication research, with on the one hand the idea of an active audience, which is individualistic, rational and selective; and on the other a belief in a passive audience, which is conformist, gullible and vulnerable. The theory that audiences are passive stems from the observed uniformity of media sources, such as television and the newspaper, that led to the belief that identical physical messages must produce homogeneity in the audience's consciousness (Biocca, 1988). While this theory prevails in assumptions about mass communication effects, there has been a burgeoning support for the theory that audiences are in fact active (Biocca, 1988; Livingstone, 2003). Levy (1983) argues that audiences can be active prior to, during, and after media exposure. In the pre-exposure phase, audience actively choose their media consumption and audience activity in this sense is thus synonymous to 'selectivity-in-exposure-seeking' (Levy, 1983). Active audiences are closely connected to and a precondition for uses and gratifications research because of the implication that audiences select media content that satisfies their various needs (Katz et al., 1973; Ruggiero, 2000).

Audiences are also active during exposure to media content, implying psychological involvement with the content (Levy, 1983). As Levy (1983) notes, "this type of activity might be best understood from an information-processing perspective, and relates to how individuals attempt to provide messages with meanings" (p. 110). Media content does not prescribe one 'ultimate' meaning. Instead, it is open for interpretation and capable of yielding a variety of meanings since it is polysemic (Morley, 2005). Polysemy in media studies context implies that "media content is seen as open to individual interpretation by people creating meaning in the process of consumption" (Evans, 1990, p. 147). Thereby, it stands in stark contrast with deterministic notions of media effects that align more with the passive audience theory (Evans, 1990). Nevertheless, polysemy does not imply that simply any meaning can be derived from a media text. It does not prescribe a multiplicity or instability of meanings, but rather a "difference in audience evaluations of shared denotations that best accounts for the [...] viewers' discrepant interpretations" (Condit, 1989, pp. 106–107). Interpretation of the message remains context-dependent, with signifying mechanisms within the message promoting certain meanings over others (Morley, 2005). Hall (2006) argues that meanings can be decoded from media texts through one of three processes. Firstly, from the perspective of the encoder, it is desirable that the message is decoded according to the preferred reading. In this ideal scenario 'effectly transparent communication' occurs whereby the audience "decodes the message in terms of the

reference code in which it has been encoded” (Hall, 2006, p. 171). However, the encoder cannot guarantee that the message will be decoded through the preferred codes. As the notion of polysemy implies, audiences may look beyond the preferred reading and extract other meanings from the text (Jensen, 1990). The audience is likely to interpret the message according to their personal context. As a result, a negotiated or oppositional reading may take place. A negotiated reading implies that the decoder acknowledges the preferred reading and interprets it on an abstract level, while they attach other meanings at a situational level. Through an oppositional reading, on the other hand, the decoder rejects the preferred meaning and instead interprets the message according to an alternative meaning (Hall, 2006). Whether audiences interpret texts according to preferred, negotiated or oppositional reading depends on a variety of influences, including gender, ethnicity, socio-economic position and culturally dependent factors (Fiske, 1986). Fiske (1986), for example, notes that different subcultures may extract meanings that diverge from the preferred reading because of their differing social relations. Through polysemy, “several interpretations coexist as potentials in any one text and may be actualized or decoded differently by different audiences, depending on their interpretive conventions and cultural backgrounds” (Jensen, 1990, pp. 57–58). The concept of polysemy has been shown in a range of media contexts, including film, television and news media (Fiske, 1986; Jensen, 1990; Morley, 2005).

It has thus far been discussed how audiences are active before and during media consumption, therein capable of selecting content and interpreting it polysemically. Levy (1983) adds that audiences are also active after media consumption. Post-exposure, the audience may reflect on the information it has consumed or integrate it in social behaviors (Levy, 1983). This notion ties in with theories of media effects, which examine the cognitive as well as behavioral change of audiences as a result of media consumption (Bryant & Thompson, 2002; Levy, 1983). The premise that media consumption can lead to cognitive and behavioral change is especially critical in the context of eco-cinema as it implies that media content can generate environmental attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors (Holbert et al., 2003). Although measuring the media effects that eco-cinema animated films have on audiences’ behavior is outside the scope of this study, the premise that such effects can occur when audiences perceive the message in films as urgent underpins the relevance of this study as previously discussed.

### ***2.2.2 Disney audiences***

Shifting away from a more general examination of audience studies to Disney audiences in particular, it must first be addressed who these Disney audiences are. Animated features are

suitable for both young and old audiences because of their aesthetic visuals and educational messages (Caraway & Caraway, 2020; Todd, 2015). The Disney audience in particular is especially large because “the Disney Multiverse covers an extremely wide range of media/entertainment activities” (Wasko, 2020, p. 210). Disney audiences are global, and in a relatively straightforward fashion it can also be said that Disney’s audience consists of ‘children of all ages’, implying that people connect with Disney products throughout all of their lives (Wasko, 2020; Wasko et al., 2001). However, due to polysemy, audience members’ interpretations of and positions vis-à-vis Disney are heterogeneous, resulting in a variety of Disney archetypes depending on their support and love for Disney (Wasko, 2020). Disney fanatics, on one end, are passionate Disney fans who arrange their lives according to the brand through, for example, Disney-themed homes or weddings. On a notch below are Disney fans, those supporters who hold the Disney brand as sacred but are less zealous than the fanatics. Positioned in the middle of the spectrum are Disney consumers, those people who consume Disney products because of nostalgic or aesthetic reasons or because they are in the company of fans or fanatics. On the other end are anti-fans, comprised of Disney cynics critical of the company’s influence, Disney resisters who do not like the brand, Disney disinterested who are simply unbothered by the brand, its products and premise, and Disney antagonists who are actively hostile against the company (Wasko, 2020).

The typification of Disney audiences is relevant because it highlights that not everyone who comes in contact with Disney values it in the same way. These different valuations of the overall brand may in turn impact the way in which audience members perceive Disney’s products. In the context of this study, the typologies of the Disney audience can be considered a factor that influences whether *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E* are interpreted according to preferred, negotiated or oppositional readings (Fiske, 1986; Hall, 2006).

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1 Qualitative methods

The purpose of this study was to understand how audiences perceive environmentalism in *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*, and the meanings assigned to the films. Prior to this audience analysis, both films were subjected to eco-critical analyses to determine the meanings packaged in the films. As both facets of this study focused on analyzing *meanings*, qualitative methods were appropriate forms of analysis. Qualitative methods are concerned with analyzing meaning-making within social contexts. Specifically, qualitative research is a suitable approach to understand “the meanings which people attach to phenomena (actions, decisions, beliefs, values) within their social worlds” (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 3).

A mixed-method approach was adopted consisting of two different qualitative methods. The ways in which environmentalism is displayed in *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E* were abstracted by means of a qualitative content analysis. This analysis aimed to answer the sub-question of this study, ‘How is environmentalism conveyed in Disney Pixar’s *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*?’. Results of this analysis were operationalized and served as the basis for the second method: in-depth interviews, which were conducted to understand how audiences perceived environmentalism in *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*. The interviews aimed to answer the main research question of this study, ‘How is environmentalism in Pixar’s *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E* perceived by audiences?’.

#### 3.2 Qualitative content analysis

##### 3.2.1 Justification of method

Bryman (2012) describes qualitative content analysis as “a searching-out of underlying themes in the materials being analyzed” (p. 557). A qualitative content analysis was chosen to answer the sub-question for several reasons. Firstly, and perhaps most evidently, it allows for the analysis of visual communication messages and was therefore a suitable approach to analyze *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E* (Bryman, 2012; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Secondly, Schreier (2014) argues that the highly systematic nature of a qualitative content analysis “counteracts the danger of looking at the material only through the lens of one’s assumptions and expectations” (p. 171). This feature is especially important in the present study, as Disney Pixar films, including *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*, have been frequent subjects of analysis in previous studies (e.g. Whitley, 2012) but were placed in an alternative context in the present study. Rather than solely being guided by previous literature, a qualitative content analysis allowed for a thorough examination of every aspect of the data relevant to the research question (and also sub-question) (Schreier, 2014).

Lastly, the method provided the opportunity to make inferences from data that could serve to enhance knowledge on the topic and provide novel insights. In the case of *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*, it added to previous research on environmentalism in these films and in Disney (Pixar) films more generally (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

### **3.2.2 Data sampling**

Two Disney Pixar films were selected for analysis using purposive sampling: *Wall-E* and *Finding Nemo*. These films were chosen for several reasons. Firstly, both films can be regarded as eco-cinema. *Wall-E* has received attention from numerous scholars for its portrayal of ecological crises, for example from Caraway and Caraway (2020) and Murray and Heumann (2011), whose analyses serve as starting points for this research. *Finding Nemo* has received ecocritical attention in the form of scholarly as well as public debate on whether the film sparked an increase in sales of fish for private and public aquaria (Militz & Foale, 2017). Secondly, both films portray vastly different ecosystems: while *Wall-E* is primarily set in a terrestrial ecosystem on land, *Finding Nemo* takes place under water, showing the marine ecosystem. The spatial settings of *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E* are also rather vast in comparison with most other Pixar films which take place in relatively narrow geographic settings. The *Toy Story* franchise, for example, largely takes place within homes and other residential spaces, while *The Incredibles* (2004), *Cars* (2006), *Ratatouille* (2007) and *Inside Out* (2015) are each set primarily in a single town or city. The extensive spatial coverage of *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E* strengthens their case for eco-cinema features as they focus on entire ecosystems rather than individual, local settings. Finally, both films also show humans. While this is not uncommon for Pixar films, it is the portrayal of humans and these broad ecosystems in juxtaposition that make them interesting units of analysis. Due to human representation, the relationship between humans and nature, as previously highlighted in the theoretical concepts, can be analyzed.

*Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E* were accessed through a paid subscription to Disney+, where both films are available for on-demand viewing and are accompanied by subtitles.

### **3.2.3 Operationalization**

The goal of the qualitative content analysis was to uncover the ways in which environmental concepts are conveyed in *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*. To this end, the four environmental concepts from the theoretical framework were operationalized. Anthropomorphism, human-nature relationships, consumerism, and displacement were all given

criteria that had to be satisfied for them to be classified as such, so that the theoretical concepts could be detected in visual form in the films (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Operationalization of theoretical concepts for qualitative content analysis

Theoretical concept	Operationalization
Anthropomorphism	A <i>non-human</i> character exhibits <i>human</i> characteristic, such as behavior, emotions, or personality traits. Human characters are not considered in this classification. Animals exhibiting characteristics that are normal/natural for that animal species are also not considered
Human-nature relationships	For this categorization to apply, either humans or human artefacts (objects made by humans) need to be present in the scene and juxtaposed with a natural ecosystem, so that a relationship between these can be detected
Consumerism	The scene shows human artefacts, either in isolation or in juxtaposition with humans, so that inferences can be made about the artefacts, or the relationship humans display to have with the artefacts
Displacement	Human-nature relationships are evident in the scene and shown in juxtaposition with the storylines of the films' characters. As a result, the human-nature relationships are not the sole events that draw attention in the scene. In some cases, they may appear less prominent/important in comparison to the storylines of the films' characters

To observe the operationalized theoretical concepts in *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*, attention was paid to cinematography, editing, mise-en-scène, use of color, use of sound, narrative and storytelling techniques (Caraway & Caraway, 2020).

### **3.2.4 Data analysis**

Both *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E* were reviewed a total of three times. Open coding was applied, which Bryman (2012) describes as analyzing the data and breaking it down into codes. The software program Atlas.ti was utilized throughout the coding process. In Atlas.ti, open

codes can be created and added to meaning units. Upon the first review, a total of 40 open codes were created. All codes were provided with criteria that had to be satisfied for a meaning unit to receive the code and were constantly compared to existing data (Bryman, 2012). Some of the codes were only created toward the end of the film. Therefore, the films were reviewed a second time to ensure that all relevant meaning units were incorporated in the coding process. Because this second review yielded an additional six open codes, the films were reviewed a third time. During the final review, no new codes were created, indicating that saturation was achieved, and all relevant meaning units had received a code. A total of 46 open codes were created.

Next, axial coding was applied to the finished selection of open codes. Through axial coding, data was put back together in new ways by seeking connections between codes (Bryman, 2012). Codes were compared and grouped together depending on their connections with each other and the context. For example, codes such as ‘food customs’, ‘forms of entertainment’ and ‘human modes of transportation’ were grouped together in the axial code ‘human systems and institutions’. A total of nine axial codes were created. The processes of open and axial coding were inductive, as both yielded findings that contributed to existing theory (Bryman, 2012).

To finalize the coding frame, selective coding was applied. The four operationalized theoretical concepts anthropomorphism, human-nature relationships, consumerism, and displacement were extracted as selective codes. These were derived from previous research, so the selective coding process was deductive in nature (Bryman, 2012). Hence, the qualitative content analysis was both inductive and deductive. Selective coding further involved selecting the core category and systematically relating it to other categories (Bryman, 2012). Human-nature relationships was selected as the core category, as it comprised the most codes and because it connected to all three of the other selective codes. A sample of the coding frame can be found in Appendix A.

Finally, the results of the qualitative content analysis were written up in the results chapter, paying attention to the selective codes and their relationships on a general level to the axial and open codes on a deeper, more specific level.

### **3.3 In-depth interviews**

#### ***3.3.1 Justification of method***

After completing the qualitative content analysis and answering the sub-question of this research, in-depth interviews were conducted to uncover audience perceptions of environmentalism in *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E* for several reasons. Firstly, as explained by Johnson (2001), in-depth interviews start by exploring “commonsense perceptions, explanations,

and understandings of some lived cultural experience” (p. 107) and go further to uncover “what is usually hidden from ordinary view or reflection or to penetrate more reflective understanding about the nature of that experience” (p. 107). Hence, in-depth interviews were considered a suitable research method as they aim to uncover if and how audiences interpret and perceive concepts of environmentalism in *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*. They allow for understanding the meanings that audiences assign to these films. Secondly, interviewees likely have opinions in relation to Disney that stem from earlier experiences with the brand. Additionally, interpretations with regards to the theoretical concepts of environmentalism, such as consumer culture, are heavily culture-dependent and must be placed within the greater context of the film. Such cultural inferences may for instance lead to a negotiated reading of the films (Hall, 2006). In-depth interviews are a suitable form of analysis for this process, because, as Johnson (2001) argues, they aim to “explore the contextual boundaries of that [lived cultural] experience” (p. 107).

The in-depth interviews were semi-structured in nature. An interview guide (Appendix B) was created with the sequence of questions sometimes altered, and probes added in a few cases, to allow for elaborations on answers and enable richer and more detailed responses (Bryman, 2012). As Bryman (2012) argues, semi-structured interviewing provides room to explore interviewee perspectives in more detail to discover what the interviewee sees as important and relevant. As the goal of the research was to understand these audience perspectives, semi-structured interviews were deemed the most appropriate approach.

### ***3.3.2 Data sampling***

A purposive sampling approach was adopted to recruit interviewees for the study. Initially, convenience sampling was used and interviewees were recruited through social media, specifically through Facebook groups about Disney films and the researcher’s Instagram account; subsequently, snowball sampling was deployed by utilizing the initial group of interviewees to establish contact with others (Bryman, 2012). In purposive sampling, interviewees are sampled in a strategic way so that they are relevant to the research question (Bryman, 2012). This was important, as the interviewees had to satisfy several criteria outlined in the research question and the theoretical framework to qualify for the study. The interviewees had to (a) qualify as Disney audience members; (b) have seen *Finding Nemo*; and (c) have seen *Wall-E*. With regards to the first point, as the theoretical framework outlined that the Disney audiences are “both universal and ubiquitous” (Wasko et al., 2001, p. 44) and include individuals across age groups and nationalities, a diverse sample was recruited in terms of age and nationality



to represent the Disney audience as well as possible within the scope of the research. The overview of interviewees can be found in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Overview of interviewees

Name	Interview date	Gender	Country of birth	Age	Audience classification <sup>1</sup>	Relevant context
Chema	April 29, 2021	Male	Poland	30	Enthusiastic consumer	
Sergio <sup>2</sup>	April 30, 2021		Central America <sup>3</sup>		Fanatic	
Sandrine	May 1, 2021	Female	France	27	Fan	Sandrine grew up in close proximity of Disneyland Paris
Matthew	May 2, 2021	Male	Australia	24	Disinterested	
Alyssa	May 3, 2021	Female	United States	35	Enthusiastic consumer	Alyssa is a writer for a children's toy company. She is also a mum of two daughters, 3 and 5 years old
Jürgen	May 3, 2021	Male	The Netherlands	44	Reluctant consumer	Jürgen is a voice actor and frequently narrates Disney films and TV shows
Cora	May 3, 2021	Female	The Netherlands	59	Disinterested	Cora is a mother, but both her kids are over the age of 18.
Haya	May 12, 2021	Female	Egypt	19	Enthusiastic consumer	

<sup>1</sup> Based on Wasko (2020)

<sup>2</sup> Sergio is a pseudonym as they preferred to remain anonymous

<sup>3</sup> Rather than a specific country, a geographical region is specified here as Sergio preferred to remain anonymous

### **3.3.3 Operationalization**

The interview guide started with a short introduction of the study and some basic questions about the interviewees' demographics. The remainder of the guide consisted of two parts. The first part was derived from the Global Disney Audiences Project. As part of this project, Wasko et al., (2001) conducted interviews to understand how interviewees were influenced by Disney and which meanings they attributed to the brand. Of the five interview questions in the interview guide by Wasko et al. (2001), three were adopted in the present research, leaving out questions about Disney's popularity and the brand's American identity as they were less relevant for this study. The questions that were included focused on experiences, values, and meanings that interviewees assign to Disney as a brand. These questions were relevant because, as explained in the theoretical framework, audience opinions on *Finding Nemo* and *Disney* may be influenced by their views on Disney more generally. It was therefore important to understand these opinions. Based on the interviewees' answers to these questions, they could be placed within one of the Disney audience typologies (Wasko, 2020) as shown in Table 2 above.

Since the qualitative content analysis had yielded insights into the ways the environmental concepts are displayed in the films, the in-depth interviews focused on discovering how audiences perceive these environmental concepts. In the second part of the interview guide, results from the qualitative content analysis were operationalized into interview questions and divided into four sets corresponding to the theoretical concepts and selective codes.

The questions about anthropomorphism focused on observing which (human) quality traits the interviewees assigned to the characters and if the interviewees sympathized with or related to the characters. A question to classify the films' characters into 'good' or 'bad' intended to discover sympathy for the non-human characters and/or a view of humans as antagonists.

In the section on displacement, two scenes from the films in which displacement was recognized in the qualitative content analysis were shown to the interviewees. The interviewees were then asked to describe what happened in the scene to observe whether they recognized the environmental issues in the scene, or the individual narrative, as predominant.

The section on human-nature relationships aimed to understand how the interviewees perceived the interactions between humans and nature in the films. The interviewees were also asked if they felt that these interactions represented real life in order to observe how they placed the films into a wider environmental context.

Finally, the interviewees' perceptions on consumerism were derived through asking whether they could describe the relationship between humans and material things in the film. The interviewees were also asked if they could identify any objects that the humans interact with, and if they could discover any consequences of these interactions.

In closing the interview, the interviewees were asked if they found *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E* important films for children and adults to watch. The complete interview guide can be found in Appendix B.

### **3.3.4 Ethics**

Prior to the interviews, all interviewees were sent a consent form (Appendix C) detailing a description of the research, the expected time involvement with the study, interviewee rights and contact information in the event the interviewee would have any concerns or questions about the study. The consent form also outlined the expectation that there were no perceived risks associated with participating in this research, and that the interviewees would not be compensated for their involvement in the study. The interviewees could sign the consent form when they (a) agreed that the interview would be audio-recorded; and (b) agreed that their identity would be revealed throughout the study. All interviewees agreed to audio recording, while all but one interviewee agreed for their given name to be revealed for the study. They preferred their personal details to remain anonymous although it was agreed that a more general geographic region of residence could be made known instead of their nationality. All interviewees gave informed consent before starting the interview.

### **3.3.5 Interview process**

The interviews were conducted between April 29, 2021, and May 15, 2021. Due to the COVID-19 regulations and the fact that the researcher and interviewee were not in the same country in most cases, the interviews took place online through Zoom, Skype, and Teams. These services offer an appropriate technological substitute for face-to-face interviewing as they allow for synchronous conversations and screen-sharing options (Janghorban et al., 2014). The interviews were between 45 and 90 minutes long. They largely followed the interview guide, but due to the semi-structured nature the interviews sometimes deviated by slightly altering the order of the questions and by including probes to obtain richer responses.

### **3.3.6 Data analysis**

To analyze the in-depth interviews, a thematic analysis was adopted. Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p. 79). Through abstracting themes, inferences can be made about the way the interviewees perceived environmentalism in *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*. Therefore, a thematic analysis is an appropriate tool to analyze the in-depth interviews in this study. Braun and Clarke (2006) outline six stages of thematic analysis, which were followed in the study. Firstly, they suggest familiarization of data through transcribing the interviews and reading them (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Upon completing the interviews, the audio recordings were uploaded into Otter.ai, a transcription software. Although Otter.ai is a useful tool, it is not faultless and therefore every transcript was manually checked to ensure the interview was transcribed verbatim. The exception were the Dutch interviews, which could not be processed by Otter.ai. These interviews were fully transcribed manually. The second step consisted of generating open codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bryman, 2012). The software program Atlas.ti was once again utilized for the creation of such open codes, and 64 codes were yielded. All codes were given criteria that were to be satisfied for the code to be applied to a meaning unit. Constant comparison was applied as new data was continuously compared with existing codes, and upon completing open coding on the last interview, a second round of open coding was applied to ensure that codes created towards the end of the first round were given a chance to be applied to all interviews (Bryman, 2012). The second round yielded no new codes; hence saturation was achieved. Thirdly, codes were sorted into themes using axial coding (Bryman, 2012). These themes were further reviewed and abstracted into selective codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bryman, 2012). In the fourth step, a coding frame was created (Appendix D) and the codes were checked to ensure that data within the themes cohered together meaningfully with clearly identifiable distinctions between themes. In other words, internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity was warranted (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Fifthly, the themes were defined and named so that the data was ready for the sixth and last step of producing the report.

## **3.4 Validity and reliability**

### **3.4.1 Validity**

According to Bengtsson (2016), validity in qualitative research implies that “the results truthfully reflect the phenomena studied” (p. 11). In this study, validity was ensured in several ways. Firstly, the researcher continuously reflected on their own perspectives throughout the study. Decisions were documented by outlining clear criteria in the operationalization of

theoretical concepts for the qualitative content analysis and once again in the operationalization of findings of this analysis to interview questions (Noble & Smith, 2015). Secondly, the interview guide was designed to consist of open questions. For example, in the displacement section the interviewees were asked, ‘Can you describe this scene?’, rather than, ‘Can you tell me whether the environmental storyline or the character-driven storyline stands out to you?’. Furthermore, no value judgements were made in the questions. For instance, the researcher remained neutral about both human and non-human characters so that the interviewees could form and voice unbiased judgements. All in all, leading questions were avoided (Smith & Noble, 2014). Finally, part of the interview guide abstracted questions directly from the Global Disney Audience Project by Wasko et al., (2001), an extensive, detailed, and often-cited study into Disney audiences. This enhanced the validity of the study.

Although attention was paid to ensure validity of the study, it is recognized that multiple realities exist and that in both the qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis of the interviews, codes and themes were created in the context of the researcher’s collection of personal experiences and pre-existing knowledge on the topic. To strengthen validity, interviewees could have been invited to read the result section to comment on the themes and results of the study as a way of validation (Noble & Smith, 2015). However, due to time constraints on the side of both the researcher and the interviewees, who would need to familiarize themselves with the research topic, this was deemed infeasible for the study.

### ***3.4.2 Reliability***

Bengtsson (2016) describes that for a study to be reliable, “the same results would be obtained if the study were replicated” (p. 11). Reliability can be achieved by leaving a ‘decision-trail’ that clearly outlines the researcher’s decisions (Noble & Smith, 2015). Through clearly outlining the criteria of the codes in the codebook, this study’s reliability was enhanced. If another researcher were to replicate the research, these criteria should provide a clear guide to the process so that it would yield a highly similar coding framework. Once again, however, the interpretive nature of qualitative research makes it unlikely that a replication of the study would yield the exact same results. Additionally, flexibility of semi-structured interviewing can compromise “the standardization of the interview process and hence the reliability and validity of measurement” (Bryman, 2012, p. 470).

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Qualitative content analysis

#### 4.1.1 Portrayal of environmentalism in *Finding Nemo*

*Finding Nemo* tells the story of two clownfish, Marlin and Nemo. Marlin lost his wife Coral and all but one of their eggs to barracuda attack. The attack has made him an overprotective father of only one son: Nemo. On Nemo's first day of school his class ventures out to the edge of the reef where Nemo and some of his fellow students spot a small boat far from the edge and are daring each other to swim closer. Although Marlin tries to stop him, Nemo swims towards the boat. Suddenly, the fish are surprised by two divers. While one of them temporarily blinds Marlin with an underwater camera, the other one takes Nemo with him in a plastic bag. Marlin and Nemo get separated.

Determined to find his son, Marlin embarks on a quest through the Great Barrier Reef together with his new-found friend Dory, a royal blue tang suffering from short-term memory loss. On their journey they encounter a variety of nature events across the aquatic ecosystem, such as a jellyfish bloom and the transoceanic turtle migration via the East Australian Current. Along the way, Marlin and Dory meet all kinds of marine species. Some become friends, such as turtle Crush and his son Squirt; others become foes, such as three sharks, Bruce, Anchor and Chum.

Meanwhile, Nemo has been placed in an aquarium in a dentist office where he meets his fellow aquarium inhabitants, the 'Tank Gang'. The fish devise a plan that involves tampering with the new filtration system in the tank in an effort to break free. The plan must succeed at all costs, because Nemo will otherwise become a birthday present for Darla, the dentist's cousin who has previously killed a member of the Tank Gang. When Marlin reaches Sydney and Nemo manages to escape via the drain system of the dentist office, the fish finally reunite.

#### *Anthropomorphism*

Two axial codes highlight that anthropomorphism in *Finding Nemo* occurs in two ways: Through human characteristics on the one hand and human systems and institutions on the other. With regards to the former, most of the animals in *Finding Nemo* receive variety of human characteristics categorized into seven open codes (Caraway & Caraway, 2020). The facial features of the animals have been adapted to resemble those of humans. Enlarged eyes and mouths allow for the expression of a large range of emotions by the animal characters (Manfredo et al., 2020). Emotions play an important role in conveying a sense of humanness, as they grant the characters

a level of complexity that can be understood by humans. *Finding Nemo* manages to assign a complex range of emotions to the animals in different intensities, including regret, love, excitement, and pride. The animal characters also engage in human behavior throughout the film. Perhaps the most vivid example is Dory's ability to read, which becomes apparent throughout the film as she deciphers pieces of text and leads the way to Sydney. Additionally, the animals adhere to human customs and beliefs, as well as human knowledge. Upon meeting they often introduce themselves and they hold superstitious beliefs, such as the idea that Nemo's smaller fin brings him luck.

Not only are the characters anthropomorphic in their personalities, emotions, and behaviors, but they also function in an anthropomorphized environment (Caraway & Caraway, 2020). Nine open codes were extracted, representing different human institutions. For instance, the importance of the family institution is stressed throughout the film. Nemo and Marlin, who are not only biologically connected but also emotionally, are both desperately longing to be reunited again and are quite literally willing to go great lengths for each other. *Finding Nemo* also shows the human educational institution, human modes of transportation, and an anthropomorphized communication system which implies that the animals have different human nationalities.

#### *Human-nature relationships*

Multiple occurrences of human interference in the natural environment can be detected: Specifically, ten open codes were generated with respect to the axial code 'human interference in the natural environment' in *Finding Nemo*, making it the most salient axial code. The viewer first meets with humans when the divers take Nemo from the reef. In line with Bruckner's (2010) description of human interference in the natural world, the divers are portrayed as intruders. Furthermore, Nemo spends most of the film in human captivity, living toward the day he falls into the hands of Darla, who is a terrifying prospective owner considering her bad track-record with pet fish. On the fish's final direct encounter with humans, fishermen this time, they once again form a threat as they trap Dory in one of their nets together with a school of groupers. The other axial code within the category of human-nature relationships in *Finding Nemo* highlights the efforts to restore a balanced nature, illustrated for example by the open code 'Animals want to break free from capture'. The animal characters actively critique the harmful interactions mindset. A member of the Tank Gang points out that "fish aren't meant to be in a box", while Chum notes, "Humans. Think they own everything."

Even when humans are not actually featured in a scene, their impact on ocean life is highlighted through the presence of human artefacts in the marine environment. The sharks' layer, for example, is a grim crater full of naval mines and the unmistakable remnants of a sunken submarine. As the sharks are chasing Nemo and Dory, they accidentally cause a torpedo from the submarine to hit the naval mines, upon which every mine in the crater explodes. The film also shows how the drains through which Nemo manages to escape the dentist office all lead to the ocean, leaving the water of the Sydney harbor cloudy and polluted.

### *Consumerism*

As previously described, consumerism refers to the notion of consumption as a way of life, and a means to obtain symbolic resources that can help construct identities (Lee, 1993). In *Finding Nemo*, consumerism is mostly illustrated by the Tank Gang in the fish tank of the dentist office, fitting within the axial code of consumption of natural resources. Ocean-related aesthetics in the office, such as a decorative lifebuoy on the wall, signal that the dentist feels a connection with the ocean and has partly formed his identity around it. It also becomes clear that he is one of the divers who took Nemo from the reef, as he explains to a patient while referring to Nemo, "Beauty, isn't he? I found that guy struggling for life out on the reef, and I saved him." The dentist identifies with the idea of being a diver. The fish are material objects that serve as symbolic resources to construct and maintain a human identity.

### *Displacement*

While *Finding Nemo* shows harmful human-nature relationships, these relationships are also displaced. Occurrences of human interference in the marine ecosystem are predominantly introduced as obstacles on Marlin and Dory's mission to find Nemo. Firstly, when Marlin and Dory enter the sharks' layer, the extent of the potential destruction of the naval mines in the scene is largely downplayed. When Dory assumes the mines to be balloons, Bruce only mildly implies that they are in fact something else, something dangerous, by saying, "Mind your distance though, those balloons can be a bit dodgy. You wouldn't want one of them to pop." When the torpedo sets off the field of naval mines, the real threat of the artefacts finally becomes visible, but once again the film shies away from showing the full impact and instead inserts a funny scene of two cranes sitting on the water.

In another moment of displacement, Nemo finally escapes the dentist office via the drains that visibly pollute the ocean. However, barely any notion of pollution is made in this



scene; instead, the drains form a handy system that aids Nemo in his escape and are thus in a sense even beneficial to the story.

Lastly, when Nemo and Dory have helped the groupers escape from the fishing net, the mood is jubilant. Nemo and Marlin are really reunited at last, and Dory is safe. The significance of the fishing boat is downplayed to merely a final obstacle for the fish to overcome rather than a form of systematic human interference with the ocean. Humans' negative impact on nature is displaced in favor of a positive conclusion of the film.

#### ***4.1.2 Portrayal of environmentalism in Wall-E***

*Wall-E* opens with a sequence of Earth as seen from space, but instead of the vibrant blue and green colors of oceans and forests that we know, it is a brown, sludgy ball surrounded by a thick layer of space waste. The surface of Earth is covered in mountains of waste and there is no trace of humanity, but there is a small robot named Wall-E, whose name is an acronym for Waste Allocation Load-Lifter: Earth-class. He has been left on Earth to clean up while humanity has left Earth 700 years ago after it had become uninhabitable. During his workdays, Wall-E collects pieces of human artefacts that appeal to him. One day, Wall-E discovers a rather special item: Hidden away is a plant in a boot, seemingly the only living thing left on Earth.

Wall-E's routine is shaken up when a probe named Eve (Extraterrestrial Vegetation Evaluator) arrives on Earth. Despite her temper that frequently leads her to blow up her surroundings, Wall-E is immediately smitten by her. After several attempts to curry favor with her, Wall-E shows her the plant; Eve, programmed to collect any form of living vegetation from Earth, immediately seizes it and subsequently shuts off. When a spaceship picks her up, Wall-E follows her into space and the two robots arrive at a large ship called the Axiom, built and controlled by Buy 'N Large, where humans have lived the past 700 years.

Spoiled with the comfort of hoverchairs that take them around the ships, the people have become increasingly deformed and attached to screens. When Eve arrives, the captain of the ship is notified that a piece of living vegetation is found on Earth, which gives him the possibility to turn the ship around and bring civilization back to Earth. The Captain is startled, as he does not even know exactly what 'Earth' is, but is nonetheless determined to return. The plan is obstructed by Auto, the autopilot of the ship who has been instructed by Buy 'N Large to stop any attempt to return to Earth as it has been rendered uninhabitable. The Captain, Wall-E and Eve fight Auto and ultimately succeed in securing the plant and returning the ship back to Earth, where the Captain introduces the human passengers to the ancient idea of farming, and they build a new pastoral society supported by technology in the after-credits.

### *Anthropomorphism*

In *Wall-E*, it is not animals that are anthropomorphized, but robots. The axial code of human characteristics was split into four open codes: human emotions, customs, behavior, and friendship. Although robots are essentially gender-neutral, it is implied that Wall-E is male through his rough exterior, clunky hands and square parts and Eve is female through her more curvaceous appearance. Wall-E is depicted as a compassionate and loveable character. Eve is sleeker and more collected, with a temper but also a sense of warmth. Anthropomorphism is predominantly conveyed through the enlarged eyes of both Wall-E and Eve and human anatomical implications such as coughing and sneezing.

Both Wall-E and Eve convey a wide range of emotions. Wall-E falls in love with Eve upon first sight and continues to adore her throughout the film, and at some point, she starts to reciprocate those feelings. Another frequently expressed emotion is worry, or the fear that something bad happens to the other. Additionally, Wall-E and Eve express pride, pain, horror, and happiness. Wall-E also engages in a variety of human behaviors and customs. He seems to enjoy 'life' in many of the same ways as humans, for example by listening to music, watching a film, dancing, and taking Eve on a date. He has adopted human mannerisms as well, such as taking his shoes off before entering his home and introducing himself to others.

Whereas in *Finding Nemo* the complete marine ecosystem is transformed to include systems and institutions from the human world, the robots in *Wall-E* function within the actual human world, be it a dystopian one. Therefore, the axial code of human systems and institutions applies to *Wall-E* to a lesser extent. Still, a small number of human influences in the robot way of life can be detected. As previously described, Wall-E borrows all his ideas of entertainment from humans. For example, he watches *Hello Dolly* and listens and dances to its soundtrack. Wall-E has also created himself a home, equipped with lights, a TV, and a bed.

### *Human-nature relationships*

Three axial codes were extracted within the selective code of human-nature relationships in *Wall-E*: Human interference in the natural environment, efforts to restore a balanced nature, and disconnection from nature. The former is the most prevalent, especially through the open codes of litter pollution and air pollution. From the start of the film, it is clear that humans have made a devastating impact on the natural environment. Even though we never see humans depleting natural resources and creating waste on Earth, resources are clearly depleted, and waste is abundant (Taylor, 1992). The surface of the Earth is covered in mountains of trash. The air is

also visibly polluted with a thick layer of smog adding to the dystopian image. The CEO of Buy 'N Large explains that toxicity levels in the air have made life on Earth unsustainable.

On the Axiom, people are disconnected from nature and inherently human experiences. They do not communicate other than through a screen, and they seem to have forgotten about the planet their ancestors once inherited. Meanwhile, they continue their destructive practices that once destroyed Earth, such as overconsumption and depositing their waste into space.

An interesting contrast to this total disregard for and disconnect from nature is introduced when Wall-E finds the plant. Wall-E is immediately mesmerized by it, and the plant sets in motion a narrative that contradicts the waste, pollution and disconnect, and instead highlights a deep appreciation for nature, mostly embodied by the Captain of the Axiom. When the Captain has learned about the plant and the possibility to return to Earth, he eagerly starts searching pictures of Earth in the ship's database. When he learns about the current dismal state of the planet, he is in shock. He realizes that the people need to return to Earth and nurture their home planet. Once there, he shows the other passengers farming, which forms the start of a pastoral way of life that the end credits reveal.

### *Consumerism*

Before humans left the Earth on the Axiom, they were living in a consumer culture as was found through the axial code 'consumption institution' which consisted of the open codes 'advertising' and 'places of consumption' (Lunt & Livingstone, 1992). Buy 'N Large seemingly governed the consumption institution on Earth. Much of the trash that Wall-E collects is also branded with the Buy 'N Large logo, and large flickering billboards promoting Buy 'N Large products form an abandoned advertising landscape. On the ship, the passengers retain their participant status in consumer culture. The humans have given up all agency over their identity, which is now asserted on them by the corporation. For example, when a voice on the ship announces that blue is the new red, passengers swiftly change their outfits' color with the push of a button. Buy 'N Large also influences other social structures, such as the educational institution, as kids in a school class learn the alphabet through the company's product placement.

Consumerism is also displayed through the concept of nostalgia, represented as an open code under the axial code 'consumption of material goods'. The items that Wall-E keeps for himself are all artefacts of an earlier era for Wall-E: They come from our present day or our recent history. Wall-E picks up consumer goods like a toaster, Rubik's Cube, and an iPod. Material objects seem to grant Wall-E an illusory connection with the past, a function of consumer culture that Whitley (2012) describes as nostalgia. Wall-E finds meaning, value and

perhaps even a sense of identity in the objects he possesses, because they connect him to an earlier era, an era he seems to long for. But in doing so, Wall-E falls prey to the same consumerism system he so actively fights against.

### *Displacement*

Despite the prominence of negative human-nature relationships, displacement also occurs in *Wall-E*. While Wall-E and Eve are clearly motivated to save the plant, it is their affection for each other that frequently receives priority over their mission. Eve is programmed to find living organisms on Earth and initially this causes her to shut off from Wall-E when she first seizes the plant. But as time goes on and Eve's affection for Wall-E grows, she loses sight of her 'directive'. After saving Wall-E from the trash chute, she scoots the plant aside and makes it clear that Wall-E is her new directive. Eve chooses her connection with Wall-E over the greater looming problem of natural extinction that she is meant to solve.

At the end of the film, the Captain shows the passengers how to farm, the ultimate pastoral activity. The films' credits show how this sets in motion a more appreciative relationship for nature that is guided by Taylor's (1992) ecological worldview. Although this is an attractive prospect, the film greatly displaces the severity of actions needed to clean the surface and air of the Earth to achieve such a society. The message conveyed in the last scene and the credits is essentially that by planting a plant and watering it, an ecological world can be achieved, displacing the profound measures that should be taken to avert global ecological disasters.

## **4.2 In-depth interviews**

### **4.2.1 Disney audiences**

The interviewees were asked about their opinions on Disney and the way they interacted with the brand. One axial code was yielded titled 'Disney audience typology indicators' as it consisted of those open codes from which Wasko's (2020) audience typologies could be inferred. Open codes such as consumption of films, Disney music and theme parks highlighted several of the ways in which interviewees interacted with the brand, while the open codes of positive values and negative values point to the interviewees' opinion on Disney. Almost all interviewees attached positive values to the brand, using words such as 'magic', 'sacred', 'happiness', and 'escape from reality' to describe it. Family values and childhood nostalgia were also frequently mentioned by the interviewees. Only Jürgen voiced relatively negative judgement of Disney due to his working relationship with the company. Combining these values with the interactions they had with the brand, the interviewees were assigned to Wasko's (2020) audience archetypes.

Sergio, for example, who frequently visits the Disney parks, often watches Disney films and listens to Disney music, and described how Disney is part of his identity, was ascribed the profile of Disney fanatic. Sergio noted:

“I’m obsessed with the theme parks to the point that I’m like, I want to propose marriage in Disney. For my honeymoon, I want to go to Disney. I know that for so many people Disney is extremely commercial. The thing is that Disney was part of my childhood memories. I was raised within that Disney culture. So, for me, it means something completely different.”

All interviewee Disney profiles are displayed in Table 2 in Chapter 3.

#### **4.2.2 Perception of environmentalism in *Finding Nemo***

##### *Anthropomorphism*

In drawing up the character profiles of the animals in *Finding Nemo* the interviewees focused mostly on personality traits, human behaviors and emotions, rather than on their physical features and the human-like institutions they are portrayed in (Bruckner, 2010; Manfredo et al., 2020). Marlin was described as an introvert who shows neurotic but also perseverant behavior. He is easily irritated, but above all a protective father. The emotions he experiences are those of anxiety, worry and fear. Dory, on the other hand, was perceived as an extravert who is easygoing, selfless, caring, empathic, funny, and eccentric. Nemo was described as naïve, curious, and playful. While dealing with the disability of his broken fin and the stubbornness of growing up, he wants to prove a point to his father and copes well with the situation he is subjected to.

Presumably because of these vast personality profiles, the interviewees could relate and/or sympathize with *Finding Nemo*’s characters strongly (Born, 2019). Matthew (May 2, 2021) noted: “Sometimes I feel like Crush, just riding the waves, and sometimes I feel like Dory, like I don’t know what’s going on”, while Jürgen (May 5th, 2021) mentioned that he relates to Dory “because she is different than others and accepts herself for it”. Alyssa (May 3, 2021) argued that she, like all parents, can relate to Marlin because parenting is terrifying and you cannot control everything that happens, so like Marlin “you do the best you can to try and keep [your children] safe”. When the interviewees were asked to divide the characters according to the good versus evil dichotomy, they regarded the animals as the protagonists and the humans as the antagonists as they mismanage and harvest the fish and separate Nemo and Marlin.

### *Human-nature relationships*

The interviewees generally agreed that humans in *Finding Nemo* disrupt nature and described three ways in which this disruption takes place. Firstly, fish are captured with the purpose of extracting monetary value. Matthew (May 2, 2021) described this interaction between humans and nature as follows:

“I would say the way humans interact with their environment in this context is one of inventory, of getting more fish. And, in that way, not necessarily caring so much about, as we can see in this in this cartoon, these fish have intricate lives that they live. So, they don't care so much about the fish, but more so about the value they can extract from the fish.”

By highlighting this notion of nature as a resource, the interviewees touched upon Taylor's (1992) description of the expansionist worldview. Secondly, several interviewees also recognized the pollution of the ocean by human artefacts. As Sergio (April 30, 2021) pointed out:

“When Marlin and Dory arrived in Sydney, you see how the water changes? It seems to be like, in a way contaminated or polluted. And you see that in different moments throughout the film, you see how that again, we generate so much garbage to the point that the sea has vessels and boats and human artefacts that have been just left there (...) Pretty much every time that you see a stain in the in the sea, it's a human artefact.”

Thirdly, some interviewees noted that fish are captured for aesthetic purposes and human entertainment by keeping them in a fish tank (Lee, 1993). Sergio (April 30, 2021) argued:

“We were not only satisfied by eating them (...) we also want to be entertained by them. We want to have them as personal objects just to just for pleasure”

Not only did the interviewees notice the imbalanced human-nature interactions, but they also critiqued them. Nature is portrayed as harmonious and pure, or pastoral: Humans contrast this pastoralism with indifference and ignorance towards the natural environment (Whitley, 2012). Chema (April 29, 2021) described this by arguing that the water surface represents a boundary between the human world and the natural world, and humans fail to see the complexity and intricacy of the world underneath. When they did break this metaphoric barrier, Sandrine (May 1,

2021) accused the humans of taking what is not theirs, while Sergio (April 30, 2021) argued they disrupt the harmony of the sea world. Thus, the interviewees extracted environmental messages from *Finding Nemo*, although they did not consider them as central to the film as will be addressed when discussing displacement in the film.

### *Consumerism*

With regards to consumerism in *Finding Nemo*, the interviewees agreed on one thing: The fish in the aquarium are the object of humans' materialistic needs. Thereby, the interviewees recognized the cultural role of fish consumption, surpassing consumption as food to also encompass material objects as symbolic resources (Lee, 1993; Miles, 1998). Sandrine (May 1, 2021), for example, argued:

“Having a fish is just like being it's pretty it's not really useful. In a way, it's kind of materialism because you just want to have the pretty things in the waiting room for a patient to see.”

Alyssa (May 3, 2021) also pointed out the aesthetic value of the fish, and the fact that it serves as a symbol for other people to see:

“There's the whole concept of 'Ooh, that's a pretty one', Nemo being the orange and white clownfish is, 'I got to have that in my aquarium, like, look at this one!'”

Despite describing the Tank Gang as objects of consumerism, the interviewees did not make the connection to the identity of the dentist as a diver, and the potential relationship between his identity and the marine animals as objects (Lee, 1993). Some interviewees did connect the consumerist images of the aquarium to the aforementioned human-nature interaction of capturing fish for aesthetic pleasure.

### *Displacement*

To observe whether the interviewees perceived the negative human-nature relationships or the individual storylines more strongly, a scene from *Finding Nemo* was shown in which Dory, Nemo and a school of groupers escape from a fishing net and Nemo and Marlin are reunited (Caraway & Caraway, 2020). All interviewees shortly paid attention to the presence of the fishermen, but for the most part their explanation revolved around Nemo's and Marlin's

relationship. The interviewees described how the scene shows a rekindled love between a father and son that highlights the difficult as well as the beautiful side of parenthood. The interviewees also extracted themes of perseverance and collaboration. They described that the collective of fish swimming down showed that by collaboration it is possible to achieve common goals.

Hence, although it was acknowledged, the human-nature relationship represented by the fishermen was largely displaced in favor of individual storylines. The same was observed for the film more generally. When asked what they interpreted as the film's main message, Chema (April 29, 2021), Sergio (April 30, 2021) and Jürgen (May 5, 2021) focused on family values, the reconciliation of a father and son and the message for parents not to limit their kids too much but instead let them experience the world. Matthew (May 2, 2021) added that the film shows that people are willing to go to the end of the Earth for their family. Haya (May 12, 2021) focused on perseverance, illustrated by 'just keep swimming', the song continuously sung by Dory. Jürgen (May 5, 2021) described *Finding Nemo* as a film with a lot of different characters whose differences are celebrated: Hence, he regards it as a film about inclusion. Cora (May 15, 2021) did not extract any particular message and mainly described the film as entertaining to both children and adults. Thus, most interviewees did not perceive environmentalism as the central message of the film: Instead, family values were regarded as the primary message. Only Alyssa (May 3, 2021) and Sergio (April 30, 2021) mentioned environmentalism as key to *Finding Nemo*, although Sergio (April 30, 2021) is more reserved:

"I would say that the message related to the nature or the environment. Is not exactly what people will get from the film. I think that it teaches you that but from the dimension of being kind and having empathy."

Alyssa (May 3, 2021) was more outspoken about *Finding Nemo* as an environmental message:

"The ocean is one of our best resources in the world. And for kids to have this lens and the scope into what it might be like underwater, even if it's greatly exaggerated, is really important. It's not something we will see often in our lifetime. We can scuba dive, we can snorkel. But realistically, that happens at most once or twice a year. So I think it's really crucial (...) to understand these very fragile ecosystems around us to understand the relationship between humans and animals and how we balance preserving our Earth and our consumption with maintaining the Earth with having a place to continue living and to see the ocean as you know, a joy, a spectacle to behold to see these amazing fish



and the reefs and all the different thriving flora and fauna within it. I think it's very important.”

Hence, apart from Alyssa’s (May 3, 2021) observation, the negative effects of humans on nature were not perceived as the central message.

#### ***4.2.3 Perception of environmentalism in Wall-E***

##### *Anthropomorphism*

Similar to the characters of *Finding Nemo*, the interviewees described the main characters in Wall-E predominantly according to their human behavior, emotions and personality traits (Bruckner, 2010; Manfredo et al., 2020). Wall-E was described as driven and someone who just wants to do good, as gullible, and naïve but also as sensitive, nice, and sympathetic. Eve undergoes character development and starts out as cold but grows to be more compassionate, caring, understanding and helpful. On this character journey, Alyssa (May 3, 2021) described that she is trying to figure out her emotions. Essentially, she starts out as more robotic in her behavior and decision-making but grows to be more human. The characters display human characteristics to the extent that Sergio (April 30, 2021) and Chema (April 29, 2021) noted that they end up being more human than the humans in the film.

Again, these rich character personalities created a sense of relatedness with the characters among the interviewees. Cora (May 15, 2021), for example, related to Wall-E’s hard-working and orderly side because she herself tends to create order in chaos; Alyssa (May 3, 2021) recognized herself in Wall-E’s whimsical romance with Eve as she described that she herself has just fallen in love again; Sergio (April 30, 2021) saw himself in Wall-E’s optimism. The interviewees all agreed that the robots were the protagonists, but there were various opinions about the antagonists of the film. To understand these, the human-nature relationships are discussed next.

##### *Human-nature relationships*

It must first be noted that the interviewees did not describe ‘humans’ as one internally homogeneous group. Instead, there were two distinct human populations perceived in the film: The legacy humans, who populated Earth prior to the start of the film; and the present humans, those shown in the film as the current inhabitants of the Axiom. The legacy humans were largely perceived as the antagonists of the film. The interviewees argued that these humans disrespected and destroyed nature. However, these humans are not actively displayed in the film: Thus, when the interviewees mentioned them, they only spoke in terms of the effects of their actions on the

planet. Cora (May 15, 2021) described these effects as “mountains of trash”, while Alyssa (May 3, 2021) spoke of “rune and wreckage”, and Sandrine (May 1, 2021) simply summed up that “the Earth is totally destroyed”. Hence, the interviewees point to the outcomes of Taylor's (1992) expansionist worldview.

In contrast to the legacy humans, Chema (April 29, 2021) argued that the present humans living on the ship have done no harm yet. In a similar fashion, Matthew (May 2, 2021) noted that vis-à-vis the natural environment, the legacy humans behave exactly how they are supposed to in the context of how they have been raised, which is disconnected from nature. This disconnect was observed by most interviewees. Sergio (April 30, 2021) pointed out:

“They just completely forget about the existence of such a thing called Earth, (...) they do not even know what the word Earth means.”

Chema (April 29, 2021) attributed the humans’ disconnect from nature to their physical distance from Earth:

“Humans are very distant from nature (...) because they are in a spaceship, just orbiting Earth. It's like the ultimate symbol of detachment that they have from the natural environment that they don't no longer understand, have no idea about it and cannot interact with.”

Hence, with regards to human-nature relationships in *Wall-E*, the interviewees mostly recognized the legacy humans as destructive towards nature while the present humans are disconnected from nature and do not necessarily mean to do harm to it simply because they have no awareness of the concept any longer.

### *Consumerism*

The interviewees perceived consumerism as a strong theme in *Wall-E* through many aspects in the film. This section first discusses the ways in which consumerism was exhibited according to the interviewees, and then outlines the results of consumerism that were observed. Consumerism and consumer culture mostly take place on the Axiom. Matthew (May 2, 2021) describes consumerism on the ship as a:

“Super intense, dopamine fueled stimulation rampage of just getting everything as quickly and as refined as possible, as fast as possible”

The interviewees perceived this most clearly through the consumption of liquid foods from cups that are always full and by the sides of the humans. Sandrine (May 1, 2021) also mentioned the continuous stream of advertisements that the humans on the ship are exposed to:

“And they are just watching a screen with all of the commercials. They are clearly all about buying things and not nothing else.”

Sergio (April 30, 2021) noticed a clear implication of these advertisements:

“[The film] even shows a moment in which something it says like, ‘Oh, so now blue is what is trending’, they clicked something, and they're dressed in blue. So, they become a number, they just become this herd that is just following whatever, a corporation or a power is telling them to do.”

With this description of consumerism on the Axiom, Sergio (April 30, 2021) touched upon the idea of consumer culture as outlined by Lunt and Livingstone (1992), as consumption is not solely an economic practice but also affects the construction of people’s identities and their socio-cultural environment more generally. Sergio (April 30, 2021) described that at the hand of consumerism, the humans on the ship have become identity-less and instead function predominantly as consumers. This ‘hand of consumerism’, the interviewees noted, is represented by the corporation Buy ‘N Large. The name itself already holds an important premise of consumerism according to Sandrine (May 1, 2021) and Sergio (April 30, 2021), who both implied that it suggests that buying goods is not enough; they must be bought extra-large and in greater volumes.

The interviewees noticed that between watching the Buy ‘N Large commercials and their personal entertainment, the present humans are constantly consumed by and utterly reliant on technology. Alyssa (May 3, 2021) noted that the humans are dependent on technology and robots to service them, and Matthew (May 2, 2021) argued:

“They've got these big screens in front of them, that takes the whole field of view to that they don't even see anything else. And as soon as they get shut off, then they almost step out of it in a haze”

With regards to effects of consumerism, a clear effect of the reliance on technology as expressed by the interviewees is that the bodies of the present humans are deformed to the extent that their bones have shrunk, and they are barely able to walk anymore. However, the interviewees perceived the most evident effects of consumerism to be on Earth. The mountains of trash are a result of consumerism, and most interviewees implied that they believed humans were already living in a consumer culture before they abandoned the planet. Cora (May 15, 2021) noted:

“There is a certain greed in people and that everything needs to be bigger, faster and more plentiful all the time, and there is no way to keep up with that. And as a result, the people were banned from the planet (...), because of their greed for those things and because of the way they handled these things, because they bring with them waste and trash and at some point, it becomes too much”

By connecting the consumerist tendencies of the present humans to the wasteland on Earth, the interviewees perceived consumerism as a negative human-nature relationship with wasteful and destructive environmental effects.

### *Displacement*

To detect whether environmental messages were displaced in favor of the characters' individual storylines, the scene was shown in which Eve throws away the plant to signal to Wall-E that her main 'directive' now is to save him (Caraway & Caraway, 2020). When asked what the scene showed, all interviewees described that Eve needs Wall-E needs to be fixed, but that Wall-E tries to make her realize that the Earth also needs to be fixed. Eventually, the robots figure out that to solve both distinct problems, the first step of the solution lies in going back to Earth. As Matthew (May 2, 2021) argued:

“I guess her directive in that moment was instead to fix Wall-E. But he wanted her to take the plant back to obviously fix Earth. So then, once she realized he was actually going to be okay, then they kind of merged them back together”

Sandrine (May 1, 2021) described the scene as follows:

“Wall-E is massively hurt and damaged. So obviously Eve is trying to find the right component to repair him, she couldn't find anything and he really tries to send her a message ‘This is not the right way to go you don't want to repair me’ I mean yes we do, but the only way to do this is to go back to your true initial mission is to give the plant to the ship so we can go back to Earth, okay, and here, we will be able to basically do everything that we want.”

Hence, the environmental messages were not displaced in favor of individual storylines according to the interviewees’ interpretations. In fact, the film’s main theme abstracted by all interviewees was that the film shows that humans are destroying the planet, and what Earth will look like in the future when climate change and pollution are not taken care of.

Environmentalism was perceived as the central message of the film. Alyssa (May 3, 2021) summarized it as follows:

“I do want to have my daughters re-watch it after seeing just that small scene. I think it's important because we saw again, in the last year in the pandemic, there's a lot of people, especially in America, that are very unaware of the world around them, and very self-consumed and self-focused and selfish. And I think we all need a refresher; we need to be reminded the fact that we are not invincible. The Earth is not a limitless resource. And be kind and take care of yourselves and the planet because it's not guaranteed. It's not forever.”

Hence, the interviewees perceive *Wall-E*'s environmental messages as a feasible prediction of the future, and the environmental meaning of the film, although intertwined with individual storylines, is interpreted as the most important message.

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1 Portrayal of environmentalism

*Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E* each show different aspects of harmful human interactions with nature. *Finding Nemo* focuses predominantly on the disturbance of the marine ecosystem. The film shows the pollution of oceans by human artefacts and water contamination. It also displays how humans capture fish for consumption as well as for leisure. The humans in the film are operating in accordance with Taylor's (1992) expansionist worldview: They treat the oceans as a resource, extracting sea animals that serve as food, income, or entertainment. The latter is portrayed in the film through the dentist, who keeps the fish in a tank as a decoration for his dental practice. In accordance with Lee's (1993) description of consumerism, Nemo becomes a symbolic resource to the dentist that helps him construct his identity as a diver. The dentist illustrates the intertwinement of the environmental concepts of human-nature relationships and consumerism, highlighting that consumerist practices can have a destructive impact on the natural environment. Consumerism is thus a facet of the human-nature relationship in *Finding Nemo* as it is expansionist in itself and creates negative environmental impact (Taylor, 1992).

The recipients of the harmful human impact on nature are the marine animals whose journeys are followed throughout *Finding Nemo*. Although their characters are based on existing species, their physical features are adapted according to the Disney tradition so they more closely resemble human beings (Manfredo et al., 2020; Wasko, 2020). Additionally, the animals engage in human behaviors, exhibit human personalities and experience human emotions. As Born (2019) described, through this collection of anthropomorphized characteristics, the animals' facial expressions, behaviors and motivations are easy to understand. In contrast to humans, whose lives and personalities are hardly touched upon, the animals are shown with rich personalities and backstories. A similarity can be drawn to the study by Lanier et al. (2013) on *Toy Story*, which argues that "anthropomorphism offers a glimpse into the world of human-object relationships from the perspective of the object" (p. 41). The word 'object' does not even need to be replaced with 'animal', as Nemo and the Tank Gang are in fact objects in possession of the diver and the viewer experiences the interactions with humans through their eyes. But the conclusion of Lanier et al. (2013) can be extended to the other animals' interaction with humans as well. Seeing the story unfold from their perspective, the viewer is placed at the receiving end of the humans' harmful interactions with nature and as a result, the humans are placed in a relatively negative light.

While *Finding Nemo* focuses on pollution and disruption of the marine ecosystem, *Wall-E* shows the destruction of the collection of Earth's ecosystems, portraying a planet on which nature has vanished altogether and is seemingly far beyond repair. A key difference between the two films in terms of their depiction of human-nature interactions is the point in time when they take place. In *Finding Nemo*, the interruptions occur in the present day, and the viewer watches the humans in the film actively engage in these behaviors. *Wall-E* is set after humans have finished harming the planet to the point it was no longer livable, and the viewer never observes the destructive actions that were carried out by the humans on Earth. All that is left for the viewer to observe is the outcomes of humans' mismanagement. The harmful relationship that once existed between humans and nature is implied through artefacts, including the abundance of trash and the decaying superstores, as well as the brown smog that covers the surface of the Earth in a toxic blanket. According to the film, 'Taylor's (1992) prediction has come true: The Earth's resources are used up and transformed into goods to satisfy humanity's material needs, with the resulting image of an unprecedented environmental crisis. One prevalent indicator is the presence of Buy 'N Large, whose abandoned stores and billboards are scattered across the rubble of the decayed cities implying that the corporation once governed life on Earth. The landscape illustrates Lunt & Livingstone's (1992) idea of consumer culture, in which mass consumption seemingly infiltrated everyday life. Hence, like *Finding Nemo*, *Wall-E* depicts a connection between the environmental concepts of human-nature relationships and consumerism. It shows the problematic effects of humans' consumer lifestyles on the natural environment, highlighting consumerism as a way in which humans negatively impact the planet. In accordance with Whitley's (2012) review, many of the consumerist artefacts are items of nostalgia that Wall-E collects and keeps in his home. In this way, Wall-E engages in the same consumerist practices that the film effectively critiques. Contrasting Buy 'N Large and the expansionist approach of humans towards nature, the Captain embodies the ecological worldview by making more concrete actions towards preservation and protection of nature, which, in this case, is symbolized by the plant (Taylor, 1992; Whitley, 2012).

An extension of consumer culture on Earth prevails on the Axiom, where the passengers seem to have given up on their individual identity in favor of a consumer identity. They passively wander around the ship in hoverchairs, their attention constantly captured by the screens in front of them. It is on the Axiom that the viewer first observes humans in the film, but with their deformed bodies and disconnected minds they barely resemble the joys and complexities of human life as we know it. The robots in *Wall-E*, on the other hand, are displayed with vivid personalities, hopes and dreams, and – paradoxically – a love for life (Caraway & Caraway, 2020).

With their anthropomorphized emotions and behaviors, they appear more human than the humans in the film. Whereas in *Finding Nemo* anthropomorphism functions as a driver to distinguish the animals as the protagonists, in *Wall-E* it offers a contrast to highlight the blandness of humans. It serves as a driver to further critique the humans in the film. With their passivity, subjectivity to consumerism and the harm they have visibly done to the planet, humans are shown unfavorably, and the viewer is invited to critique them.

*Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E* not only show different types of environmental problems at different stages, but the intensity in which they are shown also varies. In *Finding Nemo*, human influences are relatively infrequent occurrences which serve as obstacles in Marlin's and Dory's quest to find Nemo. While the story is set in motion by human interference, the film predominantly shows the intricacies of marine life and the ocean ecosystem. In *Wall-E*, on the other hand, the dire state of the natural environment and humanity's role in this lies at the very heart of the film. Nevertheless, displacement still occurs in multiple scenes, most notably when Eve disregards the plant in favor of Wall-E. In *Finding Nemo*, displacement also occurs in almost all scenes in which humans, directly or indirectly, negatively impact nature. When displacement occurs, the prominence of the negative human-nature relationships is diminished and instead shifted to the animal characters' emotions and actions (Caraway & Caraway, 2020). These attract attention because their anthropomorphic quality makes them relatable (Born, 2019). For example, Eve chooses Wall-E over the plant for reason of love, a motivation that is understandable as it drives many of humans' decisions. Similarly, although he just experienced the serious threat of a fishing net, Marlin is more concerned about the health of his son, which is relatable to many parents and children. Hence, while anthropomorphism aids in stressing human faults in their relationship with nature, it also strengthens the process of displacement.

In conclusion, and to concretely answer the sub-question 'How is environmentalism displayed in Disney Pixar's *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*?', environmentalism in these films is portrayed through three environmental concepts: Human-nature relationships, consumerism, and anthropomorphism. Specifically, the films display the negative, harmful relationship that people have with Earth, thereby fitting in the list of Disney features that focus on expansionist themes (Taylor, 1992; Whitley, 2012). Consumerism is presented as a facet of this relationship with explicitly negative consequences. Anthropomorphism strengthens the message of the other two concepts by creating a sense of sympathy for the characters, placing them in the protagonist position and providing a contrast to the humans who are shown in a relatively negative light. The fourth concept, displacement, diminishes the other three by shifting the focus to individual



storylines. Paradoxically, anthropomorphism aids the process of displacement as the viewer's sympathy for the characters directs their attention away from the environmental message.

## 5.2 Perception of environmentalism

The interviews revealed that *Finding Nemo* was considered a film with a rich and diverse cast that the audiences deeply sympathized with. Anthropomorphism proved effective in creating strong personality profiles and emotions, motivations, and behaviors that the interviewees could identify with. The interviewees answered most of the questions regarding *Finding Nemo* from the perspective of the fish, indicating that the film successfully took them on an adventure with Marlin and Dory across the Great Barrier Reef and essentially placed them along with Nemo in the fish tank in the dentist office. As a result, interviewees expressed a strong sense of sympathy for the animal characters (Born, 2019). Although the film is set in an underwater world that is largely unknown to the interviewees, they were able to draw numerous comparisons between the situations the fish found themselves in and their own lives. As Lanier et al. (2013) also concluded in their review on *Toy Story*, experiencing the story from the perspective of the fish led the interviewees to describe humans and human interactions from the fish point of view. As a result, the interviewees considered the humans as intruders in the ocean (Bruckner, 2010). They critiqued the way the humans interacted with the fish, recounting it as 'mismanagement' and 'lack of respect'. Some even described it as a personal attack, seeing it from the fish' point of view. Thus, in congruence with qualitative content analysis and the theoretical framework, anthropomorphism shaped the way in which the interviewees perceived human-nature relationships. Specifically, the interviewees noticed the disturbance of the marine ecosystem by the divers and the fishermen, as well as the artificially created marine environment in the fish tank. In the latter, they observed the function of Nemo as an object in possession of the dentist. This was the only notion of consumerism that the interviewees made with regards to *Finding Nemo*, and they did not connect the possession of fish as a way for the dentist to exhibit his identity as a diver. The application of consumerism theories by Lee (1993) and Lunt and Livingstone (1992) was therefore limited. Nevertheless, the interviewees did recognize the captivity of Nemo for aesthetic reasons as a harmful interference of humans with nature, connecting the concepts of consumerism and human-nature relationships.

Despite critiquing humans' behavior toward the environment, the interviewees generally did not regard the environmental message as a central theme in the film. It was also in the discussion about the main message of the film that polysemy was most apparent. Whereas some interviewees extracted family values and themes such as childhood and parenthood as the main message, others focused instead on perseverance and eagerness to explore. Therefore, the results

of this study fit within the active audience theory which suggests that individual audience members may draw different meanings from the same media texts due to varying factors (Condit, 1989; Fiske, 1986). A clear trend in these differing interpretations, however, is the relative importance of individual storylines that highlight family values and perseverance, compared to the environmental messages. For most interviewees, the harmful human-nature relationships were displaced. Only for a small number of interviewees did the environmental messages of the film triumph in their relevance over the characters' storylines.

With regards to *Wall-E*, the interviewees also provided rich descriptions of Wall-E's and Eve's personalities. But whereas anthropomorphism placed the individual character's storylines of *Finding Nemo* in a central position, this did not occur in the interviewees' perceptions of *Wall-E*. The interviewees recognized that Wall-E and Eve were engaged in a love story as was deciphered through their anthropomorphic emotions and behaviors. However, their love story represented merely a part of the overall plot according to the interviewees. Some of them hardly focused on the two robots at all in formulating their answers. Instead, the wasteful planet was a frequent subject of discussion. Although humans are never observed actively polluting the planet, all interviewees drew the conclusion that its wasteful state must be the product of human actions. Not only did they recognize this harmful human-nature relationship, but they also critiqued it. Equal discontent was voiced with regards to the present humans on the Axiom. The interviewees most frequently used negative labels such as 'passive', 'lazy' and 'identity-less' to describe them. They were also aware and critical of the consumerist influences on the ship and often pointed to Buy 'N Large as the culprit of these. Most interviewees regarded the waste on Earth as an outcome of consumerist practices, although they did not recognize nostalgic consumerist artefacts specifically (Lee, 1993; Lunt & Livingstone, 1992). Nevertheless, consumerism was once again recognized as a facet of negative human-nature relationships.

Seeing that Wall-E's and Eve's storylines were not considered the most important aspect of *Wall-E*, it is not unexpected that displacement in the film took place to a far lesser extent, if at all, compared to *Finding Nemo* (Caraway & Caraway, 2020). The interviewees placed the importance of the robots' adventures as inferior to the decay of the planet at the hand of humans. When asked to describe what they extracted as the overall message of the film, the interviewees all focused on the dystopian future *Wall-E* depicts. They described the film as a realistic prospect and a warning to humanity.

As the interviews revealed, the interviewees recognized harmful human-nature relationships in both *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*, but the intensity in which they perceived these messages varied. As previously outlined, environmentalism in *Wall-E* was perceived as central to

the story whereas in *Finding Nemo*, it was displaced in favor of the fish's storylines (Caraway & Caraway, 2020). Another key difference was the extent to which the interviewees identified with the humans in the film. For *Finding Nemo*, the interviewees perceived the humans as antagonists but did not recognize themselves in their behavior. They made objective interpretations, referring to them as 'the diver', 'the dentist' or 'the fishermen'. The interviewees regarded the humans' actions as harmful but did not extend their reflection to consider how they themselves contribute to the disruption of ocean life. To illustrate, the fishermen were harvesting fish likely to support global consumption, but the interviewees did not reflect on their own fish consumption and how it impacts marine life. For *Wall-E*, the opposite occurred. When the interviewees negatively judged the humans' actions, they also internalized these actions and essentially critiqued themselves. They hardly spoke of 'the humans', but instead phrased it as 'we', considering themselves as an active part of the society that harms the environment. They even drew similarities between the fictional situations and their own lives, such as the present humans' far-reaching obsession with technology and their own technology use.

In conclusion, this research aimed to answer the research question 'How is environmentalism in Disney Pixar's *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E* perceived by audiences?'. Audiences observed human-nature relationships, including exhibits of consumerism, in both *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*. For *Finding Nemo*, they extracted the harmful impact of the divers, the fishermen and the dentist who kept Nemo and the Tank Gang in an aquarium. The ecological messages were displaced, however, as messages around family and perseverance were perceived as most key to the film. In *Wall-E*, the audience members observed the wasteful planet and interpreted this as a result of human actions, and acknowledged the disconnected, consumerist behavior of humans on the ship. The audience critiqued human actions and reflected on their own behaviors. Hence, they perceived the film as an important environmental message with implications for their personal lives.

## 5.3 Research contributions

### 5.3.1 Theoretical contributions

With its environmentalism-oriented qualitative content analysis of two Disney Pixar films, this study contributes to existing textual analyses of Disney animated features with an eco-critical dimension. It solidifies observations of environmental concepts in *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E* that have been made in previous studies. For example, like Whitley (2012), who provides an extensive overview of consumerism in *Wall-E* with a focus on nostalgia, this study also recognized consumerism as an important theme in the film, exhibited by scenes showing waste,

nostalgic objects and indulgence on board of the Axiom. In *Finding Nemo*, Whitley (2012) observes negative human-nature relationships similar to those extracted in this study, but does not connect these to the concept of consumerism. Caraway and Caraway (2020) draw comparable conclusions with regards to anthropomorphism in *Wall-E*, for example about Wall-E and Eve's personalities and the sharp contrast between the richness of the robots versus the blandness of the humans. However, Caraway and Caraway (2020) do not touch upon the implications of anthropomorphism on the depiction of human-nature relationships. These cases highlight that the present study not only solidifies conclusions drawn in previous research, but also connects various environmental concepts that had been sporadically addressed in existing literature. For example, this study found that consumerism is presented as a facet of negative human-nature relationships, and that anthropomorphism aids in generating a critical perspective on the harmful impact humans have on nature.

By taking an audience perspective, this study has also aimed at bridging the research gap between textual analyses of Disney films and audience interpretations of these films, as highlighted by Buckingham (1997) and Wasko (2020). The differences between conclusions of the qualitative content analysis and the in-depth interviews of this study already highlight a gap between the portrayal and perception of environmental messages. Where some aspects of the film were clearly evident in the content analysis, such as the nostalgic element of consumerism and the identity of the diver as a driver for his consumerist desires to hold fish in his dental office, these were not perceived by audiences. Vice versa, the audience assigned meanings to the films that did not become evident in the qualitative content analysis, such as 'perseverance' and 'collaboration' as main messages in *Finding Nemo*. Extending this comparison to the wider body of existing research, the audience perceptions contradict findings by multiple authors. Caraway and Caraway (2020) conclude that *Wall-E*'s narrative "is primarily one of interpersonal conflict, displacing the collective dimensions of ecological collapse to the level of the individual" (p. 692). However, the audience members of this study did not displace the ecological narrative at all and instead perceived it as the central message of the film. The interpersonal conflict and relationship between Wall-E and Eve was regarded of minimal importance compared to the environmental theme of the film. Bruckner (2010) highlights the potential that *Finding Nemo* has to "encourage ecological sensitivity" (p. 187) and lead to "public education about the tropical fish trade and the global threat to coral reefs" (p. 188), which are logical interpretations considering the harmful human interactions with nature the film presents. The present study tempers these expectations as it highlights only a limited interpretation of the negative human-nature relationships. While the interviewees were aware of these, they did not regard environmentalism as the main theme of

the film. These examples highlight that an audience perspective is imperative to understand which messages are extracted from a film. After all, it is audiences who are exposed to films and assign meanings to them.

In the Global Disney Audiences Project, Wasko et al. (2001) found that audiences assigned values such as fun, happiness, imagination, family, and childhood to the Disney brand. A similar observation was made in the present research, as the interviewees addressed many of the same values. Thus, this study serves as a confirmation of Wasko et al.'s (2001) findings, as well as an extension in terms of the country of origin of the interviewees included in this study, such as Egypt, that were not represented in the Global Disney Audiences Project. The observation that the same values are attributed to the Disney brand by interviewees from these countries strengthens Wasko et al.'s (2001) conclusion that “Disney is both universal and ubiquitous” (p. 44).

Finally, this study confirms notions of active audiences made in audience studies and highlights that Disney audiences are also active in their meaning-making of films (Biocca, 1988; Evans, 1990; Fiske, 1986; Morley, 2005). In congruence with Levy 's(1983) suggestion, the audience members interviewed were active during their exposure to media content as they assigned to it a variety of interpretations and meanings. The interviewees were also active post-exposure as they reflected on the information they had received through the film, as well as on their own behavior, which was most visible when discussing *Wall-E*. Audience activity resulted in polysemic perceptions of *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*, especially in the films’ perceived messages. While it is not possible to infer the dominant readings of the films, it can be assumed that negotiated reading took place at least to an extent, considering the polysemy of audience interpretations (Hall, 2006). As Fiske (1986) notes, polysemy occurs due to a variety of influences, including socio-economic position, ethnicity, gender and culturally dependent factors. The Disney audience typology by Wasko (2020) was considered one such factor and therefore included in the interview part of the study. Based on the values they assigned to the Disney brand and the ways in which they interacted with the brand, the interviewees classified as different Disney audience archetypes, but these archetypes did not seem to influence audience perceptions of *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*. Deviations in the perception of the films’ messages could not be traced back to the audience profiles. Thus, while this study confirms the existence of Disney archetypes, it suggests that their effect on audience perceptions of Disney films may be limited, at least in this case. However, as this matter was not the primary intention of the present study it needs further attention for well-founded conclusions to be drawn.

### **5.3.2 Societal contributions**

Results of this study indicate that audience members are active in their meaning making. As Levy (1983) points out, audience activity may lead to reflection on the information consumed and to integration of the newly acquired information and perspectives into social behaviors. Although this study did not examine whether social behaviors indeed changed favorably as a result of active interpretation of *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*, audience activity in meaning-making indicates that such behavioral change is plausible (Bryant & Thompson, 2002; Levy, 1983).

### **5.4 Limitations**

The study has a number of limitations. Firstly, while efforts were made to strengthen the validity and reliability of the study, it is not unlikely that some answers contain bias (Bengtsson, 2016; Noble & Smith, 2015). As per ethical considerations, the subject of the research was made known to the interviewees prior to the interviews. Knowing that the study was about environmentalism, the interviewees could have made inferences about environmental concepts in the interview that they would not have made watching and interpreting the films by themselves. To limit the effect of this, questions gradually built towards environmental topics and interviewees were repeatedly told that there were no incorrect answers. Still, this potential bias can be considered a limitation of the study.

Secondly, the study is limited in its generalizability (Alshenqeeti, 2014). The research focused specifically on *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E* and applied the theoretical concepts to these films. The findings may differ for other Disney films or eco-critical readings more generally.

### **5.5 Recommendations for further research**

This study took a qualitative approach to uncover audience interpretations of *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*. It highlighted that within the polysemic range of answers, audiences recognize and interconnect the environmental concepts of human-nature relationships and consumerism; that these are strengthened by anthropomorphism; but in the case of *Finding Nemo* can be displaced in favor of storylines on the individual character level. Fitting with active audience theories, the audience members thus actively extracted environmental meanings from the films and in the case of *Wall-E* were able to reflect these meanings onto their own lives and behaviors. The audience approach yielded numerous discrepancies between the qualitative content analysis of this study as well as textual analyses of *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E* on the one hand and audience perceptions of the films on the other. It is therefore suggested that textual analyses of Disney

films are extended with audience research to increase understanding of Disney audiences and bridge the gap between these two research domains (Buckingham, 1997; Wasko, 2020).

Secondly, this study confirms the existence of various Disney archetypes. A connection between the the archetypes and their interpretation of Disney films was not evident in this study but deserves additional scrutiny to understand how this factor influences audiences' meaning making of Disney films (Fiske, 1986; Wasko, 2020). A quantitative study would be suitable to this end, as it can establish whether a causal relationship between the Disney archetypes and perception of Disney films exists (Bryman, 2012).

Finally, as Levy (1983) suggests that audiences can also be active post-exposure and incorporate their interpretations into their social behavior, it would be interesting to study the effects of watching the films on this social behavior. A quantitative study could be adopted to this end as it not only allows for a greater sample but also serves to uncover causal relationships between film perception and social behavior (Bryman, 2012). Rust (2012), for example, illustrated that viewings of *The Day After Tomorrow* and *An Inconvenient Truth* affected voting intentions and environmental behavior intentions among audiences. Seeing whether such changes also occur after viewing *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*, as well as eco-critical animated features more generally, would allow for an even better understanding of how this type of mass-media communication can play a key role in achieving widespread environmental action.

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## Appendix A. Sample coding frame of qualitative content analysis

Full coding frame can be found in supplementary file

Selective codes	Axial codes	Open codes	Meaning unit examples
Anthropomorphism	Human characteristics	Friendship	Marlin says to the light it is going to be his best friend
			Wall-E has a pet cockroach
		Human anatomy/medical implications	Sheldon is H2O intolerant
			The robot sneezes
		Human behavior	The sharks are holding an AA meeting
			Wall-E goes to sleep
		Human belief system	Nemo's lucky fin
			Dory shares a philosophy
		Human customs	Marlin names the unborn child
			Wall-E waves and introduces himself
		Human emotions	Coral is excited about becoming a mum
			Wall-E is concerned for Eve
		Human knowledge	Nigel knows about tooth extractions
			Mr. Ray names the zones of the ocean
	Human systems and institutions	Domestic environment	Coral and Marlin get a home with an 'ocean view'
			Wall-E has built himself a house
		Educational institution	Nemo is going to school
			Nemo must answer a science question
		Family institution	One of the fish, Ted, has relatives in Sydney
			Bruce says he never knew his father

		Food customs	Bruce says what he's having for dinner tonight
			Marlin says he didn't come here to be breakfast
		Forms of entertainment	Dory is using the jellyfish as a trampoline
			Wall-E watches Hello Dolly on a cassette
		Human modes of transportation	Marlin urges Nemo to wait to cross
			In the EAC, Crush says Marlin and Dory's exit is coming up
		Nationality	Jacques gets French stereotypical traits: The accent, the moustache, the music in the background
			The pelicans have an Australian accent
		Professional institution	Mr. Ray says he's a scientist
			Wall-E returns home from work
		Puns/jokes that make sense in human context	Marlin calls Bob (the seahorse) a 'Pony Boy'
			Marlin isn't funny as a clownfish according to Phil

## Appendix B. Interview guide

### 1. Introduction: General information

#### Introduction

- Welcome the participant, and thank them for participating
- Tell the participant that the interview is about *Finding Nemo* and *WALL-E*, and specifically about how nature is portrayed in these films.
- Tell the participant that their answers will be treated anonymously and that there are no wrong answers
- Ask the participant if they consent with being recorded
- Ask the participant to sign the consent form

#### Questions about participant

- What is your name?
- What is your gender?
- How old are you?
- Can you tell me a bit about your background?
  - o Where were you born?
  - o Where did you grow up?
  - o What is your educational background?

### 2. Disney questions

- How often do you watch Disney films?
- Do you consume any other Disney products?
  - o Or do you for example visit the Disney parks?
- What is your opinion of Disney?
  - o Do you consider yourself a Disney fan?
- What experiences do you associate with Disney products?
- What values/meanings do Disney products and Disney represent to you?

### 3. Finding Nemo (Alternate order of Finding Nemo and Wall-E because interviewees might be biased by reflecting on the first film)

#### Introduction questions

- o When did you watch Finding Nemo/how often?
- o What do you think of the film?
  - Do you like it? Why/why not?
- o In every Disney film there's always a message. Do you think the film teaches any particular message?

- Which one?

**Anthropomorphism: Discover if the audience describes the characters according to human traits/emotions/behavior**

- How would you describe the characters in *Finding Nemo*?
  - How would you describe Nemo?
  - How would you describe Marlin?
  - How would you describe Dory?
    - Perhaps probe: Are these characters how you would picture animals/fish to be? Why/why not?
- Who is your favourite character in the film?
  - Why?
- Can you relate with one or more of these characters?
  - Why?
- Do you feel sympathy for some of the characters?
  - Which ones?
  - Why?
- If you would have to classify of the characters, both the animals and humans, into 'good' or 'bad', what classification comes to mind?
  - Why?

**Displacement: Find out whether the audience describes the greater environmental problems or the individual storyline when describing scene**

*Share screen and show fishing net scene where Nemo and Dory escape and Nemo and Marlin reunite.*

- Can you describe this scene? What happens?
- What for you is the main take-away of this scene?
  - Why?
- How do you feel after watching this scene?
  - Why?

**Human-nature relationships: Find out how the audience describes the interactions between humans and nature: For example as invasive? Dismissive of it?**

As you know, in *Finding Nemo* there are multiple interactions between humans and the animals and the natural environment.

- How would you describe these interactions?
  - Why? Can you name an example?
- How would you describe the results of these interactions?
  - Can you name an example?
- Do you think the interactions are an accurate representation of the real-life interactions between humans and animals?
  - How do you feel about this?
  - Do you think the film taught you something in this regard?



**Consumerism: Find out if the audience detects consumerism in the film**

- How would you describe humans' relationship with material things in this film?
  - o What are the consequences of this?
  - o How do you feel about this?
  - o *If interviewee mentions it, probe more into fish as possessions in particular*
- Do you feel that this relationship is representative of our daily lives?
- How would you describe your own relationship with material things?

**Closing questions *Finding Nemo*.**

- Having answered these questions and reflected on *Finding Nemo* a bit more, do you still think it tells this message of [X] that you mentioned?
  - o Why has it changed?
- Do you think *Finding Nemo* is an important film for children and adults to watch?
  - o Why?

## **4. WALL-E**

**Introduction questions**

- o When did you watch *WALL-E*/how often?
- o What do you think of the film?
  - Do you like it? Why/why not?
- o In every Disney film there's always a message. Do you think the film teaches any particular message?
  - Which one?

**Anthropomorphism: Discover if the audience describes the characters according to human traits/emotions/behavior**

- How would you describe the characters in *WALL-E*?
  - o How would you describe Wall-E?
  - o How would you describe EVE?
  - o How would you describe The Captain?
    - Perhaps probe: Are these characters how you would picture animals/fish to be? Why/why not?
- Who is your favourite character in the film?
  - o Why?
- Can you relate with one or more of these characters?
  - o Why?
- Do you feel sympathy for some of the characters?
  - o Which ones?
  - o Why?
- If you would have to classify the characters, both the animals and humans, into 'good' or 'bad', what classification comes to mind?
  - o Why?

**Displacement: Find out whether the audience describes the greater environmental problems or the individual storyline when describing the scene**

*Share screen and show EVE choosing for WALL-E in the trash compartment of the Axiom*

- Can you describe this scene? What happens?
- What for you is the main take-away of this scene?
  - o Why?
- How do you feel after watching this scene?
  - o Why?

**Human-nature relationships: Find out how the audience describes the interactions between humans and nature: For example as invasive? Dismissive of it?**

As you know, in *WALL-E* there are interactions between humans, the animals and the natural environment.

- How would you describe these interactions?
  - o Why? Can you name an example?
- How would you describe the results of these interactions?
  - o Can you name an example?
- Do you think the interactions are an accurate representation of the real-life interactions between humans and animals?
  - o How do you feel about this?
  - o Do you think the film taught you something in this regard?

**Consumerism: Find out if the audience detects consumerism in the film**

- How would you describe humans' relationship with material things in this film?
  - o What are the consequences of this?
  - o How do you feel about this?
  - o What sort of things do the characters engage with?
  - o *If the interviewee mentions it, probe more into nostalgia in particular*
- How do you feel that relates back with XYZ that we talked about before? (*human-nature relationships*)
- Do you feel that this relationship is representative of our daily lives?

**Closing questions *WALL-E***

- Having answered these questions and reflected on *WALL-E* a bit more, do you still think it tells this message of [X] that you mentioned?
  - o Why has it changed?
- Do you think *WALL-E* is an important film for children and adults to watch?
  - o Why?

## **5. Closing the interview and thanking the participant**

- Do you have any further ideas or opinions about the topic that you want to share?

- Do you have any questions?
- Do you have any recommendations for this research?
- Thank the participant once again for participating
- Give the participant your contact details; tell them that they can contact you if they have any further questions

## **Appendix C: Interview consent form**

### **CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH**

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:

Iris van Oosterwijk

Made, The Netherlands

[421863io@student.eur.nl](mailto:421863io@student.eur.nl)

### **DESCRIPTION**

You are invited to participate in a research about Disney Pixar films, specifically *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*. The purpose of the study is to understand how Disney audiences interpret nature and environmentalism in these films.

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be interviewed. In general terms, the questions interview or focus group will be related to your experiences watching *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*, and your perception of environmentally-related topics in the films.

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will use voice recorder for the interview.

You are always free not to answer any particular question, and/or stop participating at any point.

### **RISKS AND BENEFITS**

As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. Yet, you are free to decide whether I should use your name or other identifying information in the study. If you prefer, I will make sure that you cannot be identified, by only mentioning pseudonyms and general identification such as age and gender.

I will use the material from the interviews exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

### **TIME INVOLVEMENT**

Your participation in this study will take approximately 45 minutes to an hour. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

### **PAYMENTS**

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

### **INTERVIEWEES' RIGHTS**

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. If you prefer, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

### **CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS**

If you have questions about your rights as a study interviewee or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish— William McCarthy, at [mccarthy@eshcc.eur.nl](mailto:mccarthy@eshcc.eur.nl).

#### SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM

If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity. Thus, you DO NOT NEED to sign this form. In order to minimize risks and protect your identity, you may prefer to consent orally. Your oral consent is sufficient.

I give consent to be audiotaped during this study:

Name	Signature	Date
------	-----------	------

I prefer my identity to be revealed in all written data resulting from this study

Name	Signature	Date
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This copy of the consent form is for you to keep.

## Appendix D: Sample coding frame of in-depth interviews

Full coding frame can be found in supplementary file

Selective codes	Axial codes	Open codes	Meaning unit examples
Anthropomorphism	Anthropomorphism in <i>Finding Nemo</i>	Acknowledge anthropomorphism	Matthew: I'd be most inclined to take the fish' perspective, and in that sense the humans are antagonists because they mismanage the fish
			Jürgen: The fact that we're rooting for the fish and think of humans as the bad characters is caused by the fact that we're looking at the film from the fish' perspective
		Human behavior	Chema: Finds Marlin overprotective
			Sandrine: Dory wants to help
		Human emotions	Sandrine: Marlin is afraid of everything
			Alyssa: Marlin is worried
		Personality traits	Matthew: Dory is eccentric
			Sergio: Marlin is overprotective
	Character opinions in <i>Finding Nemo</i>	Humans are antagonists	Chema: People come off as evil because they imprison the fish
			Sandrine: Identifies with the fish and feels attacked by humans
		No classification good/bad	Alyssa: They're all good with human traits, they're all human, they're all flawed. No bad characters, just flawed characters. Maybe the girl who taps the aquarium, but

			she doesn't mean to hurt them
		Relate to characters	Jürgen relates to Dory because she's different than the others and she accepts herself for It
			Matthew: Sometimes I feel like Crush, just riding the waves
	Anthropomorphism in <i>Wall-E</i>	Acknowledge anthropomorphism	Jürgen: Says Wall-E is lonely, which he immediately re-thinks because a robot probably doesn't 'feel' longely
		Human behavior	Chema: The robots are impressed
			Matthew: Wall-E is a hard worker
		Human emotions	Sergio: Wall-E and Eve have human emotions
			Alyssa: Wall-E falls in love
		Non-anthropomorphic traits	Sergio: They're programmed like that
			Matthew: In the beginning, Eve is quite mechanical and robotic in her decision-making
		Personality traits	Sandrine: Eve shows perseverance
			Haya: Wall-E has morals
	Character opinions in <i>Wall-E</i>	Auto is antagonist	Chema: The AI is the antagonist, evil without much explanation
			Matthew: Auto is antagonist, the other characters are protagonist
		Buy 'N Large president is antagonist	Sergio: The Buy 'N Large president is the bad guy
			Sergio: The evil corporate guy wants the world to consume without caring about the consequences

		Humans are antagonists	Alyssa: We see humans as evil, we see humans with our excess and our waste, and our gluttony and our greed, have in turn decimated the place where we live
			Cora: Wall-E and Eve are good, and the people in the spaceship were bad